

MATT MULLICAN: PUBLIC PARADISE

by Holland Cotter

(From the catalog)

If the term “public art” suggests art made on a demonstrative scale, in a range of traditional, often low-art materials, Matt Mullican’s recent work fits the description, for it includes immense banners and flags, tapestries, stained glass windows, engraved stone walls and floors, posters, even bulletin boards. If public art means art sited for maximum popular visibility, the application is a bit shakier. Until recently, Mullican’s work seldom has been designed to appear outdoors and, so far, has been largely restricted to artworld venues. If public art is viewed as establishing or reinforcing values via readily accessible pictorial content, Mullican’s art is something else again; its hieroglyphlike images are fragments of a symbolic universe entirely of the artist’s own devising. Interpretively elastic to a degree, it is, ultimately, carefully prescribed, bearing at its core a critique of value creation itself.

No one is quicker to point out the ambivalent, even illusory nature of his work’s public identity than Mullican himself. It does not use public space, he notes, and only simulates public metaphors: The flags are not really flags; the posters are not really posters; the monuments mark no historical event. To invite us to see the world his way and in no other, he usurps the persuasive techniques of civic, religious, and corporate art—the promotional mediums that read “authoritative” to us, whether they are commemorative (stone), nationalistic (flags), religious (stained glass), or commercial (posters). The hierarchical apparatus of a traditional cosmology is here—images of God, Hell, the Devil, Death, and other absolutes. The universe is divided into complementary existential realms of an objective/subjective, microcosmic/macrocosmic variety—and Mullican has even color coded these layers for visual identification. The results feel like a combination of prehistory, science fiction, and database sociology, and have the encyclopedic, compartmentalizing obsessiveness of medieval scholasticism, with its hunger to name and diagram every knowable thing!

Given the epic, even scriptural look of the work, it is understandable that Mullican is questioned frequently about his religious upbringing. “I was born in L.A.,” he responds jokingly. He will add that his mother was a non-practicing Catholic, and that his only religious training took place during summers on his grandparents’ farm in the midwest, when he was brought to a church of some 4 Protestant denomination on Sundays. He acknowledges as far more important that his parents, both artists, collected primitive art. The spiritual images he has carried from childhood are of African and Oceanic figures, masks, and ritual objects, formally clear and expressively resonant.

L.A. was, of course, an influence. There, in the sixties, Mullican was exposed to pop art, with its love-hate relationship to the public media—film, television, advertising in all of its forms. He studied at CalArts, which, in the early seventies (as now), had under teachers like John Baldessari, a heavy conceptualist bias. Mullican’s encounters with postminimalism—the work of Carl Andre, Frank Stella, and others—although illuminating, prompted him to move in another direction, to the “maximism” he still practices: a hybrid of pop appropriation, formal eclecticism, and conceptualistic sensitivity to context and suspicion of expressive largesse.

Mullican’s work, from the beginning, has been public in the literal sense: performance art. In New York appearances, in 1976, he sat facing one of his own pictures—landscapes at that time—and just talked. On occasion, he even had himself hypnotized on stage, a device he used to project

himself both backward and forward to earlier and later stages of his own life, relating the journey to his audience as he experienced it, often as an episodic symbolic narrative of death, transformation, and rebirth. Several of the symbols that later figured in his art (the Hell figure, a man's head with open mouth, being one) derive from these performances. Playing a shamanlike role, Mullican clearly regarded his own presence as a crucial mediating ingredient between his art and the viewer. The performances seem to have been genuinely intuitive on one level and highly manipulative on another; the sense of total immersion they engendered continues today in the increasingly theatrical public scale and format of his stationary work, and in the almost incantatory proliferation of his symbols.

In 1978, while grounded in a Nova Scotia airport before delivering a lecture, Mullican became aware of the full range of unwritten signs surrounding him: intensely concentrated graphic reductions that directed him to restaurants and rest rooms, forbade him to smoke here or enter there, encouraged him to smile, and so on. He was struck not only by the way public signs and those of his own inventive imagination interlocked but also by the way sheer ubiquity gave each sign its power. It was, for him, an epiphanic observation—the moment he was forced to take semiology personally. His 1980 show at Mary Boone—his first in a New York commercial gallery—used this understanding to create the paradigm for his subsequent work. The show consisted of posters, individually handmade but mechanically simulated, even to being shrink-wrapped. The notion of introducing fake reproduced art (which meant fake low art) into a market founded on the prestige attached to the original was part of the critical agenda, but there was more. For what these posters “sold,” in the shorthand lexicon of public signage was Mullican's own postmodernist fundamentalism: “Mullican Life,” “Mullican Death,” “Mullican World,” to quote the words that he included as part of the images themselves. These posters were early examples—in the combination of public formal and private vocabulary—not only of his gift for astutely ideated presentation but for introducing one of his recurrent concerns: In the reality of perpetual promotion we live with, the critical issue is what is being sold.

