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# Dallas Artist Jeff Zilm Was an Overnight Sensation Decades in the Making

"I'm the kind of person who, even if it doesn't happen, I'm still going," Zilm says. "I have to be an artist regardless of whether anybody ever acknowledges me or not." Photo by William Bichara.

BY PETER SIMEK | POSTED IN VISUAL ARTS. | JAN 05, 2016 AT 8:00 AM

There probably has never been a Dallas-based artist whose career has blown up quite like Jeff Zilm's. Sure, we've had artists mount great exhibitions around the world, win national media attention, and have pieces collected by our area museums. But in about 18 months, Zilm went from working full time at the Dallas Museum of Art and exhibiting in pop-up exhibitions in East Dallas to selling paintings to A-list celebrities. The 58-year-old artist has exhibited extensively around Dallas since the 1990s. His diverse body of work ranges from monochromatic abstract paintings made from emulsified film strips to heady, text-based conceptual pieces. It's work that's chic but cerebral—sardonic and often subversive. He has a show this month at the [Dallas Contemporary](#), followed in the coming months by exhibitions at Various Small Fires in Los Angeles and Simon Lee Gallery in London.

**So, you're busy.** I have a lot of shows coming up. It's intimidating.

**How do you feel about the Dallas Contemporary show?** We have a show, I think. I feel okay because I'm here. This is where I live. As long as I can work up until an hour before they open the doors, I think everything will be okay.

**That large warehouse space is notoriously difficult to handle, especially for painters. How do you plan to approach it?** The thing about that space is, obviously, there is baggage, ideological and spatially.

**The museum has changed?** Yes. The show that I'm paired with, [Black Sheep Feminism](#), is going to be incredible. It is an exhibition of female artists who are making difficult, radical work. It seems like it is going to be really good. That's a huge blind spot for us around here, and so I look forward to that. But I've been a little bit aware of what the context will be.



For some of his paintings, Zilm uses emulsified film stock from his collection of old prints, brushing and spraying it onto canvas.

**You're the white male painter.** It is hard not to be well aware of my status. And not that it would over-determine what I do, but certainly these are things that I think about making a show, especially with the show that is going to be paired.

**How do you handle it?** When it all comes down to it, I will recognize the context and basically try to forge ahead. Because I'm not a macho prick and I'm not a misogynist, I think I'll be okay.

**And how will you handle the space?** We're going to build walls. We're going to carve up the space. The idea is to deal with that space by making some spaces that will effectively isolate some objects so it will have a more contemplative kind of engagement.

**You've been showing work in Dallas since the 1990s, but you're starting to get known internationally for your film and password paintings. Does that affect how you think about what you'll show in Dallas?** I'm going to show a relatively diverse body of work. I'm probably going to show six film paintings. I have two prints of the film *Night of the Living Dead* that I'm probably going to use to do paintings. Again, it's a situation where the question becomes how reactionary is this going to be? But I've decided to move forward with this anyway. Basically the punchline is that I'm literally making "zombie abstraction." I've thought about it for a while, and I've decided I want to make that move. Put it all out there. It seems like I'm the only one who could do that, so why don't I do that?

**What was it like to get courted by London's Simon Lee Gallery?** This is the thing I've been waiting for my whole life. Basically I just feel comfortable now that I'm at this place where a certain kind of pressure is off. The exciting moment was when Journal [Gallery in Brooklyn] came into the studio and bought everything. Before that, nothing was happening. I was just making the work, working at the DMA, hoping that I'd be able to show this work somewhere but also being very realistic.

**Realistic how?** I had long ago come to the conclusion that it was either going to happen or it is not. I'm the kind of person who, even if it doesn't happen, I'm still going. I have to make these paintings. I have to be an artist regardless of whether anybody ever acknowledges me or not.

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**With everything that is happening in your career, how do you stay focused on your work?** I completely compartmentalize it. I still have my real artistic life, and it is as engaged as it has ever been. When I'm in the studio, all of this shit is, like, not even part of my process in any way. I'm just continuing on the way I always have. It helps that I've had sort of parallel lives. I've held down a full-time job and I've made art all the way along, so I'm used to separating those two things out. I'm able to set it aside when I go into the studio.