

Matt Mullican with Dan Cameron

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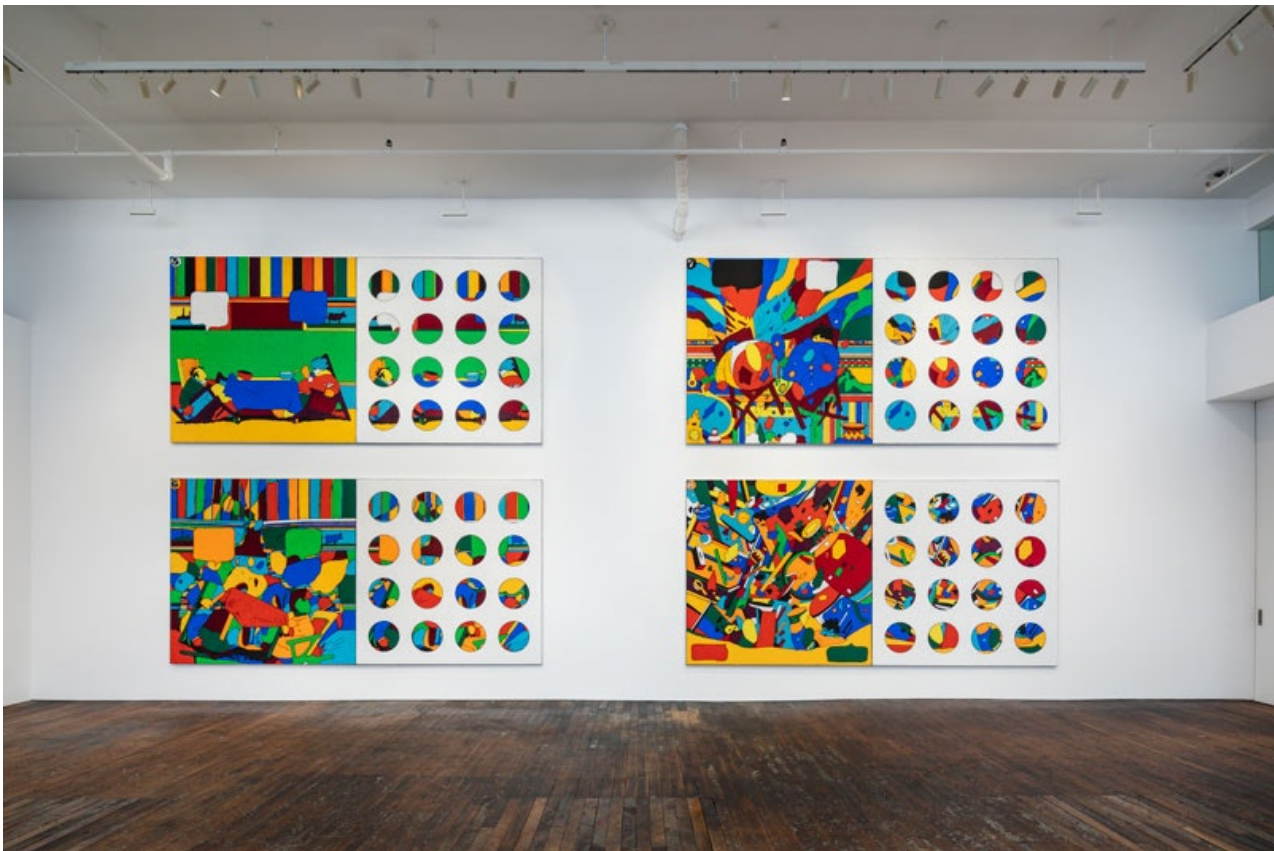
Peter Freeman, Inc.

BROOKLYN RAIL

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New York

Matt Mullican is one of the artists I've followed the most closely over the years. Part of that has to do with the fact that when I was getting interested in his work nearly forty years ago, I reached out to him, and was lucky enough to have some interview sessions. We worked on an exhibition called *Art and its Double* in Spain, and I really felt like there was a point where I could act as a spokesperson for what he was doing. Fast forward to 2023 and the incredible exhibition that's going on right now at Peter Freeman. I feel like I'm starting all over again, that I'm needing more direct discourse with Matt Mullican so I can continue on the path of decoding and getting to the bottom of the iconography in his work.



Installation view: *Matt Mullican, Sunday, August 9, 1908*, Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, 2023. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc., New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

Dan Cameron (Rail): Matt, I wanted to ask you about two dates. One is the date that you've used for the exhibition, and the other is the date to which we're approaching the fiftieth anniversary. I feel like these two dates are both pivotal. Would you mind just shedding some light on that? How are these two dates significant to this body of work?

Matt Mullican: Well, August 9, 1908 is the date of this comic—the show is based on a single page from a *Little Nemo in Slumberland* comic. This particular comic is really representing the breaking down of the comic space. There are twelve chapters, and each one is a different painting in the exhibition. Well, the last chapter is going to be one painting in two parts.

The first bit of the comic is basically this: Nemo is up in his bedroom. And Pip, his friend, is outside wanting to know what's up, so Nemo invites him in for breakfast. The next shot is of Nemo's mother giving them porridge, a new kind of porridge that would make them fat, which was a good thing, because of course, it's a different era—this is 1908. And so they start to eat it. And in the next square they both comment that they're getting bigger. In the next square the chairs start to break.

