

Matthew Angelo Harrison: Robota

March 25–July 24, 2022, Hayden Gallery



MIT List Visual
Arts Center

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In his sculptures and installations, Detroit-based artist Matthew Angelo Harrison traces intersections of labor, technology, and cultural heritage.

The objects he creates, as well as those he incorporates into his works, often speak to the impact of colonialism, capitalism, and racism while subtly addressing the aspects of identity formation and desire that underlie our relationship to objects. Harrison's experience working as a clay modeler at Ford Motor Company established a fundamental framework that has endured in his interest in the prototype—a design stage the artist describes as "an in-between state as both a reality and a possibility," and a concept that remains central to his artistic practice.¹ In part because of this experience, Harrison is an innovator with his tools as much as with his sculptural works: each piece is fully fabricated in his studio using specialized CNC routers or 3-D printers the artist builds from scratch.

These elegant, chromed custom machines are artworks, too, and have, on occasion, joined their sculptural output in exhibitions.

Throughout Harrison's sculptures—strategically chosen objects locked in shrines of solid resin; masks and busts 3-D-printed in mechanically extruded strings of soft clay—is a dynamic of possibility that drills its way, slowly, through the sediment of history. It is also realized quickly through the act of making: carving, casting, or printing with technologies that are unmistakably of this moment. This radical possibility opens cracks and channels in our received notions of sculpture in ways that summon art's histories, calling them in close for a hard conversation.



Above, and cover detail: *The Navigator*, 2021 (detail). Wooden sculpture, polyurethane resin, anodized aluminum, and acrylic, 18 1/2 x 8 1/8 x 7 3/4 in. (47 x 20.6 x 19.7 cm). Photo: Timothy Johnson

Harrison's work, particularly his *Dark Silhouette* series (2017–ongoing), has often been read through the African art objects or artifacts he encases in vitrine-like blocks of resin. For the artist, these masks, busts, figurines, or effigies, mostly attributed to unknown makers of West African origin, have implications that are simultaneously personal, cultural, and art-historical. Harrison and others have noted the significance of these traditional forms among African Americans and people of African heritage and their appeal and symbolic value not only as *objets d'art* but also objects of ancestry. As the artist has written of his uncle, who, in the 1970s, amassed a collection of wooden figures from the Guinean coast: "He curated his own idea of a homeland." For Harrison, too, the presence and revaluation of African objects open a conceptual space for

exploring what he calls "distance heritage" or "abstract ancestry."²

As curator and writer Jessica Bell Brown has observed, the title *Dark Povera*, which Harrison slyly bestows on his series of 3-D-printed clay renderings of African forms (2017–ongoing), is a nod to the postwar Italian Arte Povera movement. And yet Harrison highlights a contrast more than affinities. While the *poveristi* comfortably invoked the cultural heritage of Roman and Hellenic antiquity, *Dark Povera* confronts the severed lineage of Black descendants of chattel slavery, in the US and elsewhere. It also addresses the fact that cultural identification—for those whose ancestors were stolen and forcibly displaced—is by no means a given.³



Above: *BN-siamese 01*, 2019 (detail). Ceramic, anodized aluminum, and acrylic, 53 3/8 x 14 x 15 1/8 in. (135.6 x 35.6 x 38.4 cm)



Right: *Dark Silhouette: Manifold Composition*, 2018 (detail). Wooden sculpture from West Africa, polyurethane resin, and anodized aluminum, 58 3/4 x 13 x 13 in. (149.2 x 33 x 33 cm)



The Blue People, 2021 (detail). Paper, leather glove, and polyurethane resin, two parts, overall: 31 1/2 x 15 x 6 5/8 in. (80 x 38 x 17 cm). Photo: Timothy Johnson

In encasing traditional, hand-carved African art objects in transparent blocks, Harrison calls attention to the troubled histories by which these works have been removed from their original ceremonial, ritual, or religious function. He bores into this history, very literally, detailing his glossy surfaces with engraved ornamentation normally found on industrial objects produced in factory settings—forms that, transferred to this context, are, likewise, stripped of their function. The industrial language visible in the CNC router-carved detailing also points to potential, through reference to mechanisms that make energy transfer possible: the gears, forks, or synchronizers of engine blocks, transmissions, or hydraulic systems.

Harrison's List Center exhibition foregrounds a new body of work from the artist's *Dark Silhouette* series, in which auto-industry ephemera joins the encapsulated masks, effigies, totems, and spears of his previous series. Within this new group of CNC-carved resin blocks, we encounter auto-body parts, protective gear of automotive factory laborers, and signs from United Auto Workers' union strikes, all encased as readymades in resin forms that are shaped and transformed by the artist's mechanical hand.

