



MATT MULLICAN: THE SIGN IS THE CIRCLE

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Opening: 9.11.2024, 12:00-15.00 h. Exhibition: 09.11 > 18.01.2025

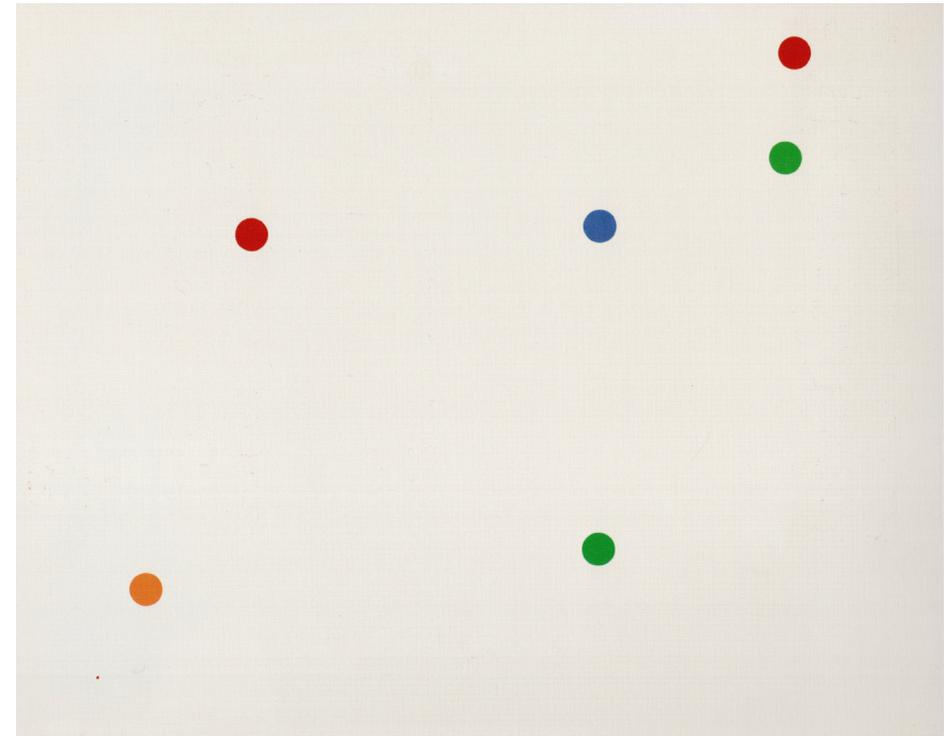
Guided tour by the artist, 9.11.2024, 12.30 h (in English)  
+info Valeria Aristizábal, gallery@projectesd.com

### Developing a Cosmology

Finding a personal voice in art is as much a question of discovery as of invention. After a given moment, what was always seen in a specific way is all at once clearly represented in another way and, from then on, this big-little discovery will transform its surroundings and the way it is perceived, as well as the conclusions reached by whoever understands and values its importance. This epiphany may happen at the beginning of a career, and so lay a solid groundwork and turn the artistic path to be explored into an ongoing prospection of concepts and forms, of variations on a theme. In other cases, the development of a personal voice has no fixed starting point, but rather develops through a series of tiny shifts, the sum of which proves critical when seen in hindsight.

Matt Mullican has made no bones about the fact that the point of departure for his trajectory is a series of elements discovered and built when he was still an art student. This period of inner search was based on encounters with and investigations into himself and the perceptions of others over these findings, which are nothing but more or less precise ways of outlining a personal boundary. As old as life itself, the artist's intention in his work is to reach a profound understanding of himself. This explains why, from the very beginning, Mullican has subtended his works with a direct cable between himself and the world; between the earthy and the heavenly, the latter understood as a vault that reflects the internal and, at once, shows what exists outside, the unfathomable; what circulates between what one can think, what one can achieve and what cannot even be imagined.

This double exhibition at ProjecteSD, Barcelona, and at 1MiraMadrid (the artist's first solo show in Madrid) functions like an addition of free-standing and irreplaceable parts. In other words, they are necessary and compatible actions. To a certain degree, it functions like Vilgot Sjöman's celebrated films *I Am Curious (Yellow)* and *I Am Curious (Blue)*, representing the colours of the Swedish flag. Each one shows an interconnected part of the story, and not in a sequel as the continuation of one after the other. Similar to the yellow cross on the blue ground of the Swedish flag which, while *merging* with it, also divides it into four parts, both shows need to be seen in conjunction to better grasp Matt Mullican's work. And even more so for the selection in this particular case, which focuses on the figure of the circle and leaves aside other more general representations—urban worldviews or complex archetypes— of our being-together in the world.



