

Galerie Max Hetzler Berlin | Paris

MUSE Magazine

Powers, Bill: Jeff Elrod: From Comes First

September 2014

JEFF ELROD
FROM COMES FIRST

photography by Clement Pascal

interview by Bill Powers



Jeff's studio, Brooklyn

maxhetzler.com

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The art writer Dave Hickey once said about abstract painting that "pattern is survival." This instinct is prevalent in the practice of Jeff Elrod who I met up with at his studio in Brooklyn this summer.

BP So you just finished reading The Circle by Dave Eggers?

JE Yeah. I don't read a lot of fiction anymore. I used to love to read J.G.Ballard, but most of what I pick up these days is non-fiction. You need to check out this new Eggers' book though. It's a dystopian horror story about a girl who basically works at Google, except they don't call it that. The novel reminded me of The Shining... it's pretty chilling. It's about the culture of social media and Facebook and pumped-up interconnectivity where people record and share everything, continuously chronicling their daily life, and any bit of secrecy is considered theft... super interesting... maybe because personally I'm not that great with emailing and texting. I just have trouble keeping up. I question my "connectivity" daily.

BP Which is kind of ironic for a guy who spends so much time drawing on the computer.

JE I guess, they seem like two very different things to me. Drawing versus email, texting, and social media – those are radically different activities. BP When did you start using the computer as a tool in your own work? JE In the mid 1990s I was making abstract paintings by appropriating Super Graphic imagery like what you find on the side of a Costco: big industrial messaging, very hard edge, dumb.

Usually it's an attempt to decorate bad architecture. So, in 1996, I get a part-time job at The Houston Chronicle proofing their front page. I would sit around their office in the middle of the night waiting for the editors to lock down photographs for the front page... it was an amazing job with tons of downtime. I didn't know anything about computers. My friend, Mark Allen, from The Museum School got me the job. And he basically showed me the ropes, dropping the images into the page, etc... I asked him to show me how to draw something and that was my introduction to Illustrator. I just started drawing little architectural abstractions... the weird stuff I'd see driving around Houston.

BP Did you know it was a game-changer?

JE It was a moment... it hit me right then that I could paint like that... that I could paint in that style of the screen.

BP Which is why you think of them as analog paintings even if they have a tech assist from your computer?

JE I don't see how that is any different from an artist using a pen or pencil... but yes, for me it means it is an analog rendering (the painting) of a digital original. Ultimately, they come out as a handmade thing which is kind of a weird distinction to make these days. Also when I say analog, I think of it in musical terms like the difference between vinyl and CDs. The screen is digital – smooth – whereas the canvas is real in that it has texture.

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Jeff Elrod by Clement Pascal

BP Is it sort of a man versus machine dynamic?

JE I don't see it like that at all. Computers are just an extension of the paint brush. It's not an adversarial relationship, but it is true that at one time the art world seemed threatened by computers, but that seems so old fashioned now.

BP But I do know that you respond negatively to the term primitive? You're not trying to embrace the anachronistic, right?

JE Because it's not about fetishizing vintage technology. Aesthetically I was drawn to vector-based programs, the same way I was drawn to Barnett Newman instead of Jules Oliski back then.

BP And this here (what we're looking at) is the first drawing you ever made on a computer?

JE It's called Stadia. It's an abstraction of the Houston Astrodome, which I used to be obsessed with, the first domed stadium in the world... it's also where Astroturf was invented... fake grass. And it was the setting of Robert Altman's wonderful movie, Brewster McCloud, about a 22 year-old photographer-squatter that lives in the Astrodome. That was my fantasy life back then.

BP Is that a Nate Lowman collage over there?

JE Yes, that's a early xerox of a photo of Robert Smithson. Nate and I shared a studio from 2002-2005 when he was just out of NYU. I rented him the back part of my studio on Bridge Street in downtown Brooklyn. We lost the space in 2006 which is about when I moved back to Marfa.

BP Is Marfa where you hooked up with Mark Flood?