Now, all of the geometry of the dining room where they're eating is very linear. It's very geometric, everything is in its place: the two bowls are in the same spot; there are two pictures on the wall; the wallpaper is very linear; everything's geometric. And then at one point, the chairs break, and in the next square, they fall into the floor itself. And then they're falling into the room below, which is the living room.

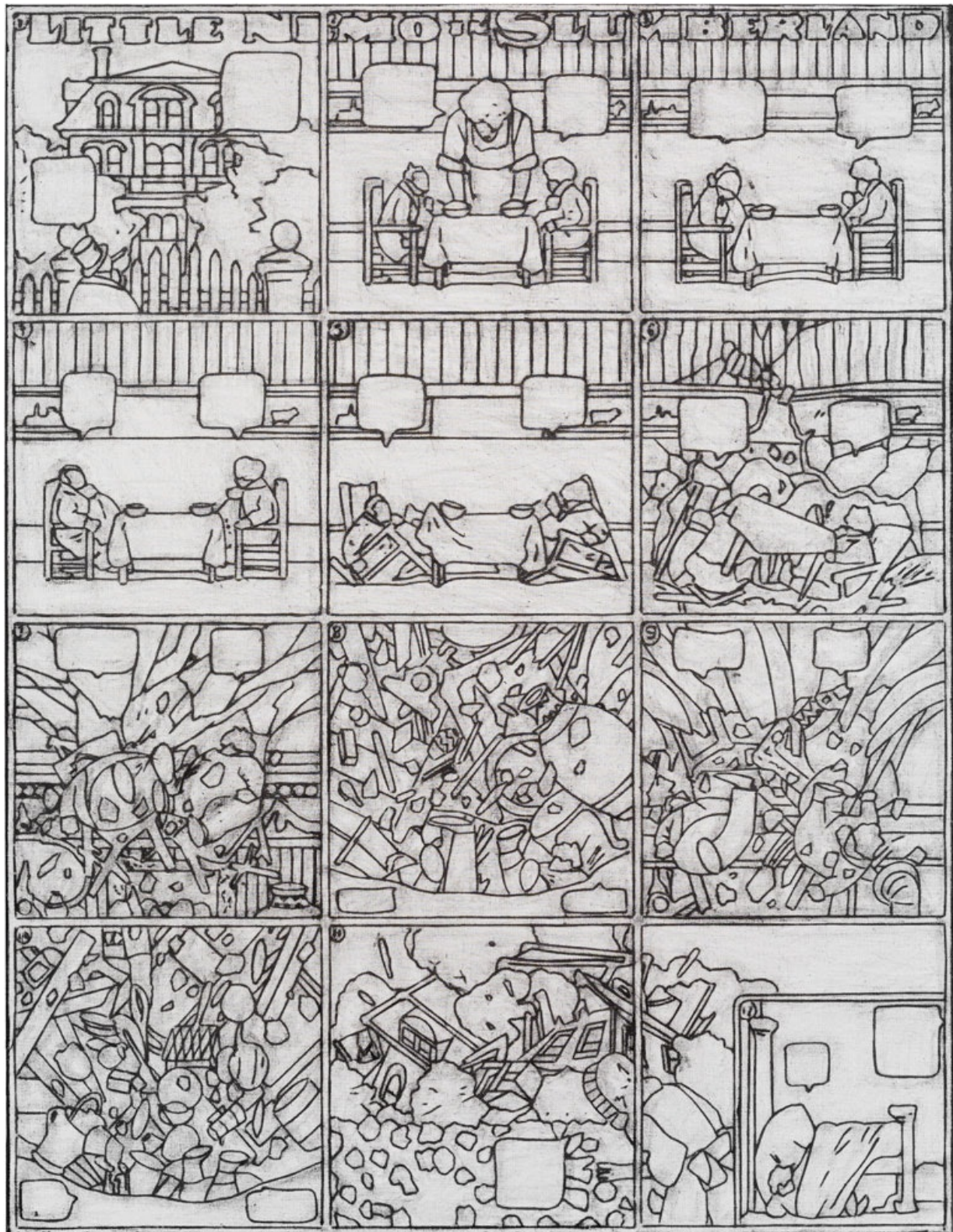
So finally, all of the stuff that's been in the first four panels is starting to disappear, and now they're in freefall, and all the objects from the dining room and the objects from the living room are intermixed in freefall. So they're all crashing around and everything is becoming very abstract. All the geometry and the linearity has been destroyed; it's been deconstructed. They're in the living room falling through it, and then they crash down through the bottom of the living room into the basement where there's coal, and there's boilers down there, and all these other materials.

So now the dining room stuff, the living room stuff, and the basement stuff is all floating in the picture, because it's all falling. And then they fall into a hole in the basement, into the ground, and they are going into the earth. They're being swallowed up by the earth, and you just see their feet sticking out of the hole. And then, the last pattern is the mother who had given them this porridge, looking at them at the house, and she says, "What in the world are those boys doing in that house!"

And then, as she is saying it, Little Nemo falls out of his real bed in the real world. This whole story was in his dream. So when he wakes up in the dream, the very first panel is the same context, except that it's a dream space. And the last panel is the real space. Now this was done in 1908. This deconstruction of the picture plane is really along the same year as the beginning of Cubism, a very pivotal year. So this is essentially a deconstruction of the picture plane and of the narrative—the narrative ceases to exist when they're falling.

