

# The Boston Globe

"Power and prototypes: Matthew Angelo Harrison at MIT List Visual Arts Center"

By Murray Whyte

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, "Echoic Sections," 2021. Installation view of Harrison's exhibition "Robota," now on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SALON 94. PHOTO: MEL TAING.

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**The Detroit-based artist positions organized labor and workers' rights as entombed relics, victims of post-industrial economy — and leaves little room for discussion.**

CAMBRIDGE — With his unsettling sculptural work, Matthew Angelo Harrison aims for so many conceptual bull's-eyes at once that he runs the risk of being a little too on the nose. "Robota," his solo exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, includes a mixed bag of objects — carved wooden African masks and figures; car parts; factory worker accoutrement like hard hats and gloves — cast in thick transparent blocks of resin, making them eerily lush and sleek.

They're uniformly conflicting, equal parts seductive beauty and ominous threat, though the pieces that use African objects have a clear-eyed particularity. Collectively, they call out a century's

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worth of ethnographic museum display that simultaneously fetishized and sterilized their significance. For decades, museums encased countless objects in vitrines as lifeless relics of colonial pillage — culture, safely under glass — a practice Harrison pushes to a suffocating extreme. Look closely, and you'll see bubbles along their rough surfaces, air trapped as though a last breath, flash-frozen in place.

The gesture is particularly dead-on when Harrison works in a dig to high Modernism. "Celestial Tower," a stack of fingery wooden combs encased in a clear resin tower. The work is a jab at the sculptor [Constantin Brancusi](#), one of the progenitors of the patronizing Modernist notion of [primitivism](#), an early 20th-century idea that imagined the aesthetics of tribal cultures as pure and unsullied by the taint of modernity.

Brancusi's "[Endless Column](#)," a stack of blocks tapered at top and bottom and first made of wood (there are now countless iterations), might be primitivism's most enduring symbol, a simplified form he intended as an emblem of human aesthetics at their most durably basic.



"Matthew Angelo Harrison: Robota" at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. MEL TAING.  
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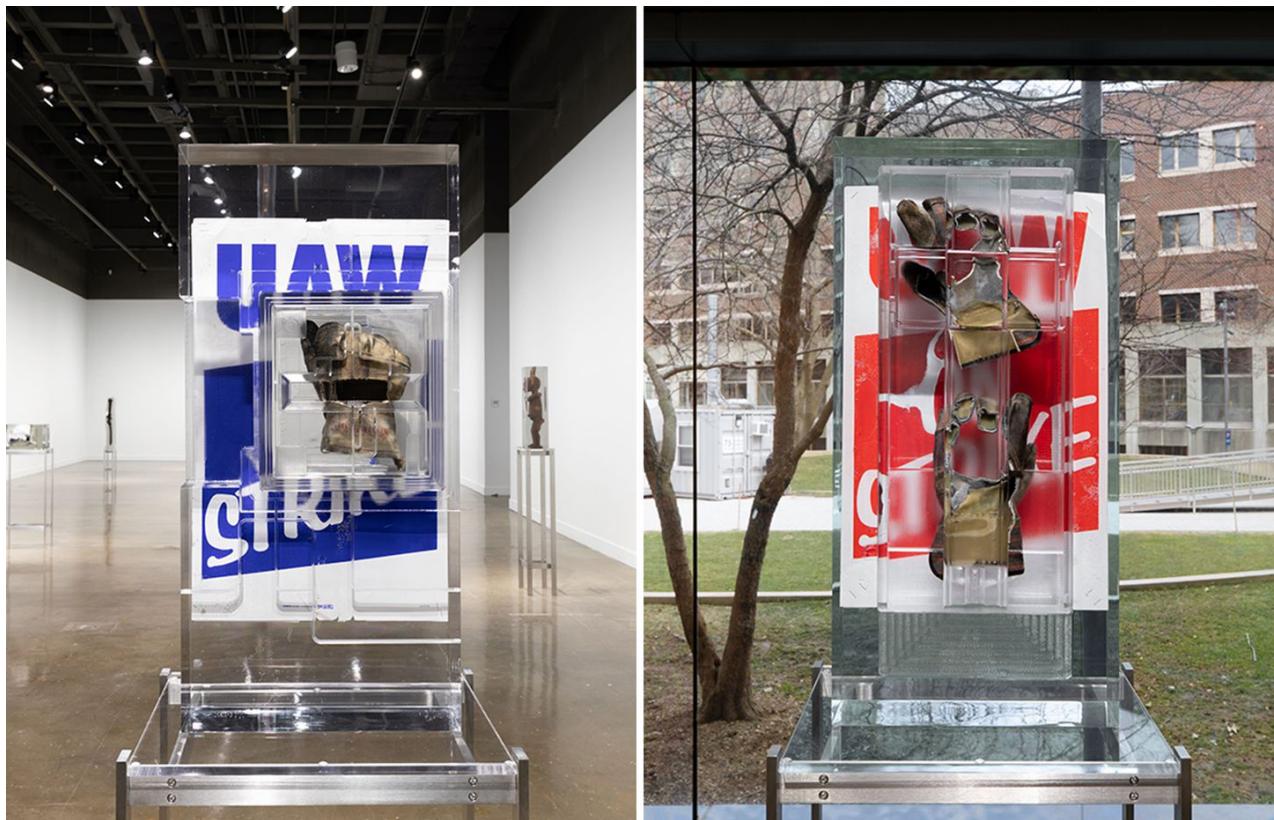
Harrison's material response, unmistakably deadening, is elegant critique, beating Brancusi at his own chilly formalist game. Not content to let it lie, the artist has carved into the block with a mechanical router, gouging so deep in spots as to expose raw wood. I wondered if this was gilding

