

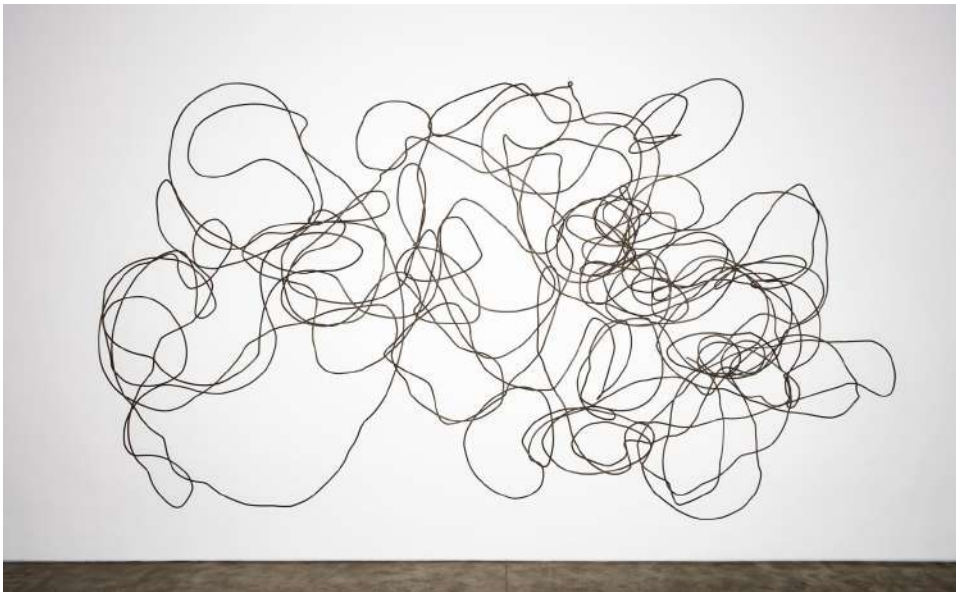
# ELLIOTT PUCKETTE

SELECTED PRESS

## Tension, freedom, restraint: Elliott Puckette crosses the line at Kasmin New York

Artist Elliott Puckette talks doubt, contradictions, and venturing into sculpture at Kasmin New York

TILLY MACALISTER-SMITH  
JANUARY 18, 2022



Elliott Puckette's wall mounted, three-dimensional cast bronze sculpture *Random Walk*, 2021, on view as part of the exhibition 'Elliott Puckette' at Kasmin, until 26 February 2022

Elliott Puckette's new show at Kasmin, her ninth with the gallery, occupies a 3,000 sq ft space on 509 West 27th Street, designed by Studio MDA. Afternoon winter light permeates coolly through the 20 or so skylights in the poured concrete ceiling and onto Puckette's new works, which include paintings of varying sizes, several works on paper, and two sculptures, the last marking a new development for the artist.

### **Elliott Puckette: a decades-long obsession with the line**

Puckette is best known for her abstract line paintings of swirling arcs and meandering squiggles. The Kentucky-born artist has a decades-long obsession with the line, which she describes as having 'more possibilities than shape or colour', although it's neither overtly calligraphic nor directly figurative. 'I was always interested in graphology – not

necessarily what someone was writing but reading into the psychology of how it's written,' she discloses, citing artist Henri Michaux's imaginary alphabets as influential; 'It's a kind of asemic writing, open to interpretation.'



Portrait of Elliott Puckette with her wall-mounted, three-dimensional cast bronze sculpture *Random Walk*, 2021, at Kasmin Gallery, New York.

Puckette makes all her paintings in the same painstakingly methodical way. Working always by herself, she first preps all her boards (although she will only work on one at a time) with her own recipe of gesso, which blends acrylic with powdered clay kaolin (after developing an allergic reaction to the marble dust used in traditional gesso years ago, she had to create her own). Puckette applies about a dozen layers, letting the gesso dry each time before sanding to a paper-smooth finish. Then ink is washed over the boards – most often dark greys, black, occasionally blues and rich purple. She draws her line with a piece of chalk, fast and freehand, before cutting into the dry inky surface with a razor blade to reveal the white gesso beneath: 'It's subtractive,' she says.

She then works over the line, making micro crosshatches, shaping its thinness and thickness as she goes. Catch the board's surface in the right light and you can glimpse the subtle indentation. The line on her white boards is made slightly differently: 'I put gouache on the ground, then I draw the line and etch it in with a razor blade, and then put ink in the line, so it's more like an etching.' The process is arduous and lengthy, but meditative. 'You really get in the zone. It's perfect for these times,' she says.



