

Jesús Matheus

b. 1957 Caracas, Venezuela - lives in Boston, Massachusetts

Since 1973, Venezuelan artist Jesús Matheus has studied the art of printmaking intensively, both in Venezuela and Brazil. His paintings and drawings reflect this graphic background in their direct linearity and layers of texture and meaning.

Influenced by modern Latin American artists such as Joaquín Torres-García and Wifredo Lam, as well as by indigenous and pre-Columbian craft and folk art, Matheus executes geometric, minimalist pieces that are cannot be perceived as cold or sterile. Rather, the artwork maintains the warmth and richness of its historical foundations and becomes almost archeological in character.

Critic Carlos Palacios wrote, "Matheus is not interested in re-interpreting history, his visual references remain faithful to the originals and he only arranges them fragmentarily..." The result is drawings, paintings and installations that evoke a history culled from research in culture and ethnicity, expeditions throughout South America and, as always, personal experience.

Jesus Matheus has taught Drawing and Printmaking since 1992 at the Armando Reveron Institute, Caracas, and has exhibited extensively in South America and internationally. His work is part of several public and private collections in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the United States, Spain, Switzerland, France, and Austria. The artist currently lives and works in Boston, Massachusetts.



Chronology

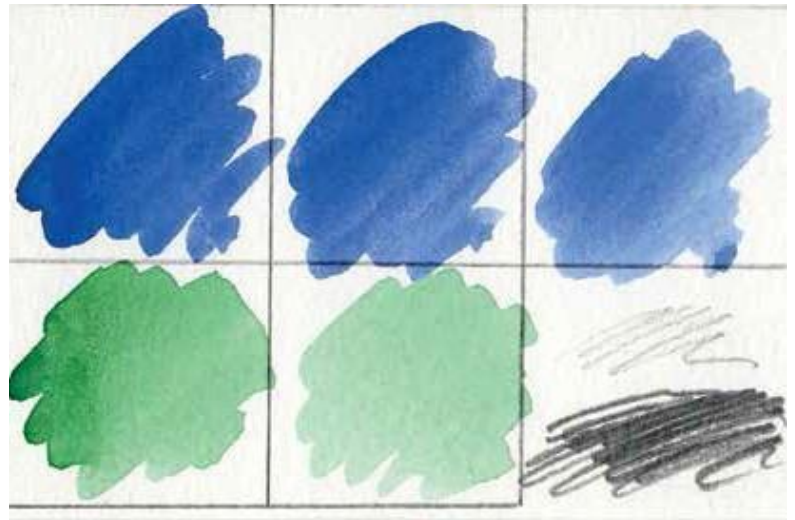
Jesús Matheus was born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1957. He studied at the Escola de Belas Artes, Universidad Federal de Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1981) and graduated from the Centro de Enseñanza Gráfica, Caracas (1987). From 1992 to 1999 and in 2003, Matheus taught printmaking and drawing at the Instituto 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.

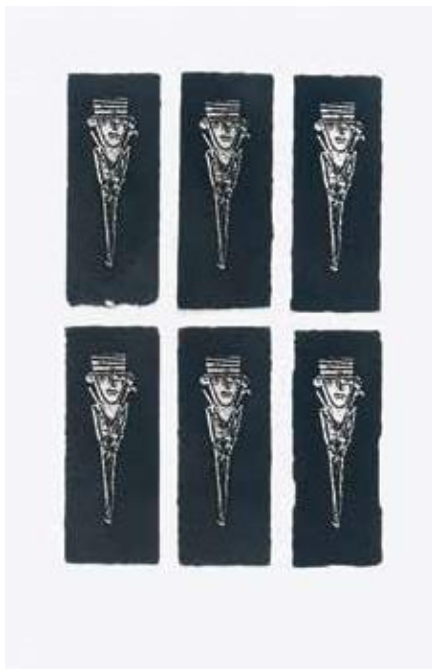


During his stay in Rio de Janeiro (1976–1981), Matheus continued a line of work he had begun in Caracas: a set of landscapes, made up of separate brush marks, which he called "notations."

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 pre-Hispanic archaeological sites in Bolivia, Perú, Ecuador and Colombia, the artist decided to continue what became a long-held inquiry into the tectonic character of Amerindian 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 silk screens 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 Levi-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 Élica Salazar. She elaborates, in a text that accompanied the solo exhibition *Novísimas Imagerías* (Most Recent Imageries; México City, 1992): “the use of a figurative language, the recourse to pre Hispanic 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 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 Wifredo 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).

