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Brooklyn Rail
Art in Conversation | JEFF ELROD with Phong H. Bui
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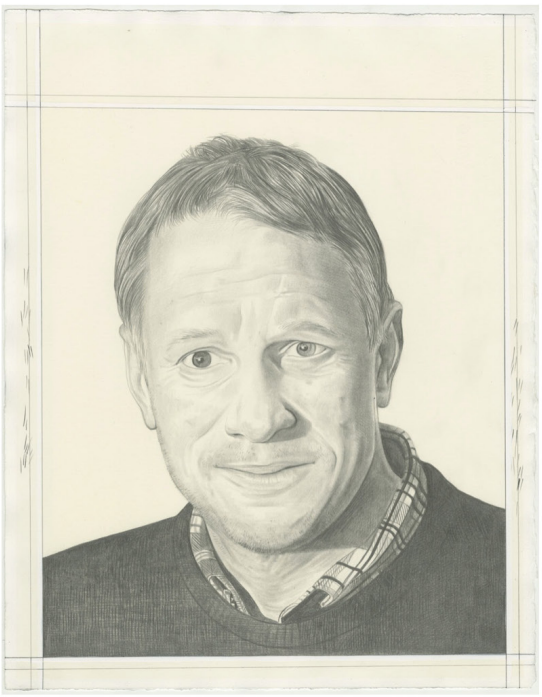


Jeff Elrod. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui

When I think of Jeff Elrod, I think of the following Ernst Cassirer remark:

> A utopia is not a portrait of the real world, or of the actual political or social order. It exists at no moment of time and at no point in space; it is "nowhere." But just such a conception of a nowhere has stood the test and proved its strength in the development of the modern world. It follows from the nature and character of ethical thought that it can never condescend to accept the "given." The ethical world is never given; it is forever in the making. [1]

ON VIEW
Luhring Augustine
The Last Handshake
November 17, 2020 – January 9, 2021
New York

And knowing Jeff's deep appreciation for concrete poetry and haiku, I also thought of J.G. Ballard (one of his favorite authors), who uttered, "Art exists because reality is neither real nor significant." Whatever lies between Jeff's early natural alchemy with super graphics and video game lexicons and his willful desire to explore an inherent pictorial synthesis of digital art that ascribes to the warmth of the human hand and body, they are indeed both collided and integrated at times. All of a sudden the old conflict of art and technology becomes new and urgent again. This time the two old friends (who had forgotten each other's names and places of birth) met again with tremendous resistance to and embrace of each other simultaneously. On this occasion of Jeff's third solo exhibition *The Last Handshake* at Luhring Augustine (November 17, 2020–January 9, 2021), I've finally found an ideal opportunity to speak at length through Zoom with Jeff at his studio in Marfa, Texas about some of the questions that had been lingering in my mind in regards to the continuity of his evolution as a painter, leading to the creation of this new body of work. The following is an edited version of our two-hour conversation for your reading pleasure.

Phong Bui (Rail): I've been reading Lev Manovich's writings the Russian philosopher of media who I met through my friends Lisa Yuskavage and Matvey Levenstein. Lev in fact was a childhood friend of Matvey's from Moscow. In any case, I've avoided and neglected how to deal with technology for so long ...

Jeff Elrod: Yeah, yeah. For good reason ...

Rail: It is no longer the case ever since Trump's deployment of speed with his unpredictable Tweets in the morning and middle of the night to generate chaos, anxiety, and fear to his self-serving advantage. I felt a need to understand it more fully. It's no more or no less than when members of Al-Qaeda found means to communicate through disposable SIM cards that can be bought over the counter at any deli in NYC, inserted into the mobile phone, used once, and then thrown away during the planning of the September 11 attacks. Be it high or low use of technology, it doesn't matter, as long as there was and is an intent of subversion, of resistance to conformity, so I'm learning many aspects of cultural software, cyber culture, computer technology as a distribution platform, digital data, modern computing which has been good for me.

