

Art in America

MARTIN PURYEAR

Matthew Marks

If Martin Puryear's distinct style of minimalist sculpture has earned him widespread recognition these last several decades, it is partly because his work is so deeply satisfying. Densely allusive and technically pristine, the new sculptures exhibited at two of Matthew Marks's four New York galleries assert the talents of a master still in his prime.

The exhibition's 10 sculptures take as their unifying conceit the rather loaded and obliquely humorous shape of the Phrygian cap: a limp, conical hat that droops forward at its top. (Two small etchings on view were studies of the same shape.) Red Phrygian caps were worn by 18th-century French revolutionaries, who referred to the hat as the "red cap of liberty" because of its association with the headgear worn by emancipated slaves in ancient Rome.

Each sculpture was an interpretation of this basic form. The red-painted *Big Phrygian* (2010-14) is a roughly 5-foot-tall mass of red cedar, whose every surface, crease and bulge is hand-finished to machinelike perfection. *Up and Over* (2014) realizes the shape in a smaller, more bashful work of rust-colored ductile iron; *Cascade* (2013) and *Phrygian Spirit* (2012-14), by contrast, abstractly render the cap's curving contours with thin, spooling wooden strips that are as crisp, fluid and confident as the marks of a Japanese ink brush.

The African-American artist has noted, according to the gallery, that the cap accrued additional significance for him when he came upon a 1794 stipple engraving after he had already begun *Big Phrygian*. The engraving, made by Jean-Louis Darcis in the year France first emancipated its slaves, depicts a black man wearing the red cap, and includes the statement, in French, "I, too, am free." (Slavery was restored by Napoleon eight years later, and then abolished for good in 1848.) But visually and as a symbol, the cap conjures other associations. It appears on the Cuban coat of arms and on the heads of garden gnomes. There is also the unavoidable connotation of a flaccid phallus—perhaps suggesting for Puryear the impotence of "liberty" as we experience it and allow it to be defined. Several pieces, with their slouching postures and smooth surfaces, recall the ambiguously gendered genitalia referenced in Louise Bourgeois's work.



Martin Puryear: *Big Phrygian*, 2010-14, painted red cedar, 58 by 40 by 76 inches; at Matthew Marks.

The son of a self-taught woodworker, Puryear learned to build guitars, boats and furniture as a young man; he sculpts with a craftsman's attention to precision and durability, often spending years on a sculpture. Rather than outsourcing labor to assistants or industrial fabricators, he drafts each work by hand, then cuts, planes and fits its components himself. The sculptures are Brancusi-esque in their ability to evoke so much with such simple means. But as with a well-crafted instrument, the interior spaces that you don't see are equally important. Puryear foregrounds these normally concealed aspects in *Faux Vitrine* (2014), a 6-foot-tall conical structure consisting of shelflike scaffolding in polished steel and painted wood.

In every work on view, the results were as robust on close inspection as they were from afar. *Question* (2010), an impressive sculpture displayed on its own in the smaller Marks gallery, thrills with its lush curves and twisting contours—a complex assembly of dozens of interlocking sections of tulip poplar, pine and ash wood. It is a prime example of what Michael Auping, in his catalogue essay for Puryear's 2007 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art, called one of the artist's "most pointed contributions to sculpture"—namely, "bringing the eye and the hand of the woodworker to Minimalism's precise forms."

—Austin Considine