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Art REVIEWS

Matt Mullican

“Works from the ‘70s and ‘80s,”
Tracy Williams, Ltd., through Jun 21
(see Chelsea)



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Matt Mullican has always been an eclectic artist. Film, sculptures in wood and stone, prints, collage and computer generated imagery are just some of the broad range of mediums represented in this modest but illuminating two-decade survey. At the heart of Mullican’s free-ranging exploration is an ongoing concern with systems of signage and a belief that abject and exalted materials are equally adept at conveying them.

The works on view, most made between 20 and 30 years ago, breathe easier without the once-fashionable semiotic theory that weighted down their original reception. Mullican’s personal cosmology—an icon-dominated, color-coded system—still fascinates, though his chosen mediums vary in their ability to communicate his idiosyncratic world view. In one room, a series of computer generated landscapes from 1986 are installed near a granite sculpture with runelike etchings and a bulletin board collaged with photographs, newspaper clippings and sketches. The computer prints look touchingly obsolete, the newspapers have yellowed and the sculpture resembles a Celtic relic—a shifting set of historical auras surrounds each object. The only constant is Mullican’s arcane system itself, with its references to “the framed world” (represented in yellow), subjectivity (red) and language (black).

One of the earliest works in the show is his 1974 student animation of a dead stick figure—motionless but for the flicker of the shifting frames. It’s a Beckettian joke that runs through all the artist’s attempts to communicate: Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

—Graham Parker