Left: Elliott Puckette, *Fixed Star*, 2021, gesso, kaolin and ink on board. Right: *Blanching the Goose*, 2021, gesso, kaolin and ink on board

Puckette is of course referring to the juddering standstill underscored with the chaotic maelstrom of our recent times. Each work in her New York exhibition possesses freedom and restraint; the fluidity of the line, drawn instinctively, playing against the precision of her minuscule crosshatches. We are all grappling to some degree with losing control, making a graceful submission. Has this sensation become heightened to Puckette? 'I think daily doubt isn't such a bad thing,' she says. 'There is no certainty in anything, it's exhausting, the not knowing. But I wouldn't want a world without doubt.'

While Puckette's works have an element of chance – 'a throw of the dice', as she puts it – her new works evolve this established theme with subtle but distinct differences. Each painting began life as a small-scale maquette of wire, which Puckette twisted and contorted. The line drawn on the board mirrors the form of the maquette and, whereas previously she created a continual ouroboros loop, now she depicts the start and end of the line in her paintings – the start and end of the maquette wire. Each time, she recycles the wire and begins again. 'I wanted to see if the ephemeral nature would still hold in the sculptures, in something as substantial as bronze. It's a contradiction that interests me.'

The larger of the two sculptures appears suspended in mid-air. It is made from 117 pieces of individually cast and soldered bronze and created in collaboration with Workshop Art Fabrication foundry in upstate New York. 'The hardest part was letting go of control, but I knew I had to hand it over to the professionals,' she says. 'This was our first and only attempt. There is a giant almanac of soldering instructions explaining which pieces go next to which, and each is numbered so we could see where they all connect.'



Puckette's wall-mounted, three-dimensional cast bronze sculpture *Random Walk*, 2021, on view as part of the exhibition 'Elliott Puckette' at Kasmin, until 26 February 2022

Puckette goes to her studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn, every day, the same space she has worked in for over 30 years. 'It's part of my routine,' she says. 'It's the space I feel safest. I got it in 1989 when I first graduated from art school. It's a funky old building, very ramshackle, nothing tweaked about it at all, a bit of old New York.'

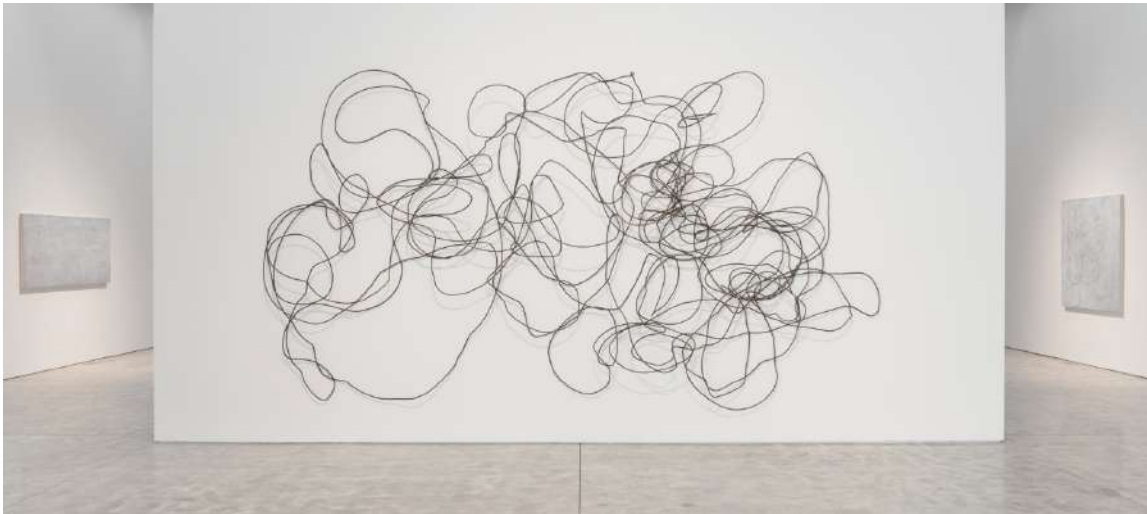
Now that the show is open, will she take even a day off to recharge? 'I like to have the motor running all the time, otherwise it can be hard to get going again. I've already primed a bunch of panels which are just winking at me in the studio.'

# CULTURED

## Elliott Puckette Redraws Art Boundaries with New Work at Kasmin Gallery

The artist demonstrates the flexibility of the line through her new solo show of debut sculptures, new paintings and works on paper, on view at Kasmin Gallery in New York through February 26.

CLEO KANTER  
JANUARY 26, 2022



Photography courtesy of Kasmin Gallery.

In her new body of work, Elliott Puckette has taken something that seems so simple and demonstrated its true complexities—the line. The artist’s work redefines the traditional role that geometry plays in art and explores how linear abstraction can be brought to life through drawing, painting and sculpture. In her methodical, multistep art making process, Puckette creates lines through the instinctive contortion of wire maquettes and then the formation of a flattened image of the wire in her paintings. She carefully layers gesso onto the board and covers that with a layer of ink. Using her own language of lines, the artist draws with chalk and uses a razor blade to dig away at that line. This technique creates a subtractive depiction of a line, taking away from the canvas in order to create it.

