

# ARTNEWS

REVIEWS: NEW YORK



Martin Puryear. *Big Phrygian*, 2010–14, red cedar and paint, 58" x 40" x 76".

## MARTIN PURYEAR

MATTHEW MARKS  
NOVEMBER 8 - JANUARY 10

Martin Puryear's first solo show with Matthew Marks was a virtuoso riff on the theme of the Phrygian cap, consisting of ten sculptures and two etchings that take the 18th-century symbol of liberty far beyond its political connotations. True, Puryear did discover, as he was at work on the monumental *Big Phrygian* (2010–14), an image of a black man wearing a similar red cap with the caption "Moi libre aussi" (I too am free), but there was no cause-and-effect relationship involved. The slave is evoked, but Puryear is not mounting the barricades.

What he did do was transform the Phrygian cap into a leitmotif: every piece in the show alluded to it, but did so both seriously and playfully. This was especially the case in the room-size *Untitled* (2014), a huge playground construction made of hardwood saplings. This sculpture transforms the cap into a "thinking cap," one we might enter, scale, and transform into a model of our own mind. It may well represent Puryear's statement on the

dangers of freedom: total freedom is also total anarchy.

The same notion, that the cap is an aid to reflection, recurs in the *Faux Vitrine* (2014), a stand-alone piece made of mirror-polished stainless steel. Here Puryear metamorphosed the cap into a tower of mirrors, perhaps to jar us with the idea that merely donning a cap does not really change who we are, that the cap may be a disguise. The piece inevitably evoked a clown's hat, which in turn recalled the fact that the Phrygian cap is the favorite chapeau of Mr. Punch, sublime mischief-maker, libertine, and criminal.

In terms of Puryear's career, these caps are a gust of artistic liberation: light, full of fun, intellectually complex. This artist's hallmark is elegance, but here we found a sensibility akin not to the 18th-century revolutionaries of the Phrygian cap, but to witty, sensual artists like Houdon, Fragonard, and Boucher. Puryear is a purveyor of Rococo mirth joyfully tweaking the nose of sculptural solemnity.

ALFRED MAC ADAM