Matt Mullican *Untitled*, 1975



Studio visit in Berlin. 1 May 2024



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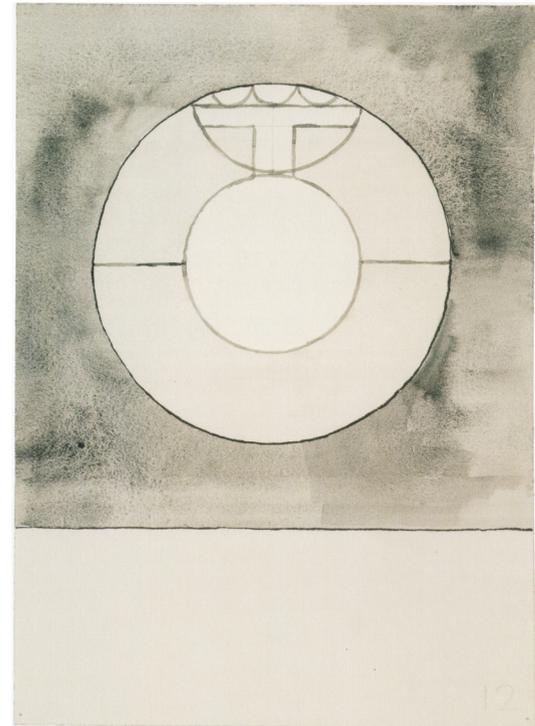
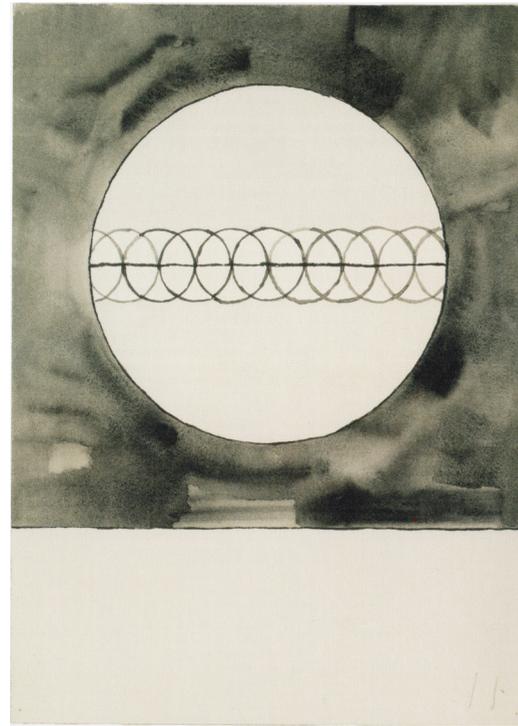
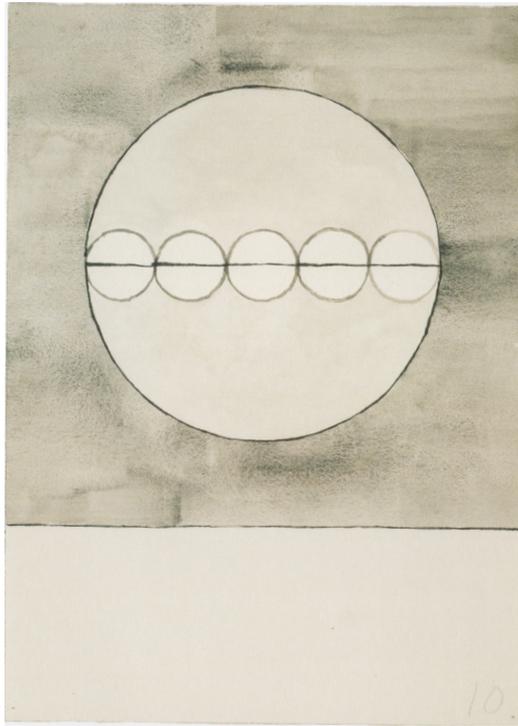
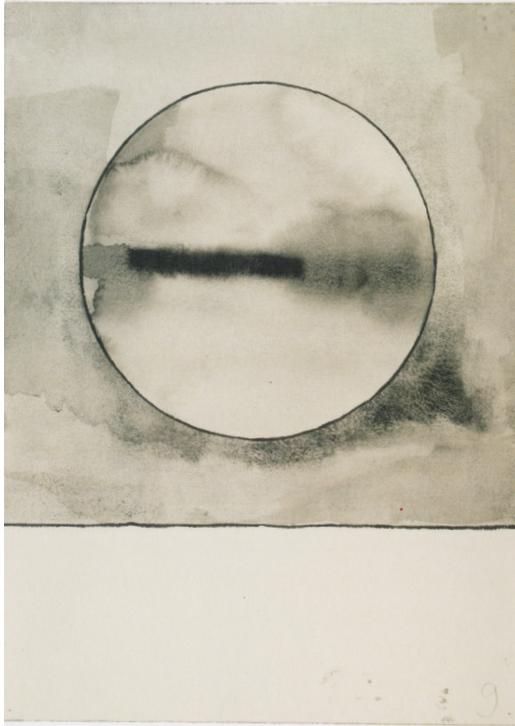