Puckette’s abstraction leads to lyrical imagery and emphasizes the importance of each individual marking in the creation of the overall image. During her current show at Kasmin Gallery in New York, *Cultured* spoke with the artist about her artistic development, her move into the medium of sculpture and how to walk (and mark) a line.

**Cleo Kanter:** How did you exercise creativity as a child?

**Elliott Puckette:** I didn’t discover art until I was a teenager. As a child I was always playing in the woods, off with the fairies, creating imaginary worlds in in my head.

**CK:** How has your work developed through the years?

**EP:** The inherent energy in calligraphy and graphology always interested me. Now I find the clear meander of the line in space is the point.

**CK:** What interests you about linear abstraction?

**EP:** The form. A line that goes for a walk is probability in motion... and I love getting lost in the wordless form that is open to interpretation.



**CK:** What are you exploring in this exhibition at Kasmin?

**EP:** 3D! And it's been quite a learning process. I had a wonderful time working with a foundry in Kingston, New York called Workshop.

**CK:** How do the sculptural works in your current show relate to your paintings?

**EP:** Very directly. The paintings are based on wire configurations that I create. The sculptures are also drawn from those same maquettes.

**CK:** How do color and shape interact in your work?

**EP:** The form is influenced less by color than value. The lighter the ground, the more emphatic the line needs to be. The darker backgrounds can have a much more delicate line and still be read.

**CK:** While your work appears to be clear cut lines, they are in fact etched together by thousands of smaller lines. What is your process like? Do you prefer to look at the big picture first or piece things together bit by bit?

**EP:** I initially draw it all out quickly with chalk. As soon as I map out the line the process slows down, and I etch it in with a razor blade.

**CK:** Do you follow a storyline when you create each piece?

**EP:** No. I'm more of a formalist.

**CK:** As art is often centered around the addition to a surface, in what ways do your subtractive lines challenge this tradition?

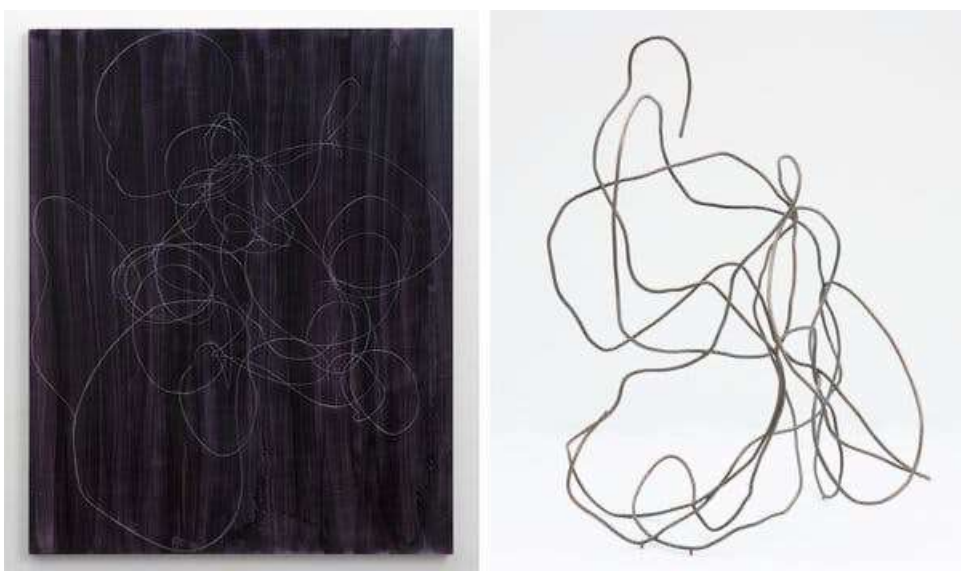
**EP:** Why add when you can subtract? I like to strip away. Having said that, the sculptures are another can of worms entirely!



# The T List: Five Things We Recommend This Week

## The Line Liberated

BRIAN RANSOM  
JANUARY 13, 2022



From left: Elliott Puckette's "Confessional" (2021) and "Pivot" (2021) Credit...Photos: Diego Flores. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York

### [EXCERPT]

Like many of us, the Brooklyn-based artist Elliott Puckette has spent the pandemic taking solace in what she can control while making peace with what she cannot. Her ninth solo exhibition with New York's Kasmin Gallery, which will also publish her first major monograph later this year, showcases her characteristically precise yet expansive line paintings alongside her first foray into sculpture, a medium she's long wanted to explore. Early attempts with plaster of Paris, wire, paper and clay did not pass muster. "It was an absolute disaster," Puckette says. "Then I realized it wasn't something I could do on my own; I needed to hand it over." Cast in bronze by Workshop Art Fabrication in Kingston, N.Y., the two sculptures in the exhibition, "Random Walk" and "Pivot," represent a natural evolution of Puckette's career-long commitment to the line by manifesting it in three-dimensional space. What once meandered along inside the confines of the canvas has now broken free.

