

## Matt Mullican: Universal Perspective

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Matt Mullican, *Five Worlds Sign*, 2020. Acrylic and oil stick rubbing on canvas, in two parts, each: 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

New York

It turns out that binge watching the television show *Counterpart* was the perfect appetizer to Matt Mullican's latest exhibition *Universal Perspective*, his fifth at Peter Freeman. The series is set upon the premise that in 1987 East German scientists succeeded in creating a parallel earth in order to test the bounds of science. In order to examine the potential differences between the two earths, one of the scientists conducts a cause-and-effect experiment, gifting his daughter a vinyl record from her favorite artist, while his counterpart does not. This small divergence fundamentally alters both worlds, highlighting the potential significance of seemingly mundane daily actions to impact the global landscape. The same idea and effect are evident in *Five World Signs* (2020), which is hung on a singular wall in the gallery's entryway; it is the first work viewers are presented with, and can be seen from outside the gallery's front doors. Two 78 3/4 by 78 3/4-inch canvases hang side by side, displaying a small circle within a square within two larger circles. One canvas features the black outline of the shapes amidst the white

backdrop of the canvas. The other is ablaze with colors: an emerald green, a dark shade of royal blue, a vibrant yellow, and a reddish orange at the very center. Together, the two canvases continue Mullican’s career-long investigation into the ways isolated details can impact visual perception of the whole—or a micro version of the ways in which apparent minute factors can impact society as a whole.

In the first gallery, viewers are presented with three large-scale works, *Untitled (Birth to Death List)*, *Untitled (Apartment, 2 AM)*, and *Universal Perspective and Details* (all 2020)—from which the exhibition takes its name—and a melted phone beneath green plexiglas on view in the middle of the room. Meanwhile, *Untitled (Birth to Death List)* (2020), consists of 32 pieces of printed canvas each embedded with the same ink and oil stick rubbing—two lines at the top and bottom of the canvas connected to a circle in the middle—and a continuous variation of words. The first one reads “Birth, Family, House, Home, Crawl, Heat, Kitchen, Stove,” while the last says “Reunion, Christmas, Walk, Caring, Feet, Faces, Vegetable, Death,” connecting a multitude of ordinary objects, actions, and occurrences together. None of the individual pieces of canvas make complete sense on their own, but together they highlight Mullican’s fascination with perspective, both his own and ours, challenging the notion that any one act can truly stand alone.



Installation view: *Matt Mullican: Universal Perspective*, Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

*Untitled (Apartment, 2 AM)* follows a similar trajectory, with Mullican continuing to work with the oil stick and ink rubbing, but this time onto yellow lit photographs of an apartment, presumably his own. The knowledge that these photographs were taken at 2 a.m. adds to the ongoing mystique of these works, capturing the many states of Mullican’s

apartment during the early morning hours. Some of the items in the apartment are fully captured by the oil stick and ink rubbing—oranges on a table, a pot on the stove, the ceiling light, while other objects are split in half by the rubbing, mildly distorting the image into a state of flux, as each image battles with the others for the viewers' attention. *Universal Perspective and Details* (2020), a big diptych, returns to Mullican's exploration of yellow, with one canvas featuring a landscape oil stick rubbing of a railroad beneath a bridge, while the other offers isolated details amidst a white backdrop, providing each section of the rubbing with its own specific focus within the larger work.

Three large-scale rubbings are on view in the larger second gallery, dominated by an enormous 249 by 257 1/4-inch flag hanging from the ceiling onto the floor. The flag, *Untitled (Between Subject and Sign)* (2019), is half red and half black with a white circle in the middle of it, continuing Mullican's challenge of perception through visual means. The three rubbings are black and white and give viewers an up-close look at Mullican's sense of draftsmanship, depicting letters and scribbles that are attributed to "that person," the artist's alter ego, which he discovered through extended periods of hypnosis. The second gallery also introduces two turn-of-the-century generators—*Generator 1* and *Generator 2* (both 2020)—situated on different sides of the space. *Generator 1* sits within a wooden box and is protected by yellow plexiglass, acting in dialogue with the black-and-white rubbings, while *Generator 2* sits in front of a series of laser-cut plexiglass disks hung together on the wall, featuring an in-progress emerald green plexiglass disk still on the machine. Each of the hanging plexiglass disks is unique either in color or in shape, as Mullican has carved out different shapes within the circular frame of each disk, sometimes simply breaking the disks in half. The effect of the work is a continued exploration into how the micro and macro can exist with each other, and how each has the ability to shape one's sense of reality when only one side is dutifully considered. This is ultimately what makes the comparison to *Counterpart* so striking.



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In *Counterpart*, following the vinyl incident, the informed parties on both sides live in fear of the other's ability to alter their respective worlds. Ultimately, this fear festers and leads one side to produce a biological weapon and release it into the parallel world. It is not done out of cruelty or malice, but rather out of the desire for self-preservation. The characters' rationale is that once the idea has been considered in one world, there can be no guarantee that it has not been considered on the other side. Yet, this fear of the other is shown to be unfounded, as the parallel world had not even considered such a measure. It is this fear that Mullican's work contests, as it offers a reminder that while differences are often striking in appearance—whether it be the color of plexiglass disks or the color of one's skin—society is an alluring, more harmonious place for everyone when they can be acknowledged and welcomed. As we sit at home, each in our own digital bubbles waiting for the world to reopen, Mullican's *Universal Perspective* feels increasingly pertinent to our current state of affairs, a testament to both individual differences and communal strengths.