As a child, I remember one of my vivid dreams was falling out of an airplane. I remember falling and always thinking about what it would feel like to hit the ground. And having vertigo when I was falling—that's what I was interested in, those kinds of feelings you have in dreams, this imaginary universe, which has been in my work since 1973. That's the other date.

This show will be up for the fiftieth anniversary of this idea I had, which was *Details from an Imaginary Universe*. We're talking about pictures, and this whole idea that a picture is a real place. And that comes from something else altogether, which has to do with light patterns. The thing that I haven't mentioned yet is the fact that I changed all the colors of everything inside this comic. And they change from picture to picture. So Nemo is wearing blue in one, and green in the other and he has a red face in one and he has a green face in the other. So they keep on switching. The whole thing is very kaleidoscopic.



Matt Mullican, *Untitled (Sunday, August 9, 1908)*, 2023. Acrylic gouache and oil stick rubbing on canvas, 51 1/4 x 39 1/2 inches. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc., New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

Rail: And each picture is actually two pictures side by side—

Mullican: Yes. The left is the whole comic, and the picture on the right is the details of that comic and circular details, which are in the exact same spot because all of these pieces are rubbings. That means that every painting that you see is a rubbing in itself, though those are the drawings. But the paintings themselves are rubbings. I've been working with that since the early eighties.

Rail: You've been making rubbings for forty years. Can you talk more about your process?

Mullican: In these particular works we have the *Little Nemo* comic that gets projected onto a piece of masonite, and then it's cut with a knife. When you cut into the board, it creates a little bit of a ridge, and that's enough. When you put a canvas over that, and you rub it like you would a coin or a gravestone, the image comes up as a black line.



Matt Mullican, *Untitled (Study for Sunday, August 9, 1908 #2)*, 2022. Acrylic gouache on inkjet print, in two parts, 14 3/4 x 27 1/2 x 1 3/8 inches. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc., New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

Rail: And after that it's colored in?

Mullican: Yeah, what happens is that I do the rubbing first with a flat little brick of carbon, and that gets the image onto the canvas. Then you see this whole thing on the canvas. Then I'll do a drawing of where I want all the colors to be. After that we put the canvas on the relief—it stays on the relief the entire time—and then with masking tape, we paint all the colors in. This takes about a week to ten days. Once that's all done, we very gently rub on top of that with oil paint sticks, and then the black comes through. That's

how it's done. When you do the rubbing it also rubs up the texture of the canvas, so the knots in the canvas come up, which gives the surface a very particular texture. This is actually the first form of reproducible media; it goes back several thousand years in China.

At the same time that I was making these frottage works in the eighties, I started working with computerized media, which was the latest form of digital technology. I did virtual reality environments in the early nineties. So this was all about that. That's a relationship to the show. So back in 1973, I created an imaginary, fictional studio where I worked. I invented a character named "Glen" who is a stick figure and he basically experiments in the studio. I was in John Baldessari's class called Post Studio Art. And I never had a studio because I was an undergrad when I was at CalArts, so I never got a studio. So my studio existed in a fictional plane. This is the fifty year anniversary of the creation of Glen and that imaginary studio. It's been fifty years since Glen started investigating the nature of his own reality: Where was he? What's happening around him? When Glen is listening to someone next door, who is that person? What's going on there?

In 1973 I entered a picture as a performance at Project Inc. in Boston, using a print belonging to Paul McMahon from a book of Piranesi prints. And I projected my mind's eye into the print, and simply walked in and started to describe to the audience what I was seeing. I wanted to get to actually not worry about the form of the picture, but the subject of the picture independent of that form. If that was possible.

Rail: Were you doing this in a form of self hypnosis?

Mullican: It was a form of trance, not a formal hypnosis because I didn't have a hypnotist. I did it on my own. But it is like that. And that's something that happens whenever we go to the movies. When you go into the movie theater, you can hear people eating the popcorn around you, you're very aware of where you're sitting. But within minutes of the movie starting you don't hear them eating popcorn anymore. You're in the picture. That is something I was very interested in. When you see pictures—a painting of somebody, or a photograph of somebody that you recognize—you see them and someone can ask you, "who is that?" And then you can say, "Oh, that's so and so." But you know, that person is not there. That person is not there at all. They are there, and they are not there. And that is something that I'm very much interested in. I'm interested in the subject's relationship to the sign. This is all stuff that was coming up in the seventies.



Matt Mullican performing under hypnosis at Haus der Kunst, 2011. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Well, I think you set off on a very fruitful journey. You tapped into something with the stick figure and the rubbings where you can say there's a pre-civilized or Neolithic idea about symbology. And how human beings at the beginning of civilization are forming groups, and forming these realities, these pictures that were actually things that they needed to invest their beliefs in. From the beginning, you've tried to tap into something that's very universal, but which people often confuse with another level of symbology, which is art objects, and images understood within a context of other images. You're less interested in that, and much more interested in the meanings behind the images and what they evoke.

Mullican: Yeah, well, when I was a kid at the age of six or seven, I remember my teacher telling us in class in the first or second or third grade, that underneath everything there is a word. So in the bed, there's the word "bed." In the chair, there is the word "chair," and that is what's there. I didn't believe them. I thought no, there's another thing that's there underneath the bed that is not a word. And that is something that I'm investigating. If I'm processing information, *how* am I processing that information?

