

MAI 36 GALERIE

MATT MULLICAN

What They See

Zurich Art Weekend: June 7 – 9, 2024
Vernissage: Sunday, June 9, 11 am
Exhibition: June 7 – August 10, 2024

Mai 36 Galerie is delighted to present an exhibition featuring new works by renowned American artist Matt Mullican, marking his 11th solo exhibition with the gallery in a relationship that started in the foundation year of the gallery in 1988, 36 years ago.

“What They See” builds upon Mullican’s investigations of the reality “inside the image” and his cosmology of the world, two cornerstone concepts that Mullican has been exploring for over five decades.

“Who feels the most pain?” The uniformly hung, large yellow room in the exhibition shows eight versions of a fictional character inscribed as “Glenn”, eight rubbings on canvas, each depicting a different version of Glenn. Mullican is asking us to decide which version of Glenn can feel the most pain. The artworks vary in their levels of detail, ranging from photographic representations to abstract shapes. Each piece shares the same dimensions—1 meter wide and 1.75 meters high—and uses a consistent color palette of yellow (“World Framed” in Mullican’s color code) and black & white (“Language” in Mullican’s color code)

The question goes back to an idea from 1973 when Matt Mullican invented a stick figure representing a fictive being. As a sign of identity and to complete the personification of his figure, Mullican named it Glenn.

“In 1973, I came up with a drawing of a stick figure I called ‘Glenn’. I made about 500 images of him, and I went through psychology, anatomy and biology books in order to come up with descriptions that could be noted underneath: Glenn’s circulatory system; Glenn forgetting an idea or trying to impress a friend; Glenn pinching his arm. I was trying to identify the pain that the stick figure felt as I understood it in my own psyche. Glenn dealt with his own physicality and that of the space: he masturbated or had fits or ate too much or remembered the time he hurt himself skiing.” - M.M.

Mullican continued to add and remove details from Glenn to understand how the level of details in a picture affects our emotional response to it: Reducing Glenn to just the abstract forms of a rectangular shape for the body and a circle for the head - or increasing details by replacing the mere stick figure with a comic book character, a portrait photograph or a digital avatar. Consequently,

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the human visceral response becomes stronger with increased levels of detail, as pictures feel more real.

The small yellow room further explores how we project into others, examining how we inhabit the experiences and perspectives of others through various forms of representation, using imagery ranging from a detail of a comic book (“man in the snowstorm”) to a self-portrait of the artist. The visceral response intensifies when triggered by sexual or violent imagery.

“That’s the terrible thing with horrific images like executions: you’re suddenly stuck in a situation where you can imagine yourself as the perpetrator and as the victim as well but you’re neither.” - M.M.

In the middle room, the 18 photographs closely follow Mullican drinking his morning coffee, transporting the viewer into a first-person perspective, and making us see what the artist sees. Instantly, Mullican’s reality becomes everyone’s shared reality, our daily life, away from life and death, the two existential factors that differentiate reality from fiction.

The red room opens up the exhibition to Mullican’s most well-known concept: His model of a possible cosmology. Mullican’s cosmologies are at the core of his practice, coming to form in pictograms, city maps, and charts in a wide range of media, materials, and scales. Surrounded by the ethnic works of his parents’ collection, Mullican drew his first cosmology when he was eight. Much like the cosmologies of ancient cultures, Mullican’s cosmologies aim to explain how the world functions. Mullican’s newest cosmologies take a circular form, where birth and death—in the material and spiritual sense—culminate at the same point, creating a repeatable and continuing life cycle.

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Matt Mullican (born 1951 in Santa Monica, California; lives and works in Berlin and New York) studied under John Baldessari at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles and held a professorship at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg until 2019.

His work, ranging from performance to installation to computer-generated images, and from sculpture to drawing above all, examines the methods used by humankind to interpret reality, feel empathy for images and project itself onto them. He attempts to define reality and its representations through an artistic systemization and encyclopaedic approach of collecting, creating and ordering elements. Over the years, he has designed a personal language made of formal

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and symbolic elements combined with a declension of five recurrent colours (green, blue, yellow, black, and red), each referring to a different type of perception.

Matt Mullican's work has been exhibited internationally since the early 1970s in venues including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2009); Haus Der Kunst, Munich (2011); Kunstmuseum Winterthur (2016); MoMa, New York (1989) National Galerie, Berlin (1997); Stedelijk Museum, Schiedam, Netherlands (1997), etc. It was also included at Documenta in Kassel in 1982, 1993 and 1997, in the 2008 Whitney Biennial and in the 2013 Biennale di Venezia. In 2018 the Pirelli Hangar Bicocca in Milan hosted a retrospective exhibition.