Mullican's consumerist trope of evangelism and personal advertising further developed with the rubbings began in 1983. The technique occurred to him on a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts, in Boston, where he saw a Chinese stone relief and its rubbed impression displayed side by side. The idea was appealing. Critically it addressed the mystique of the hidden original—the master—that a rubbing implied. His response to this phenomenon was to create masters so function-intensive and aesthetically unrepresentable they would be good for nothing *but* the taking of a rubbing. Here, the original is a mere mechanical; the copy alone is art. Metaphorically the rubbing process recalled the transference to the retina of an image of the world itself—revealing that image be only a shadowy version of the original, a neo-Platonic gloss in line with Mullican's metaphysical layerings of reality and the curious sadness at the heart of his vision. Practically, the rubbing technique permitted him to make quick multiples on a large scale; in the world of art, the growing notion that public presence was an active conceptual ingredient made the factors of size and production very important.

With these concerns grew an interest in craftsmanly manufacture. This issue first arose in 1981–82 when Mullican visited India, where his designs were turned into colored banners by local tailors—a material realization of ideas that a single artist with limited artisanal skills could not hope to accomplish. Subsequently, he has employed craftsmen in a variety of mediums, from stained glass work (which he designs infrequently, the last being for the museum in The Hague) to carved stonework (an outdoor floor installed in Münster, Germany, in the summer of 1987), to flags and banners (a series of which was commissioned to hang outside the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art this past year [cover]).

The sight of Mullican's personal emblems flying from MOCA's facade, or, for that matter, brought together in a gallery space, naturally prompts the question, how personal are these images? To the degree that Mullican has invented, or reinvented, them (he claims no specific literary sources; he takes them wherever he finds them—the street, the airport, his imagination), and given the fact that he is the only one capable of accurately designating their meanings, they are personal

indeed. They comprise a world so intricate that it defies detailed description, and so programmatic, it leaves every attempt at critical exegesis sounding very much like any other. To get an idea of the ingenuity of Mullican's method, one only has to consider the role of chromatic metaphor in the work. Mullican originally used the basic shades of the popular press—black and white, with the occasional emphatic red—but has since expanded his palette to embrace yellow; green, and blue. To each of these he has assigned a function corresponding to the five divisions of his universe. Yellow is "The World Framed"—that is, the world of art. (Mullican claims that an animistic sense of art is as much a living, natural part of the world as any other.) Green signifies "The Elemental World" of nature, and blue, "The World Unframed," which encompasses the mundane functional objects that surround us. Black and white together have come to stand for the world of "Languages and Signs," the rational network of information and definitions. Red is "The Subjective World," which is as close as Mullican comes to a notion of spirituality. Red actually signified Hell in a vision from an early performance piece; that it is now the color of the subjective self is a clue to the psychological quirks in the schema. By no means is this a utopian vision, but edgy, complicated, often harshly mechanistic.

And there are the symbols themselves, which range from abstract pictographs (two lines in a circle may mean either Life or Death, depending upon their left or right placement) to the draughtsmanly complexities of the immense, multipart installation Mullican designed last year for the Dallas Museum of Art. The two panels of the cycle of fifty-two oilstick rubbings document a chain of evolution from microbe through human life. The cycle reaches an apotheosis in a huge tympanumlike image of a head, from upon which descends a stream of symbols, ancient and modern, arcane and obvious, sacred and profane, absurd and profound—crucifixes, the Roman she-bear, covered wagons, men's room symbols—all laid out zodiacally in grids. Almost all of Mullican's images are as ironic as they are ambitious. In the past few years, he has repeatedly made rubbings of the form of the Paris Opera House. Its colors, red and yellow, suggest a positive , symbol of art in many of its disciplines—music, dance, architecture, painting, theater—but in drawing the Opera House as a vast luxury liner, with levels from first class down to steerage, he creates an emblem of social elitism and political oppression.

This critical aspect of the work may be, in fact, its most i~.deeply felt and most personal side. When Mullican says, "I hate banners myself," and goes on to suggest that the whole emblematic paraphernalia of factionalism makes him nervous (colors and signs distinguishing nation from nation, team from team), he gives a clue to the irony implicit in his relationship to his own work. Certainly, he strongly resists a view of himself as a purveyor of psychological or mystical hermeneutics, or as a "nice guy on the sidelines" with personal redemption alone on his mind! Asked whether he believes in the pictographic universe he is creating, he says that it is possible to believe and disbelieve at the same time. What is clear is the critical distance operating in his cosmology, and the fact that it is precisely the personal quality of his work that prevents it from being co-opted—its critical nature explained, extolled, and so rendered harmless—as much postmodernist work based on borrowed media strategies, he feels, is doomed to be.

Where Mullican differs from many of his colleagues, : however, and from a younger generation of artists who have learned much from his example, is in the fact that irony is only part of the substance of his work. What we come back to, of course, is the extraordinarily poetic fictional world, at once pedagogic and childlike, he has created. "People say I'm trying to put everything in the universe into one of my shows. I'm just trying to diagram what we have in us." Does this make his work mock-public art, theoretical public art? Unpublic art? Part of each, I think, and more than any of them, for, perhaps uniquely in his generation, Mullican combines public and private worlds, treating internal and external territory as continuous and life itself as a single, vast, brilliantly articulated metaphysical space.