

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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HYPERALLERGIC

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ESSAYS • WEEKEND

John Keats and Martin Puryear, and the Latter's Renewal of "Negative Capability"

by John Yau on January 18, 2015



Martin Puryear, "Big Phrygian" (2010–14), painted red cedar 58 x 40 x 76 inches (all images © Martin Puryear, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

Recently, and rather unexpectedly, the term "negative capability," which was coined by the poet John Keats, came to mind. Was this an outlandish association to make while looking at Martin Puryear's debut exhibition at [Matthew Marks](#) (November 8, 2014–January 10, 2015)? After all, what does the 19th-century English Romantic poet, Keats, who died at the age of twenty-five, and who published only around 50 not particularly well-received poems in his short lifetime, have to do with a late-20th century black sculptor in his mid-seventies, who had a well-received retrospective in 2007 at the [Museum of Modern Art](#), New York? Other than their deep belief in craft and the thing itself (the poem or sculpture), which these days is considered old fashioned, Puryear and Keats seem to share little.

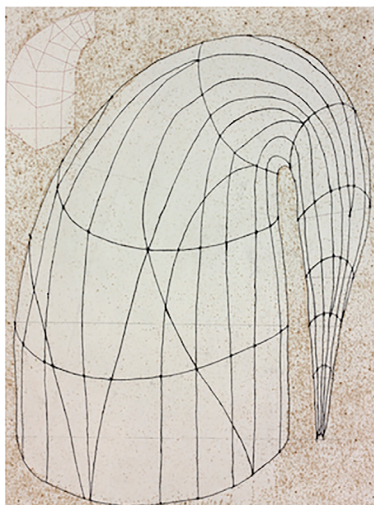
And yet, for some not immediately apprehensible reason, while I was looking at a group of nine thematically related sculptures and two prints at Marks's 522 West 22nd Street space, all of which were inspired by the pliable red Phrygian cap, I thought back to Keats's belief that the receptivity to experience could enable an artist to transcend historical circumstances. While admittedly the association initially seemed far-fetched, the more I reread Keats and researched the backstory of the red Phrygian cap, the more I realized that there was a deep bond connecting these two disparate figures across time. And, perhaps even more importantly, as I unraveled the connection between these two men, I realized in some concrete way that Puryear had surpassed the achievement of his previous work, while transcending and expanding a variety of contexts in which his work had been seen. It was clear to me that this new development in Puryear's work demanded to be declared and acknowledged, which is to say spelled out.

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According to the gallery's press release, the sculptures and prints "were inspired by the form of the felt Phrygian cap, or 'liberty cap' [...] was worn as a sign of resistance during the French Revolution and adopted as a symbol of liberty during the American Revolution." It goes on to quote Puryear about the subject, which is depicted on the card by an 18th-century print of a black man wearing a red "liberty cap" with the caption, "*Moi libre aussi*" ("I am free too") beneath him:

Although I was certainly aware of numerous depictions of this cap in European and early American art when I began work on the *Big Phrygian* sculpture, I only discovered the engraved image of the black man wearing the red Phrygian cap — the image that appears on the exhibition announcement — years afterwards.

As a symbol used by various individuals and societies to mean freedom and the pursuit of liberty, the red Phrygian cap marks a new kind of source for Puryear. It is both what he did and what he didn't do with the symbol that conveys the nature of the breakthrough he has made in his art.



Martin Puryear, "Untitled (State 2)" (2014), color softground etching with drypoint and Chine collé on Somerset White paper, 35 x 28 inches

"Big Phrygian" (2010–14) is made of sections of red cedar that have been joined together in the form of the soft, pointed cap. The curling upper section is not as tightly sealed as the lower one, with visible seams that prevent the sculpture being read as a single unified form. The visible seams underscore the changes that occur in the form as it curls out while shrinking in space. "Big Phrygian" has been painted many coats of red veneer, with parts textured like felt. Its form is a sensual and visual paradox, which the artist explores in a variety of different ways in the other related sculptures. Like the soft, felt cap that inspired it, the form diminishes rather swiftly in circumference the further it gets from the base.

