

GALERIA MANUEL OJEDA

JESÚS MATHEUS



Jesús Matheus, Caracas, Venezuela, 1957
Desde 2005, vive y trabaja en Boston, USA

EXHIBICIONES INDIVIDUALES RECIENTES

2017 *Construcción*, Galería Manuel Ojeda, Las Palmas GC, Spain
2015 *Neoglifos*, Sala TAC, Caracas, Venezuela
2014 *The Ideogram of Place*, Cecilia de Torres LTD, New York, NY
Time Pieces (with Danielle Sauve), ArtBlock Gallery, Boston, MA
2013 *SquareTotem*, Ideobox Artspace, Miami, FL
El Cuadrado Inquieto, Galería Artepuy, Caracas, Venezuela
2012 *El Cuadrado Mágico*, Galería Arquitek /Facultad de Arquitectura y Diseño, Universidad de Los Andes ULA, Mérida, Venezuela
2011 *Recent works*, Art Solar Gallery, East Hampton, NY
2010 *Variable Dimensions* (with Santiago Hernández), Art Institute of Boston/Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, US

EXHIBICIONES COLECTIVAS RECIENTES

2017 *LA / LA Projects*, Paul Getty Foundation, Los Angeles, CA
2016 *The Global South, Visiones y revisiones desde la Colección Brillembourg Capriles*, Mana Common/Pinta Miami 2016, Miami, FL, US
2015 *Monochrome Undone*, Space Foundation, Irvine, CAL, US
2014 *Punto de Quiebre*, 16 ensayos latinoamericanos, Beatriz Gil Gallery, Caracas, Venezuela
2013 *Rethink Ink 25*, Cantor Gallery, College of Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, US
2012 *Rethink Ink 25*, Boston Public Library /Central Library Copley Square, Boston, MA, US
Armory Show NY, representado por Cecilia de Torres, NY, US
Línea Crítica, Galería Artepuy, Caracas, Venezuela

OBRAS EN COLECCIÓN

Gabinete de Dibujo, Grabado y Fotografía, Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas, Venezuela
Museo del Diseño y la Estampa Carlos Cruz Diez, Caracas, Venezuela
NYPW/Taller Bob Blackburn, Nueva York, NY
Fundación Cisneros, Caracas, Venezuela
Fundación Mercantil, Caracas, Venezuela
Fundación Banco Provincial, Caracas, Venezuela

GALERIA MANUEL OJEDA

BIOGRAPHY

Jesús Matheus was born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1957. He studied at the Escola de Belas Artes, Universidad Federal de Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1981) and graduated from the Centro de Enseñanza Gráfica, Caracas (1987). From 1992 to 1999 and 2003-04, Matheus taught printmaking and drawing at the Instituto Universitario de Estudios Superiores de Artes Plásticas Armando Reverón, now Universidad Nacional Experimental de las Artes (Caracas), from which he also obtained a BFA degree with the thesis “Visual/Manual. A Mode of *Making* in the Visual Arts” (2012). He has lived in Boston, Massachusetts, since 2005.

During his stay in Rio de Janeiro (1976–1981), Matheus continued a line of work he had begun in Caracas: a set of landscapes, made up of separate brushmarks, which he called “notations.” These inaugural works already reveal the artist’s interest in serial structures, which he has maintained throughout his production. Also in Rio, Matheus came into contact with pre-Columbian imagery, the schematic construction of which he used in the creation of small synthetic figures. Following expeditions to prehispanic archaeological sites in Bolivia, Perú, Ecuador and Colombia, the artist decided to continue what became a long-held inquiry into the tectonic character of Indian stonework and weaving. The influence of the Amerindian paradigm is discernible in the period’s engravings, which emphasize the structural inscription of repeated figures in grid-like arrangements. *Universalismo Constructivo*, the collection of writings by Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), provided the conceptual ground for these early works. The book has remained a fundamental point of reference and a guide in the artist’s progressive adoption of abstraction.

In 1987, having returned to Caracas and further trained as a graphic artist, Matheus began combining separate silkscreens stamped with pre-Columbian motifs into sequential sets. He ascribed a votive character to these arrangements, which he conceived as altars. The writings of Mircea Eliade and especially the theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss marked this period: resorting to the serial repetition of figures, the artist used mythic imagery as structural components of increasingly complex forms. Beginning in 1991, a strong interest in syncretism—the conjunction of different religious beliefs into one cult, so typical of Latin America—led him to treat the plane of each image as a “time of encounters.” The phrase appears in the title of a critical account of the artist’s production, written by Élide Salazar. She elaborates, in a text that accompanied the solo exhibition *Novísimas Imaginerías* (Most Recent Imagineries; México City, 1992): “the use of a figurative language, the recourse to prehispanic and colonial forms extracted from markedly different latitudes and bearing a Latin American content [allows the artist to go beyond] the local theme, rendering it universal.” The syncretic element also found a technical translation, as Xeroxes and typographic characters were included in photo-etching matrixes—the means to what critic

GALERIA MANUEL OJEDA

Carlos Palacios called “appropriation”: rather than engaging in the interpretation of cultural remnants, Matheus performed as both cartographer and archivist, much in the manner of the region’s colonial *cronistas*. He called these works “text-images.” Hosted in 1993 by the art foundation Casa de las Américas, La Habana, Cuba, the exhibition *Plaza Mayor* (Main Square) gathered these multiple references to “ancient rediscoveries and a dramatic present,” as the artist wrote in the show’s flyer.

