

ARTFORUM

"Jörg Scheller on Matthew Angelo Harrison"

By Jörg Scheller

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Patient Descent*, 2024, wooden figure, polyurethane resin, steel, acrylic, 60 1/8 x 20 5/8 x 24 3/4".

They look like cyborg animals carrying a burden as precious as it is mysterious: a phalanx of creatures with long, straight metal legs, on whose pelvises sharp-edged cuboid blocks rest like inorganic bodies. The cubes are transparent or semitransparent and enclose objects whose contours are sometimes clear, sometimes less so. Approaching the translucent masses, which turned out to be polyurethane resin blocks, one could observe inside them, among other things, machine parts, a baseball cap, and traditional wooden African masks and figures. Some of the encased objects are partly covered with a silvery mass (for instance, *Mother Still Holds You*, 2024), and air bubbles have congealed around most of the objects as if they were exhaling. One of the cubes, *Wraith*, 2021, shows precise, yet random-looking incisions.

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To build these works for his solo show "American Ghost," Detroit-based Matthew Angelo Harrison used the techniques and tools that he learned while working in the design department of an automotive company. He now employs them to address themes such as identity and colonialism. However, Harrison's approach is not to simply affirm and reinforce conventional understandings of these terms or deal with them in moralizing, essentializing ways. The artist seems to be more interested in the mutability of heritage and the blind spots in the heated discussions in today's universities and media. Yet if his sculptures go "beyond the debate on identity politics," as the exhibition text states, where do they actually go? While it is tempting to discuss them in terms of reminiscences of Minimal art or as allusions to discourses about the white cube as a space of alleged neutrality, farther-reaching alternatives exist. The encapsulated objects appear to be frozen, like artifacts preserved in glacial ice; the translucent resin blocks level out the genealogical differences between items such as the baseball cap in *Fog of American Ghosts*, 2024; a picket sign in *Riven*, 2024; and a traditional African figure in *Patient Descent*, 2024. Possible commonalities come to the fore. Those masks and other carvings, for instance: For Harrison, the issue is not about specific African cultures and identities, but about the abstractions the masks and figures have become in the course of being recontextualized time and again after functioning as objects of anthropological study and entering the Western market. As globally circulating objects with varying connotations, they have indeed moved "beyond identity." However, the same is true of the clothing, machine parts, or posters that Harrison processes in his oeuvre. While he evokes the struggles of American labor unions—*Riven* contains a strike sign from the United Auto Workers union—these things have long transcended their cultural origins and joined the global pilgrimage of signs.

Harrison's treatment of cultural items thus questions the phantasm of cultural ownership. As philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah put it in *The Lies That Bind* (2018), "The real problem isn't that it's difficult to decide who owns culture; it's that the very idea of ownership is the wrong model." In the works in "American Ghost," Harrison focuses on basic working conditions and economic environments, suggesting a shift in focus from the fixation on the symbolic and linguistic sphere of the academic New Left to the down-to-earth priorities of the Old Left. Presenting his works at the Kunsthalle Basel in 2021, Harrison said in an interview: "America is in a free fall, as far as its relationship to the working class and labor [is concerned], it's so conceptualized in our society that it doesn't belong to people anymore." I was reminded of rapper Ice-T's song with his crossover band Body Count: In the song "No Lives Matter" (2017), they point to common interests and shared suffering, with the focus on working and ownership conditions. In a time of strategically designed top-down polarization and commodified identity politics, such approaches are more urgent than ever.

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