Elrod: Given COVID-19 and what's been happening, I think we all have reevaluated the way that we look at technology in our lives and see the different uses of it, as the *Rail* has with the Zoom forum in the New Social Environment series. Yeah, the way that we Zoom in order to keep ourselves connected in a way that we never really thought about before all this happened.

I actually think we're living through a paradigm shift, right now. We need these screens more than ever for a variety of reasons of interconnectivity ... health, art, politics, commerce, family, friends, and everything else.

Maybe we can begin a new relationship to all of this now and not go back. We can use new tools for positive purposes ... maybe Zoom is one? Facebook is a good example of what we should possibly rid ourselves of. Facebook has its moments for sure, and a lot can be said about its positive influence over the years but it seems corrupted and infiltrated at this point and should probably be rethought. As an outsider to social media it seems to me that the negative aspects of that platform far outweigh the positives at this point ... it seems like a giant falsehood to me, but I am speaking from the outside.

Jeff Elrod, *The Last Handshake*, 2020. Inkjet ink and gesso on linen, 83 3/4 x 59 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Rail: After having read David Tompkins's insightful essay, "Filter > Distort > Displace," I can't help but to think of Richard Shiff's brilliant essay "Blur and Fuzz." According to Richard, while "blur" refers to disjunctive movement and has a temporal infrastructure, "fuzz" has a spatial infrastructure, but it's an outcome of disjunctive distribution of material elements, be it mark-making, particles of pigment in painting, particles of emulsion conventional photography, for example, or electronic raster of pixels on TV, digital photography or any form of digital imaging. Before we get into the greater depth of things, let me begin with the first question: knowing you went to a liberal arts college at the University of North Texas, but was it there you began to make art also?

Elrod: It was a very interesting school at that time ... and hopefully still is. It had a very strong philosophy and art department at the time that I was there in the late '80s which was the reason why I went there from Dallas where I was born.

Rail: Which is only 30 to 45 minutes between the two cities.

Elrod: It was an adventure, yeah [*laughs*]. I was lucky enough to have had Dave Hickey as a quasi-art history teacher. Thomas McEvilley was also a visiting critic from Rice University, where he was teaching. They were all connected to Vernon Fisher at the time, my first painting instructor.

Vernon was very active in inviting different critics and artists. I believe we had one of the first symposiums on "Postmodernism in Art," which I think McEvilley organized. That was a big deal to us kids then—I mean, we were in Texas after all!

There was a huge philosophical bent in that they did not teach you how to stretch a canvas, how to paint, or anything that you needed to know about materials and techniques, etc. We were taught how to look and talk about art instead. Well, this didn't go over well with many of the students then ... and for me, the die was cast right there. I loved it, I thought it was great. So I never really learned to paint ... just to follow my ideas. It was at a great place, partly because it helped me to contextualize what it meant to be an artist. So I started painting almost right away, making abstract paintings from the very beginning.

Rail: Did you begin with oil paint?

Elrod: No, I've always liked the flat, minimal, monochrome aesthetic of acrylic paint, partly because I was inspired by the dank industrial, mindless expanses of repetitive middle class architecture in Texas, like miles and miles of warehouses and so on. The sorts of things you see while driving and you don't even try to absorb. But one of the things that I found interesting as a kid is noticing how these giant companies would attempt to decorate these incredibly oppressive structures with classic supergraphic paint jobs which came out of Yale, like Paul Rand, Alvin Eisenmen, Herbert Matter, among others ... the SuperGraphic's crew there. The book *SuperMannerism* was like a bible to me for years. Anyway, I find that really interesting in the way it was relating to what I was learning about appropriated imagery, David Salle, and all the Postmodern image jugglers and painters in the '80s. Although I couldn't totally relate to it all, I could relate to the idea of taking imagery off

these horribly ugly buildings and also hilariously bad painted imagery. Jim Shaw's *Thrift Store Paintings* book and show did it for me. That's how I started making paintings, very minimal, in the spirit of Paul Feeley and the whole Color Field paintings associated with the Washington Color School, including Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Paul Reed, and Howard Mehring. Yeah, they're real cool. I just loved making paintings with tape and rollers, inspired by digital imagery out of books from the library, like in the history of video games, and I would take photos of the screen and I was doing everything I could to make an abstract image that wasn't coming from a place of pure emotion. I was instead trying to explore a place, or a space that can be a little more thoughtful towards experimentation.

