

FEATURE:

Prior to an  
international  
quartet of  
survey shows,  
**Matt  
Mullican**  
explains  
what makes  
his mind tick

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"I CAN SEE HOW SOME OF THE WORK could be considered a little bit psychotic", Matt Mullican confides. And as he unpacks his work for me, a purposeful – and powerful – separation between it and material reality can be perceived. In a wide-ranging practice that incorporates performance under hypnosis, lectures, sculpture, installation and acres of drawn cartoon hieroglyphics, the American artist has taken on the personalities of people who might actually live in heterotopic nowhere space, including 'That Person', the name he has given his hypnotised alter ego, and 'Glen', a stick-figure motif that recurs throughout his drawing practice.

Still, 'psychotic' is not how Mullican himself explains his ongoing investigations into alternative states of being, particularly the geography and architecture, imagined or otherwise, that exists within the flat surface of an image. In fact, the artist describes the psychological 'space' of his pictorial worlds with such evident assurance that they are transformed from something conceptual, almost fictional, into a more tangible, if alternate, reality. The direction has been fruitful for the artist: he has four museum shows to look forward to, stretching consecutively from this summer into 2011, all of which build on a long career, that has seen solo shows at venues including the Centre Pompidou in Paris, MOCA LA and the Drawing Center, in New York.

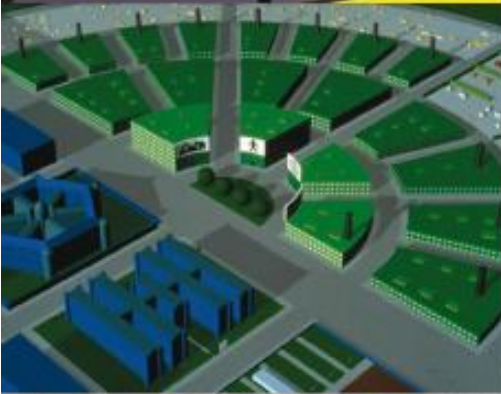
Mullican first became interested in issues of perception while studying (under John Baldessari) at the California Institute of Arts during the early 1970s. "All I see are light patterns", the artist explains. "And when I say 'all I see are light patterns', it puts tremendous distance between you and me. Everything becomes an illusion in which there is no difference between anything: soft and hard, big or small, life and death. It's all been equalised in the psyche." This interest had a catalysing impact on his work as an artist, when, in April 1973, Mullican drew a car wheel in his now standard pared-down style – akin to a newspaper sketch – tightly framed to give no hint of anything other than the wheel. "The wheel was of a car that never existed", says the artist. And neither the act of making it nor the final drawing itself held Mullican's interest; rather, it was the way in which the drawing – and those in the same style that came after it – acted as a generator for a series of verbalised questions concerning the circumstances of the crudely depicted subject. "I asked myself: what kind of car is the wheel on? Who's driving the car? Where is the car? Is it raining outside?" he says.

There is a logic to these questions, the artist reasoned, as the drawn wheel is no more unreal than a material counterpart: both are constructions of light. Yet the unquestionably fictive nature of the drawing allowed the artist to push things further. "[It is] the issue of neuropsychology and how it affects how we engage socially with our surroundings. I am trying to understand that response by isolating it, by putting myself into a fiction so that one might become aware of that projection." By drawing and 'entering' a room, Mullican believes he can embody the idea of 'person in a room'; a person who could never be in anything other than what is drawn on the paper. Consequently, because the image depicts the iconic 'person in a room', stripped down to just the essential representational elements, Mullican – and indeed the viewer – is able to metaphorically assimilate himself into the situation, divested of personality and baggage.