Matt Mullican *Untitled (Heaven)*, 1983

Developing an ontological relationship with colours is fundamental in the work of the US artist, who uses them to determine the functions of his complex yet at once simplified compositions, and constitute his symbolism of the world. Black represents language and signs; green refers to physical elements and materials; yellow allows us to perceive cultural events (art, music, theatre, museums and libraries) which, though adjacent to us, we do not always pay close attention to; he uses blue for all other aspects of everyday life; and red is subjective understanding. The walls of 1MiraMadrid have been painted yellow, red, blue, green and black to hosts works that, in some but not all cases, also feature some of these colours. The polychromy of its walls turns the gallery into a *Mullicanian* urn of sorts, a slipcase that makes each work on show a part of a whole. At ProjecteSD, where the artist is exhibiting for the sixth time and the mutual connection is wide-ranging and productive, the relationship with the space operates differently, like a figurative timeline that covers the almost fifty years that spans the works on view and their decades of working together; a sign of mutual understanding.

Indeed, the figure of the circle runs through the work of the two shows, which are one, connected by an invisible thread like the beads on a pendant or a net that binds together the thousand possible variations of representing the same object. Although their relationship is obvious, the symbolism of the circle or disc is different from the ellipse and the circumference. In Juan Eduardo Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols*, he states that "the circle or disc is often a symbol of the sun [...]. It also corresponds with the number 10 (a return to unity after multiplicity), which is why it often symbolizes heaven and perfection or even eternity. There is a profound psychological implication in this meaning of the circle as perfection. That is why Jung tells us that the square, as a minimum plural number, represents the pluralist state of man who has not reached inner unity (perfection), while the circle would correspond to that final phase."

Mullican is a transcendental artist; but *his* transcendence is deliberately and decisively far removed from the religious or mystic. For instance, in *Untitled (Heaven/Sky/Land/Hell)*, 1975, the sheet of paper, similar in size to a DINA4, has only three lines. One, a straight line, divides the vertical rectangle into two halves; the second is a semi-circumference that encompasses the top part of the paper; the third is like a reflection of the second on the bottom half. *Heaven* (understood as paradise) is the space included in the upper semi-circumference, while the *sky* (in the astronomic sense) would be the space comprised between the end of the former and the central line (horizon). The same happens with land and hell reflected below. That being said, it is precisely the use of a simple, schematic and pared-down symbolism that enables one to read this drawing as a playing field where the two opposing parts aspire to win out over the other, or, to lay the foundations for a cosmology that, though shared, here aspires to be a subjective mark.



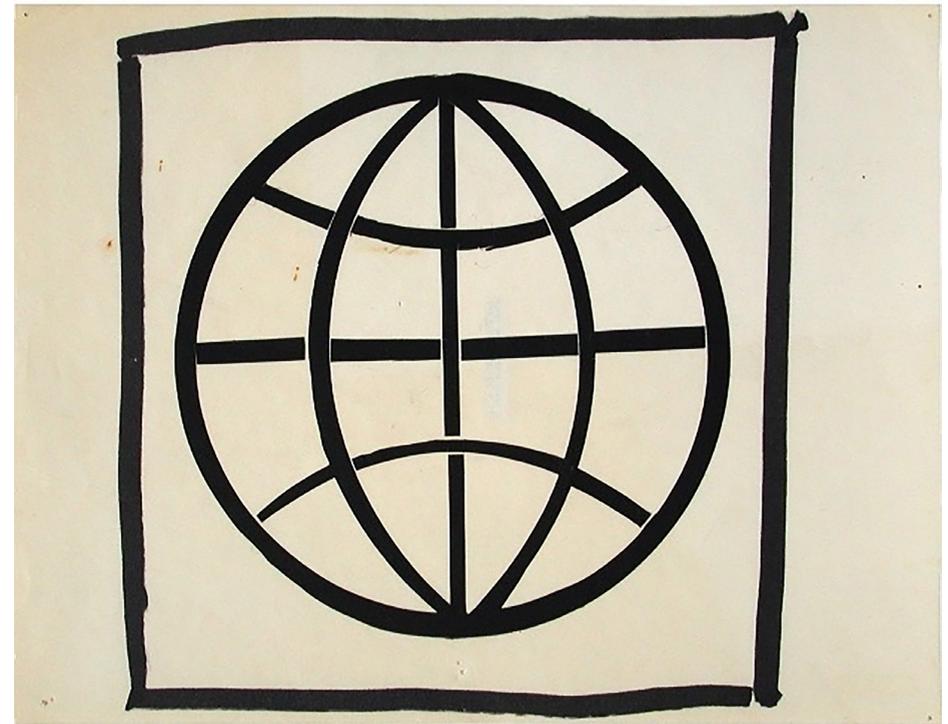
Matt Mullican *Untitled (Things change in Heaven, 9-12)*, 2020