Rail: And playfulness.

Elrod: Exactly. In my case it means my natural relationship with the computer and technology. I felt real comfortable making drawings on the screen with a mouse. I found out right away that that was my comfort zone. So yes, by the time I had access to a computer or drawing programs in Houston, I was making abstract paintings based on invented shapes and forms from the computer. Then, as I graduated in 1991, I received a residency at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston aka the Core Program.

I moved to Houston and soon met people like Walter Hopps and Fredericka Hunter. Walter had been in Houston about five years at the de Menil … both extraordinary people. Walter was a really cool guy. He hung out with us artists all the time. I was introduced to the whole Houston art scene through that program and Fredericka … Dominique was in a wheelchair, but you'd still see her at every opening and you could go up and talk to her. The whole experience was very meaningful to me. So when I was in Houston I really forged this idea of how I was going to make paintings by appropriating abstractions … and ultimately drawing with a mouse. Back then it was really looked down on to use computer or electronic imagery. I was very sensitive to it and did not want to print my paintings. So I spent like a decade or more avoiding it. I technically like making everything by hand. Even though I made it all on the screen. I made sure it got off the screen and that I transferred it all and did it all by hand. And that was my thing for many years.

Rail: And then you spent a year or more at the famous Rijksakademie in Amsterdam where Mondrian, Constant (Anton Nieuwenhuys), Karel Appel, and more had been as students?

Elrod: Yeah, it was there that I realized they taught art very differently than I was accustomed to—I mean, I was rolling my paint on with rollers and taping everything and making giant ridiculous looking paintings and they were all using easels and reworking Mondrian strategies on these tiny canvases. I'd never seen anything like that.

Jeff Elrod, *TBT*, 2020. Inkjet ink, acrylic, and oil stick on canvas, 82 x 58 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Some of the cool tutors there were Marlene Dumas and Jan Dibbets. I was definitely a bit of an outsider academically but I had a lot of friends at the school. I remember my assigned tutor, a very nice person in his 80s who was famous in Amsterdam for his Ingres-like pencil drawings. After a few awkward minutes in the studio we agreed we didn't have a lot in common but liked each other so I ended up just listening to his incredible WWII stories about fighting the Nazis outside of town. I had a 16 by 7 feet supergraphic painting with an orange and yellow stripe which was very similar to a Barnett Newman painting. He thought I was somehow making fun of the school or he felt offended. I had to explain to him that I'm the last person to make fun of anything that is art and that I'm so happy to be here. I said my scale is a part of my work. It's part of the game that I'm playing, joking on postwar American abstraction and this was all very real for me. They thought I was in my studio screwing around, giving them the finger or something. I had to tell them over and over again that this wasn't the case. I still find it funny. After all, I did send my slides to the school before getting accepted. In any case, it turned out to be a great experience, partly because I made so many friends at the school and I spent lots of time in all the museums in Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Stedelijk Museum, and so on.

Rail: As Henry James once said, "Be one of those on whom nothing is lost."

Elrod: Yeah, definitely. What I realized was how Americans, I being one, had a different sense of aesthetic and definitely a different sense of scale altogether. It was only when I came back to Houston that I realized that I was making basically thrift store paintings on a massive scale. [*Laughs*]

Rail: Even though they'd been exposed to seeing American postwar and contemporary paintings. I can also understand a thrift store in Houston is quite different from a thrift store in New York City. Anyway, when you came back you eventually had your first solo show at the Texas Gallery, Fredericka Hunter's stomping ground, in 1997. Am I right?

Installation view: *Jeff Elrod: Analog*, Texas Gallery, Texas, 1997. Courtesy the artist and Texas Gallery.

Elrod: I started out working at the gallery, sweeping the gallery floors, while reading all the books and catalogs in the gallery's archive library. That was the only job I had. Fredericka was so kind to me, and she gave me two shows in fact, one in 1997 (*Analog Paintings*) and the other in 1998 (*Heroes & Zeros*). And through the gallery I met Jack Pierson, and it was Jack who introduced me to Pat Hearn.

