

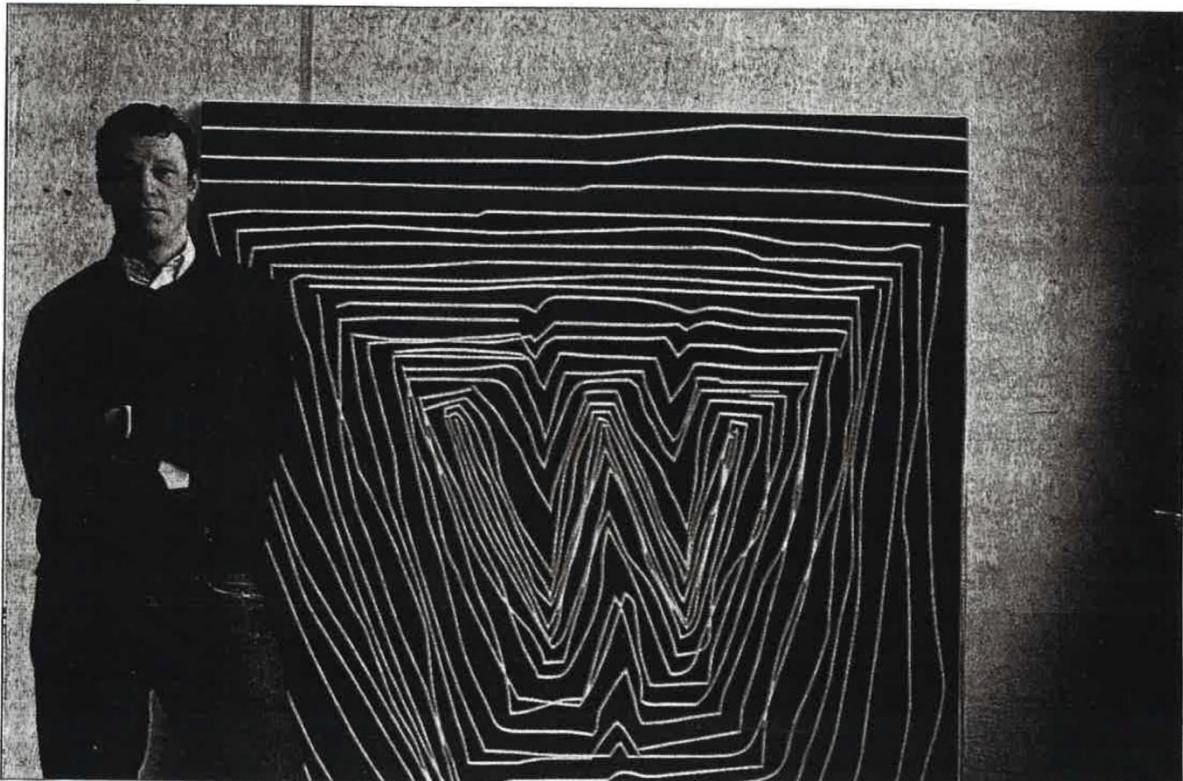
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Jeff Elrod, a native of Irving, poses in his Brooklyn studio.

Courtesy of Jeff Elrod

CODEBREAKER

By JANET KUTNER
Art Critic

Jammin' on the computer and cuttin' up like a kid — it's not quite that simple but these talents helped thrust Irving native Jeff Elrod into the national limelight.

ART

Recent paintings by the 34-year-old artist, now based in Brooklyn, N.Y., are on view at Angstrom Gallery in Dallas. A huge commissioned piece is part of "BitStreams," a major exhibition that opens March 22 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan. One of the first serious assessments of digital technology's impact on contemporary developments, the show pits Mr. Elrod against 50 other hot properties including Ann Hamilton, Paul Pfeiffer and Diana Thater.

