

Jeff Elrod at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Cindy Schwartz | February 17, 2009



Jeff Elrod's work that went on display this weekend in a Focus exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth is fresh and honest. To meet him is to know that his work really does reflect the man. Both he and his work are without pretense. I was happy to hear him speak to a group of Fort Worth's brightest, most talented high school students who had been hand picked to be a part of this intimate discussion with the artist. He spoke personally about becoming an artist, described his process in making the work and explained the evolution of the digitally-derived paintings in the show which cover a 12-year span.

Employed to lay out the front page of the *Houston Chronicle*, Elrod, 43, first began to experiment with the possibilities that the paper's computers allowed. He told of having that same magical feeling when he first used the mouse to draw that he had experienced in playing video games. He began to leave work each day with more and more drawings. This new-found obsession with the freedom in drawing that the computer fostered led to his work as we know it today.

The artist begins a piece by drawing with choppy gestures on a computer using a mouse. He takes advantage of the bold spectrum of colors that are available in computer graphics programs. After creating the designs, he projects the digital drawing onto the canvas and creates the paintings completely by hand. He painstakingly masks all of the gestures with tape and applies paint to give the surface of the painting a flat, manufactured look. The beauty is, you can feel the hand of the artist in a way that belies the fact that the work has its roots in technology.

His newest painting, and the one created for this exhibition, *Dream Machine (for Brion Gysin)*, 2009 (which he is standing in front of in this photo) was the painting the artist used to speak to the students about automatic drawing. A term usually associated with Surrealism, it has to do with drawing from the subconscious, drawing without thinking or self-editing. This work refers to the stroboscopic flicker device, *Dream Machine*, that Brion Gysin invented with Ian Somerville. Elrod employs another Brion Gysin discovery of the cut-up technique usually associated with piecing together text. In this painting, however, he cuts and repeats images in panels to present a stunning flicker sensation, like the dream machine, for the viewer to experience as his eyes take in the entire surface of the painting.

Elrod spoke of his earliest painting in the show, *Endgame*, 1994, which was pre-digital. Even in this earliest work, he is combining the new, digital age with the reference to art history. It has a clear nod to Barnett Newman's zip painting from the 1950's yet it shows black alien figures that the artist took from the Atari game *Space Invaders*.

The references to art history cannot be denied. Like Newman and other Abstract Expressionist painters, Elrod uses masking tape to define lines and space in his work. Each time Elrod hits the button on the computer, he is like the Dadaist Max Ernst, for whom chance played a major role in his work. The genius of Elrod's works bring into the present the formalist elements from American painting from 1955 through 1975. By combining the past associations of modernist aesthetics, his fresh approach and the technology of today, he makes new the abstract image.