In bringing these works together under the exhibition title *Robota*, Harrison is actually addressing the *human*. *Robota*, an Old Czech word for "forced labor," also gives us the word "robot."⁴ Harrison's interest

in its etymology stems from the ways that technological promise—and the desire for robotics or automation, in particular—calls into question ideas of the human. More specifically, it approaches the human as an exclusionary category that served to justify the dispossession, exploitation, and enslavement that emanated from Europe's Enlightenment and colonial projects. In other words, notions of "robotics," like notions of the "human," cannot be untangled from imperial histories of enslavement and extraction, from present-day struggles of laboring bodies, or from current debates around automation within industrial manufacturing and AI in our everyday lives. In the context of the United States (a nation whose wealth was built through the exploitation of labor under slavery and land grabs made possible by settler colonialism and genocide), engineering projects since the early 1900s have shared in a fantasy around robotics yoked to the history of racial slavery and the myth of a worker who cannot rebel.

If one looks closely, engraved in these new sculptures' CNC-rendered cavities are documents of roboticization: kinetic maps of humanoid hands and other technical designs are overlaid on the material relics

of human laboring bodies. The protective items we encounter (both the gear and the labor-organizing ephemera) have, like the African objects, lost their function: not only are the workers who once wore them no longer required, but the protections they most needed exceeded their attire. "Our society doesn't see labor as a human activity,"⁵ Harrison has quipped, and his scrutiny of the dehumanization of labor—this expropriation of the very human and intimate expression of people's effort and time and talent—grows more insistent in these recent works.

And yet, Harrison maintains an interest in the application of robotics within his process, and the possibility inherent to that is as central to his thinking as it has ever been. "I'm reading traces and also leaving them," he notes. The traces he leaves behind make these objects prototypes: their function, value, and presence are re-envisioned, their possible futures opened up for infinite development or iteration—even, perhaps, for a different way forward. With each work is a physical or semiotic prototype, a new beginning, and with each successive iteration, in turn, is another point of departure for new possibilities, revelatory and recuperative.

- 1 Matthew Angelo Harrison, "Artificial Families: Matthew Angelo Harrison in Conversation with Tausif Noor," in *Colored People Time* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2020), 221.
- 2 Matthew Angelo Harrison, as quoted by Diamond Stingily in "Matthew Angelo Harrison," in *Songs for Sabotage: New Museum 2018 Triennial* (New York: Phaidon, 2018), 112.
- 3 Jessica Bell Brown, "Human Resources," in *Matthew Angelo Harrison*, ed. Natalie Bell and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 114–28.
- 4 The word and modern concept of "robot," as we know it, is attributed to Czech playwright Karel Čapek, whose science-fiction play from 1920, *R.U.R. (Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti)* [Rossum's Universal Robots], depicted a factory that produces robots with robot laborers. Prior to Čapek's use, *robota* (and its Slavic and Germanic cognates) described a Central European serfdom system in which tenants paid rent through forced labor.
- 5 Matthew Angelo Harrison, Conversation with the author, September 24, 2020.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Matthew Angelo Harrison (b. 1989, United States; lives and works in Detroit) completed his BFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2012. Solo exhibitions of his work have taken place at: Kunsthalle Basel (2021); Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University (2018); Atlanta Contemporary, Culture Lab, Detroit (2017); and the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2016). Harrison's work has also been included in important group exhibitions at the Thoma Foundation (2021); Cranbrook Art Museum (2020); Whitney Museum of American Art, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2019); the New Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2018); the Studio Museum in Harlem, Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2017); and the Jewish Museum, New York (2016).

Matthew Angelo Harrison: Robota is organized by Natalie Bell, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

Harrison's exhibition is complemented by the artist's first monograph (MIT Press, 2021), and this brochure's text includes excerpts from Bell's introduction. The catalogue was coedited by Bell and Elena Filipovic, designed by Practise, and copublished by MIT List Visual Art Center, Kunsthalle Basel, and MIT Press. Contributors include Taylor Renee Aldridge, Bell, Jessica Bell Brown, DeForrest Brown, Jr., and Filipovic.

Left: *Headdress*, 2021 (detail). Plastic hard hat, polyurethane resin, stainless steel, and acrylic, 55 1/8 x 11 1/2 x 11 1/8 in. (140 x 29.2 x 28.3 cm).
Photo: Timothy Johnson

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Gallery Conversation:
Matthew Angelo Harrison
Friday, March 25, 4:00 PM

LEARN MORE

Atanasoski, Neda, and Kalindi Vora. *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Future*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.

Bell, Natalie, and Elena Filipovic, eds. *Matthew Angelo Harrison*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021.

Chude-Sokei, Louis. *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015.

Lavender III, Isiah. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

Rhee, Jennifer. *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

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Front cover:

The Navigator, 2021 (detail).

All images of artwork courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

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