Rail: Nice. About your first show at Texas Gallery: all the paintings were mostly made or created on a computer, using simple tools from various graphic software programs like lines, scissors, speed, and so on, then the final compositions were transferred onto the canvas, am I right?

Elrod: Yes.

Rail: I remember one review seemed to suggest that they were enigmatic and almost violent versions of Matisse's paper cut outs. [*Laughs*]

Elrod: Whaaaaat? Again, it's the issue of the computer in art in its interaction. That was the mid-'90s ... and suspicions were high. Technology in art is one thing but technology in painting back then was viewed as a corrupting force, a negative

Rail: I think of it being also a presence or an energy, being a completely separate "situation" from whatever we've been familiar with or accustomed to.

Elrod: I think it was the general audience who wasn't completely there yet. Even when I showed these same paintings at Pat Hearn Gallery, in New York with Francis Ruyter in 1999, Mario Naves from the *New York Observer* totally condemned the show as the death of painting. I had other reviews but I did find that one to be my favorite. It made me feel I was really doing it ... doing something marginally subversive.

Rail: You certainly aroused some attention for your first show in NYC. There were more than a dozen reviews. That's pretty remarkable, hello.

Elrod: There were those who loved it and those who were threatened by it. It seemed writers and "critics" liked it but some artists secretly resented it. It all seems so goofy now.

Rail: Don't you think it's better to be prepared to accept both realities than just choosing one over the other? This

Jeff Elrod, *Deep Fake*, 2020. Inkjet ink and acrylic on linen, 79 3/4 x 60 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

is true with J.G. Ballard's intense conflation of the present and the future—an author I know you admire immensely.

Elrod: Super true! And yeah, I love Ballard's dystopian view and also just his descriptive imagery of industrial space. As specific as the way he describes a certain light hitting on a particular chrome surface. The way that blood spills on concrete. He can really describe these materials, be it rubble, rusted metal, crunched metal, shiny concrete, etc., in such a beautiful and poetic way that a kid like me, who grew up in Texas, can really identify with totally, mostly because I find beauty in those things too. You know, you're young and you read Ballard and you live in a shithole where your surroundings were so oppressive, it makes you look at a mall, a rampart, a fast food joint, or a traffic jam differently.

Rail: You mean like the way America's working class identifies with Trump's behavior that embodies their own—I mean apart from their sad reading of Trump as a wealthy businessman—be it overweight, aggressive, outspoken, ignorant, addicted to TV, junk food, and so on.

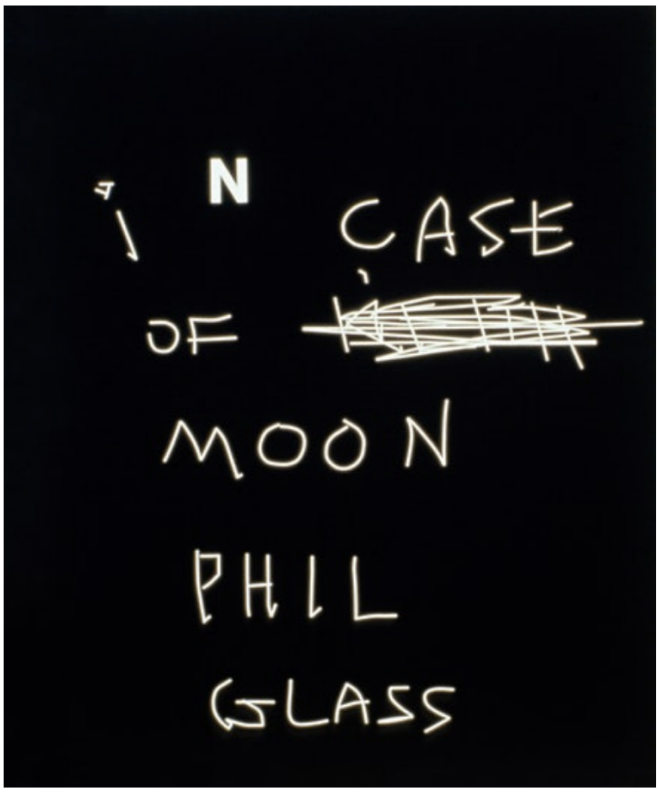
Elrod: Sad but true. [*Laughs*] Don't you think perception is important for how we identify or sympathize with things?