There's this woman named Temple Grandin who says she thinks in pictures, and her assumption is that most people think in words. Now, I know I don't think in words; I know this for sure. And I don't think in pictures, either. So if I don't think in words, and I don't think in pictures, what do I think in? I think in feelings. My sense is that when we have an idea—and we know it's right—it's a feeling that we have.

Rail: Like an instinct? Or a hunch? Or feelings as in emotion? Or both?

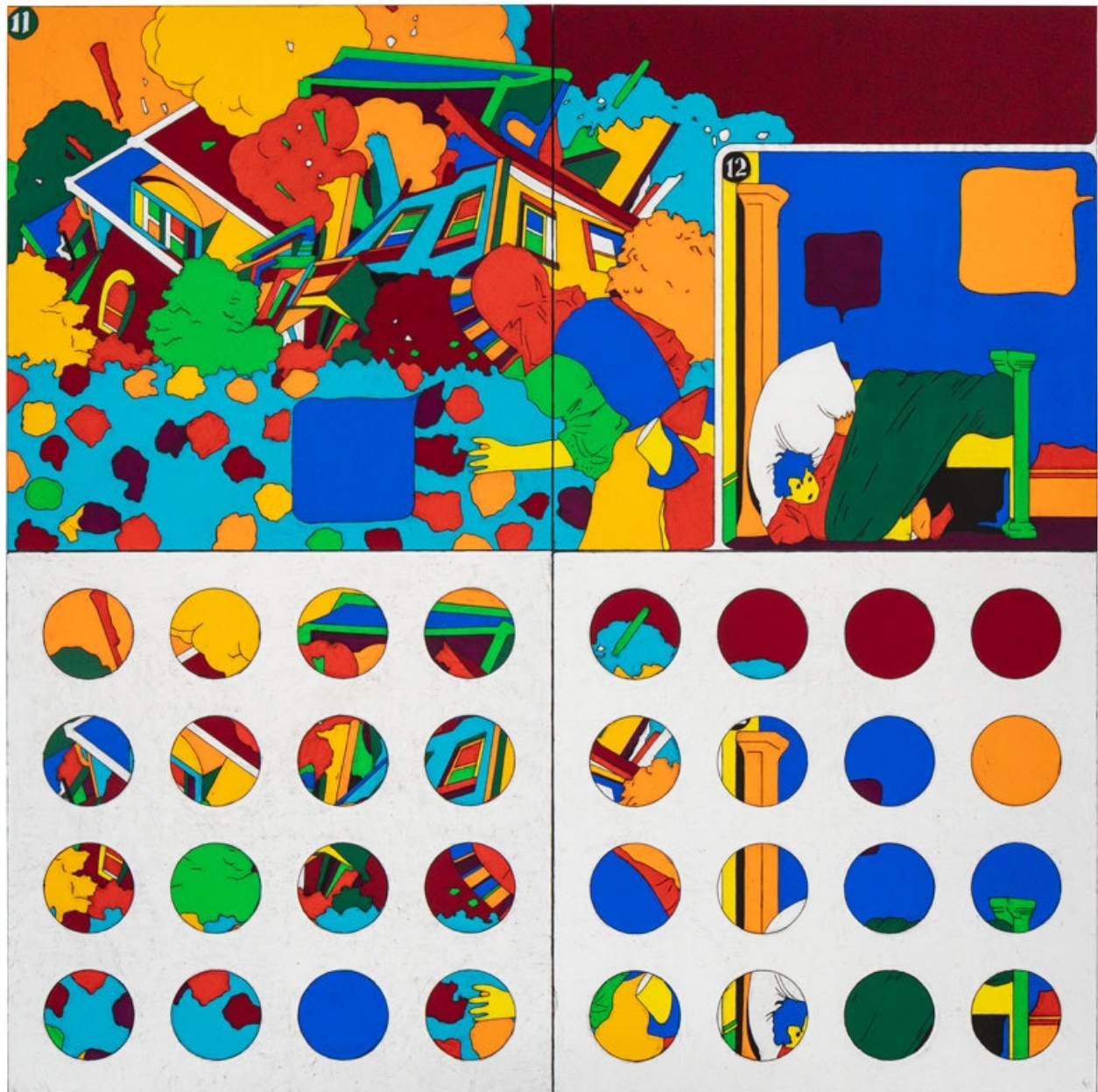
Mullican: Yeah, feelings as in all of those. I mean, it's like a record. When we see an object or a place that we have a relationship to, within that object or place there is that relationship, that personality, that thing. Whatever it is, we know what it feels like. When we think, we are processing information at a very high speed, and those feelings are almost divorced from the object representing them.

Rail: It's a form of knowledge—

Mullican: It's a form of very real knowledge. You know, whatever knowledge is. I mean, that's the fun thing about being an artist. You have these very simple questions: What's going on? What am I doing? Why am I doing it? These are very simple questions, but they can have super complex answers. I remember, the one reason I went to the signs of things was because it was almost a different part of the brain that understood the sign. A sign seemed to be faster than a word, not that it necessarily is, but it seemed to be faster.

And then when I went to Europe for the first time in the early eighties, I was just taking photographs of all the signs everywhere, in all the train stations and bus stations and airports and in the cities and everywhere else. And that was fun because most of them are quantitative. And they're also informative. They tell you where things are. They're not really expressing a feeling, although they are, but the intent is not to do that. The intent is to make life easier.

