

FRIEZE

"Matthew Angelo Harrison's Prototypes for a New Life"

By Mark Godfrey

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, Bated Breath, 2021, installation detail. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Basel; photograph: Anja Karolina Furrer

Matthew Angelo Harrison lives in Detroit, surrounded by the shuttered factories of the automobile industry where his mother worked on the General Motors production line. He grew up in a community forever changed by the gradual diminution of the city's main industry – once one of the largest in the world. In his most recent body of work, shown this summer at Kunsthalle Basel in 'Proto', his first European institutional solo exhibition, Harrison has taken objects from his mother's time in the factories – work gloves, jackets, helmets and placards from a 2007 strike – and encapsulated them in resin. It is unusual to encounter objects associated with blue-collar labour in American art and those artists who have addressed this subject – such as LaToya Ruby Frazier, Fred Lonidier and Allan Sekula – tend to work with film and photography. Harrison's turn to this material brings his own history into his art in a more poignant way than before.

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Bated Breath*, 2021, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Basel; photograph: Philipp Hänger

Harrison has become known for two series of works in recent years, both of which start with African sculptures and objects. Harrison acquires the sculptures in different ways, and it is hard to tell which, if any, are authentic ceremonial artefacts, what culture or region they came from, which are modern replicas carved in Africa for the tourist trade, and which were produced in the US for predominantly African American customers. For 'Dark Silhouettes' (2017-ongoing), he encases masks, figures and spears in sleek oblong resin blocks, standing these on the floor or mounting them on anodized aluminium and stainless-steel supports. For 'Dark Povera' (2017-ongoing), he scans the wooden objects and uses a 3-D printer to make replicas at low resolution. In working with objects of ambiguous origin, and in creating assisted readymades within minimalist blocks, Harrison emphasizes a sense of disconnect from Africa. In interviews and online videos for previous exhibitions he has said that the objects he encapsulates are 'obscured', as he said in a 2018 interview with the Kadist Foundation, and that they have 'lost the energy that was originally in them'. He talks about the desire, especially prevalent among diasporic communities, 'to be part of something' and of the trauma he experienced in finding that a 'true connection' is not there for him. Recalling museum displays of stolen artefacts inaccessible in their vitrines, Harrison's mounted resin blocks express this trauma very effectively.

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Headdress*, 2021, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Basel; photograph: Philipp Hänger

In 'Proto', however, Harrison has added another layer of complexity to these works by carving into the resin. Having scanned different objects or produced drawings of invented patterns, he then feeds that data into computer numerical control (CNC) machines which route and drill into his blocks. These machines are designed to fabricate car parts, but Harrison pushes them way past their normal functionality to make exquisite, expressive cuts in the resin surfaces, often recalling the patterns carved into the encased sculptures. These incisions cause unpredictable reflections and refractions, with the effect that the wooden objects no longer seem suffocated or buried, as was the case with Harrison's earlier works. Here, in pieces such as *Womb Retraced* (2021), it feels as though the artefacts' original energy breaks free. Harrison's deployment of the CNC machines used in Detroit's car-manufacturing plants rhymes with the way the city's techno DJs transformed the industrial sounds of its factories to forge an Afrofuturist-influenced music quite distinct from that coming out of other cities at the time.

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, 'Proto', 2021, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Basel; photograph: Philipp Hänger

In *Headdress* (2021), a worker's helmet is set - inverted and on a diagonal tilt - within a resin block that has been carved by a CNC machine in a jagged curve, which just about follows the arc of the helmet. Beneath this, the resin protrudes in the shape of a carved head. Harrison scanned a staff from the Penn Museum in Philadelphia at relatively low resolution, fed the data into a CNC machine, and programmed it to cut away at the resin block until the profile of the head remained. From the side, the resin block appears like a pregnant torso, swollen by the helmet and this head. After a history characterized by displacement, enslavement, precarious labour, strikes and unemployment, this feels like a prototype for a new life.

Matthew Angelo Harrison's **Proto** is on view at Kunsthalle Basel until 26 September 2021.

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