

FRISCHE feature

JEFF ELROD— THE SCREEN GAZES

“Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible.”

—Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 1

In 2013 American abstract painter Jeff Elrod unveiled his new series of Echo paintings that aimed to explore the nature of sight—for as the show title suggests. “Nobody Sees Like Us.” Inspired by poet Brion Gysin’s exchange with writer William Burroughs surrounding Gysin’s “Dream Machine” and later built by Ian Somerville in the 1950s, the machine used oscillating light to stimulate the optical nerves while viewers’ eyes were closed. The newly unveiled canvases prompted *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith to write “they make the eyes tingle and the act of seeing uncommonly visceral.” The show incited similar reviews—all emphatically heralding a new voice in the world of abstract art. That same year in the article “The New Abstract,” *Interview Magazine* included Elrod as one of five New York-based artists redefining abstract art in the 21st century.



Interview - ALIYAH SHAMSHER

Studio - Life, 2013

UV ink and acrylic on Fischer canvas

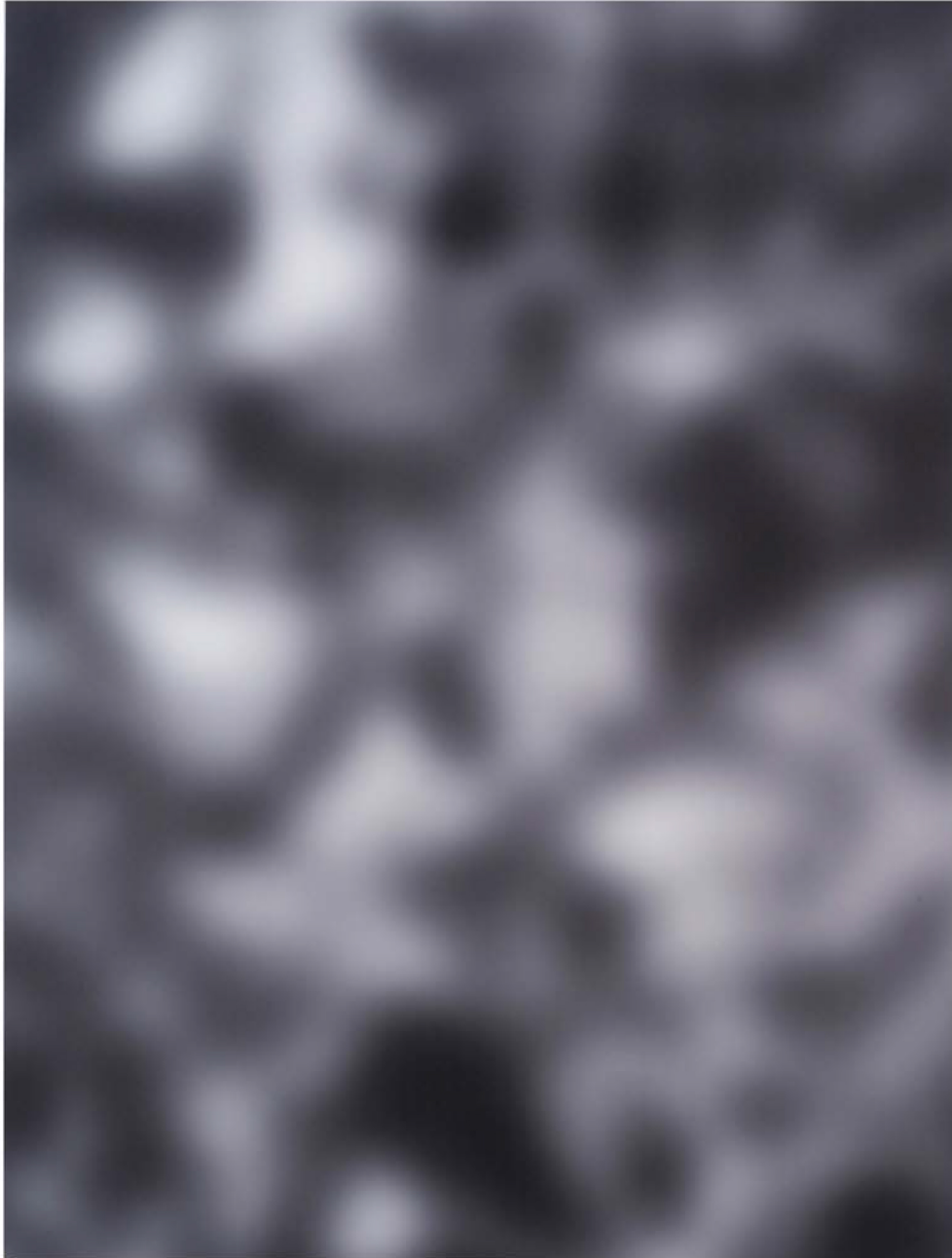
96 x 74 3/4 inches (243.84 x 189.87 cm)

MARFA, USA

54

NO.6—FW14

Images courtesy of the artist and LUHRING AUGUSTINE, New York.