And in the eighties, when I was making all this stuff with signs, people were understanding my work in relation to Egypt or Mexico, but that wasn't what I was after. I mean, of course, it pertains to all of that, but I was interested in interface design. I was interested in asking, how do I communicate to you what my intentions are? And how does the picture work? How does it function? That's what I was interested in.



Matt Mullican, *Untitled (Sunday, August 9, 1908 #11-12)*, 2023. Acrylic gouache and oil stick rubbing on canvas, in four parts, overall: 78 7/8 x 157 3/4 inches. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc., New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

Rail: And I'm interested in how, in the year 2023, you're cycling back to the year 1908. If we imagine that it's Sunday morning, we've gotten our *New York Herald Tribune*, and we open it up and see the *Little Nemo* comic. From where we stand now, we can say, "well, this is a harbinger of chaos and confusion." Cubism emerged along with many other modern movements, like dissonance in symphonic music, but also the Great War was right around the corner. And so here we are in 2023, seeing this almost subliminal message, or a warning seeping out through the *Little Nemo* comic. Letting us know, long after the fact, that some of these things were predictable. So how is it that this particular comic became emblematic of something that you were interested in exploring and investigating?

Mullican: It's the abstraction of it, it's this breaking down. Those questions about what's behind things: What is behind the picture? If I go into the picture, and I'm having these feelings, where am I? Who is that person? What's going on here? So in a way they answer that, but it's the architecture of how this whole system, this field of vision, is breaking down in front of us and turning into this abstraction. Who knows what it's turning into, but it's doing what all things do, which is change.

Now the reason for the color, and this is an important point in the work, is that in '72 or '73 I had this idea, and I still have this idea, that all I see are light patterns. So when I'm looking at anybody or anything—and that's important, anybody is a living being and anything is an object. It's all light. I see the light pattern; I am disengaged from it. And that includes an apparition and—

Rail: And that includes other representations of things?

Mullican: Everything from when I wake up in the morning to when I have breakfast to when I'm walking down the street; when I run into whoever I'm running into; when I'm talking to you; when I'm performing.

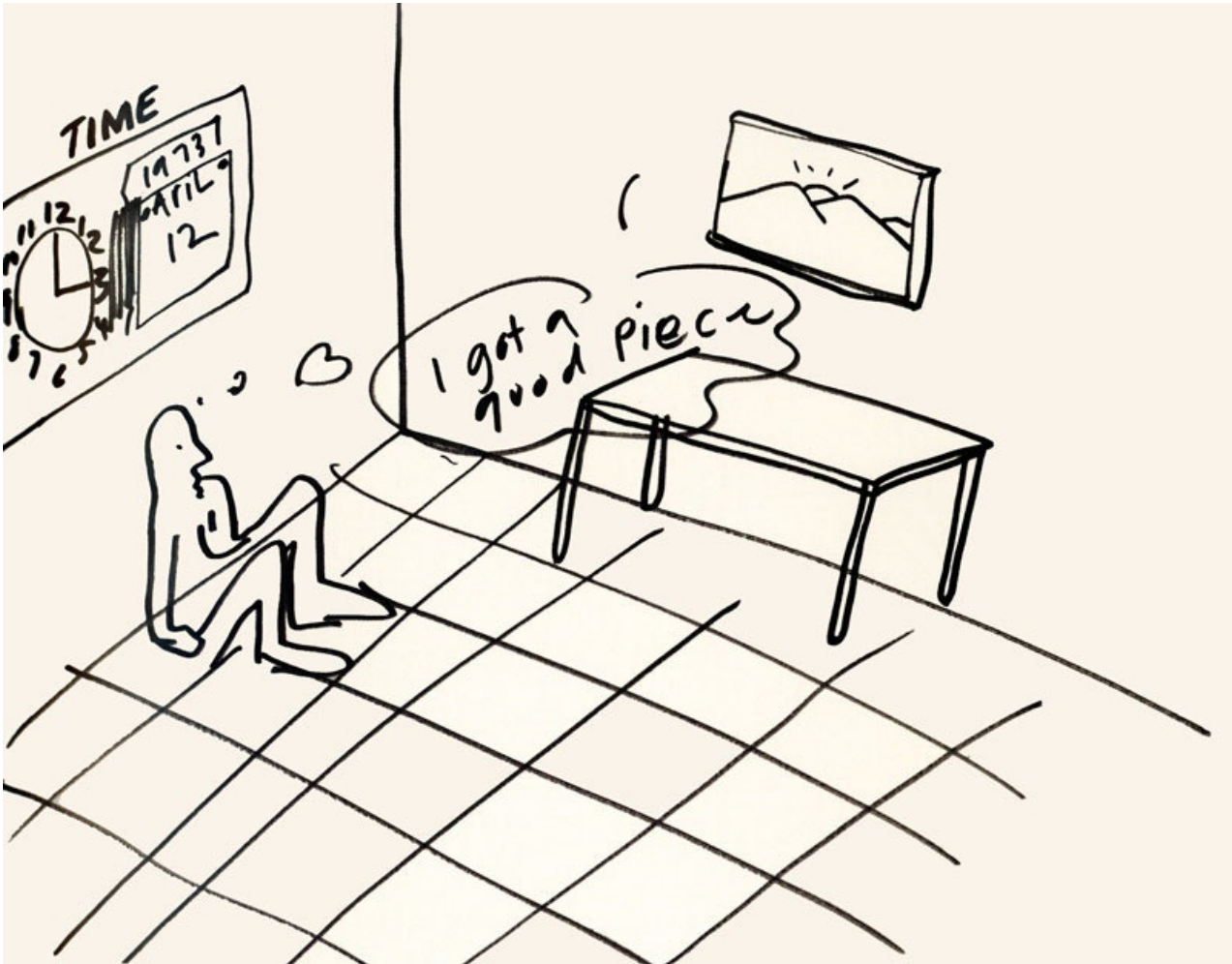
Now the question is, if all I see are light patterns, then where does life fit into those patterns? And then you get into something else altogether. Then you can jump into, say, Philip Guston. I was reading a book about him, and in one story he was giving a lecture about painting. He and someone else were talking about painting on a stage. This must have been in the late sixties. And the person he was talking with said a painting is so much paint on so much canvas, and that's all a painting is. Guston tells him that's ridiculous. A painting doesn't exist in the same plane that we do. It's a different thing; it's a different universe. A painting is in the mind. It doesn't exist on the panel, it doesn't exist on the canvas. It exists in its form, true, but that's not what's good about it. There's form in everything. What makes a painting different, what makes a picture different is that it represents something other than what it is.

