ARTFORUM

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Jeff Elrod, *Get Off the Internet*, **2001,**
acrylic on canvas, 72 x 84".

JEFF ELROD
ANGSTROM GALLERY

Jeff Elrod's starkly graphic paintings stem from preliminary drawings he executes on a computer, using a mouse as his pencil to produce scores of rapidly drafted variations on improvised themes. As he draws, he periodically prints iterations in the evolving series that strike him as worthwhile before continuing to add and delete visual data onscreen. From this stockpile of interrelated digital prints, he eventually selects one or two to reproduce, on an enlarged scale, in acrylic on canvas.

Elrod's method grants his work an enviable portability: For this recent show in his native Texas, he had large canvases made to order and brought to the gallery, projected slides of his drawings onto them and taped off the linear forms, then rolled on flat fields of paint. In addition to solving those nasty shipping problems, however, his process firmly links the digital, data-saturated present to a more humanist past by referencing Surrealism's automatic writing and Abstract Expressionism's spontaneous gesture in the imperturbably cool context of a computer's logic-bound system of representation. Elrod works the circuitry of mouse and keyboard in much the same spirit that Franz Kline made preparatory drawings in New York City phone books, and just as the brush and ink Kline employed in his drawings flavored his finished paintings, Elrod's digital tools determine the look and feel of his work.
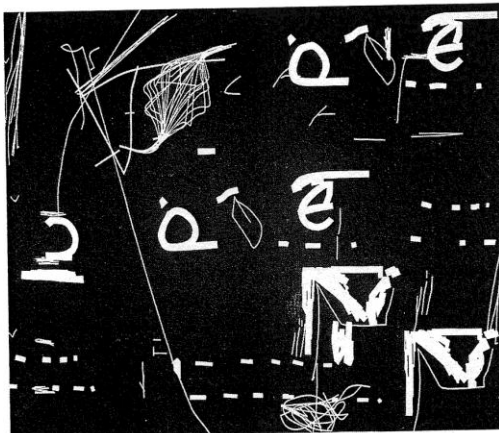
But the crabbed gestures in these paintings are a far cry from Kline's calligraphic heroics. The flat black rectangle of *Swan Dive* (all works 2001) contains a set of barely legible letters that spell out "GREAT" and then seem to stutter the word as they tumble down the face of the painting. The scrawling script records both the awkward effort of writing with a mouse and the machine's idiotic fidelity to every "trace of the artist's hand," as it were. Elrod's technique might be an updated take on Kline, but his results are more suggestive of Cy Twombly's attenuated scratches and squiggles—except that the uninflected black of the ground evokes the airless plenum of a '70s "supergraphic" and permits nothing of Twombly's spaciousness.

The dimensionless nature of the computer screen pervades Elrod's technique and affects the outcome every time. In *Get Off the Internet*, a crackling composition of white marks on a black field, awkwardly rhyming letters and impetuous contours arranged in loosely structured horizontal registers proffer a glut of "information," as it is called in reference to cyberspace. The projected, taped, and painted enlargement of the drawing is so mechanically determined that not a hint of painterly embellishment has crept into the nervous glyphs. And yet, if the painting is deeply informed by allegedly impersonal, even depersonalizing technologies, the painter is still evident in his willful denial of easy references. He's painting not information, but rather memes ripped from their informing contexts for the purpose of making good paintings.

The value in all this lies in Elrod's ability to communicate that an individual intelligence lives and plays behind the technology he employs. It would be too much of a stretch to claim nostalgically that he has discovered a way back to the humanism of a bygone era. Rather, his paintings suggest what personal individuation looks like in the present circumstances. There's a person in the machine, not ghost, but flesh.

—*Michael Odom*