Houston Press
S. Dewan, "Pixel Power"
April 16, 1997

Pixel Power

From computers to television, art gets a boost via the electronic age

By Shaila Dewan

By titling his new show at Texas Gallery "Analog Paintings," Jeff Elrod presents the viewer a bit of a conundrum. After all, paintings are never digital. And thank god for that, because just as the Internet has so far failed to muster up its promised miracles, computers have far from revolutionized contemporary artmaking. People get excited over digitally produced imagery simply because it's digitally produced, as if that alone replaces the need for imagery that *works*. But Elrod has discovered that computers are better suited for the quick flow of impulses that "automatic" drawing sought to tap into than they are for minute and careful adjustments. And his computer-designed images not only work, they're a white-boy-at-the-keypad breakthrough for abstract painting.

One problem with computer art programs is an embarrassment of tools and funky special effects, which artists tend to use simply because they're there, and not because the integrity of their work demands it. By contrast, Elrod's "Analog Paintings" are analogs of images that he first created on a computer, using a graphics program's simplest tools: line, scissors, fill and, most important, speed. The results were then transferred onto huge canvases or directly onto the gallery wall using a masking technique whose exactitude you have to see to believe. The four paintings in the main gallery have an immediate graphic punch: You can walk in, make four 90-degree turns and walk out with a buzzing retinal imprint. With their flat areas of pure, modern color, these paintings are enigmatic, almost violent, versions of Matisse's paper cutouts.

Split Second, undeniably the exhibit's masterwork, is a gigantic two-panel painting done in light and medium gray, white and a hint of bright yellow that resembles the left-to-right repetition and soft palette of Robert Motherwell. The left panel has a white, boat-like form accompanied by giant, rhythmic scribbles. (Imagine what your signature looks like after you sign the UPS man's electronic tablet and you'll get an idea of the quality of the line.) The scribbles, which must have been pencil-thin on the computer screen, are now about one inch thick, every skip and false start ruthlessly reproduced. In the next panel, presumably created a split second later, the whole affair of the first panel has been obliterated by a clean, near-circular gray mass with a promising yellow nucleus. Bits of the first image peek out from behind it, squelched like the legs of the Wicked Witch of the West. It's a stunning painting, and one devoid of any expressionist whine for attention.

R.S.V.P., on the opposite wall, is somewhat less successful. White letters shuffled and laid out on an orange ground can be puzzled out to read "OVERDOSE" on one panel and, rather prudishly, "SMOKE P" on the other. Purposefully cryptic, this painting looks great, but it withholds information with no real payoff and doesn't rely on the show's real breakthrough — the wildly fast-paced manipulation of images afforded by the computer.

Elrod's paintings don't look computery, though they do have a completely new feel. Still, they deal with the classic formal concerns of high abstraction: flatness, color, archetypal or suggestive forms. *Delete*, one of the paintings transferred directly to a wall, is a clunky brown fist of a form with a blue, irregularly "cut out" ball at the end, like the socket of a socket wrench. It feels a little silly to discuss a painting in terms of phallic symbolism, but with this one, it's inevitable: The word "Delete" is penned across the shape in irregular white letters, negating its halfhearted thrust.

If Matisse, as one teacher told him, was born to simplify painting, then Elrod was born to synthesize it. These paintings, with their energetic gestural scrawls and archetypal forms, are somewhere between de Kooning and Adolph Gottlieb. But since all the expressive outpouring was completed in the frenetic click-click-click of a computer session, the finished analog product is as cool and self-possessed as that of any hard-edged painter. Thus Elrod almost miraculously resolves one of Modernism's underlying tensions — whether purity resides in the untrammeled gesture of the artist or in the absence of the artist's contaminating touch — by incorporating both possibilities. In Elrod's paintings, precision intensifies, rather than negates, emotion.