So when I see a picture of my mother, my mother is there and she is not there. Really she is not physically there. And yet, I can tell you how old she is in that particular picture that I'm looking at. The decoding is so spontaneous that I'm there. So when I'm talking to my mom, and she's in Los Angeles, and I'm in Berlin, Germany, I hear her voice, and yet all the sounds that I'm hearing are emanating from the phone, which is less than an inch away from my ear. That's where the sounds are coming from. But there she is. We are in a different universe. So I'm dealing with my mother in a virtual way. And pictures are virtual in that sense. So what my work is all about, generally speaking, is trying to understand how the architecture of those two states of being can coexist.

Rail: Let's frame some of these ideas you're talking about with some work.

Mullican: Sure, *I Got a Good Piece* (1973) is pretty significant. It has this figure in an imaginary studio. He has the time on the wall. He has a table and a picture on the wall and he's sitting down and he's thinking, "I've got a good piece," which is "I have a good idea." I was trying to understand what to do. Where can I go? This was at CalArts, where

I'd been for two years. This is after conceptual art. And my friends and I were trying to figure out what we could do after conceptual art. Where could we go? Lawrence Weiner said that the piece did not have to be fabricated. So the piece has disappeared. Where do we go after that? What happens after the piece doesn't exist? What happens next? We had no idea, but that's what we were looking for.



Matt Mullican, *I Got a Good Piece*, 1973. Ink on paper, 14 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc., New York.

Rail: You can occupy the imaginary, which you did.

Mullican: That's what I did. Now the formalist view of things is the form, which is Carl Andre and Donald Judd and all those artists. And conceptual art is formalist in a sense because it's dealing with the form of content, as in language. I was not interested in that per se; I was interested in the feeling of living within that language, that place, so I was trying to prove that stick figures really live lives. I was interested in the pain that Glen felt when he put a pin into his finger, when he stuck a pin in his finger and he felt pain.

In my "Light Patterns" I put color aid cards on the wall, and then I shine different lights on them so they all change. This is really where the colors in the comic book come from. When I'm changing the colors on Little Nemo, that's what I'm paying attention to. So it becomes almost hallucinatory. The people at the opening came up to me and the adjective that I heard more than anything was "trippy"—that my paintings were "trippy," or

“psychedelic”—and to a degree that’s true. Because the picture plane is psychological. Pictures are of the mind, as Philip Guston said, and he was quoting Leonardo da Vinci saying that paintings are of the mind, pictures and paintings are of the mind. So of course it is going to end up being psychedelic. It’s just got to be, because that’s what it is. It is of the mind.

Rail: And you were one of the first artists I think to naturally move towards the idea of virtual reality.

Mullican: Yeah, I entered the picture in 1973. I walked around it in front of an audience. In 1986 I was doing rubbings, and I was representing cities that exist in these five worlds that exist in my work. I got a phone call in California from a company called Digital Productions. They had seen my exhibition, and I had a big cityscape in my show, and they asked me how I would like to walk inside my city. That’s how the conversation started.

Rail: They knew who they were talking to! [*Laughter*]

Mullican: So I said, “absolutely,” and within a week I was in their place. They had a Cray supercomputer and we were creating a landscape that one could walk into. That was in 1986. And that became this exhibition that I had at MoMA Projects, all with digital information. It cost a ridiculous amount of money, back then, because we had to use very, very fancy computers that cost a ton. In fact, for that project the software was being produced as we went along. It was all being created as we went.

Rail: There was no beta version.

Mullican: Connection Machine Two was the computer we were using. I wanted to make sure that MoMA would give credit to Nynex, the phone company, because they put money into the show and I wanted to make sure that they were acknowledged for that. And the woman at MoMA agreed to that, but said that they needed to know who took the photographs. And I said, No, there is no photographer. I took these pictures in the digital space. I was in that virtual space. And I was taking the pictures there. That’s the process. That’s part of the project. They said they understood that, but then they asked who took the picture of the picture. I said, No one took the picture of the picture. It doesn’t exist. This was the first time that they had this problem, which all digital work has.



Installation view: *Matt Mullican, Sunday, August 9, 1908*, Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, 2023. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc., New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

You don't ask who took the picture when you're showing a film. The museum has a whole film department. They wouldn't ask the director who took the picture. But in the art part of the museum, this was a first, and I got the worst review of my life. It was a terrible, terrible review. The reviewer barely touched on the fact that it was all digital. That didn't seem to be interesting for the reviewer. Mostly they were talking about architecture, and I'm not an architect. I represent architecture within my work. And I actually represent it to the extent that I can walk around in it.