# CULTURED

## Artist Elliott Puckette's Beautiful Rebellion Unfolds At Paul Kasmin

CAIT MUNRO  
APRIL 24, 2018



Elliott Puckette in her DUMBO studio. Photography by Stephen Kent Johnson.  
Produced by Michael Reynolds.

Elliott Puckette isn't afraid to make art that is beautiful. This may seem obvious at first, but for an artist that came of age during a time when painting was a dirty word and the cool kids at Cooper Union—where Puckette received her BFA in 1989—were making mostly politically charged, heavily theoretical works, it's a subtle act of rebellion.

"I think people are still afraid of making something beautiful," says Puckette. "There always has to be something kind of nasty or edgy about it to be taken seriously. I just don't really subscribe to that."

Often described using words like delicate and ethereal, Puckette's paintings draw from the aesthetics of calligraphy and reveal an obsession with the many possibilities of the line. Her solo show at Paul Kasmin Gallery features new

works created using abstract wire maquettes that she fashions herself and then translates to the canvas. The idea, says Puckette, is to lose a degree of control by forming an intermediary between herself and the paint.

“Some of them feel very fragile, like an old lady’s handwriting, sort of wobbling,” describes Puckette of the finished product.



Based in New York, Puckette has been represented by Kasmin since 1993, making her relationship with the gallery one of its longest. After arriving in the city in 1985, she met Kasmin—then a young photography dealer—through her ex-husband. She occasionally helped out at the gallery doing inventory while in art school and struck up a fast friendship with the dealer. Several years later, he saw her work and asked her to do a show.

Kasmin eventually morphed into a powerhouse dealer with a star-studded roster and three large spaces in Chelsea. Yet Edith Dicconson, a gallery director who has worked with Puckette for six years, still describes her as “one of the backbones of the gallery.”

Dicconson is also quick to note the depth of Puckette’s artistic evolution. After years of painting abstractions that traced a single line and were, according to Puckette, “finished when the snake did its tail,” she debuted the so-called wire pictures at the gallery in 2014, marking a stark departure from her previous way of working. Whereas earlier work was heavily influenced by the free-wheeling nature of Surrealism, Puckette’s new paintings feel at once more considered and more explosive. The forms depicted on her canvases look less like snakes than intricate mazes with many possible roads and little opportunity for exit.

“It’s a huge change and shift for Elliott and how her process evolves out of herself,” says Dicconson. “It’s a big hurdle for her, and the effects have been fantastic. Her growth has been really great because of it.”



While Puckette's own artistic practice has matured, those heady years of the downtown art scene still aren't far from her mind. In fact, she sees some of that spirit beginning to re-emerge today, despite the gentrification.

"There were these naked painted ladies going around to all these gallery openings the other night and I just thought, 'This is so great!' Just like it was back in the day," she says with a laugh. "I mean, it has changed so much, but you still get these little glimmers."



## In the Studio With an Artist Devoted to the Line

Merrell Hambleton

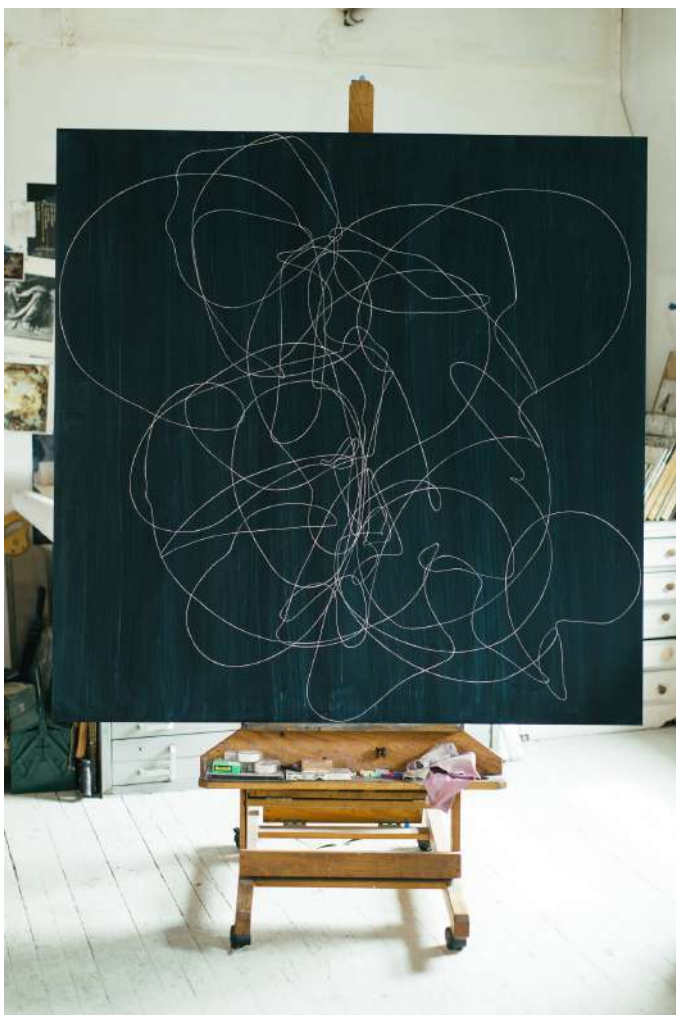
April 18, 2018



Elliott Puckette stands in front of “Love Letter” (2018), the largest piece in her upcoming show at Paul Kasmin Gallery. Credit: Matthew Novak