Rail: Absolutely. Once any one of us feel validated by association, it means our existence in some ways is justified. You had spoken in the past of how to translate the screen space to physical space, analog space into digital space, vector space and raster space. My question is how would you describe that transition that exists in between or during the process of—

Elrod: Transference?

Rail: Yeah, and if it does exist, I'm sure it's more complicated than the way the result of the painting looks.

Elrod: It's complicated, and super frustrating sometimes, regarding the technology, but being a painter and making paintings is the most important aspect of my work. I need the technology to make my paintings though. Otherwise—without it—I wouldn't be able to make the kind of paintings I want. It's a necessity to me that it exists in the world the way I want it to: as a painting. So yeah, I do also have to bring the long history of painting with me wherever I go, but I like it. It's a challenge and I'm totally committed to it ... the symbiosis of both histories.



Jeff Elrod, *Moon Glass*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Texas Gallery.

Rail: It's the vision that drives you, not the other way around.

Elrod: Yeah, the way I use technology is not that different from the way perspective was used to make paintings as a window, from which a viewer can look through in the Renaissance tradition. There existed the whole 700-something-year-old idea of a traditional picture plane representing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, which was obliterated by Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and postwar America's response to flatness and scale. Of course it starts with Manet ...Turner? And that's interesting. So, to me, I guess that's what I've always been thinking about from the beginning, just in the back of my head, but not with any sort of goal in mind. I have no goal. But I am interested in the space that I call screen space, being a space that exists behind the glass of the computer screen ... it's what you see, the light compressed against it in a sea of information and data. It's a fresh kind of painting space to me. I try and represent that space in my paintings. It began when I played video games as a kid, starting with Atari games. I was aware of the blackness of the screen as a kind of phenomenal space that was beyond the game. And it is a deep space, and everything that appeared on the surface was sort of beautiful and weird, especially the way the light on the screen moved around and so on. All of that stuff really affected me visually. It was almost meditative ... with trance-like

focus. For me, a lot of those early paintings were the screen space, as a flat and compressed three dimensional space. To me it's different from traditional space. Be it a Giotto or a Newman, both are still painted on a flat surface.

Rail: Isn't that the truth, as so many of us are creatures of habit.

Elrod: I have been thinking about this recently, and I've come to a conclusion that I basically am a very old-fashioned painter. In a lot of ways I think of myself as a Franz Kline. You know, I take small imagery that I make on a computer, I stare at it for a while, then I figure out a way to get it into the real world, similar to Kline. He was making ink drawings on telephone book pages; Walter used to tell me about watching him work on 10th Street by St. Mark's Church, and how he'd visit his studio and watch Kline make these paintings with an overhead projector projecting his ink gesture drawings, made on New York City phonebook paper, onto a blank canvas.

Jeff Elrod, *Modern Box*, 2020. Inkjet ink and acrylic on linen, 74 x 58 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Rail: Same with Jasper Johns, Julie Mehretu, and countless others.

Elrod: Exactly. It's this exact same thing. In a lot of ways, I'm not technically grounded. In fact, there's nothing that innovative about what I do at all. It's all old-fashioned techniques. It's just that I'm doing it in 2020, with different new tools, but frankly, the same old-fashioned process. If Kline, Johns used it, don't you think that's legitimate for anyone who is inspired to do the same thing?

Rail: Definitely. Just a side note, but it's an important one: as we know the video game industry would design a super mechanism that corresponds to how weapons would operate in the military, so recruitment and training would be less strenuous and time consuming. Let's say a young teenager plays a certain game, it's designed for him, her, or them, to become a pilot for an airplane, submarine, or to be a tank gunner, for example, which are unquestionable aim for exactitude, some forms of perfection indeed. Whereas

in your case, you're cultivating the right measure of imperfection, a certain right balance of awkwardness in lines within lines with often spatial discrepancy or collision of form, all of which I don't think are a relaxed matter.