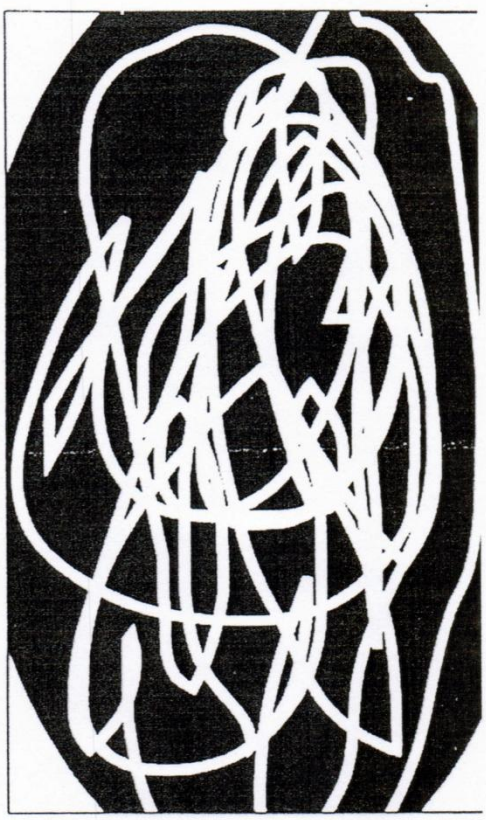
In the gallery's foyer, Elrod presents not serigraphs or monoprints but four "unique laser prints," a group of futuristically generated images that are retro in sensibility. *The Inner Me*, so naively titled one feels it must be a joke, is like a '70s abstract poster lacking only the inspirational poem. Its symbolism is more direct than that of the paintings — a tiny yellow circle, with a finger of white from the border almost touching it, *is* the inner Elrod. Viewed alongside the serious, refined beauty of its fellow laser prints, it quickly becomes clear that this is not a joke; sitting in front of a computer screen has stirred up simple, direct communication from an artist known for coolly appropriating imagery from video-game screens and corporate decor. And if computers can catalyze that kind of outpouring, then hey — maybe they *are* good for something.

Viewers who tune into *Melrose Place* next Monday will see the culmination of a project that began as a stealth invasion of television by artists with Houston ties. Over the past two years, a group of about 50 artists spearheaded by Houston native Mel Chin have "inserted" art objects of talismanic, political and symbolic stripe on the sets of *Melrose Place*. Those objects, along with video clips of their appearances on the show, are now on view as part of "In the Name of the Place" at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art. In a nice conceptual twist that reflects the degree of cooperation eventually obtained from the producers of *Melrose Place*, the April 14 episode has a scene filmed in the MOCA exhibit.

Houston artist Mark Flood will appear as an extra in the show, though he suspects he'll be no more than "a pixel in the background." Flood installed the MOCA exhibit and served on Chin's GALA Committee (so named because of the project's focal points in Georgia, where Chin now teaches, and Los Angeles). At first, GALA members submitted possible "insertions" to their ally on the show: the set decorator. But after producer Aaron Spelling learned about the project and gave it his stamp of approval, Flood and others on the committee began receiving advance copies of scripts so they could identify props or other set pieces members of the committee might design. Ideas ranged from the super serious to the downright prankish. Working with the show's writers, GALA even invented a client for the ad agency on *Melrose Place*, and then went on to design that client's ad campaign.

Still, if getting objects on the set wasn't much of a problem, getting those objects on the air as something other than throwaways in the background wasn't easy. Close-ups of GALA-designed objects such as bed sheets silk-screened with a print of unrolled condoms were regarded as "victories."

Flood says the project's chief goal was to explore television as a place for site-specific art. "Let's say, for example, [that] the meaning of a crucifix is completed by its location in a church," Flood says. "We had to ask, what objects would have their meaning completed by being on TV?"



▲ The swirls of *Lasso* show the freedom artist Jeff Elrod felt when creating by computer.

Some of the objects that appeared on *Melrose Place*, such as a cutting board in the shape of a divided Ireland stowed in the show's Irish-themed restaurant, relate directly to their environment. But in most cases, the objects were easy to overlook, even though GALA tried to help matters along by planting clues to what they were doing on *Melrose Place* Internet sites.

Still, if the project did little to enrich the experience of TV viewers, it did fortify the value of the art through a sort of product placement — the MOCA exhibit even plays on this, offering "bottled auras," vials of air from the set and water from the *Melrose Place* pool, for viewer consumption. Product placement is something Mel Chin, an artist with the cachet of having had an NEA grant denied by the agency's director, learned about when he tried to peddle objects from the Aspen City Dump as "artifacts" outside the gates of the affluent town's art fair. In the GALA project, Chin managed to situate his objects *within* the gates.

Just as he persuaded the NEA to reinstate his grant, he persuaded Aaron Spelling to allow all manner of shenanigans on the set of his show, and even to foot portions of the bill. And since I'm all for art boosterism, to me it ultimately doesn't matter much if "In the Name of the Place" is successful as art. What matters is that it happened at all.

Analog Paintings will be on view through April 26 at Texas Gallery, 2012 Peden, 524-1593.