Also in the late 1980s, Matheus started painting. At first gestural compositions influenced by the work of Wilfredo Lam, his pictures took on a more synthetic character. They eventually became as streamlined as pictographs—each of them signaling “the presence,” as he then put it, “of abstract synthesis.” *House of Signs*, an exhibition that opened in Galería Leo Blasini, Caracas, in 1997, gathered what Matheus described as “crosses and Ts, inverted and repeated, placed in different positions or site(s), pectorals or dual marks, icons and fretworks, steps of a great pyramid that occupy the plane and make up a spatial symbology of sorts.”

The artist’s interest in lending his works a space of their own—not just symbolic, but actual—led to the production of “graphic installations,” such as *Memoria de los Muertos. Tiempo Mágico* (Memory of the Dead. Magical Time), shown at Museo Taller José Clemente Orozco (México City, 1996) and the Museo de las Américas (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1998). In both venues, a large amount of the same etched image covered entire walls. Thereby the artist’s work took on the collective character of murals; a condition he related to the fact that, as appropriations of past imageries, they were the production of “collective hands.” Matheus remarked on the idea that these “walls of offerings,” were altars—yet, rather than devoted to a numinous idea, the murals opened a space for the contemplation of an “eroded memory.” In 1999, such an attempt at recovering a cancelled past acquired an unprecedented dimension: in *Imaginería Nómada* (Nomadic Imagery)—an exhibition mounted at the Sala Mendoza, a renowned experimental gallery in Caracas—piles of etchings, incised wooden blocks, books and other types of written material combined to create a complex “space and time.” Revolving around the central idea of making a syncretic whole out of past and present references, the temporal space in question was compared by the artist to the swirling rings of a snail’s shell.

In titling his work “nomadic,” Matheus presciently named the state that would define his life’s following years, as political circumstances determined a voluntary exile. In 1999 the artist moved to New Mexico, where he stayed for one year so as to explore ancestral Pueblo and Navajo culture. His graphic production became even more schematic, with a distinct emphasis on the frontal disposition of Nahuatl glyphs. *Fossil*, a work dated in 2000, marked a turning point: the strict frontality of the torqued black shape arrests the gaze of the viewer, who is at the same time prompted to perceive the surrounding white area as either figure or ground. Thus, according to the artist’s terms, the image takes on the condition of the totem (i.e., upright, arresting and fixed), while opening up to perceptual ambivalence. Those two factors—totemism and visual ambiguity—will inform his

GALERIA MANUEL OJEDA

subsequent production. So will the reduction of the figure to a glyph, a pictographic inscription that in *Fossil* stands for a deer's antlers: it is by way of the pictograph's reductiveness that Matheus fully embraced abstraction.

In **2002**, Matheus met Cecilia de Torres, the leading scholar on the work of Torres-García. The encounter allowed him a better grasp of the School of the South, the production of which has found a site of exhibition and discussion at the Cecilia de Torres Gallery, New York. Yet another encounter influenced the artist's later work: George Kubler's *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962) proved a fundamental source of ideas as Matheus adopted an entirely abstract idiom in the same year. Thus, the notions of order, classification and variation—all explored in Kubler's book—informed the three series with which he bade farewell to the figure in order to engage both in the production of planar geometric shapes and the construction of *things*: despite their residual iconic character, as conveyed by their titles, "Bolts," "Echoes," and "Stepped Forms" explored the possibility to shape, by means of the formulation of constructive methods, the time through which pure form develops. That is especially the case with the artist's volumes: all-white, each of them is a fractional element of a larger objective system—they are "unclassifiable things," to use a term of Torres-García, which belong to a formal continuum. In **2008**, the artist made such an intent clear by recreating and gathering them in a shifting installation which he called "The White Studio." A "volatile order," as the architecture historian Guillermo Barrios wrote at the time, was thereby produced: "a spectrum of [constructive] options" underlain by "deep codes, primary structures, series and geometric taxonomies."

Also in 2008, Matheus adopted a stringent format that allowed him further to explore the notion of totemic structures: the series of "Squares" testify to his double engagement with, on the one hand, a rational stricture (i.e., the proportional equilibrium of the quadrilateral shape) and, on the other, an intuitive approach to the limits that such a stricture imposes on the generation of alternate forms. Matheus became interested in inflecting formal reason, yet within the limits of rationality itself. This he did through an intensive use of color, the layers of which pile up on the plane as strata bearing witness to the progressive "history of the thing," to use Kubler's expression—a thing that, in this case, is the constructed picture. Other questions raised by Kubler fueled the artist's creative process, both in the series of "Squares" and the subsequent one, which he called "Steles" and began in **2010**: To what extent is a series infinite? What prevents the square from becoming a dogma; a system from turning into a rigid order?

These questions were also key to thinking about the place in which different forms, formats and mediums coexist. Matheus has experimented with the prolongation of painting into sculpture and explored the extent to which such a prolongation demarcates a site, a place that belongs in neither discipline. In that mediatory realm, another system—other rules and guides of classification—begins to operate in the production of aesthetic space. There are three ways in which the artist has approached the place in question: through the interlocking shapes of his "Tectonics" series, begun in 2012; by way of installations in which

GALERIA MANUEL OJEDA

plane and volume resonate with each other; and through pictographs in which the trace of detached tapes marks the boundaries of a conjured territory. These three options converge in *The Ideogram of Place*, an exhibition that opened on October 10, 2014, at Cecilia de Torres Gallery—only that there the space of exhibition intruded the structure of the works themselves, constructing a site that is both aesthetic and actual; while the works on display projected back onto the viewer's location a place that is neither visual nor habitable. That place is, as the artist has stated, an ideogrammatic construction.