Elrod: Hand-eye coordination development and video games are intrinsically linked. The mouse makes an inherently awkward line naturally … I don't aim for perfection of anything at all … that seems too easy.

Rail: Exactly, whereas it would be utterly fatal in actual combat if you miss your target, in art it can be super interesting and useful.

Elrod: It's about how to subvert the tools, which is something we artists are supposed to do. The mouse has kinks … it's a line different from a pencil pen or brush.

Rail: Yes, indeed.

Elrod: In this regard, if you accept the condition that you're constantly faced with unexpected situations, you may experience some discoveries about things and about yourself, and they're kind of multi-fold because of the computer. Instead of it just being a spill on your table, with the technology today you have five or 500 variables. For every painting I make there is anywhere from 5–50 finished variations. … I edit what to paint, much like a photographer used to go through his negatives to print something.

Jeff Elrod, *Melville*, 2020. Inkjet ink, acrylic, and oil stick on linen, 81 1/2 x 58 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

When you get that amount of countless and unexpected imagery, it can be challenging. But it is fun also, because it just opens up all the doors of perception. You know and you can float through any door, any lane, you wish. I think at the moment Nam June Paik looks so much more fascinating, weirder, than when I first saw the works in the '80s. I mean he was cramming all sorts of information on the screens along with all kinds of visual noise. But if you're cramming all sorts of things into a blender, most of the time what you get is absolutely not what you had intended. Anyway, technology has been part of our lives for a very long time. It's just in the last two or three decades the speed of its development seems to have increased at a great pace.

Rail: And the idea of us being chimeras, all theorized as fabricated hybrids, part machine and part living organism. We are cyborgs and cyborgs are our ontology. We see many examples of this vision in the Weimar Republic, with Dadaists, right after WWI, in, say, the photomontages of Hannah Höch, or Raoul Hausmann, or collapsed paintings by Kurt Schwitters, and so on.

Elrod: Yeah, they were automatists.

Rail: Exactly, and there was a genuine desire, a collective desire, for new modes of technology, new modes of perception, how senses of sight, touch, hearing were being transformed through different forms of technological prosthesis. To them, it was a utopian dream, in response to the intense destruction of the war.

Elrod: In my case, I see what I do as a spiritual hallucination. It's interesting to think about the Weimar era, in the wake of WWI, which is the first mechanized war, although we know Cubism, Futurism, and even Surrealism were all affected by technology one way or another. I'm sure someone will figure out how to make art with Zoom and whatever is the current, available technology.

Rail: Absolutely, as long as his, her, or their calling is there to be activated, as Immanuel Kant spoke of the natural end in each human's life and purpose where each natural occurrence can be explained in terms of the very purpose it serves, rather than the cause by which it arises. In other words, if you're born to be a natural violin player, but your head is telling you you should play the drums, it can be a disaster. My point is, you know, Warhol, like Tristan Tzara, who was expelled as you remember by André Breton for having proposed to create a poem on the spot by pulling words out of the hat.

Elrod: The exquisite corpse, which anyone can play.

Rail: Exactly. Warhol had a similar aspiration when he declared, "The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine." It revealed their interests in technology for radical changes. For Warhol, his appeal is invested in the democratic idea of art for the many. Tzara's similar idea was poetry for everyone.

Elrod: I think the same way about William Borrough and Brion Gysin's cut-up method, for the exact same reason. I tried to explore it in my blurred paintings. I was trying to make something that looked like a natural phenomenon, or something that just exists as an accident, which is beautiful, intriguing, and mesmerizing at the same time. I still remember the first blur I made. It was like magic. I couldn't stop looking at it. Then eventually, I thought to myself, "how can I reverse engineer my steps to understand how I made such a weird image?" So I just had to kind of do it again and again until I could play and control it at the same time. For a lot of reasons, I enjoy the process as a spiritual ambition.

