

PRESS RELEASE

Matthew Angelo Harrison
American Ghost

April 13 – May 25, 2024

Opening on Friday, April 12, 6 – 8 pm

Artist talk with Matthew Angelo Harrison and Joshua Amissah, 6.30 pm

Waldmannstrasse 6, CH-8001, Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present *American Ghost*, its first solo exhibition with the US-American artist Matthew Angelo Harrison.

In the current discourse on contemporary art, theories and reflections on postcolonialism and identity politics play an important role, focusing on key issues such as discrimination, oppression, and cultural and material appropriation. Against this discursive framework, Matthew Angelo Harrison takes up perspectives that go beyond the debate on identity politics and racial violence by situating artifacts from the *past*, in this case traditional African sculptures and masks, into the technological *present*, in a sense preserving them for a potentially dystopian *future*.

Harrison lives in his hometown of Detroit, a city marked by the boom and bust of the auto industry and whose population is nearly eighty percent African American. In a sense, Detroit provides the socio-urban foundation for his work. After studying art, he worked for a time in the automotive industry, prototyping in a Ford design lab. By modifying the technologies and equipment used there, he transfers them to the art context. Using protective clothing such as jackets, helmets, and gloves, as well as relics of the union struggle kept by Harrison's mother and her colleagues, he brings into focus a social dimension that historically meant slave labor for African Americans.

Traditional African masks and sculptures are at the heart of Harrison's work. African-American collectors often see them as an identity-building bridge to their cultural roots. In ethnology, if they have not disappeared into the depots of ethnological museums, they become material for scientific insight and knowledge. Power-hungry colonizers saw them as prey to support their claims to dominance. Colonial traders used them to further their financial interests. Modern art appropriated their formal vocabulary but interpreted them as expressions of a primitivist worldview.

In *American Ghost*, Harrison encapsulates African sculptures and masks – most of which were donated from private collections or bought from galleries – and found personal items from the US labor unions in transparent resin. While art exhibitions usually use protective glass and pedestals as presentation tools, here the resin cuboids enclosing the artifacts and the pedestals on which they stand are part of the art. In terms of materials, production methods and aesthetics, heterogeneous elements collide. Organic materials such as wood, sometimes straw and, occasionally, animal bones, are juxtaposed against polyurethane and metal; the cool, minimalist aesthetic of the pedestal opposes the expressive nature of the masks and sculptures; and traditional craftsmanship is contrasted against mechanical and computer-aided production. The encapsulation process itself results in an interplay between the respective aggregate states of the materials.

The sculptor deliberately places the found artifacts in relation to the technological present day. In previous exhibitions he installed self-built 3D printers, which he not only exhibited but also demonstrated, intentionally printing scanned tribal helmets with code errors to create different versions of the same template. Using CNC machines – tools with computerized control – Harrison works on the surfaces of the resin blocks, creating linear ornaments, holes, and constructive "mortices" that connect the inside to the outside. He repeatedly breaks the strict rectangular geometry with cuts, protrusions, and new contours.

Casting African and labour union artifacts in blocks of synthetic resin opens up a wide functional and semantic spectrum. The transparent resin makes the encased object stand out from its surroundings and has a certain "refining" effect - which is why it is used in jewelry design, for example. Just as amber preserves insects and plants for centuries, the resin protects the encased masks and sculptures from the environment and preserves their

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condition. The expressiveness of Harrison's masks brings them to life; for example, in the earlier sculpture *Bated Breath* (2021), a mask surrounded by air bubbles is depicted with its mouth open as if gasping for air, evoking George Floyd's "I can't breathe." The African-American had been strangled to death by police officers in 2020.

Riven (2024), with its encapsulated union posters, or *Fog of American Ghosts* (2024), with its red worker's cap, stand out as singular. They build a bridge to social reality – the ongoing labor disputes in Detroit – and attribute the magical function of African artifacts to the paraphernalia of labor. At the same time, the encapsulated African sculptures, such as *Mother Still Holds You* (2024) or *Sister Covered in Tears* (2024), and masks, such as *Patient Decent* (2024), or *Carrying Your Shadow* (2024), unfold their expressive power and anthropological potential in the social context of the US working class, beyond their original tribal attributes and functions in Africa.

It would be obvious to understand Harrison's turn to traditional African artifacts and labor union items primarily as an African-American search for identity and his references to socio-political reality in the sense of identity-political strategies. However, this perspective is challenged by Harrison's explicit self-positioning as a post-identity artist who rejects the reduction of the discourse to a singular characteristic – the exploration of postcolonial African heritage holds distinct significance for both Africans and African-Americans, albeit for varying reasons. In *American Ghost*, the artist approaches this complex issue from a US-American viewpoint, infused with a subtle touch of irony.

Heinz Schütz

Harrison was born in 1989 in Detroit, MI, US, where he lives and works. He has been the subject of solo exhibitions at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, US (2022); SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, US (2022); Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, CH (2021); Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, US (2018); Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, GA, US (2017); Culture Lab, Detroit, MI, US (2017); and Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Detroit, MI, US (2016). Harrison's work has been featured in group exhibitions at MUDAM, Luxembourg, LU (2024); MUSEION, Bolzano, IT (2023); Blanton Museum, Austin, TX, US (2023); Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH, US (2022); Thoma Foundation, Santa Fe, NM, US (2021); Cranbrook Art Museum, Detroit, MI, US (2020); MCA Chicago, Chicago, IL, US (2020); MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, US (2020); and Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, NL (2020). In 2024, he will participate at the 15th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, KR.

Harrison's work is represented in the collections of institutions including the Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, US; Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation, Chicago, IL, US; Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI, US; de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA, US; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI, US; Galeries Lafayette Foundation – Fonds de dotation Famille Moulin, Paris, FR; The Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Indianapolis, IN, US; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL, US; The Joyner/Giuffreda Collection, San Francisco, CA, US; JPMorgan Chase Art Collection, New York, NY, US; Kadist, San Francisco/Paris Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, FR; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL, US; Museum Ludwig, Cologne, DE; National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C., US; University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI, US; The Rennie Collection, Vancouver, B.C., CA; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US.

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