

Art in America

September 2000

Jeff Elrod at Pat Hearn

Jeff Elrod creates paintings that look back to the beginning of the last century while incorporating motifs which could only belong to the beginning of this one. Making reference to modernist abstraction, his paintings are composed of irregular monochrome shapes laid on flat grounds and occasionally interrupted by desultory lines. The precision of his hard-edge compositions, we discover, derives from their origins as digital drawings that have been projected onto canvas and transferred using tape and paint rollers.

The results are colorful graphic works which are spiced with references to hard-edged predecessors like Malevich, Ellsworth Kelly and late Matisse. Their origins on the computer screen are often hinted at in titles like *Analogue Painting* or *Internal Document*. In the former painting, a flat black shape which suggests negative space liberated from its surround floats over a gray field. The latter work is a computer-inspired self-portrait dominated by an abstracted white head with yellow eyes. One surmises that it was created on the computer by digitally erasing a circular section of the underlying arrangement of orange rectangles and diagonal green stripes.

Occasionally, graffiti markings meander through the compositions, taking the form of scribbled lines or apparently handwritten notations. Closer inspection reveals that these are also digital transfers. In *Clone*

Alone, for instance, mechanically drawn marks are individually nonreferential. Taken together, they begin to suggest a head with facial features à la Basquiat.

In contrast to the busyness of some of the paintings, *Wicked Ass* has the simplicity of a Matisse paper cutout. A white shape floats in a sea of blue, suggesting a bird with extended wings. *Mythic Proportion* has a more vegetative quality. A dark brown ground surrounds an orange circle and a root-shaped white form. Perceptually, the white area does an interesting figure/ground reversal, as one alternates between the sense that it represents a discrete object or is simply a cutaway section of the ground.

What gives these works their interest is a hybrid sensibility that comes from the effort to employ one medium to do the work of another, supposedly antithetical one. Like Photo-Realist artists, who melded the gestural and the mechanical, Elrod grafts a computer aesthetic onto modernist painting. In doing so, he plays into post-modern debates over the authenticity of the copy and the meaning of originality. He also suggests the distance we have come from earlier traditions of modernist painting. In Elrod's hands, painting is no longer either a search for truth or an affront to authority, just as technology sheds its alternating guise as humankind's enemy or its savior. Elrod uses the machine as a neutral tool that can be employed to create pleasant abstractions gently flavored with the dissonance between art history and electronic imaging.

—Eleanor Heartney

Jeff Elrod: *Wicked Ass*, 1999-2000, acrylic on canvas, 84 by 126½ inches; at Pat Hearn.

