

# Matt Mullican's Cosmology of the Self

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Since the mid-1970s, Matt Mullican has combined nearly every artistic media available under the sun, moon and stars into an idiosyncratic cosmology of the self. In today's climate, this strategy seems a bit like waltzing into the town square and voluntarily putting yourself into the stocks: witness a privileged white man (his parents were successful artists and he studied at the prestigious California Institute of the Arts) placing himself at the centre of an invented cosmos. Even for an admitted Mullican fanboy such as myself, it's sometimes hard to understand why this approach might still merit attention. Mullican's current survey at Kunsthalle St. Annen underlines one big reason: a restless comic existentialism brings his project down to earth, counterbalancing the arrogance of world-building with the vulnerability of an oddball searching the world for meaning.



Matt Mullican, 'Mapping the World: 50 Years of Work', 2022–23, Kunsthalle St. Annen, Lübeck.  
Courtesy: the artist and Captain Petzel, Berlin; Photograph: Fred Dott

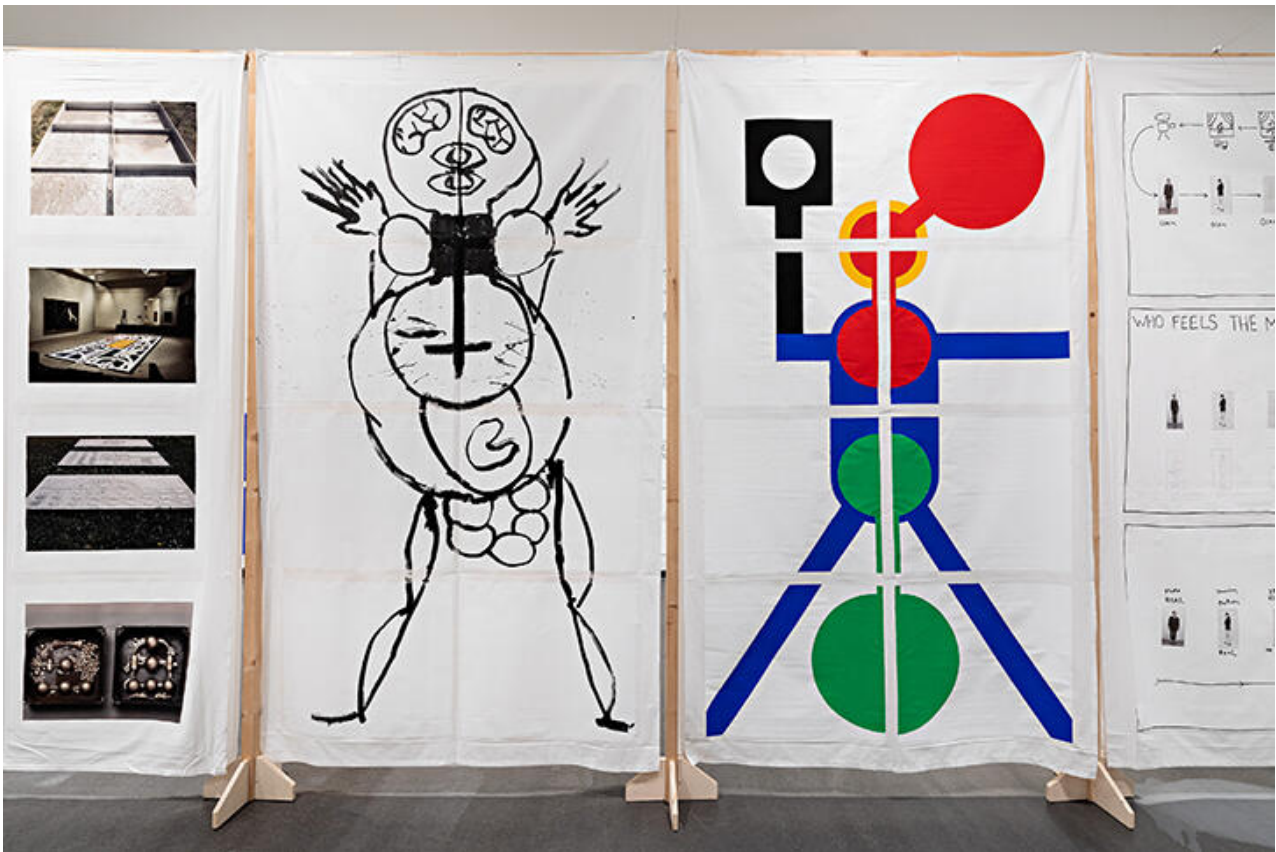
Upon visiting 'Mapping the World', I took in one of Mullican's artist talks, which belong to a tradition of didactic performance art whose chief historical reference point is Joseph Beuys. Speaking at length, largely with closed eyes, Mullican makes a certain kind of sense. In the way a Sunday school teacher might explain theology after dropping a tab of acid, he expounds on the system of shapes and symbols that suffuses his world. In his installations, by contrast, he lets the grid operate as a surrogate sense-giver. Here, in 50 years' worth of work arranged across the museum's four floors, architectural and graphic structures provide a comforting impression of logical order to unending abstract patterns, automatic writing and vast accumulations of decontextualized photographic and cartoon imagery.



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On the exhibition's ground floor, long tables hold *88 Maps* (2010): a collection of spreads, like splayed book pages, combining colourful screen prints and graphite rubbings. They show diagrammatic drawings recalling machine schematics, along with a panoply of encircled symbols – motifs that recur throughout Mullican's *oeuvre*. The next floor is overtaken by *Representing the Work* (2018–19), a system of hallways made from white bedsheets, hung vertically and covered in a dense grid of reproduced drawings, photographs and paintings – a kind of walk-in catalogue of Mullican's body of work, and a format that he's used previously, notably in *Untitled (Learning from That Person's Work: Room 1)* (2005).





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While some of the drawings in *Representing the Work* depict cryptic dream sequences, others show both naturalistic and stick figures or overlapping, densely handwritten phrases, often penned under hypnosis, as Mullican's alter ego Glen. 'BIG BEAUTY!!! BIG LOVE!!!! BIG TRUTHS!!!', shouts Glen from the page, with a gusto that makes you worry for his mental health. On adjacent white bedsheets, tightly hung black and white photographs range from peaceful landscapes and domestic scenes to charming documentations of 1970s experiments in art and life, to grisly encounters with life's end: a plank of wood lies upon a bed in mimicry of the human form; a body lies on an autopsy table, as the dim black and white image confuses folds of clothing with edges of punctured skin.



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*Representing the Work* embodies my favourite Mullican: a philosopher of the self, playing wildly on a knife's edge between self-seriousness and self-mockery. My least favourite Mullican is the one who loses this density and complexity of feeling. One room is largely dedicated to *Untitled (20 glass balls)* (1995), a series of amoebic, blown-glass shapes. Their forms are neat but not novel, recalling product-design prototypes as much as sculptures made by an artist committed to rifling through the human condition. *Computer Project* (1989) suffers in a different way. Comprising a series of stills from an animated, 3D rendition of Mullican's cosmology, this piece now feels like a time capsule, holding obsolete technological promise. It's the work made through simpler means, of which there is thankfully reams, which makes contact.

*Matt Mullican's 'Mapping the World' is on view at Kunsthalle St. Annen, Lübeck, until 8 January 2023.*