

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Matthew Angelo Harrison: *Robota*

March 25–July 24, 2022

Hayden Gallery

Detroit-based artist Matthew Angelo Harrison explores intersections of labor, technology, and cultural heritage in his austere, cast-resin sculptures that encapsulate African objects as well as auto-industry ephemera.

Cambridge, MA—March 8, 2022—This spring, the MIT List Visual Arts Center presents a solo exhibition of recent works by Detroit-based artist Matthew Angelo Harrison. In his sculptures and installations, 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.

The artist’s List Center exhibition includes work from his *Dark Silhouette* series (2017–ongoing), which initially featured animal skeletal remains and wood sculptures from West Africa—masks, effigies, totems, and spears—encased in solid resin blocks. In a recent shift in this series, Harrison’s resin encapsulations also feature material traces of the automotive industry and its labor organizing—car parts such as headlights, protective gear of factory workers (helmets, boots, and clothing), and signs from United Auto Workers’ union strikes. Carving into these resin sculptures using precise, high-speed, computer-controlled cutting tools (CNC routers and mills that he designs and builds himself), Harrison riffs on the auto industry’s manufacturing technology.

For the artist, the presence and revaluation of African objects open a conceptual space for exploring the severed lineage of Black descendants of chattel slavery—what he has called “distance heritage” or “abstract ancestry.” 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-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 offers the full range of this series to date. The works on view encapsulate both auto-industry ephemera and African objects. In bringing these works together under the exhibition title *Robota* (a Czech word for “forced labor” that also gives us the word “robot”), Harrison examines the devaluation and dehumanization of labor amid the promise of robotics. Mindful of the historic use of “human” as an exclusionary category to justify dispossession, exploitation, and enslavement during Europe’s Enlightenment and colonial projects, Harrison alludes to the ways early engineering projects shared in a fantasy around robotics, yoked to the history of racialized slavery and



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the myth of a worker who cannot rebel. In other words, ideas of “robotics,” like notions of the “human,” cannot be untangled from imperial histories, present-day labor struggles, or current debates around artificial intelligence and automation. By using manufacturing technologies in his own process, however, Harrison also implicates his works in the troubled potential of robotics and mechanization. Manifesting these ambiguities, his works become prototypes—experimental sites of reevaluation and reassessment—even as they remain anchored in human history and labor.

Harrison’s exhibition is complemented by the artist’s first monograph, *Matthew Angelo Harrison* (2021), edited by Natalie Bell and Elena Filipovic, designed by Practise, and published by MIT Press, MIT List Visual Art Center, and Kunsthalle Basel. Contributors include Taylor Renee Aldridge, Bell, Jessica Bell Brown, DeForrest Brown Jr., and Filipovic.

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

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