

# Matt Mullican

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**View of “Sunday, August 9, 1908,”** Peter Freeman, Inc, New York.

*To his own surprise, Matt Mullican’s new body of work is vibrantly colorful. A departure and liberation of sorts, it is also his most labor-intensive work yet. Made in his Berlin studio, “Sunday, August 9, 1908” consists of very large paintings involving rubbing, a technique he’s been using since the early ’80s. A first rubbing transfers the image to be painted; a second rubbing draws outlines around the painted areas with an oil stick. Below, the artist describes his painstaking process, how the project came about, and how it fits into his work as a whole. “Sunday, August 9, 1908” remains on view at Peter Freeman, Inc, in New York until April 15. On April 1 at 5 p.m., the gallery will host a live performance during which the artist will take his breakfast in a trance state.*

**I’VE BEEN WORKING WITH LITTLE NEMO** for about three years, and I’ve been working with cartoons for fifty. Back in 1973, I was cutting out details from comic books, mostly romance comics rather than superhero comics. I was interested not so much in the subject, but the place: the city that it’s in, the house you’re in, the air that you’re breathing, the gravity that’s pulling you down, the light reflecting off the trees, the smell of the early morning. If Superman is flying through the air, I’m more interested in the air that he’s flying through than in the fact of him being able to fly.

I was born in 1951. I grew up with the first generation of television in the late '50s and early '60s. Cartoons like Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse were very much part of my childhood. Growing up, I questioned the reality of those characters, and in the early '70s, I became interested in the life that those characters represented. It has to do with feeling and participating within the representation. What does it feel like to enter the picture, to go into that house and go upstairs into the bedrooms, in a house that you really don't know? In these images, Little Nemo is in his bedroom. He's yelling out to his friend Pip in the front yard: *Come on in, my mom made us breakfast and you're invited to eat with us!* Pip walks into the house, and Nemo's mother serves them porridge. She says, *This cereal will be good for you, it will fatten you up.* The drawings are very regimented, the table is set, there's a grid on the wall behind them. It's all right angles and well planted. There are twelve frames on this page, which appeared in the *Sunday Herald Tribune*. The date is August 9, 1908. As they eat, Nemo and Pip get bigger and bigger, and by the fourth frame, their chairs have broken. By frame six or seven, they are falling into the floor. The next frame is seen from the floor below: They are falling through the living room with the objects falling down with them. The living room has pictures, vases, a clock; it has ornamentation, so it's not utilitarian. It's aesthetic, and they're crashing that. The field has been destroyed. In the next frame, they're going through a hole in the floor, they're crashing into the basement. It's total abstraction now. Everything is topsy-turvy, and they're going through a hole in the ground. They are collapsing into the earth, you see their feet sticking out, with the entire house behind them. The last frame is the mother looking at the rubble saying, *Oh my gosh, what are you kids doing now, the whole place is destroyed.* In the last panel, Little Nemo wakes up; he's fallen out of his bed.



**The August 9, 1908, edition of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*.**

This is really about the material of things taking over. It's about gravity, the material splintering about—that's one reason why I was attracted to this comic. Another is that in its depiction of abstraction, everything is equalized. You have bits of the wall, bits of the furniture, bits of artwork, bits of everything, all doing the same things: disappearing and

falling. This is 1908, the beginning of Cubism. This comic is from Middle America, the Sunday funnies, and yet it represents a new world: Freudian dream analysis was just ten years earlier; Einstein's theory of relativity was happening at the same time. This was before Mondrian and Kandinsky were breaking all that down. Other touchstones I want to mention are Bruce Nauman's video *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down*, 1973, and Alighiero Boetti's *Everything*, 1987–88, where everything in the picture plane is demarcated.

When I was a student at CalArts, there were two notions of superreality. One was about the object—a superrealist would be someone like Frank Stella, Donald Judd, or Robert Ryman, with the object being all that is there. The other kind was superrealist painting, like Richard Estes, Chuck Close, and all those people making photographic-looking work. You had these two representations: the object and the picture. I was not so much interested in the form, but in the understanding or the feeling of seeing that form. Not in what I'm looking at in a photograph, but how it feels.



**Matt Mullican, *Untitled (Sunday, August 9, 1908 #1)*, 2023**, acrylic gouache and oil stick rubbing on canvas, 78 7/8 x 157 3/4".

This show was a monster to make. All the colors had to be masked separately. All the reds, all the blues, all the blacks, all the yellows, all the oranges, all the purples, all of that: Every color on every picture has to be masked. Once it's masked, it's rubbed with a relief under the canvas. The surface is lively because the rubbing picks up on the canvas structure. The entire show is basically one work, one page from this comic. In this way, it's very different from the last show, where I had generators, flags, rubbings, drawings. Usually, my colors have meaning—green represents the natural world, blue represents our collective world, yellow represents cultural framework, black represents language, and red represents subjective experience. Here, the colors have no associative meanings. They really have to do with the breaking down of the system of understanding through the light that you're looking at.

I've been in one "painting" show in my life. One. I've made hundreds of paintings, showing in many, many exhibitions, but I'm not a painter. I have a cosmology. I work with virtual reality. I'm not interested in painting as such. I don't think Mondrian was a

formalist in that sense: I don't think the subject of what he was doing is painting. It's about the world. I'm a symbolist if anything. Symbolism goes back to the beginning of art. I'm everything but about the object. Because as Philip Guston said, painting is of the mind, as Leonardo said, painting is of the mind. And yet there I was, on the first wall of the Pictures Generation show at the Met ["The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984," 2009]. I was there only because I use the word "picture" in my work. I am very much interested not in the object of the picture but in the psyche of the picture, the psychic relationship to the picture. I first entered a picture at a performance at Project Inc. in 1973. I put my mind's eye into it and immediately it was 11 o'clock in the morning. I was fourteen years old, and it had rained the night before, and I was describing what it was like to be in that picture, at that time, to an audience. This show at Peter Freeman happened to open in March of 2023, and Glen, my stick figure, was born in March of 1973—my first foray into the imaginary universe.

— As told to Laura Hoffmann