The same motivation lies behind the ongoing series of performances that the artist has staged since the late 1970s while under hypnosis. Mullican disconcertingly separates the self-







generated identity that emerges through the performance – given the formal moniker ‘That Person’ – from his normal personality. The former is personified by wild and exaggerated actions and the repetition of certain phrases, and frequently becomes fixated with everyday acts, particularly coffee drinking. ‘That Person’ is, the artist explains, the iconic person, an abstraction of a person, inhabiting the same role in life as the man depicted on toilet signs or street crossings. “‘That Person’ is tortured because he’s trying to become real. When we see a picture of somebody, we can’t help but identify with them – we project ourselves into the picture. ‘That Person’ is that projection making big efforts to become real. But he will never become real.” Watching the performances is undoubtedly an uncomfortable experience for the viewer, but this is also the case for the artist: “I do these performances less frequently now because it is painful and mentally exhausting for me.”

If Mullican’s project was started some time ago, it has nonetheless proved to have particular resonance in the present. The artist is quick to identify the analogies that contemporary life, so frequently mediated by virtual space, provides. “When my kids are on Facebook or playing their skateboard game on the Xbox, they are truly involved in this virtual context. They’re in a trance, in this other place.” Indeed, the artist collaborated with Digital Productions, a computer-graphics firm that was experimenting with the possibilities of a Cray Supercomputer, to create *The Computer Project* (1989–90), an early virtual world that can be seen as a precursor to the online gaming phenomenon of *Second Life*. The work allowed him physically to enter the (virtual) picture world that the pen-drawn cartoons could only offer a window on.

That world, which the artist inhabited through virtual reality goggles (and which a gallery audience could simultaneously experience on a big screen), was based on a complex cosmology the artist had created previously. It is one that mimics the heaven and hell of the Christian construct but fails on a vital point: “A cosmology is a social agreement made between people. There is no social agreement behind my cosmology.” It is not, however, an unfamiliar one, despite *The Computer Project*’s alienating, flat-toned landscape. Each area of the world is colour-coded, tying in with a similar practice devised earlier for his 2D models of the cosmology: red for ‘the subjective’, black and white for ‘the zone of signs’ (dealing primarily with language in its abstract form), blue for actual empirical reality, green for ‘the elements’ and finally yellow acting as a microcosmic representation of the whole thing. The colours map out the human subconscious, allowing Mullican not only to enter the frame of the picture, but consequently the



generator of that picture, his own mind. Indeed, Mullican makes a passing reference to the comedy sci-fi caper *Innerspace* to me. The 1987 film sees a miniaturised spaceship injected into a human body, and Mullican’s cosmology does seem a neuropsychological, conceptual version of that film’s plot.

“The cosmology has been around for quite a while now and is growing, getting more sophisticated. In my cosmology there is a heaven and hell, but they are removed from the religious ideas of heaven and hell. In my cosmology the heaven is the subject of a picture and the hell is the picture as object. It’s not so much about good and evil, and more about these two realities.” If the whole idea of a redundant ideology, only fully known to one man – the personification of a stick figure and the separation of a hypnotised self – seems comedic, Mullican sees the funny coming not from the work’s intention as from the subject-medium it inhabits. “The work has two meanings – the meaning of form and the meaning of subject. When you have two meanings, it’s a pun. That’s what a pun is. So it becomes automatically funny. What makes a pun funny is the crossing of two realities; the comedic for me, in my work, comes from the crossing of the reality of form and the reality of subject”.

*Work by Matt Mullican can be seen in exhibitions 12 by 2, at the Institut d’Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne, from 3 June to 29 August; The Glass Delusion, National Glass Centre, Sunderland, through 3 October; Work in Residence, at Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, through 21 May 2011; and Haus der Kunst, Munich, opening summer 2011*

(IMAGES  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE))

Three views from *The Computer Project*, 1989/1990, digital environment created via Cray XMP Supercomputer, produced by John Whitney, Jr of Digital Productions with programmer Carl Stearns of Thinking Machines, exhibited at MoMA, New York and supported by NYNEX, New York

**Gallery installations**, 1975–9. Courtesy the artist

**Stick figure drawings**, 1973–4, pen and pencil on paper. Courtesy the artist

**Performance under hypnosis**, 2007, Tate Modern, London. Courtesy the artist

