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MATTHEW CUSICK

12 Votes

Matthew Cusick is an artist to know, understand and admire. Inspired by topography, he uses vintage map cutouts as a surrogate for paint and creates the most compelling pieces of art. Each image is meticulously pieced together by pasting small map-snippets into either beautiful portraits or wide spatial landscapes. Other recurrent themes in his work are horses, highways, big waves and old-fashioned muscle cars.

Originally from New York, Cusick graduated from The Cooper Union in 1993 and had his first exhibition just three years later. His laborious working method and great attention to detail immediately caused a stir on the national art scene. Since then, his pieces have been showcased in museums and galleries in the States as well as internationally, and featured in publications like *The New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Harper's Magazine* and *Art In America*. His work also forms part of numerous public and private collections including the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art and the Progressive Art Collection. At present, Cusick resides and works in Oak Cliff, Texas, where he continues to paint, make videos and arrange entire states and countries into works of art.





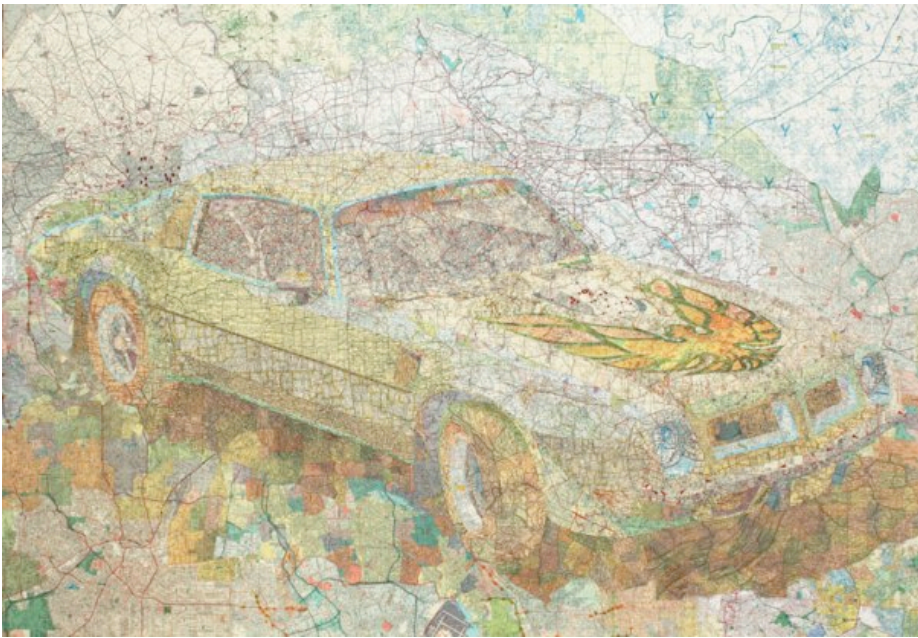
Why maps?

I never consciously intended to work this way, it just happened. About ten years ago I inherited a box full of old maps. They lay around my studio for months. Then one day, being frustrated with a painting I was working on, I just pulled a map out of this box and started experimenting with it. I discovered that fragments of maps have all the properties of a brushstroke: nuance, density, line, movement, and color. Their palette is deliberate and symbolic, acting as a cognitive mechanism to help us internalize the external. And furthermore, since each map fragment is an index of a specific place and time, I found I could combine fragments from different maps and construct geographical timelines within my paintings. The maps also enabled me to achieve both a cut, hard-edge and a more nuanced, almost impressionistic one. The technique and conceptual applications continue to evolve. It's a very generous medium.

So, how do you normally create a piece? Do you have a clear idea from the beginning or do you improvise as you go along?

I've accumulated a large inventory of all kinds of maps at this point. Most of them come from atlases and national geographic magazines but I also collect nautical and aeronautical charts and bathymetric and topographic maps. Knowing the range of materials I have to work with helps me conceptualize the piece. It helps me determine the subject matter, the palette, the composition and the size of the piece. Each new Map work begins with extensive research into the subject matter. The people I construct out of maps represent certain ideas and moments in time that resonate deeply with me. The maps I choose for each work relate to that person's timeline and history. I'll use these maps as a surrogate for paint but also as a way to expand the limits of representational painting. Each map fragment is employed both as a brush stroke and a unit of information. The pictorial space acts as a matrix in which inlaid maps from different places and times coalesce into a narrative. Once I have a grasp on these elements I'll start making a very detailed line drawing. Enlarged copies of the drawing are then used as templates to cut the maps. Each new map piece is cut to fit exactly with the adjacent pieces so as to preserve the uniformity of the picture plane. The map pieces never overlap one another so that in the end the illusion of a singular map surface is created. It involves a lot of patience and a strong commitment to craft.





How long does a piece take?

It depends on many factors; size, subject matter, the kind of maps I'm using, the clarity of vision I have for the piece. It can take anywhere between 100 to 300 hours to finish a three by four foot piece. Sometimes I scrape off all the maps and start over again, and some subjects I work and re-work for years.