Typically, this means that the spiraling form both extends and withdraws, simultaneously rising, diminishing, and moving outward into the surrounding space; as the top grows smaller, it seems to pull back inside itself, eventually balling into a small, ineffectual fist. With the outward movement of the piece culminating in withdrawal and consolidation, the viewer is invited to contemplate how the tension animating "Big Phrygian" is intrinsic to its meaning.

In the cast ductile iron sculpture, "Up and Over" (2014), a curving, seemingly soft form rises up, while leaning forward slightly, until it suddenly flops over, at once clownish and futile. The combination of hard material and soft appearance of "Up and Over" underscores the contradiction that is basic to the form. It can neither overcome its material status nor defy gravity.



Martin Puryear, "Faux Vitrine" (2014), mirror polished stainless steel, curly maple, black walnut, marine plywood, Japan color 73 3/4 x 46 1/2 x 40 3/4 inches

In the two-sided sculpture "Faux Vitrine" (2014), which resembles a display case bending over, as if pulled by its own gravitational force, Puryear has made a piece with shelves that changes radically as we walk around it. The polished steel on one side mirrors and breaks up our reflection, while the painted shelves on the other side face away, seemingly unaffected by the mirror-like surfaces. There is neither an ideal vantage point nor any continuity in "Faux Vitrine."

The visual and physical contradictions arrived at by Puryear in the three pieces that I have briefly described posit a complex nexus of possible meanings in the history of sculpture, including a convincing counterpoint to the verticality found in the different versions Constantin Brancusi did of his "Endless Column," beginning with "Version I" (1918), made of carved oak, in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Doubt and fruitlessness are bound up in the identity of each of Puryear's, as are struggle and determination. None of these possibilities, however, supplant the others.

What enhances all of these possibilities is the backstory that Puryear evokes in his allusion to the Phrygian cap, but refuses to nail down. Known for the thoroughness that he brings to bear in all of his work, it is clear from Puryear's statement in the press release that he was engaged with the subject for many years before discovering the engraving. In fact, I want to suggest the possibility that his awareness of the liberty cap dates all the way back to his childhood, growing up in Washington, DC. It is this possible biographical trace, and the degree to which Puryear has displaced it into his work without having it point back toward him in any obvious way, that further convinced me of his affinity with Keats.

Keats, we might remember, possessed an astonishing ability to restrain contending points of view in a single poem, such as his "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," where sensuality, eros, destruction and death are embodied in the lady without mercy. At the same time, Keats transcended biography to such a great degree that the "knight," who is "alone and palely loitering" in the opening lines of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," is both the alter ego of the tubercular Keats and not him at all.

In "Big Phrygian," Puryear also manages to organize a wide spectrum of contradictions into a single form, something very few artists of any generation are able to accomplish, particularly with such extreme economy. Meanwhile, the sculpture has subsumed any biographical traces, leaving the viewer to conjecture and, more importantly, reflect upon what was experienced and known from history.

I feel confident in saying that Puryear is deeply knowledgeable of the history of the Phrygian cap: from when its first instance of signifying freedom and the quest for individual liberty in Europe (it was confused with the Pileus, a brimless, conical felt cap worn by freed Roman slaves) through its incorporation into the coats of arms and flags of many Latin American countries, including Nicaragua, Cuba and El Salvador. I also cannot help but think that (as it may have occurred to Puryear), as a symbol of rebellion and self-identification, the Phrygian cap can be seen as a precursor to the hoodie.

It is while Puryear was growing up in Washington, DC, that he likely first encountered the symbol of the Phrygian cap. A representation of the cap can be found on the seal of the United States Senate and the Seal of the United States Army. It is on the flag of Haiti and its coat of arms, where it is placed atop a palm tree, signifying the only successful revolution by slaves, led by the former slave, Toussaint Louverture, against their white European owners. While another artist might have chosen to make a sculpture depicting the soft red cap atop a palm tree, giving viewers a literalist work whose meaning is easily accessible and not particularly challenging, this is not what Puryear elected to do. In fact, by choosing to make work in which he could have cited a particular historical context to gain traction for its meaning, yet deliberately not doing so, Puryear equates aesthetic freedom with personal freedom, even as he expresses an unavoidable doubt about whether this idealized state can ever be reached.