When I arrive at the Dumbo, Brooklyn building where the artist Elliott Puckette keeps a studio, it’s as if I’ve traveled back in time — to, say, 1989, when Puckette first rented the Pearl Street space and the building was still a working paper factory. Warped wooden floorboards creak under my feet, and exposed pipes and electrical wiring line the unfinished hallway. It smells of paint and turpentine. The contrast to the sleek, granite-floored lobby is striking. “They’re renovating the building in the most absurd way, floor-by-floor,” she explains good-naturedly. “Eventually I’m getting kicked out.”

It’s a few weeks before Puckette’s upcoming show, “New Work,” at Paul Kasmin Gallery, and I expect to interrupt the artist in somewhat of a frenzied state, paint-spattered and anxious. Instead, she is serene. Dressed neatly in a short white skirt and red V-neck sweater (not, she confirms, her painting clothes), her blonde hair in a French twist and a silk scarf knotted around her neck, Puckette looks more like a gallery owner than an artist. She has the erect posture and gently turned out feet of a ballet dancer and, as we enter her studio, the air of a straight-A student who finished the assignment long ago.



The painting “Wallum” (2018) in Puckette’s studio. Puckette favors a muted palette. “I don’t want to be distracted by too much color,” she says. Credit: Matthew Novak

Puckette has good reason to be at ease. This is her eighth solo show with Kasmin, which first exhibited her work shortly after she earned her B.F.A. from Cooper Union in 1989. “He has been very good to me all these years,” she says of the dealer, “and he knows to just leave me alone.”

A bit like her top-floor studio, which has resisted the insistent creep of luxury Brooklyn redevelopment, Puckette makes paintings today much like she did 25 years ago. She layers her large-scale square and rectangular boards with thick coats of gesso. Initially, she made the gesso herself from rabbit-skin glue and whiting, a traditional method she learned while studying old master techniques at Cooper. When this recipe started to affect her asthma, she developed her own variation using white kaolin clay. Once the surface has hardened, she applies a translucent wash of ink — lately, in muted shades of gray, black-blue and very deep purple. “I have a weird relationship with color,” she says. “It’s always sort of an afterthought.”

At top of mind has always been the line, Puckette's career-long fascination. She doesn't know, she says, why it intrigues her. But more than color or form, the line is both central formal element and subject — mapped out with chalk and then painstakingly etched into the surface of her pieces with a single-edge razor blade.



In one corner of her studio, Puckette keeps a loose mood-board of work by other artists — Rembrandt, Ellsworth Kelly, Matisse among them. Credit: Matthew Novak

“I always start on the upper left-hand corner,” says Puckette, “as if I was writing.” We’re standing with our faces inches from “Love Letter,” a 15-foot-long triptych that is the largest piece in the upcoming show. A tangle of wavering, looping marks wends its way across the three panels. To demonstrate, Puckette scoops up a stray razor from the floor (“I tried to clean up!”) and begins lightly scratching at a section of line. Watching her work, it’s clear that what appears, from a distance, to be a strong line carving a single path is, in fact, made up of thousands of tiny marks.

Until 2010, Puckette’s lines had stayed consistent over the course of her career: clean, arching and like a calligraphy that can’t be read. At the time, she had been referencing different scripts — Arabic and Chinese. Then, before her 2014 show with Kasmin, something shifted. “I’d become so familiar with my own hand,” she says. “It was too automatic. I knew where I was going before I even started, and I didn’t like that.”

She wanted to remove herself a little from the process. So she started looking for lines in nature. “I was looking at brambles and branches,” she says. “I did a few, but I destroyed them. They were too literal.” Next, she turned to wire. She began making loose maquettes — abstract nests of wire that she “tried not to manipulate too much, letting it still have its own wire-ness.” She’d then etch the silhouettes into the gesso-and-ink ground. “I wanted there to be a lot of variety in the line,” say Puckette. “Really loose and then weird and coagulated in parts.”



Puckette stands in front of “Love Letter” (2018), her Long Island mutt, Louie, at her feet. Credit: Matthew Novak

The resulting pieces have a complex, almost narrative quality. They’re darker and less succinct than her more calligraphic work, with lines that collapse like a balloon losing air, knot together or waver like a sagging jawline. At times, the contours almost seem to take shape — into bodies, or a landscape — only to wander, unpredictably, back into abstraction. “I wanted it to have this frailty, like when your grandmother’s handwriting starts to wobble,” she says. “I remember that very clearly as a child, seeing handwriting change. I know mine’s changing.”