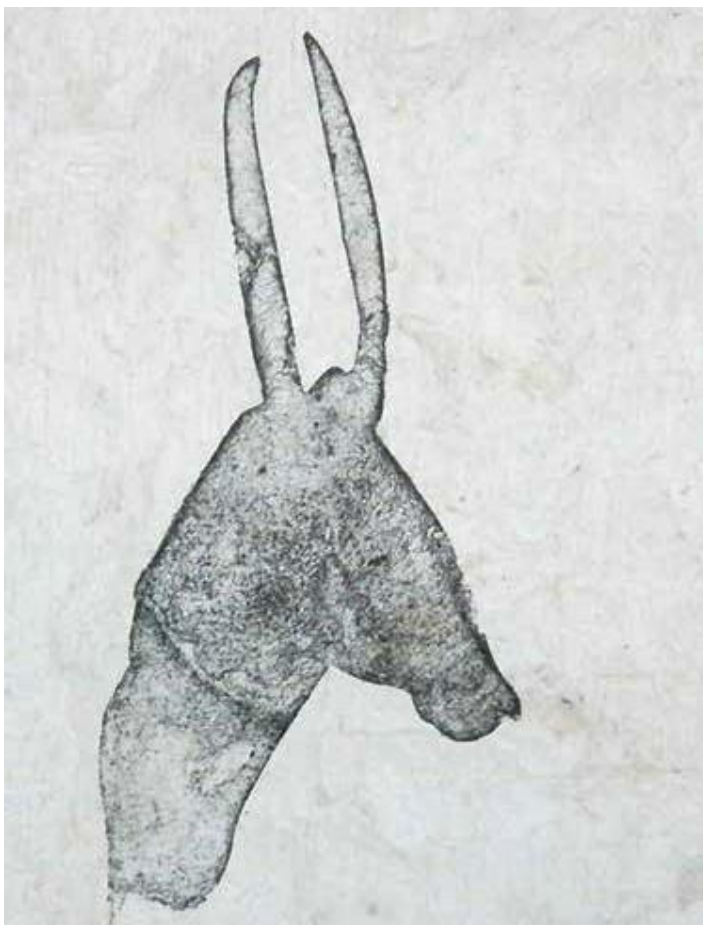
In both venues, a large amount of the same etched image covered entire walls. There by the artist’s work took on the collective character of murals; a condition he related to the fact that, as appropriations of past imageries, they were the production of “collective hands.” Matheus remarked on the idea 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 the next period of his life, 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 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.





Matheus moved in 2000 to Boston, where he would live for three years. In 2002, the artist exhibited his work in individual shows titled *Paintings* and *The Skin of Painting* (Gómez Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland; and Solar Gallery, East Hampton, New York). That same year, before returning to Caracas in order to pursue an advanced degree in art, he reconnected with Cecilia de Torres, the leading scholar on the work of Joaquín Torres-García, whom he had met in Venezuela in the late 1990s. 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 Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York.

Also in 2002, yet another encounter markedly influenced the artist's 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, that belong to a formal continuum. In 2008, three years after returning to Boston, the artist made such an intent clear by recreating and gathering the mina shifting installation which he called "The White Studio" and exhibited in his third individual show in the United States (*Visual/Manual*, Center for Latino Arts, Boston). A "volatile order" was thereby produced, as the architecture historian Guillermo Barrios wrote at the time on the artist's work in general: "a spectrum of [constructive] options" underlain by "deep codes, primary structures, series and geometric taxonomies." The artist exhibited such constructions in Caracas (Artepuy, 2008), where local news papers remarked on his shift to full-blown abstraction and what could be called a laboratory architecture: "Matheus returns extra pictorial and geometric," read the headline of one review.

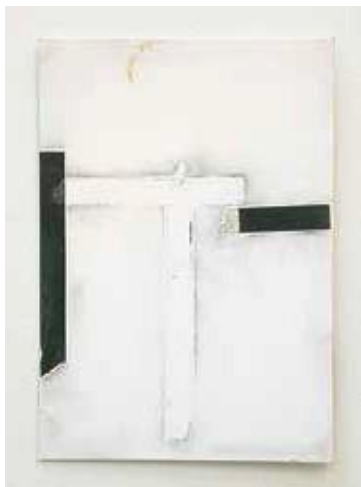
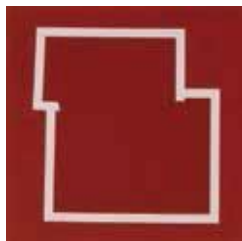


Matheus simultaneously adopted a stringent format that allowed him further to explore the notion of totemic structures: the series of “Squares,” begun in 2008, testify to his double engagement with, on the one hand, a rational stricture (i.e., the proportional equilibrium of the quadrilateral shape) 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?





In **2013**, the exhibitions *Square/Totem* (Ideobox, Miami) and *The Restive Square* (Artepuuy, Caracas) remarked on the ways in which such questions about formative systems we're also key to the artist's thinking about the place in which different forms, formats and mediums coexist. Matheus is currently experimenting with the prolongation of painting into sculpture and exploring 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 he has approached the place in question: through the interlocking shapes of his "Tectonics" series, begun in **2012**; by way of installations in which 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 9, **2014**, at Cecilia de Torres, Ltd.—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. In **2015**, his solo exhibition entitled *Neoglifos* at Sala Trasnchocho Arte Contacto in Caracas, Venezuela, showcased recent work and was very well received by art critics. His latest solo exhibition, *Construcción* at Galería Manuel Ojeda, in Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, Spain, presented his latest body of work, which included sculpture, drawing and painting with found objects.