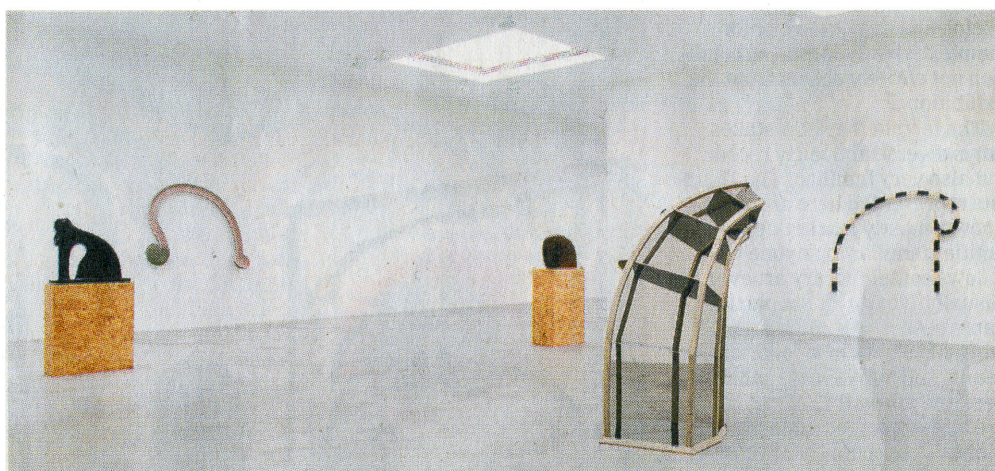


MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Art in Review



MARTIN PURYEAR, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Martin Puryear's sculptures at Matthew Marks. From left, "Shackled" (2014), "Shell Game" (2014), "Up and Over" (2014), "Faux Vitrine" (2014) and "Phrygian Plot" (2012).

Martin Puryear

Matthew Marks Gallery
502 and 522 West 22nd Street,
Chelsea
Through Jan. 10

Late in long careers, some artists settle for delivering signatures rather than fresh work, but not Martin Puryear. His first solo show was in 1972, and for his latest, which is also his debut at Matthew Marks Gallery, he has come up with an exploratory group of nine sculptures and two large etchings, all ingenious variations on a single historical image, the Phrygian cap, the soft, red conical hat that became an emblem of anti-loyalist resistance during the French Revolution. The extended political implications of the headwear caught Mr.

Puryear's attention when he saw an antique print of a black man wearing one of these "liberty caps," a reminder that slavery in France and its colonies was officially, if briefly, abolished by the revolution. (Napoleon later reinstated it).

The show's centerpiece is a nearly five-foot-tall cedar carving, painted a rich vermilion, of the cap's shape, with its distinctive forward-flopped peak: That thick-based tapering curve is the show's motif. It's there on a large scale in a tall, openwork, shelterlike structure of bent and roped-together saplings. It's small and compressed in a squat iron piece that looks like a locked manacle. And it's most complicated in "Faux Vitrine," which resembles a curving display case or bookcase with

shelves set at an impractical tilt: They can hold nothing.

To compound a sense of disorientation, the vitrine is two-sided. One side of its skewed grid of shelves is painted in dim pastel shades of Mondrian's utopian red, yellow and blue. On the other, the grid is composed of mirrorlike plates of polished steel: As you circle the piece, you see your own reflection, but fragmented and distorted, the way the vaunted universal concept of freedom is broken up and elusive depending on when, where and by whom it is defined.

No such message is specified; maybe it's not really there. What is there, and has consistently been throughout Mr. Puryear's career, is work that's political, playful, sweet to the eye and deep.

HOLLAND COTTER