

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



MATT MULLICAN TRACY WILLIAMS, LTD

Matt Mullican, Untitled No. 18, 2004,
Duratrans in lightbox, 16 ½ x 20 inches.
From the series "Default Atmospheres," 2004.

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Most artists would argue that their work is on some level about consciousness, but few could make the claim as literally as Matt Mullican. Over the past thirty years, Mullican has intermittently created "trance" performances in which he undergoes hypnosis, either self-induced or prompted by a hypnotist. For the next hour or so he experiences (or, depending on your faith in the process, acts out) a range of tasks, emotions, and impulses: pacing, talking to himself, painting, singing, regressing to childish behavior, and occasionally becoming enraged. One particularly notorious incident occurred during a 2002 performance at Anton Kern Gallery in New York, when Mullican's resistance to the hypnotist escalated into a serious conflict.

This exhibition of videos and objects took place at a gallery located in an old Greenwich Village house—perfect for Mullican, who envisioned the space as duplicating levels of consciousness. The downstairs, or "unconscious," level of the show included video documentation of a trance performance, *Untitled (Matt Mullican Under Hypnosis: Geneva)*, that was staged in 2003 at the Centre pour l'Image Contemporaine, Geneva, where Mullican was hypnotized by a Jungian practitioner. In the video he paces a taped-off area of the space, chants to himself ("it's hot, it's hot" or "this is crazy"), and swears at the newspaper. Also downstairs was "Default Atmospheres," 2004, a series of eight lightboxes showing vibrant computer-generated images of the sky, and "Collected Objects," 1970-2004, consisting of two vitrines containing human and coyote skeletons, chips of the crystal used in radios, assorted insects, and a nautilus fossil.

Upstairs, on the exhibition's "conscious" level, were works from the '70's, including a sequence of panels clipped from comic books featuring images of dead people, and more recent projects, like a DVD Mullican shot in his studio while under the influence (*Five Performances Under Hypnosis [Matt Mullican Shooting-Close]*, 2003) and a wall of digital prints (*Untitled [Learning from That Person's Work]*, 2004).

Noticeably absent from the show were the works from the '80s for which Mullican is best known. These use graphic sign imagery to depict a complex cosmology alluding to-or paralleling-semiotics and Christian iconography. Recent computer animations shown on wall-mounted monitors upstairs echoed those, however, portraying *Death* (a stick figure), *Sky*, *Clock*, and a series of circular gray-scale abstractions titled *Cosmology* (all 2004). A series of pewter reliefs of melted objects (*Reconstructing the Fifth World*, 2004), also called to mind art used to define cosmologies—specifically, bronze Renaissance church doors, which were typically loaded with symbolic freight.

To enter Mullican's world is to understand that objects and images have almost talismanic powers, and that they are referential—that is, they retain rather than deflect symbolic meaning tied to his own personal belief system. Add to this his engagement with the computer (he was one of the first artists to use a supercomputer, in 1985, to make graphic compositions that complimented his signs), and you have a version of consciousness that expands into the digital realm, or what Mullican now calls the "hypnotic world" of cyberspace, an extension of or parallel to the "trance state" induced by advertising and the media.

This is a different way of looking at the world than that proposed by, for instance, Pop art and its more orthodox progeny. Mullican seeks depth over surface and actual belief over mere representations or repudiations of it. He is better trained than most of us to view the world this way: His father, Lee Mullican, was a well-known spiritualist painter in the 1950s. But in Mullican's own work, consciousness becomes the canvas, or stage, and the artist and his practice become conduits through which we may experience the different realms that his cosmology implies; with the belief, of course, that they exist in the first place.

-Martha Schwendener