Moreover, it is also likely that Puryear was aware that the presence of the Phrygian cap, appearing as it does in well-known signs dotting the nation's capital, is also haunted by its absence: there is also a well-known story about its removal from a monumental sculpture by Thomas Crawford (1814–1857) on the order of Jefferson Davis, who was the Secretary of War at the time, before he went on to become the President of the Confederacy. It seems likely that Crawford, who was married to Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910), the American abolitionist and author of the song, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," knew what it could mean to have his monument, "Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace," wearing a Phrygian cap, the Roman symbol of an emancipated slave. Davis, a diehard slave owner, who oversaw the project, ordered its removal because "its history renders it inappropriate to a people who were born free and would not be enslaved." "Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace," which crowns the dome of the US Capitol in Washington, DC, is wearing a military helmet.



Martin Puryear, "Shackled" (2014), iron, 27 1/2 x 30 5/8 x 8 3/8 inches

One of the interesting aspects about the backstory to Puryear's "Big Phrygian" is the fact that, while he knows the various histories associated with it, he doesn't bring any particular narrative into the foreground; doesn't, in fact, make any one of them the point of the work, even in a sculpture pointedly titled, "Shackled" (2014). At the same time, "*Moi libre aussi*" ("I am free too"), the caption beneath the 18th-century print of a black man proudly wearing the red cap, reproduced on the announcement card, is equally applicable to the sculptor, Puryear. Through his art, Puryear both asserts and reminds us that he too is free to work (like his white counterparts) in any way that he pleases.

In fact, the declaration ("I am free too") serves multiple roles. It claims equality, while remaining true to the individual's historical context. By using this image as his announcement card, Puryear openly challenges mainstream society's belief that an artist of color should become a particular kind of spokesperson for his or her racial or ethnic community, and must speak in a certain way about certain subjects. Most often, the spokesperson that mainstream society praises understandably divides the world into "us and them." Puryear, however, reminds us that the divisions separating everyone into groups and hierarchies are porous and constantly changing.

By not using a reassuring narrative — or the reassurance of narrative itself — to foreground "Big Phrygian" and the related works, Puryear invites viewers to engage with the form itself and all the different ways he has brought it into existence. This is where John Keats comes in. In a letter, dated December 21, 1817, sent to his brothers George and Thomas, John Keats begins formulating the basis of his poetic belief:

I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.

Not only does Keats spell out the deep, unavoidable conflict between the artist's imagination and his capacity for self-criticism (which has been called doubt), but he also proclaims the necessity to reject "reaching after fact & reason."

Less than a year later, in a letter dated October 27, 1818, sent to his friend, Richard Woodhouse, Keats observed:

What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet [..] A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity.

Keats's "chameleon poet" anticipates Charles Baudelaire's "passionate spectator [...]" who everywhere rejoices in his incognito." An artist or poet without an identity exists on the opposite end of the spectrum from the individual who is celebrated for producing signature works.



Martin Puryear, "Up and Over" (2014), cast ductile iron, 18 5/8 x 26 1/2 x 12 3/4 inches

In our postmodern age, when sampling, copying, branding, deskillling, and uncreativity are commonplace, even celebrated, in what has recently been defined as our "atemporality" or our time of timelessness, Keats' belief in "Negative Capability" and the artist's ability to live in "uncertainties" must seem quaint. And yet, it was Keats' contribution to theory that came to mind when I was looking at Puryear's work, especially "*Big Phrygian*." Looking at his work, I realized how often he must have refused to give himself a way out and sought certainty. In contrast to many other sculptors, Puryear has never developed a style. Since he began exhibiting in 1972, he has remained fresh, even as he broadened his work. By using the Phrygian cap as a starting point, he takes a potent symbol and makes it his own, even as he rejects the obvious markers of subjectivity and the "I." Moreover, he brings history back into sculpture, something that was supposedly banished by the rise of modernist sculpture and the innovative work of Constantin Brancusi.

Knowing that he was going to die from tuberculosis, Keats transcended his stricken state to write poems in which imagination overcame all obstacles without denying their existence. Puryear, a black artist working during a time when pronouncements of all kinds about what should and should not be done, declares, "I am free too." By doing so, Puryear speaks both for himself and for any artist who refuses to conform to expectations, refuses to become easily identified or reach after the reassurances offered by fact and reason. This is the undeniable greatness that they share.

[Martin Puryear](#) was on view at the Matthew Marks Gallery (502 & 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) November 8, 2014–January 10, 2015.