Rail: Do you have any interest in dealing with augmented reality or virtual reality systems now? Or is it too formalized at this point?

Mullican: Oh, I'm interested in it, totally! I did a project with the French Ministry of Culture where I was interested in just the representation of virtual space. We had to make it a certain size, because if you flew off into the digital realm, you could go on forever. And so I was interested in just the fact that you could do that, that you could go off forever inside that digital space. So I created this project where I'm just representing the solar system. So it would take you many, many, many days, at a very high rate of speed, to go from one planet to another within that digital space.

But that's not so far away from the hypnosis. And that's a project that I started in the seventies. I think the first performance I did with hypnosis was in '77, with a hypnotist. And that is an ongoing project for me, because all rules go out the window with that project.

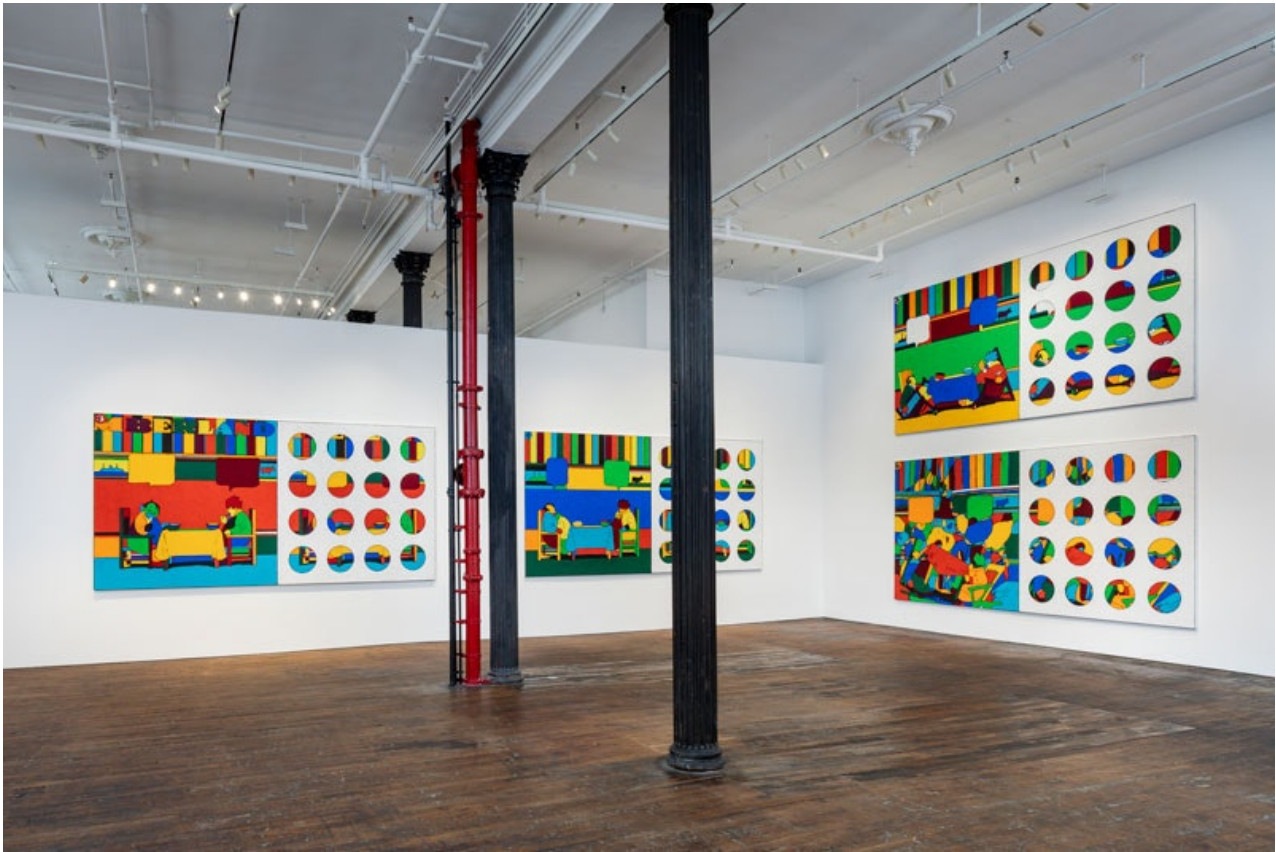
Rail: Well, I think that your inclusion in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*—Lynne Cooke’s important exhibition of what used to be called outsider art—had a lot to do with that, because as you explained to me, the piece in that show, *Three Suitcases of Love, Truth, Work and Beauty* (2006) wasn’t by you, it was authored by Glen.

Mullican: Yes, but Glen is totally separate from the individual that I become under hypnosis. I have a whole bunch of theories about who that person is, but we’ll just say that person is who I am when I’m in that trance state. That person has no sex, and no age. It’s man or woman, old or young—kind of whoever.

The first I remember, I did this performance at The Kitchen in 1982. And I come out on stage and actually say that to the audience, you know, that I’m not a man, I’m not a woman, I have no age. And, that’s how that started. So that person is very particular.