The influence of Mullican's time under his teacher John Baldessari can be adumbrated in *Untitled* and *Untitled (Head Broken Up)*, both 1975, where circles of colours distributed over the blank paper recall some works by the master. Especially those in which the faces of people in black and white photos were obscured with coloured dots. There is in Mullican however an attempt to go further, in trying to achieve the same with the minimum means possible. Because the reduction of a complex world to signage of simple forms and primary colours gives his work a strong personality and continually updates it. In another, *Untitled (Heaven)*, 1983, a red circle is inscribed at the centre of a black circle, both painted in *gouache* on rough grey paper. The idea of the circle as a disc evokes the symbol—a circle with a dot in the middle—which, in Rudolf Koch's *The Book of Signs* is "the open eye of God, the purpose of Revelation: 'And God said, Let there be light.'" Again, *Heaven* is the title Mullican gives to the drawing of a circle that looks more like a vinyl record.

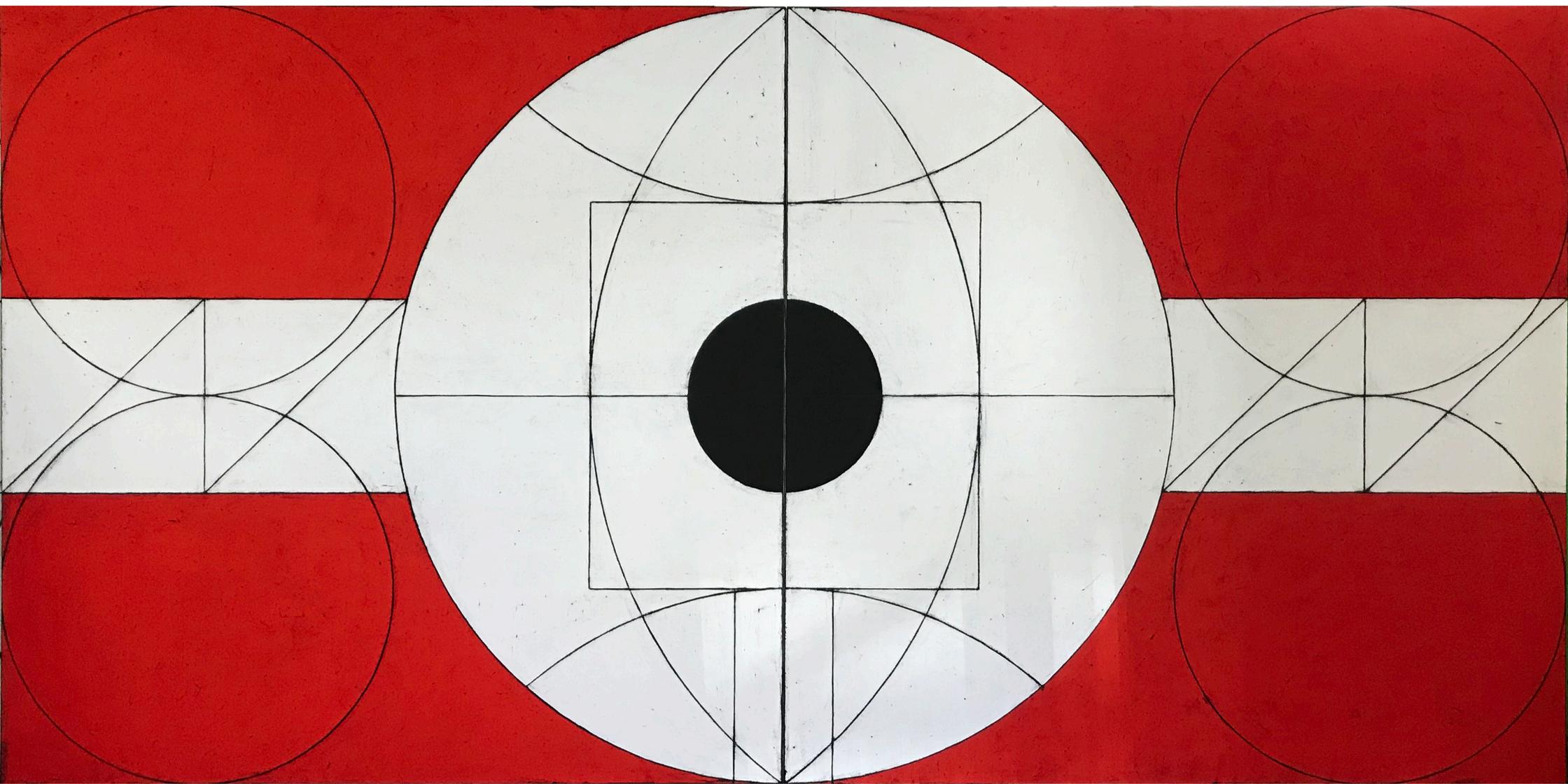
The use of pictograms has a twofold purpose in his work. It is an almost logical derivation of certain concepts of Pop Art, at the root of a large part of US art in the 1960s and 70s and, at the same time, it also enabled him to overstep the boundaries of written language and the idiomatic diversity of the world. The pictograms used in the Olympic games in Tokyo in 1964 took on a global dimension beyond any doubt, precisely to celebrate the planet's greatest intercultural and multilinguistic sporting event. Any later use has had to look back, even in passing, to this landmark in visual communication.