JE No, I've know Flood since 1990 from Houston when I started at The Museum School. Later we opened a fake gallery called Art of This Century in an abandoned driving school which I was using as my studio. I knew him as Perry Webb then, his Culturecide moniker. We did shows like "Tragic Fading Supergraphic" and "Objects Beside The Economy". I met Perry within the first week of moving to Houston. I loved Culturecide from college so I was excited to meet him.

BP Are there other artists to come out of the Museum School?

JE Yeah, Mark Allen and Julie Mehretu most notably.

BP So what developed from your first stint in Marfa?

JE I did my three month residency at Chinati and was making a lot of work, it ended up turning into a year which was very generous of Chinati to let me stay. Jack Pierson came through town and called Pat Hearn to check out my studio. She then put me in a group show at Matthew Marks called "Painting Now and Forever." Then Pat got me a studio in Bushwick in 1999. I worked with her as long as I could.

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BP To me the real turning point for you – when everything exploded – was your MoMA/PSI show in 2013 “Nobody Sees Like Us” where you had that one room of blurry paintings or what you call echo paintings. JE Klaus offered me the show at PSI. And he was the person who decided that we should make the room with no corners, you know, where they all round out so it's hard to concentrate spatially. I thought it worked really well with the paintings which are already hyper-retinal. BP Almost akin to a seamless backdrop at a photo shoot. It creates an environment like a Robert Irwin installation where your perspective is off-kilter, only you do it with painting instead of light.

JE I always liked his book “Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees.” He's been at Chinati for about seven years working on this massive permanent installation.

BP I feel a spirit connection in your work to Wool's, particularly how you both harness different modes of technology to make paintings by hand.

JE I wouldn't argue that at all... I've always looked up to him as an artist. He works almost in the reverse of how I do though. He'll make a painting, take a photo of it, then start messing with the image and do a silkscreen of that. I usually start on the computer.

BP Is there too much abstract art in the world right now?

JE I don't know.

BP In optometry there's a term called the resting point of accommodation which is the place your eyes go if you don't consciously focus them. I think art can hit us in primal ways we're not always aware of.

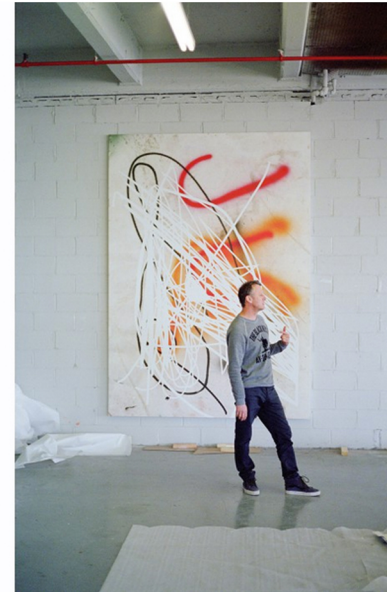
JE Your eye would be in an analog mode then. The computer for me is where I go to zone, where I can make drawings reflexively. I prefer the smoothness of drawing in light as opposed to pencil and paper which made me self-consciously aware of the friction I was creating.

BP So Christopher Wool you met in New York then?

JE Yeah, Lizzi Bougatsos curated a show at Participant and Kenny Schaefer – a two location show – and they put my painting right next to a Wool painting. I met him at the opening, but then we didn't speak for years until I was back living in Marfa.

BP And did Wool introduce you to Lurhing Augustine where you recently had your first solo show?

JE Yes, he did introduce me to those guys and put me in this group show called “Mix/Remix” at the gallery in 2012.



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BP Hence your interest in frictionless drawing. Your earlier paintings seemed to have more text in them.

JE Possibly, I'm not really sure, I'm always jotting things down when I'm drawing. I go back and forth. I always use text as a device. They're like notes to self.

BP What about the shaped canvases in your "Rabbit Ears" show?

JE It comes from the screen... how Cover Flow scrolls through images and crops them sometimes in interesting ways, then I screen shoot them.

BP Before we end, you have to tell me about your ESP paintings.

JE Okay. Extra sensory perception, yes. I used to write "El Espectro" all the time...it was a way for me to start drawing. Then maybe a year later, I saw the letters ESP embedded in the word and having lived in California in the 70s, ESP was a major thing culturally. I'm not like super-serious about it, but I do think ESP connects to our experience of art. It's also just a great tag.