

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Galleries

MARTIN PURYEAR

Through Jan. 30. Matthew Marks,
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There are six sculptures in Martin Puryear's outstanding exhibition of recent work at Matthew Marks Gallery — four fewer than in his show there in 2014. This may explain the spatial expansiveness that prevails. Entering it can feel like stepping outdoors, onto a big, open field. But this effect may also reflect the monumental internal scale of many of Mr. Puryear's objects as well as their individual magnetism. Each draws us into its own world of materials and techniques, forms and meanings, creating a kind of isolation, or spell that distances it from whatever is around it. Some of this spell derives from the way the works slow down time, and thought, by being evidently handmade at one stage or another, which blurs the line between art and craft, and downplays traditional artistic ego.

Few sculptors of the past century can match the sheer diversity of Mr. Puryear's art. Equally significant as its physical variety is its thematic



MARTIN PURYEAR, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Martin Puryear's "A Column for Sally Hemings" (2019) is one of six sculptures featured in the artist's solo exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery.

and imaginative range. With remarkable ease, his work conjures and combines different histories of art, craft and utilitarian objects; of people and nations; of conflicts large

and small — and embeds them in form, often with the help of a pointed title. (For that reason, it helps to look at this show with a checklist, which can be downloaded from the gallery's

QR code scanner.) Why miss, for example, the main meaning of one of the most beautiful and evocative works here, from 2019, by remaining ignorant of its title, “A Column for Sally Hemings”? Its dedicatee was an enslaved woman of mixed race who belonged to Thomas Jefferson and whose six children were in all likelihood fathered by him.

These six works, all recent, are being shown in New York for the first time. But five of them were among those seen in the exhibition “Liberty/Libertà” at the Venice Biennale in 2019, where Mr. Puryear represented the United States. Not surprisingly, all touch on different, often American power dynamics — the Civil War, slavery, Africa and colonialism — as well as the context of the pavilion itself. It was inspired in layout, brick cladding and neo-Classical columns by Monticello, the plantation home that Jefferson designed and began building for himself in 1768.

Still the sculptures lose little of their punch in the relatively stripped-down space of an art gallery. They also reflect Mr. Puryear’s artistic range, setting him off in different directions: toward enlargement or miniaturization; architecture or craft; made or found (and remade) objects; inaccessible interior volumes or ones used as stage sets for elaborate narratives.

“Tabernacle” is an enlarged version of a cap worn by Union Army infantrymen. Its interior, visible through three holes, contrasts domestic luxury (Indian chintz fabric and makore

wood from Africa) with military might in the form of a cannon equipped with a mirror-finish ball whose reflections distort much of what can be seen within. Similarly “New Voortrekker” recalls the Boer settlers of what is now South Africa with an exquisitely miniaturized hybrid of covered wagon, cart and clapboard house (replete with Surrealistic spiral staircase and mirror). It is being pulled up a slope by a blocky toylike truck, making note that the depredations on Indigenous Africans that the Voortrekkers helped start continues.

The volume of “Aso Oke” is breathtakingly open. It outlines the shape and volume of a traditional Yoruba hat with a soft folded-over top that remains in wide use today. Mr. Puryear’s version began as a grid of rattan tied with twine and was then cast in bronze. The overlapping layers of the grid conjure a magical star chart, intimating ingenuity, adventure and heavenly infinitude. “Happy Jack,” the only work here not shown in Venice, responds to “Aso Oke” with a closed yet equally clear volume. It suggests the upper half of a giant wine jug sheathed in basketry — another feat of craft cast in bronze. But its shape is more flask than jug, which turns the form into a headless torso that is both appealing and going to seed.

The subject of “Hibernian Testosterone” (2018), the show’s one wall piece, is toxic masculinity in general. It consists of an immense pair of antlers cast in aluminum and painted white attached to an

inverted cross — of wood. Very Georgia O’Keeffe. The antlers — which resemble gorgeous splashes of milk — belonged to an Irish elk whose excess of testosterone contributed to the size of its headgear and eventual extinction.

Like “Hibernian Testosterone,” “A Column for Sally Hemings” lacks an interior volume and joins two unlike parts: a white fluted column, like those at Monticello, with a shackle-like cast iron spike driven into its top. The combination shocks but also suggests a beautiful brown woman wearing a white skirt, and seen from the side, a tall dignified bird. Mr. Puryear’s meanings are as open-ended as his means are meticulously finite.

ROBERTA SMITH