

Books and magazines of all kinds fill shelves and rolling carts at NIAD. They are available to the artists based there and often arrive as donations. Mullen began using this print material as subject matter for his paintings in the mid-1990s. But over the last decade, he has turned almost exclusively to art-related publications, such as *Art in America* and *Artforum*, as the points of departure for his work. Text is meaningful to Mullen not for its content but for its form. Engaging repeatedly with these sources, geared towards “insider” art world circles, Mullen stakes his own place in the conversation.

“He’s a colorist, and this quality has been present from the beginning,” says Andrés Cisneros-Galindo, a studio facilitator at NIAD who has worked with Mullen since 1986. “His colors are almost edible. They make you feel like grabbing a cupcake.” This complex composition—made after a 2004 magazine cover that features a cropped view of Pop artist James Rosenquist’s *House of Fire* (1981)—wraps around all sides of the canvas. Contained within distinct shapes, stripes, and contours, the pigments activate the surface, almost seeming to set it in motion.

In early 2024, Mullen visited The Museum of Modern Art and spent many hours in the collection galleries. Following his visit, the Museum sent the artist about thirty of its publications, old and recent, to add to his stock of source material. Mullen has so far made only one painting inspired by that wide-ranging assortment: this painting based on the cover of a book about Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889). The cover reproduces a detail of the painting's right side, which Mullen reimagines with swaths of pure ultramarine, interrupted by clouds of light blue dotted with yellow.

In the late 1960s, Time-Life published a series of books focused on the lives of renowned artists, including Old Masters like Titian and modernists such as Pablo Picasso. A set was donated to NIAD and formed the basis for many of Mullen's paintings. This work and the nearby painting created after *The World of Van Gogh* show how Mullen's approach to a given source can take different directions. Whereas all the Time-Life books share the same vertical format, graphic design, and neutral-colored cover, Mullen varies the format and size of the canvases, redesigns each title, and provides an array of vibrant backgrounds.

This work is a rare instance of Mullen looking beyond art publications for inspiration. He developed the composition from the cover of a consumer automotive guide that featured a red Mustang with a vanity license plate reading "GRRR." In the artist's interpretation, the head-on view of the car becomes blocky and ambiguous, and the letters could be the loud utterance of the machine.

This painting by Mullen is an enigmatic work with no known source material. In rare cases such as this, the artist fully embraces abstraction. Here, an anthropomorphic green shape seems to stand or stride on yellow legs against a white background. The simplicity of the painting's subject and palette extend to its humble size, barely larger than a sheet of paper.

This recent, large-format painting shows that Mullen's deep understanding of color might be most evident within a restricted palette. Here he uses the stark simplicity of red, black, white, and gray. These colors capture the many elements of the cover design for an issue of *Art in America*, including the red typography of the magazine title, the reproductions of black-and-white photographs by the artists Hilla and Bernd Becher, and a barcode number. In Mullen's reimagining of the cover, these elements drift across an expansive white background, coalescing into new constellations of form.

Marlon Mullen at work on *Untitled* (2024) at NIAD, Richmond, California October 2024
Video

Director and producer: Alexandra Warner
Production manager: Liz Yong Lowe

SOUND DESCRIPTION:

The chatter and bustling energy of the shared studio produce a fluctuating soundscape: art materials rustling, artists conversing and creating, and musicians practicing instruments. Water falling from the fountain installed outside NIAD ripples. The quiet sounds of Mullen stirring his paint, moving his brush against the rim of the container or across the canvas, washing his brushes in the sink, and softly vocalizing as he paints coexist within the liveliness of the studio ambiance.