Puckette is unlikely to tire of the language of the line, which seems to continually reveal its possibilities — and mysteries. In one corner of her studio, the wall is papered with black-and-white printouts of the work of other artists in what amounts to a sort of shrine. “It’s a variety of things,” she says, “But line seems to be the continuum.” There’s Giovanni Marco Pitteri’s “Head of St. Peter,” whose beard is all fine, curling lines; the intricate whorls and hatches of an early Rembrandt self-portrait and a page of surrealist, automatic script. “I’ve always liked the idea of imaginary alphabets that nobody can read,” she says, “and having a narrative in my head that’s never going to be revealed.”



# Interview

## Elliot Puckette and the Purpose of Paintings

ALLYSON SHIFFMAN

OCTOBER 9, 2014



Making beautiful paintings is rarely seen as an act of rebellion, but when Elliott Puckette began defining her aesthetic, painting denied popular convention. "It was a time when it was very uncool to paint," she says. "Everyone was making video art and political stuff." Luckily, then-emerging gallerist Paul Kasmin thought Puckette's paintings were rather cool indeed, and over the past 15 years, Kasmin has exhibited Puckette's work seven times. Given their history, it comes as little surprise that Kasmin chose Puckette for the inaugural show in his new Chelsea space, which opens this evening.

For Puckette's latest series, the artist tried her hand at something new: sculpture. No, sculpture will not fill the gallery, which sits on the corner of West 27th Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Instead, wire sculptures fashioned by Puckette herself served as the subject for a new series of paintings. The resulting works are awkward and visceral in appearance, but that isn't to say that they aren't still in the same vein of beautiful paintings that captured Kasmin's (and the art world's) attention years ago. As Puckette says, "Paintings are, ultimately, decorative."

ALLYSON SHIFFMAN: For this new series, you make sculptures that you then paint, correct?

ELLIOTT PUCKETTE: They don't really qualify as sculptures—it's just me mucking around with some wire—but I use them as still lifes. I've been doing my own line for so long it was so nice to get away from that. It was unfamiliar but still in the same throw of the dice.

SHIFFMAN: Because it's no longer your own line, do you feel more removed from the work?

PUCKETTE: No, actually. It was really an act of letting go of some of the control I always had.

SHIFFMAN: I imagine with your previous works, it was about knowing when a painting is done. In this case, is it more about knowing when the sculpture is done and ready to be painted?

PUCKETTE: It is, exactly. I didn't want to muck around with them too much, because then I'd be composing. Obviously I'm an aesthetic person and I wanted it to be just so, but I tried to let it do its thing too.

SHIFFMAN: The word "decorative" always pops up in describing your work. How do you feel about that word?

PUCKETTE: The decorative critique... It's such a damning thing. People are often afraid of making things that are beautiful; they have to make something that's edgy or ugly. But people are going to say whatever they like—I just make the stuff.

SHIFFMAN: How did you first come to be showing with Paul Kasmin?

PUCKETTE: I met Paul through a friend in '89. I was still in art school and he had just opened his gallery [in SoHo]. I thought he was great; his first show was Brancusi and it was absolutely beautiful. He needed someone to do inventory, which took me one day. Then he said [British accent] "Oh, don't go away love." And then I did a little bit more inventory and then I just sat there for a few weeks and we got to know each other. When I left art school, he came to my studio one day and offered me a show right there.

SHIFFMAN: And what was the conversation like when discussing this show?

PUCKETTE: When Paul and I talked about doing this show, he said, "Come to think of it, we've had a history of inaugural spaces." When [the 10th Avenue] gallery opened, he showed my work for the first show, which was such an honor. He wanted to do a similar thing for this space, too. It looks big, but it's actually quite a nice intimate space.

SHIFFMAN: What's Paul like during installation?

PUCKETTE: He'll nod a lot and make little noises. It takes about five minutes. All the paintings find their rightful places and we call it a day.

SHIFFMAN: Do you revisit your old paintings?

PUCKETTE: I do. It's like seeing an old friend.

SHIFFMAN: What does your studio look like?

PUCKETTE: I've been there since '89. It's in DUMBO in one of the very few buildings that hasn't been renovated. It used to be that you get in and out by rush hour or opt into getting mugged.

SHIFFMAN: Do you work on a schedule or when the mood strikes?

PUCKETTE: I've always had a schedule. I have kids now, so it can't be all night long. You train your muse to show up.

SHIFFMAN: Do you get post show fatigue or depression?

PUCKETTE: Sometimes. It's sad when you've had a crowded studio and then it's like it's a party and everyone's gone. It's like the Grinch has been in and there's just a few hooks on the wall.