Jeff Elrod, *Figment 4*, 2020. Inkjet ink and acrylic on linen, 82 x 58 1/2 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Rail: Or somewhere between meditation and hypnosis.

Elrod: Oh, yeah. Imagine your mind on mescaline or LSD, or whatever, crunching information together, then spitting it out somehow visually satisfying, even sublime.

Rail: To go back to the early reference to Matisse's cut-outs in the earliest review of your first show, I don't really see Matisse's use of scissors being any different than deploying digital equipment as creative tools as you have, so have others, like Wade Guyton, Cheyney Thompson, Kelley Walker, and Cory Arcangel.

Elrod: I couldn't agree more. I'd like to also add Monique Prieto to the list. But you know, but I have to admit, Wade is kind of brilliant. He opened things up in many different directions. He's the one that really brought it to official legitimacy. I remember thinking about the inkjet printer differently. I was not threatened by it after Wade. So yes, I use digital tools and make work that looks digital, but ultimately, it's handmade. Again, because of Wade, I think about printing differently with endless possibilities.

Rail: I appreciated him when he confessed to Peter Schjeldahl in 2002 that by being so frustrated with his failures in drawing, he then turned to the use of the computer, the scanner, the printer to explore what would fulfill his creative drive and pictorial ambition.

Elrod: I can relate to this similar frustration.

Rail: This is to say, just as Guyton's digital media looks efficient as a legitimate surrogate for his drawing and his painting, it doesn't mean more or less than a representation of say, Albert Oehlen's deliberate embrace of excess and indulgence, as he aims to communicate a visual picture of when a painting breaks down. Either way, they both undertake the process of revision, editing, very seriously. I suppose the same applies to yours as well?

Elrod: Absolutely. 100 percent. I appreciate your quoting of Kant's reference to finding your natural end. I remember growing up as a suburban kid, I always loved looking at images and wanted to make images. And, when I realized I wanted to be an artist, I became too self conscious about drawing in general, how to draw and what to draw. It was the computer that liberated me. It made me relax my mind, and I can look at things and draw things on the computer that I would never do in the real world. It was like a comfortable chair. The process of transferring a drawing to a painting is something else.

Rail: Would it be fair to say to you while making a drawing is riding a bike, while making a painting is like driving a car?

Elrod: I'd say it the other way around: while the later, painting, is more physical as riding a bike, the latter, drawing, is more like driving the car.

Rail: That's cool! Let's focus on this new body of work! How would you describe it being a subtle or not-so-subtle leap from your last show at Galerie Max Hetzler in Paris last year?

Elrod: It all began with being restless, wanting to be more physically involved in the painting. It was really about missing the physical interaction with the hand making gestures, making a mess really. I started with making drawings on top of the blurs, knowing the bars were done as a project, which I've never really done before, drawing on top of something else I'd made. I usually begin with an empty space. Anyway, it's just all these years had passed, and I realized I want to mess around with things. Maybe I became too familiar with technology. It's time to shake things up. This sounds crazy but I figured out that I could really work the printing ink, and take it off the surface and change it immediately and work it like a wet oil painting.

Jeff Elrod, *Flying V*, 2014. UV ink and acrylic on Fischer canvas, 108 x 81 3/4 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler.

Rail: But doesn't it get dry super fast?

Elrod: Yes, maybe in one hour. Yeah, I feel it was just one of those moments where I just saw a massive potential for

it. The whole idea of it was cool to me, that you put an image of anything in, you print it traditionally, its coming out as a giant picture, then you would destroy it, in order to make something new out of it. In all the years that I spent removing my hand from the paintings, not even touching the paintings, since last year the urge to erase what I've done, let my anxiety be the energy for the hand, so my hand can be more visible, as I really wanted to see myself, my whole body, in the paintings.

Rail: *Figment 4* (2020) has your classic blurred form, which seems to be sprayed on at the last minute.