Untitled (Echo Painting), 2013
UV Ink on Fisher canvas
111 x 84 1/4 inches (281.94 x 214 cm)

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Buffalo Painting, 2014
UV ink on Fischer canvas
118 1/4 x 84 inches (300.36 x 213.36 cm)

NO.6—FW14



Mirage, 2011
Acrylic and ink on canvas
48 x 36 inches (121.92 x 91.44 cm)



Bubble Puppy, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
244.2 x 188.3 cm (96 1/8 x 74 1/8 in)



ESP (blue), 2013
Acrylic and enamel on canvas
72 x 59 inches (182.88 x 149.86 cm)

"Bubble Puppy" image courtesy of the artist and SIMON LEE GALLERY London / Hong Kong

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The thing is, Elrod isn't exactly new. Born in Irving, Texas and currently splitting his time between Marfa and New York, the 47-year-old artist has been experimenting with abstract art since the early '90s. First with supergraphics, a form of crude decoration used mainly within the corporate sector, Elrod spent the earlier part of that decade photographing bold stripes of colour and geometric shapes, as he describes, "oppressive industrial buildings." He then transferred the imagery onto canvas using tape and stencil. "It was a particular kind of 'bad abstract painting.'" But that was the style back then. You know, the '90s, very ironic and very academic..." he says, trailing off.

In an interview with the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in 2009, Elrod discussed his early experimentation with abstract art further:

"I was conflicted, I was trying to find a clever way to approach painting because I felt like it wasn't acceptable to earnestly make abstract work, even though I was earnest about it. I was searching for a relevant form of present-day American abstraction."

It wasn't until 1996, while Elrod was working in the graphics department of the *Houston Chronicle* that the artist happened upon his now well-known technique of "frictionless drawing." When asked about the discovery, Elrod wrote via email, "I had no computer skills but the job was simple. I would basically drop a photo onto the front page before deadline and wait for the page to proof. During my downtime, which there was a lot of, I would draw big fields of colour with my mouse using programs like Illustrator and Photoshop. I realized immediately that I could 'appropriate' this imagery and went home that night to copy a digital drawing onto canvas using a projector and masking tape."

And for the past 18 years Elrod has been doing just that. The result is new breed of automatic writing for the digital age: Elrod's own answer to what American abstraction could and should look like today. Modifications and adjustments aside, at its core, the process has remained the same: Elrod begins at his computer by drawing lines and colour fields with Photoshop or Illustrator and then meticulously applies these renderings onto canvas using acrylic, tape and spray paint. For the artist's Echo paintings, Elrod

reverses the process, starting with his hard-edged drawings and transforming them into amorphous clouds of colour on his computer.

The effect is a canvas with no background or foreground. Sometimes swift, hyper smooth strokes cut through the surface, in other instances the image never truly comes into focus with forms and shapes appearing and dissolving all at once. Sometimes hallucinatory, always captivating, Elrod's paintings look both decidedly futuristic yet feel oddly familiar. In this sense, the trajectory of abstract art—from Kandinsky's off-kilter geometries to Rothko's colour fields—is laid before us in one fell swoop, just before situating itself firmly in the present.

For those that have spent time working with computer graphics and digital renderings, Elrod's Echo paintings and geometric markings are familiar. But what about the rest of us? And why now? Why the sudden interest after almost two decades of working within the field of digital abstraction has the industry finally sat up and taken notice? Artnet.com posed a similar question back in April, noting that all this "recent enthusiasm has been unsettling." Unsettling for collectors of course, who were looking to buy from the artist's now sold out show "Rabbit Ears" that ran earlier this year at Luhring Augustine. Elrod easily shrugs off the ironic, academic atmosphere of the '90s in which he came of age, but I would argue here that it is precisely why his work has become increasingly poignant and resonates deeper than many of his peers working within this same genre of post-Internet abstraction.

Explaining his interest in technology Elrod writes, "I think it comes from my childhood, from that particular idea of the screen gaze—its comforting glow and simulated warmth of light. I wanted to make paintings that felt like abstracted screens but could exist as concrete paintings. I guess it's bit of that *Blade Runner* mentality... human machine, machine human." It's this sort of thinking that shows up time and time again within Elrod's work. That all too real dichotomy currently being played out in our day-to-day lives—the cool distance of interacting with a screen for hours each day as we earnestly browse, read and shop for something more homemade, something... human.

As for the rest of us, we've just spent the last decade playing catch-up. Becoming increasingly at ease with our new digital surroundings, our own relationship to the screen has altered irrevocably. And as this slippage between our own hand and the computer screen continues to blur further into oblivion, so too will Elrod's work look and feel all that more familiar.



Seeing Things. 2014

UV Ink and acrylic on Fischer canvas
94 3/4 x 90 inches (240.67 x 228.6 cm)