# AD

## Preview Artist Elliott Puckette's New Show

SAM COCHRAN  
OCTOBER 10, 2014



*Bellerophon.* Elliott Puckette, 2014.

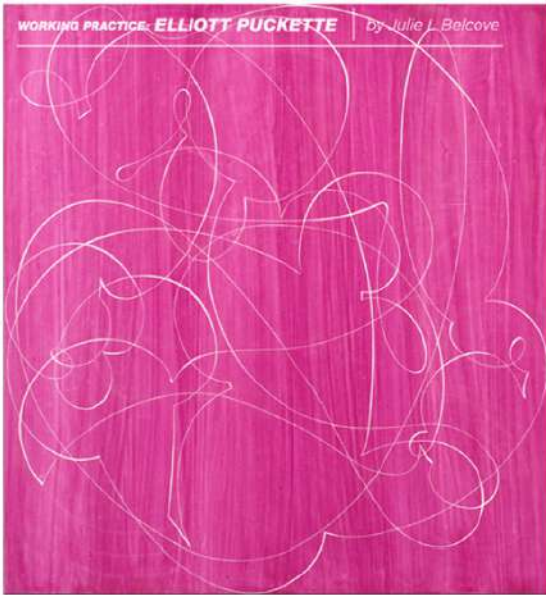
This week Paul Kasmin Gallery inaugurated its third Manhattan outpost with a show of new work by Elliott Puckette—a Brooklyn artist beloved for ethereal paintings etched with curving, often seemingly calligraphic lines. Comprising six pieces, her latest series stays true to such signature forms but marks a departure in terms of the underlying concept and process.

Rather than allowing gesture and chance to dictate the patterns, Puckette has based the motifs on sculptural maquettes of her own making, in effect staging acts of expressive spontaneity in three dimensions before translating them into two. Hints of these tactile origins reveal themselves in the mesmerizing new pieces, each one reminiscent of a wire sculpture dynamically suspended in a shadowy void.

# Working Practice

Elliott Puckette

JULIE L. BELCOVE  
DECEMBER 2010



**W**ith a three-mile round-trip each day, which she walks in the company of her mutt, Louis, and six very long flights of stairs up to her studio (the unspoken downside of otherwise fabulous high ceilings), Elliott Puckette would not seem to need additional exercise. A willowy blonde, she has the carriage of a woman graced with a natural slim. But there in one corner of her studio, situated in Brooklyn's grittily groovy DUMBO neighborhood, is a stationary bike. And on the gray painted-wood floor next to a work table is a rubber mat — for jumping rope, she explains.

The equipment is not there to satisfy an incessant need for cardio but to help her brainstorm when she gets blocked. Both options, in fact, offer views of Puckette's "inspiration wall," tacked up with black-and-white print-outs of everything from a dramatic Bernini sculpture of the Virgin "right before she croaks," as Puckette dryly puts it, to a sublime Ellsworth Kelly drawing of a lemon branch and a sampling of Chinese calligraphy.

Puckette in her DUMBO studio, a seventh-floor walk-up. Photo by Julie L. Belcove

What could possibly be the thread from Bernini to Kelly to calligraphy, you ask? For Puckette, it's simple: the line. The line was her very motivation for becoming an artist. "It always was the line," she says. "I was just completely compelled by the line from the get-go. It had more possibilities than form or shape or color."

Since the early 1990s, Puckette, who grew up in a mountaintop college town in Tennessee, has explored her passion by etching lines with a razor blade onto wooden panels covered in gesso and stained with ink. The lines are at turns sharp and gracefully arched, meandering and purposeful, but always lyrical. They stop and start again. They narrow and widen. "I always get lost in the line," says Puckette. Like many artists whose work is tethered to a self-imposed process, Puckette, 43, came to a point when she realized she needed to shake things up. "It was getting too easy," she says.



In her new work, on view at Chelsea's Paul Kasmin Gallery in a solo exhibition that opened on December 14, Puckette has turned her attention to the background. In place of her customary gentle washes of color — rainy-day grays, saffron yellows, even girly pinks — Puckette for the past year or so has painted fields of dots in grays and blacks across the panels. On close inspection, the ink dots vary in size and are of charmingly irregular shape, not perfect circles. Over the dots she has carved — or in some cases painted with brush and ink — her customary meandering lines.

"It's got the same linear focus, but the idea was to have more tension between the foreground and the background," Puckette says. "I wanted more going on, and for it to break up as you come toward it and come together as you move away." Then, in a note of doubt uncharacteristically voiced by an artist (to a journalist, at least), she adds, "I'm not sure if I totally got there. I'm still digesting it."

A work table in Puckette's studio, with razor blades, her tools of choice. Photo by Julie L. Belcove

Untitled, 2010.

