

Mapping an Imagined Order, Page by Page

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Art

By DOROTHY SPEARS

MATT MULLICAN loves to scribble. "This is my studio," he said on a recent morning, gesturing around the fluorescent-lighted space in Lower Manhattan that serves as a workshop, office, storage room and clearinghouse for his artwork. "But I don't really work here. My studio is in my notebook, and where I travel."

As if to prove the point, he plucked a sketchbook off a metal bookshelf and opened it.

A Christmas gift from his parents dated Dec. 26, 1970, it was filled in a single day by Mr. Mullican, now 57, when he was still a high school senior. A miniature tour of Pop Art history, it is strikingly precocious.

Inside, a colored-pencil sketch of a spoon dunked in coffee uncannily channels Claes Oldenburg. Contour drawings of a fountain pen and a pencil mimic the spirit and stylish lines of Andy Warhol. A series of drawings depict both the ingredient (lighter fluid) and the tool (a spoon) used for Robert Rauschenberg's famous photo-transfer process.

And yet the elongated scrawl of the artist's own name and a drawing of an automobile juxtaposed with the words "fast car" written in the shape of a vehicle, is all Mr. Mullican.

"I used to be really into Formula One race cars," he said. Judging from the way his drawings correspond to the words alongside them, he was also clearly interested in exploring how both pictures and words trigger human responses.

Mr. Mullican's high school notebook foreshadows what has become for him a career-long investigation: How do we all insert ourselves into the imagery that bombards us every day? Why does the pain of another person, or even a stick figure, become our own? What is the basis of human empathy? How can thoughts and emotions be communicated visually?

"It's all about projection," Mr. Mullican said. "I'm sitting in front of you now, and you're seeing me. But you're also seeing lots of other things, based on your own experiences."

This "subject-object" divide, as it is known in philosophical circles, is nothing new, according to João Ribas, a curator at the Drawing Center in SoHo. But what intrigues him about Mr. Mullican's work, he said, was "the way Matt attempts to collapse this split through the medium of drawing."

That process is explored in "Matt Mullican: A Drawing Translates the Way of Thinking," an exhibition that opens Friday at the center. Featuring more than 100 artworks made over 35 years, it includes Mr. Mullican's stick-figure sketches, videos of him drawing while under hypnosis, large-scale rubbings based on original works on paper that have since been photocopied and cut out, and vitrines displaying — you guessed it — notebooks.

"Matt always carries a notebook around," said the artist John Baldessari, the master of California conceptualism and a former teacher to Mr. Mullican. "He's always jotting things down. He has a very fertile imagination."

Mr. Mullican has been traveling quite a lot in recent months. In September and October, for example, a mini-retrospective of his mixed-media work at Gallery Klosterfelde in Berlin overlapped with a show of his monumental rubbings at the Karsten Schubert gallery in London. He is also one of 40 artists from 20 countries exhibiting at the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil through Dec. 6.

Mr. Mullican's mad-scientist-style musings have taken a variety of forms, from virtual tours conducted via computer and 3D goggles to color-coded charts, banners, maps and architectural models. Etched granite sculptures commissioned by, among others, the Metropolitan Transit Authority in New York, the Swiss Bank Corporation and Middlebury College in Vermont are chock full of ideas about how the universe is ordered. And in decades of performances given while under hypnosis, Mr. Mullican has consistently exposed the private realm of his unconscious to public scrutiny in the hope of tapping universal patterns of behavior.

These performances typically begin when the hypnotized Mr. Mullican shuffles out onto the stage, dazed and squinting. But by the time they end, he has often managed to draw an array of words and symbols on an enormous sheet of paper. "I would never say what is the basis of my work," Mr. Mullican said. "That's too big a statement." But he will allow that, "to a degree, drawing is at the core of my practice."

Drawing, that is, and talking.

Mr. Mullican's fascination with both dates back to his early childhood. Born in 1951 in Santa Monica, Calif., to Luchita Hurtado, a Surrealist painter from Venezuela, and the American painter Lee Mullican, he recalls that, "before I could even talk, I would see my father put a painting on the wall to discuss it with friends." Mr. Mullican's response as a toddler was to make a drawing of his own and stick it on the wall. Inevitably the drawing would fall, he said, and he would stand before an empty wall, spouting gibberish.