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the lily. The gesture cranks somber, implicit disdain — at colonial violence, and the blithe display of its plunder — into explicit rage. How much is too much? Harrison doesn't draw that line, succumbing, maybe, to visceral feeling, one piece to the next.

Not every work here is as unbound. Harrison often chooses to direct your gaze by obscuring certain vantage points: "Echoic Sections," 2021, a slender wooden mask hanging suspended in its resin prison, is ridged on four of its six sides, offering a clear view only from either end; two sides of "Fields to Burrow," 2021, are fitted with the knobby surface of an outsize Lego block, forcing you to see the female wooden figure inside in profile only. These works, and others like them here, elicit a hyper-awareness of the structures that have always privileged a particular view, informed by the dynamic of winner and loser, conqueror and conquered.



From Left: Matthew Angelo Harrison, "The Blue People," 2021 (detail); "The Red People," 2021 (detail). Installation view of Harrison's exhibition "Robota," at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. RENNIE COLLECTION, VANCOUVER. PHOTO: MEL TIANG.  
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Other works fast-forward through history, connecting past plunder to its corollary in contemporary 20th-century capitalism. Harrison, a Detroit native, worked as a clay modeler for the Ford Motor Company until his burgeoning art career afforded him very early retirement from the field (he's in his early 30s). That makes him intimate both with production technology and the often-fractious realm of labor relations. Resin-trapped posters for labor actions by the United Auto Workers are sometimes joined by heavy work gloves; separate blocks feature hardhats.

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The works share an ethic of blunt dehumanization with the African pieces. The explicit idea — of organized labor and workers' rights as entombed relics, victims of post-industrial economy — is blunt and resonant amid the hard slog of current union efforts at new-economy behemoths such as [Amazon](#) and [Starbucks](#). (Harrison has routed into several of these works, too, a by-hand gesture in the context of the automotive industry, [an early adopter of replacing human workers with robots](#).)

The artist takes particular aim at Tesla, encasing headlights from a Model X in resin blocks tinted a shadowy near-black ("Wraith," 2021). The connection is easy, and chilling: Harrison looks from relics of an ugly past to a darkening future, ruled by overlords like [labor-antagonizing](#), Twitter-grandstanding Tesla CEO and billionaire Elon Musk. Meet the new boss. Same as the old boss. Just worse.

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