Do you only work with the colors and nuances of a map or do you also take the actual words and names of places into account?

I take all of these things into consideration, and again it depends on the piece. With the waves I will only work from maps of the ocean and nautical charts. With the portraits the maps are chosen from the time period and geographic history of the subject. Sometimes I will choose something completely arbitrary just because I like how it looks, but usually there is a logic or framework to the choices I make. Names and typography play an important role. Maps were meant to be read. To truly be appreciated, the map collages need to be read as well. But their impact and longevity depends on the strength of their formal elements. It is a delicate balance of the visual and the conceptual, the literal and the abstract.

I'm really curious about the Defacement series, how did you come up with that idea? Which book did you use? There seem to be a lot of pages with the word 'fart' on them.

In the process of collecting maps to use in my work, I have acquired a bunch of old geography textbooks. These got me thinking about my experiences in elementary school and how I would often get in trouble for marking up textbooks with offensive commentary. I was a smart-ass kid who was always challenging the voices of authority. So, with these rediscovered old textbooks I found myself doing it again, only instead of marking them up, I began scraping and sanding away everything on the page but a few words and a single image. It is a process of revision and redaction. My goal is to complete an entire textbook. This is why I also leave the page numbers intact; so that once it is finished I can have them rebound. The words are chosen through a combination of process and poetry. I try to stay true to the voice of my inner child, that is why the word 'fart' and 'ass' appear so often.



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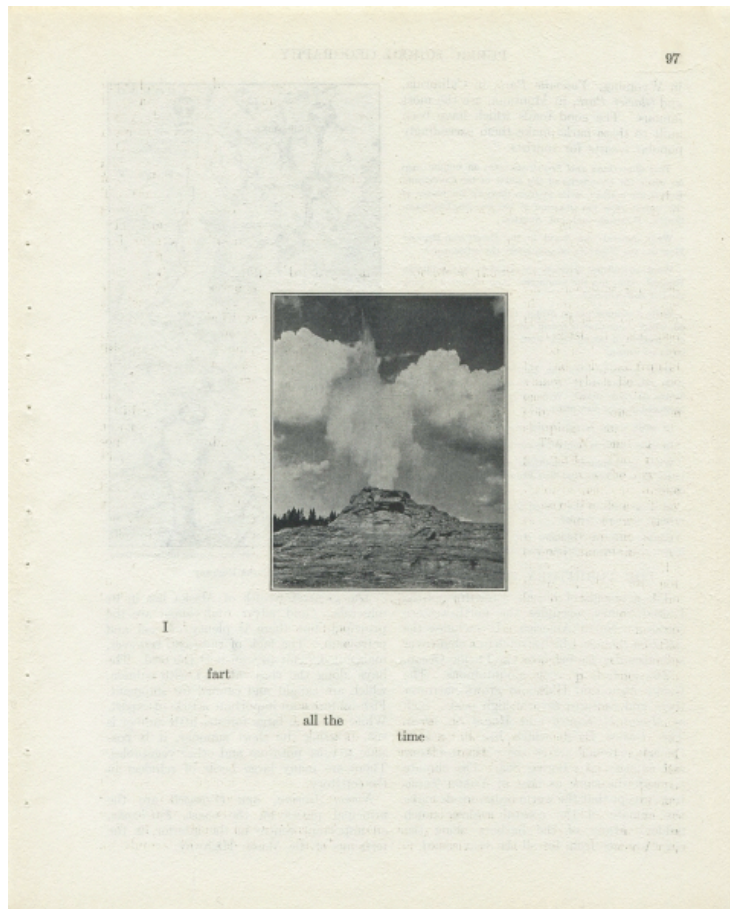
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You have one extensive CV filled with both solo and group exhibitions, which would you say are the highlights in your career?

It's been a slow but steady pace. I try to just stay focused on the task at hand. Solo exhibitions are obviously the most work and are usually the most fulfilling, but the most rewarding moments in my career happened in the studio and aren't listed on my CV.

Is there anything you would have done differently?

It's taken me a long time to learn to trust my instincts. I probably wasted too much valuable time listening to the opinions of others. But it takes time to learn how to trust yourself and along the way you can learn a lot from others. It's all part of the process.