Mullican's works have evolved from the flat clean use of colours towards an aspect derived from *rubbing* or *frottage* that smudges part of what is depicted. This age-old technique, which was already seen in prehistoric paintings, here takes on a mongrel, almost bastard, presence of forms, limits and colours. It acts as a resistance, an obstacle of sorts, that ends up questioning the very symbolism of the circle as perfection or eternity. Likewise, it seems to question the very artistic process as a key to answering the essential question the artist already posed in the collage from 1974 *Untitled (... Did the Universe Have a Beginning?)*. Here, the representation of the earth globe inscribed inside a square seems more like an empty cage, a placeless space that continues to pose the primary question any human asks: Is there anything else, before or after, apart from what we see? Nothing but art, Matt Mullican seems to answer with his works.

Álvaro de los Ángeles



Matt Mullican *Untitled (... Did The Universe Have a Beginning?)*, 1974



Matt Mullican *Untitled (Subjective within Subjects)*, 2018



## BIOGRAPHY

Matt Mullican (born 1951 in Santa Monica, California), lives and works in Berlin and New York. He 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. In 2022 he received the Possehl Prize for International Art.

In over fifty years of artistic career, Mullican has developed a vocabulary and a system of signs and symbols that offer a polyhedral vision of the universe. Systematization, structure and order of his vision of the world, ranging from personal to universal, are central themes in his production. By repeatedly presenting and exploring his own intuitive visual language of signs (in collage, drawing, frottage, painting, digital renderings, performance and video) Mullican challenges us to understand our own perceptions and to recalibrate what we see and who we are.

Matt Mullican's work has been exhibited internationally since the early 1970s in venues including Kunstmuseum Winterthur (2016); Haus Der Kunst, Munich (2011); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2009); National Galerie, Berlin (1997); Stedelijk Museum, Schiedam, Netherlands (1997), MoMa, New York (1989), among others. He participated 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 an extensive retrospective exhibition. Recent solo shows include Thomas Schütte Stiftung, Neuss/Holzheim, Germany (2019); MACS – Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu, Belgium (2020) and Kunsthalle St. Annen, Lübeck, Germany (2022). Mullican's two solo institutional exhibitions in Spain so far were held at the IVAM, Centre del Carme in 1995 and at the Fundació Tàpies in 2001.

PROJECTESD  
T 934 881 360  
INFO@PROJECTESD.COM  
WWW.PROJECTESD.COM  
PASSATGE MERCADER, 8 BAIXOS 1  
08008 BARCELONA