Whenever we see a picture of anybody, there’s a part of that person that we project onto the picture. That projection is closest to who I become in the trance state. So that person is that projection, separated. Basically, he/she can be broken down into my mother and my father, the two of them, both of those people. And he/she seems to have a real problem when it comes to functioning in a normal sense. So people think I as a performer am autistic or schizophrenic, or have Tourette’s—I’m very impulsive and I’m acting in a very strange way.

I’ve had doctors come up to me after seeing some of these videos of my performances, and they wanted to know, where did I study patients that look and act this way? And I said, “it’s in me, it’s not something that I’m studying to become.” It’s innate behavior. It is who I am. And I do think that it’s in everybody, I think we all have that in us, and we keep a lid on it. As an artist, what we want to do is take the lid off of those places, in order to articulate the way the world works, could work, or could not work.



Installation view: *Matt Mullican, Sunday, August 9, 1908*, Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, 2023. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc., New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

Rail: Is there any relationship between that person and Glen, who is an imaginary artist occupying an imaginary space?

Mullican: The difference is the fact that I am that person, and Glen is someone else. Glen is viewed from the outside. I see Glen in the room, and he is pricking his finger, or he is peeing in a corner, or Glen is remembering the time he hurt himself skiing. Whereas in that performance, I am that person, and I don't know where I am. I don't see where I am. I don't see what I want to do. It's an experience which has no gaps. Whereas with Glen, there's a distance. I think that person—the gift of that person—is that all space has collapsed.

My work is highly systematic. I have five specific worlds. Each world has a different color, and it can be applied to many different contexts, and different architectures. But that person has none of it. That person is different. That person has no gaps.

Rail: Could you describe the five worlds?

Mullican: Sure. I'll start at the bottom, which is the elements; it's materiality. If you can say that an object can have no meaning at all—that would be the green area, the elemental, the physical.

One step above that is what I call the real world. It's the street, the house—it's when we're not thinking about anything. We're just living our lives. That would be walking in the park, going to a restaurant—all the real world stuff.

And then the next world up is the world framed. And that would be the arts, the theater, the picture, all of those frames. When you take anything out of the real world, and you put a frame around it, you're no longer living with it, but you're looking at it as a sign. And that would be the world framed. That's in the center.

Above that, you have language, sign. And that would be in black and white. So the bottom is green, the world is blue, the world framed is yellow. And now we're in black and white, which is sign. It's very related to what exists inside the frame world, but it's been abstracted. It's no longer necessarily physically real. It could be in your head. The signs can be in any context in any way. And that would be black and white.

And then on the top is the red, the subject. And the subject is really having to do with the feeling of the sign. It's the relationship to that sign. So in a sense, the red is the meaning, meaning without physicality. If meaning can exist without any physical armature whatsoever, that would be in the red. If the physical armature could exist without any meaning, that would be the elements, the green. So at one end is subject without material and at the other end is object without subject. Those are the bookends, and they've been in my work since the seventies.

I've been using those colors since then. So that is kind of like a cycle. The color of those worlds' existence, stained glass and carpet, ceramics, architecture, you name it, I've tried to play it that way. I haven't even touched on the cosmology, which is heaven and God and hell, and demons and angels and all of that. A huge amount of my work exists in that red area.

In my work I represent God, I represent hell, I represent demons and angels, before birth, and after death. It's a deity, but it's almost childlike in the way it adds to the questions. Where was I before I was born? I remember asking my parents that when I was five or six years old, because there was a photograph of them without me there. And I said, "So where was I?" Those are questions kids ask. My cosmology is very simple minded, but it does answer those questions. Why do things happen the way they do while I live my life? Where do I go after I die? They address those questions, which go back to the Neolithic period. Those questions have to do with our future, our past, our fate. They're in all cultures. I'm trying to address those questions in my work, trying to understand how art functions. What is art anyway? Especially art beyond the art world? I think it's important for me, as an artist, to address the larger picture, the circumstance of art making.

Rail: I think it's telling that you say their world has collapsed. And in fact, that's what's happening to Little Nemo in the comic book. His world is collapsing all around him.

Mullican: That is absolutely true. I hadn't thought of it. The Little Nemo thing is—I still don't know what's going on there. I decided to do this picture, I was offered the exhibition, and Peter said, "Let's do another show." I was very happy to do another show.

Every time I do a show in a particular space, I want to challenge the parameters of how I am seen. And I wanted to do this because most of my exhibitions have been very different kinds of work. The last show I had there, I had a big flag. And then I had scientific objects, I had photographs, I had all these different mediums. And I wanted to do a show where I only had one media. And this was the show. I had this idea to do this *Little Nemo* comic and to change all the colors. It was a fantasy of sorts. Then I was talking to Peter, and I said maybe this should be my exhibition, and he was very enthusiastic to do it. And why not? So we went with it.

It was a huge effort. This particular show was probably the most physically demanding and, formally speaking, the most ambitious show I've done in a long time. It was a surprise for people, not what they were expecting.

Rail: I was completely surprised by it! I walked in and the first question I had was, what did I miss? What was the transitional work that I didn't get to see?

Mullican: You know, I'm seventy-one, which in today's world is not that old. The thing is, as you get older, it's fun to push things around a little bit. I think that is one of the best things that artists can do. I still don't really know what the work is about. Your comment about this relationship between Nemo and how I'm describing that person—they are very close. This body of work is very close to the hypnotic work.

Rail: Sometimes you can't see the work until you make it.

Mullican: That's why people make it.