

Art in America

GILDED LABOR

By *Madeline Weisburg*  March 3, 2021



View of Harry Gould Harvey IV's exhibition "The Confusion of Tongues!," 2020/1, at Bureau, New York.

PHOTO DARIO LASAGNI/COURTESY BUREAU, NEW YORK

"The Confusion of Tongues!," [Harry Gould Harvey IV](#)'s solo exhibition at [Bureau](#), offers a collection of idiosyncratic objects that feel devotional and also a little diabolical, given their swirling coded texts, barbed gothic embellishments, and mystic flair. The multi-element *The Space between Your Temples Lay the House of Whose Name Could Never Be Spoken*, one of the first works that visitors encounter in the show, is staged in an alcove resembling a side chapel, centered on what looks like a small openwork reliquary adorned with several hearts and a peace sign with a spikey sunburst aureole. But the strength of these new works, all from 2021, extends beyond their mischievous aesthetic. Harvey's primary focus is not simply creating physical objects but boring into the material memory that his mediums contain—in this case a charred eighteenth-century kneeler from a Providence church, a can of Portuguese sardines, used motor oil, cast bronze, and wood foraged from the Gilded Age seaside mansions of Newport, Rhode Island. Together, such materials evoke backstories of artisanship and labor, economic decline, and the cycles of American industry.

The history of labor along New England's southern coast impels this body of work, gathered under a title alluding to the Tower of Babel myth. Harvey is based in his native city of Fall River, Massachusetts, an area once known for its abundant textile mills and granite quarries, which made the town prosperous—and a magnet for immigrants—before nineteenth-century expansion collapsed into twentieth-century deindustrialization. When dynastic industrialist families began to erect lavish summer homes in Newport in a confusion of Gothic Revival, Renaissance, and French Baroque styles (incredibly, more than one house is modelled in part after Versailles), laborers were brought in from nearby working-class cities like Fall River to build and embellish these structures, anonymously. The show's sculptural works, all lengthily and rather enigmatically titled—*A Proposal for a New Statue of Liberty toward the Epoch of a New 'G*d'*; *So I Hope Her Soul Has Gone to Rest and Away in Heaven She'll Go Oh Away Away in Heaven and Away from the Burning Mills*; and *I Was Standing in a Window a Calling My Mother's Name Crying Mother Mother Save Me as I Fell Back in the Flame*—are constructed from reclaimed neo-Gothic corbels and other architectural elements salvaged from the grounds of such a mansion, and then painstakingly transformed through a process of stripping, charring, burning, and re-furnishing with hand-cast bronze supports and ornamentation. Even Harvey's diagrammatic drawings, like the ethereal, red-and-black *Knot a Line Left in the Sky of Where the Birds Had Flown*, which mixes natural and geometric forms, are framed by jagged carved wood from the famed Newport "summer cottages."



Harry Gould Harvey IV: *A Proposal for a New Statue of Liberty toward the Epoch of a New 'G*d'*, 2021, charred architectural salvage from The Newport Mansions, cast white bronze, used motor oil from Sinister Motorsports on blackened bolts, OSB, beeswax, 66 1/4 by 81 by 14 inches.

PHOTO DARIO LASAGNI/COURTESY BUREAU, NEW YORK



Harry Gould Harvey IV: *Knot a Line Left in the Sky of Where the Birds Had Flown*, 2021, charred 18th century English Walnut, charred Black Walnut from The Newport Mansions, beeswax, MDF, colored pencil and charcoal on archival matboard, 49 by 33 3/4 by 2 1/8 inches.

PHOTO DARIO LASAGNI/COURTESY BUREAU, NEW YORK

Today, as enormous restoration efforts are under way to preserve examples of American residential architecture, there is still little public support for conserving the country's industrial complexes in cities like Fall River, despite their significance in economic history. The social inequity of this distinction is critiqued through Harvey's methods of production and display. As the artist writes in an "appendix" available at the gallery and on its website, his process, honoring the value of craft tradition, involves "taking control of" and "reconfiguring" once socially discriminatory forms. Yet what is most salient about "The Confusion of Tongues!" is the reverence that the works invite in viewers, who are asked to stand before altarpieces to unseen labor.