

Martin Puryear
Parasol Unit, London.
18th September- 6th December 2017

Intricate discussions about methods of woodworking and formal decisions about sculpture characterised Martin Puryear's lectures in the early 1980's in Chicago. He didn't, at that time overtly 'play the race card' but you could see plain as day he was a Black man talking about art in a divided city. As Thelma Golden says, contexts change. The current formidable show at Parasol Unit bills Puryear's work as identity politics and is staged to overlap Tate Modern's, 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power'.

It is precisely the un-alienated labour of woodworking as sculpture which is consistently the crux of meaning of his sculpture. However the abstract nature of the work provokes a myriad of visual associations for the viewer which sometimes remains fluid and sometimes condenses towards a cultural definition. An early work, *Untitled, 1978, African Blackwood and Vine*, is small scale and consists of what appears to be two intensely black, burnished kidneys conjoined by a textured, veined umbilical. As abstraction it is evocative of the interior of a body in a universal sense, yet its' blackness forces an exterior reading. Exposed viscera on the outside of a Black male body has connotations which are possibly erotic but certainly existentially very striking and jarring. This work encapsulates the dual nature of Puryear's current stance as an 'open' yet politically defined artist.

Puryear has cited W.E.B. DuBois' notion of a 'double-consciousness', where people of African descent read and understand themselves through ideological models of historically dominant cultures. For example Puryear as an African American, would have studied Modernist Primitivism in the form of say, Picasso's African masks as Cubism. This then is an ironic experience of received consciousness where the source of Puryear's culture is obtained second hand: a hand-me-down. To then learn carpentry in Africa opens the possibility of another consciousness one which enables cultural ownership. Martin Puryear is a generous artist who has pointed the way to the resolve of a difficult cultural riddle through the politics of woodwork.

Big Phrygian, 2010-2014, is a large scale, painted red sculpture made of cedar. The shape is fascinatingly worked to make the limbs of a cedar tree appear as a giant fabric hat. Considerable problem-solving must have been applied to the creation of this shape which implies a mathematical, geometric form which actually humorously flops over into folds akin to fabric. Rather than a design/build conceit I think the making process is likely more meditative than technical. The title forces the interpretation in this instance. The Phrygian cap is associated historically with liberty; it was worn by the republicans in the French Revolution, by slaves in the Hattian slave revolt. It is also the cap worn by the prankster folk hero of Brazil, the one-legged Saci-Perere. Its' scale reminds me in the context of London, of Gulliver's hat, though a different shape, from Swift's satire about the convolutions of liberty.

As contrast to the invoked titling of the *Big Phrygian*, the evocative sculpture, *Untitled, 1995* leaves the viewer with an interpretive task. Wire mesh, covered in tar with a tar-smear wooden base, this larger than human scale elongated blob has the appearance of an abstracted and caricatured head or figure, a similar shape to one of the ears of Disney's 'Oswald, The Lucky Rabbit'. The imagery of cartoons can lead to murky undertones of stereotype as humour. This sculpture, almost as a reprieve, remains undefined. Tar has many associations, it is a by-product of a fossil-fuelled economy, bitumen was used to make the first photograph, tar and feathering was a medieval shaming practice associated with slavery, in this context though tar signifies blackness. It could evoke perhaps the 'Tar Baby' in Brer Rabbit stories, an enigma contrived as a prankster trap: once

touched it is impossible to get away from, it sticks to the viewer. The difficulty with this interpretation is that it could be considered a racial slur. My dialogue with the sculpture then tends towards an intimidating knot of political correctness. The accessible abstraction of Puryear's work inevitably hangs uneasily with its politically persistent sub-text. My critical response is to ask, what is the relationship between Du Bois' double-consciousness experienced by Black people and a wider Marxist sense of reification and false consciousness?

Whoever the viewer, the content remains anxious; it endlessly reflects the complexity of identity. As abstraction the sculptures appear essentially open one minute, sugar-coated the next. My responses flip-flop from defensive to absorption. The importance of the sculpture is that its connotations are necessarily jittery and problematic, while formally experienced as calm and resolved. They are both homely and unhomely, a contradiction resolved by Martin Puryear figuring out in a straight forward way and in a way that is Byzantine with evocation, how to join pieces of wood together.