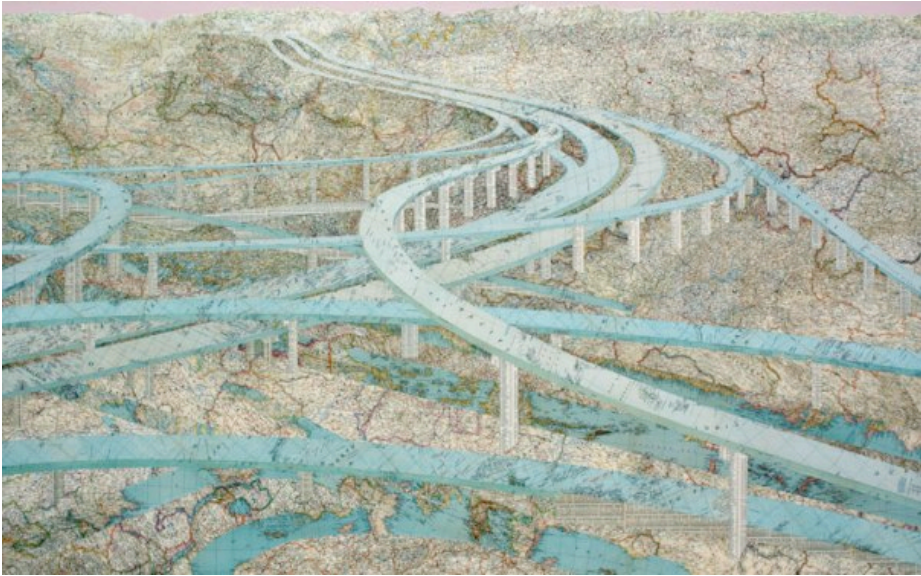
Tell me about your Happy Endings series, how did you come up with the idea?

I was just messing around in my studio. I wanted to make a map collage of a car accident and I didn't want to work from a photograph of an actual car accident. I didn't have any model cars handy so I decided I would just 'mash up' a bunch of magazine car advertisements. It was a Cubist/Futurist approach. Anyhow, when it came time to create the 'ball of fire' explosion that accompanies the ideal car accident I just decided to try a bouquet of flowers instead. This is the wonderful thing about collage. It's a kind of alchemy and a kind of bricolage. You use what you have available and you try to transform these materials.



Overall there seems to be a great deal of cars and roads involved in your work, both in Happy Endings, your video installations and map work too, what's up with that?

The car, the roads, the maps... these are important motifs for me, like the waves. Momentum, power, transformation, passage... these ideas all tie in somehow, but there is something else there that is hard to put a finger on. Perhaps these motifs are representations of deathlessness, expressions of immortality, of our desire to throw caution to the wind. Or maybe fast cars and big waves are just cool and awe-inspiring.



What do you do when you're not creating art?

Clean dirty dishes, rake leaves, laundry... fun stuff like that. And I play music, guitar actually. I've played in a few different groups and write and record music of my own. Nowadays I try to spend my free time with my daughter who is just turning four.

Here comes the serious question; do you feel that the economic crisis and the current situation in general in the States has affected the art scene?

Yes, I do feel the economic crisis has affected the art scene, but not nearly as bad as it has affected other industries and markets. The part of the population responsible for keeping the art market healthy is mostly the one percent, and the economic downturn has not really affected this group. But the art market has many tiers and on many of the lower levels there has been some fallout.

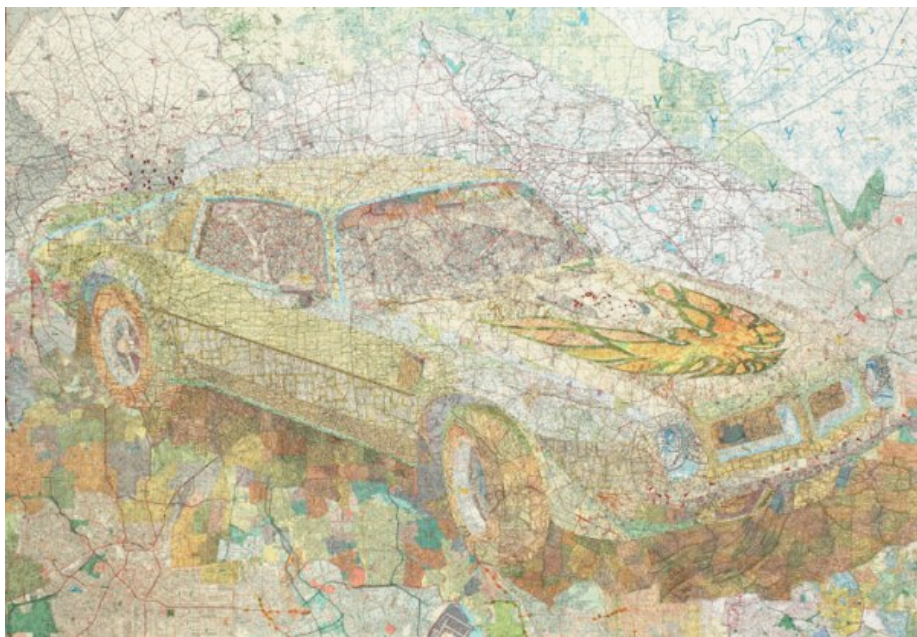
Are you ever coming to do an exhibition for us here in Europe?

I would love to do an exhibition in Europe. I hope this can be arranged soon!

So do I!

Thank you, Matthew!

Amelie Malmgren





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