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ARTFORUM

Jeff Elrod / Lisa Ruyter

PAT HEARN GALLERY

Viewing the work of Jeff Elrod and Lisa Ruyter side by side was akin to overhearing a dialogue, if not quite a duel, over painting's flatness: Who can achieve the freshest results in this regard? One senses a fair amount of ambition on the part of these artists to carve out a space for themselves in what has become a cluttered constellation of young painters, and they often achieved admirable results in their recent show.

Elrod is a Houston-based artist known for his large acrylic paintings of scratches, lines, and loops that originate as drawings made with an outmoded computer graphics program. His method allows him to improvise, using the mouse to rapidly produce a sort of automatic drawing, and then modify the results, thickening, elongating, or erasing lines. Once satisfied with the image, he prints out his “drawing” and projects it onto a canvas, masking the lines off with tape before rolling several layers of acrylic paint across the surface. The five new works consist mostly of red and white abstract shapes—a few resembling (computer) mice—and ziplike lines arranged on dull brown backgrounds. Compositionally they are strong—the pictorial elements are well balanced; in that sense, his preliminary editing efforts are successful. By virtue of its starker palette, *Tuff-Neck* (all works 1999) surpasses its more muted counterparts. Agitated white lines zigzag like the registered movements of an EEG over a black background.

Elrod says he is striving for a “super-flatness,” but that desire is belied by the nervous energy of line and the subtle overall collage effect. Blank edges left by tape marks remain perceptible and, in a visual echo of the electronic cut-and-paste command, the white and red shapes look as if they might have been cut from a giant roll of wallpaper and applied directly to the canvas. If Elrod is attempting to obliterate the frenetic movements of his own hand in favor of the smoothness of hard-edged abstraction, the works do not ultimately serve to negate the opposition between the two.

Ruyter's works demonstrate a similar ambivalence toward completely effacing evidence of the artist's touch. She also initiates the painting process through mechanical means, but rather than an old software program, she uses her own photographs as a starting point. The ordinary images—snapshots of landscapes and the exteriors of suburban homes—are made wholly unreal by Ruyter's corrosive neon palette. In one piece (*In the Realm of the Senses*, all works 1999), biomorphic tree branches are rendered in pink, green, and purple and set starkly against a black sky, while another gives us a view of the sliver of space between two houses from a low, hallucinatory angle. The flat areas of saturated colors sharply outlined in black are reminiscent of Patrick Caulfield's pictures.

A similarly smart, neo-Pop sensibility was especially evident in two new works comprising brightly painted slats of store-bought vinyl siding that could be read as seemingly straightforward remarks on the prefab sterility of suburbia. That Ruyter takes her titles from a range of psychologically intense films—the grisly *Last House on the Left* and the David Mamet classic *House of Games*—positions things in a more wicked register. Even without these designations, in a post-*Untitled Film Stills* world, Ruyter might still be able to count on us to interpret the eerie desolation of *Blind Alley* as an ominous cinematic cue. Something menacing is going on behind the Sears-brand siding; we'll leave the porch light on for you, honey, so you can see the killer as he lunges out from behind the garage.

—Meghan Dailey