In spite of his parents' artistic pedigrees — Morris Graves, Mark Tobey and Isamu Noguchi were among their long Who's Who of artist friends — the family was often financially strapped. In an effort to economize, they moved in 1955 to Caracas, Venezuela, where Mr. Mullican said, "I spoke only Spanish, and forgot all of my English." Then in 1956 they resettled in New York City, and, he said, "I relearned English and forgot all my Spanish."

To make sense of his linguistic upheaval, Mr. Mullican began piecing together the signs and symbols of distant cultures and multiple time periods in much the way that his father, a cartographer for the United States Army during World War II, had learned to translate vast bodies of land and sea into an intricate series of pattern and lines.

He was also influenced by his parents' collection of Oceanic and tribal art. New Guinea architectural posts, Navajo rugs and totem poles purchased cheaply during the family's extensive travels "just filled up the house," he recalled.

"Every single object depicted some kind of cosmology," he said.

In 1959, when his father won a Guggenheim fellowship, the family moved to Rome, and the young Mullican briefly dreamed of becoming an archaeologist. His parents took him to Pompeii, he said, and "I was totally into it."

Back in Los Angeles he experienced an epiphany when he saw Mr. Oldenburg's sculptures of a giant upside-down ice cream cone and a hamburger at Virginia Dwan's gallery. Captivated by what he called "both the color, and the Surrealist idea of blowing up a small object into this big abstract thing," Mr. Mullican became a devotee of Pop Art while amassing a collection of first-edition comic books.

Yet his itinerant upbringing took a toll. "My school record was horrible," he said. Between his academic struggles and his mother's insistence that he repeat 10th grade to avoid the Vietnam-era draft, he said, he was almost 20 when he graduated from high school. By that time he had already bought a Rapidograph pen and had filled notebook after notebook.

Before graduating he won a \$1,000 college scholarship through a school art competition with his notebooks and large-scale drawings. An announcement was made over the school's public-address system.

"I was such a nobody," Mr. Mullican said. "Almost a nonperson. I had learned how to disappear. So that was an exciting moment for me."

Buoyed, he entered the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, where he befriended the artists David Salle, James Welling, Troy Brauntuch and Jack Goldstein and enrolled in Mr. Baldessari's fabled "Post-Studio Art" course. Asked what he remembered best about the young Mr. Mullican, Mr. Baldessari said: "His mind. I couldn't shut him off."

For a student exhibition in their windowless third-floor classroom, he recalled, Mr. Mullican tacked a dried leaf to the wall. Then, positioning five students at strategic intervals inside and outside the building, Mr. Mullican handed each of them a mirror. By tilting the mirrors, they directed sunlight from outside, up the stairs, down a corridor, and onto the classroom wall, where Mr. Mullican used a magnifying glass to burn the leaf.

Reminded of this work, he laughed. "Oh, right," he said. "That's when I really got John's attention." The two remain friends, and collaborated on a project last spring at Tracy Williams, Mr. Mullican's gallery in Greenwich Village.

Over the last three decades, Mr. Mullican said, he began exhibiting with high-profile dealers like Mary Boone and Barbara Gladstone. But because his cerebral multidisciplinary work has never been an easy sell, he said,

he also began working with a large pool of dealers internationally. While commissions from schools, corporations and governments have helped him make ends meet, he said, his midcareer period has been something of a grind. "Once you go through that," he said, "you're humbled. It just tests your obsession."

Yet recently, Mr. Mullican said, "people finally seem to be understanding what I'm up to." Having seen one of his rubbings or a flag or a series of drawings at an art fair, he said, a member of the art cognoscenti may decide to call him up. Now that interest in his work has quickened, he is preparing for shows at the Stuk Kunstencentrum in Leuven, Belgium; the Haus der Kunst in Munich; and the Nouveau Musée/Institut d'Art Contemporain in Villeurbanne, France, near Lyon.

Mr. Mullican is at a loss to explain the flurry of exhibitions. At the same time, he said, he is feeling more mortal these days.

"It's odd," he said, shaking his head and sighing. "I've been doing this for what? Almost 40 years? Looking at your old work, you're also looking at your life."

Then his brow furrowed, and he grabbed a notebook.

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