Elrod: It's one of the first ones that I realized, the ink is not too a stable material, so let's fuck with it. I just did it without thinking about anything, and looked at it later, tweaked it a bit. Then I saw something very specific as a figure-ground relationship, which gave me the title of this show, *The Last Handshake*. It's named for obvious reasons because no one is shaking hands anymore right now, and also this whole idea of my hand in relation to the paintings. My hand being visible, my hand interacting with the paint again. As may be a desire to touch something is so real, so needed at this moment. At the very least, it represented my headspace where I am making this painting in the middle of the COVID pandemic in Marfa. It's a weird metaphor for being quarantined in Marfa where I've been living and working for the last nine months. It's one of the most visceral paintings I've made in recent years.

Rail: Spooky indeed! Yes, this pandemic has prompted us to meditate with the condition of time, how we deal with it differently than ever before. This new body of work has a strong array of broad, diverse, sweeping gestures, that stretch right up against the front of the picture plane and across the visual field; at times some are very strangely lyrical while others are very aggressive.

Elrod: You're right. And in flesh, they're a little more terse, because they're super thin. There's not a whole lot of paint. It's a lot of ink. I totally see the aggressiveness, or rather ...

Rail: Subversiveness.

Elrod: That's a word I like to use, since it's about obliterating an image, then building a new one. Some look like accidents. And some look like little poems. Some border on the sublime.

Rail: Like *Deep Fake*, partly because of its atmospheric quality and diffused palette.

Elrod: Thanks. It's a print of itself, on itself. I don't run away from sublime imagery I must confess.

Rail: Me too, Jeff. Anyway whereas the gestures in *This Is Not A Painting* appear to be more varied, more agitated, as though a car's windshield is being washed with soap, water, and a spunge—I mean after a long period of accumulation of dust, and it really needed a real wash.

Elrod: That's such a good analogy because they're just right on top of the surface. There's no real depth. It's all an artificial space. "It's all right there on the surface," as Andy would say.

Rail: Although in *Crack Up*, one can say it has been your most identifiable line or drawing from the screen, floating above or on top of the shared sprayed and painted gestures.

Elrod: True.

Rail: How would you describe *Modern Box*?

Elrod: I'd say it's my version of part dusty, deconstructed rubix cube, part [Georges] Braque's fake-analytic Cubist painting.

Rail: That makes sense, especially with the Braque reference, partly because what appears to be an image of a stacks of papers, shoved into different compartments of the bookshelves, like the tabletops, which have been the intimate subjects for the Cubists. I'd like actually to think of it being Walter Benjamin's bookshelves.

Elrod: That's cool!

Rail: What about the issue of scale? I notice all the paintings, while sharing small differences in length, varying from 74 or 82 inches, share the same 58 and 60 inches in width?

Jeff Elrod, *Crack-up*, 2020. Inkjet ink and acrylic on linen, 82 x 58 1/2 inches. © Jeff Elrod; Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Elrod: That's because of my printer's capacity of printing to 58 and 60 inches. The paintings' scale comes from the proportional scale of the drawing on the screen ... which I rarely think about when I start. I'm not thinking about "sizing" a painting when I start drawing, so when they get big they often have awkward or unusual dims. It's also something I still am working on. But yes, scale has always been an issue. It's always there. It's always something you have to deal with. I'd say it begins with an image in my head, or an image I play with, and when I accept it as something I want to transfer onto a canvas, that's when the issue of scale gets dealt with.

Rail: Even, or especially, with the shape paintings.

Elrod: Yeah, especially with the shape paintings, which are about how to create an irregular shape or edge, then making an image and sticking it on the wall where it punctuates the wall. Even with these new paintings, I still treat them with different kinds of punctuations.

Rail: That's a wonderful way to describe it like the way we need punctuation when we write. Each comma, period, parentheses, colon, semicolon, question mark, and so on have a specific function.

Elrod: Yeah, and every punctuation has different meanings in a poem than in a piece of prose or fiction. When I think of punctuation in art … taking it literally, the first thing that comes to mind is Lucio Fontana and Gordon Matta-Clark … and parenthetically Steven Parrino and Robert Gober. Maybe we should end with that.

1. Cassirer, Ernst. *An Essay on Man: an Introduction to a Philosopy of Human Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.

Contributor

Phong Bui

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