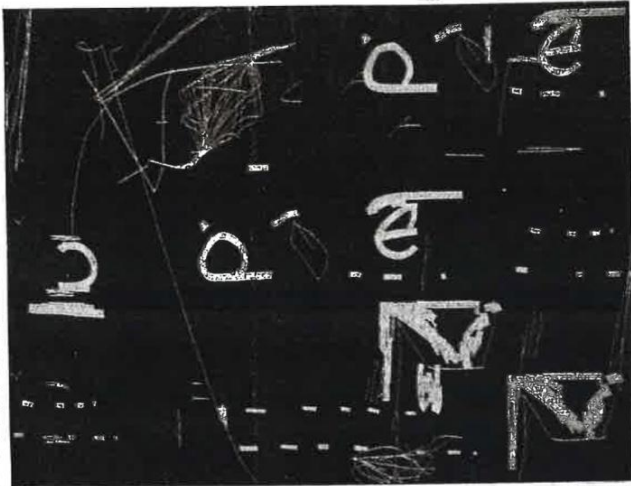
Mr. Elrod blundered into his present modus operandi — a pristine blend of drawing, collage and painting that ends up looking like sporadic spurts of illegibly coded information — after a 10-year flirtation with everything from flimsy cardboard constructions to free-form variations on supergraphics.

Oddly, it was the computer — and an outmoded vector-based program, at that — that liberated Mr. Elrod from self-imposed restrictions that had kept him from meeting his potential.

"Looking back, I was repressed because I worried too much about how a painting should be made," he says. "The computer freed me in the old-fashioned sense, like scribbling," he explains, alluding to random mouse movements and arbitrary key strokes that produce unpredictable results.

Much as the abstract expressionist painters exploited accidental drips and stains, so Mr. Elrod expands on some random marks, obliterating others. As a result, his flat, uniformly painted canvases have a human touch that belies the computer's ability to perfect an image. Viewers are keenly aware of gesture, line and rhythm — essential attributes of drawing throughout art history.

"Elrod endows his simple com-



Angstrom Gallery
Get Off the Internet (2000) combines computer imagery with scribbles.



Angstrom Gallery
Tape Deck (2000)

positions with ironic, larger-than-life presence and humorous allure," says Whitney curator Lawrence Rinder. "His work betrays the idiosyncratic gestural qualities of digital, mouse-made lines, while creating hypnotic, almost psychedelic abstractions."

It all takes time. Things that look spontaneous — nervous patterns, eccentric distortions of signs

and symbols, organic shapes evocative of plant life — are the result of endless hours spent at the computer and more hours in the studio.

Mr. Elrod has several hundred drawings going on his desktop at any time, and there may be 20 subtle variations of each one. About every five minutes, he either hits "Save" or makes a print-out. Once he gets an improvisation he's happy with, he

projects the image onto canvas. But the projected image is merely "a tracing device." He then draws it all out with masking tape, which he cuts and bends to order.

The last stage of the process — applying uniform coats of paint with giant rollers and then removing the tape to reveal the drawing — is fairly simple. But what started on a 21-inch screen is now 5 to

6 feet tall in the case of the paintings at Angstrom and an expansive 6 by 17 feet at the Whitney. And the procedure can take months.

Mr. Elrod finds it amusing that people regard him as an overnight sensation. True, the Whitney show is a big deal. His only previous museum exposure was in group exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Conn.

"But whether or not this happened fast depends on where you start looking," says Mr. Elrod, noting that it's been 10 years since he got a bachelor's degree from the University of North Texas.

He went straight from there to the Core Fellowship program in Houston, then "knocked around a lot," trying first one thing and then another while doing menial jobs in museums and galleries. It wasn't until 1997 that he had a show at Texas Gallery. In the interim he'd opened a small alternative space, tried his luck in New York for six months to no avail and broadened his vision through residencies in Amsterdam and Marfa, Texas.

He met a lot of influential people along the way — Texas Gallery owner Fredricka Hunter, Menil Collection curator Walter Hopps, Angstrom Gallery director David Quadrini. A Tiffany Award allowed him to devote more time to

By infusing digital design with a personal flair, Irving native makes his name in New York

his art. The first big break came in 1998, when Pat Hearn, a New York dealer who launched many careers before her recent death, put him in a group show titled "Painting Now and Forever" along with big names such as Peter Halley, Sigmar Polke and Terry Winters.

A subsequent two-person show with Lisa Ruyter was followed by a solo exhibition last summer.

"I just feel incredibly lucky — Pat not only exposed my work to New Yorkers but created a context for my kind of painting," Mr. Elrod says. Not bad for an avowed misfit, who might never be where he is were it not for a nondescript job laying things out on a computer, which gave him time to play around.

Jeff Elrod's paintings are on view through March 10 at Angstrom Gallery, 3609 Parry Ave., in a show that also includes digitally manipulated photographs by Anthony Golcolea of New York. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and by appointment. Free. Call 214-823-6456.