**T**he dot-making was a labor-intensive process, taking months longer than her stained backgrounds. "They're very time-consuming, and I looooved doing them," Puckette says. "Probably because I have OCD." She compares the effect to knowing every blade of grass on your lawn. "I find it so satisfying sitting over a painting, hovering over it."

The dots also complicated the line-drawing for Puckette. Normally, she draws directly onto the panel in chalk before scratching away the surface with the razor blade. But with the large dot paintings in particular, she found she needed to sketch the lines first on paper.

Puckette hails from an old Southern family, and one that is rife with academics. Her father taught at the University of the South, popularly known as Sewanee. Puckette is the last of five children; the next youngest, Charles, is a musician, while the three eldest are all in math-related fields. "My mother was running out of protein by the time she got to [Charles and me]," Puckette laughs.

Joking aside, Puckette probably has more math coursing through her synapses — and across her canvases — than she cares to admit. Even when she references Paul Klee, it's his famous geometry-infused quote, "A line is a dot that went for a walk."

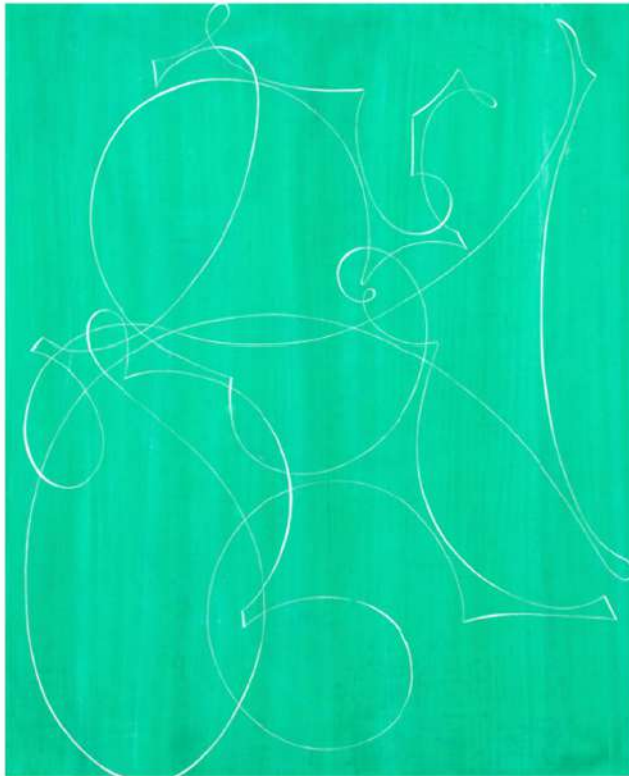


Puckette and her dog Louis, which she pronounces in the French manner - as in the Sun King, she notes. Photo by Julie L. Belcove. Right: *Untitled*, 2010.



**P**uckette retains a soft lilt to her voice as well as a kind of femininity that's rarely seen in New York. Even wearing skinny jeans and a holey black sweater, her hair pulled back loosely in a red rubberband, Puckette exudes a certain chic. She is married to Hugo Guinness, an artist and an heir to the Irish banking fortune, to whom she was introduced by Alexandra Kasmin, Paul's wife.. They live with their two daughters in a Brooklyn townhouse that was a model for the family home in friend Wes Anderson's film *The Royal Tenenbaums*. As one-half of an It couple, she has had to contend with not letting the perceived glamour of their life together somehow diminish the seriousness of her art.

A corner of Puckette's studio, with one of her new dot paintings. Photo by Julie L. Belcove



She has acquired something of a cult following, however, helped in part, no doubt, by her paintings frequently popping up in glossy-magazine spreads of stylish homes. (She received one fan letter from jail, where an inmate had seen her work in *Elle Decor*. He noted a similarity between her drawings and female scarification.) Last year, bloggers gushed about *Vogue* offering a limited-edition Puckette print with the same enthusiasm that fans of *Sex & the City* once dissected the foursome's wardrobes.

Puckette came north to study art at Cooper Union in the mid-'80s, a time when painting was decidedly not in vogue. "You couldn't make painting because it was considered decadent. You couldn't make sculpture because it was considered old-school," she recalls ruefully. "All these kids went to art school to make stuff and came out writing reams of pointless drivel. They all ended up teaching. Very few ended up making stuff."

Perhaps because Puckette was so drastically out of alignment with what was considered cool, she persisted. She worked briefly for Kasmin as a part-time gallerina — she thinks he paid her about five dollars an hour — and stayed in touch with him. A few years later, she invited him for a studio visit, and she's been showing at his gallery ever since, having her first solo exhibition in 1993.

*Untitled*, 2010.





W

hile painting has more than proved it won't disappear quietly, Puckette's particular brand of elegance occasionally still takes shots for being too "decorative." She says: "That's always been something I've had to speak up for. You have to be brave to try to make something beautiful. A lot of people are afraid of it. Ugly seems more edgy. There always has to be a nasty barb at the end, some sort of irony. I'm just not like that."

Puckette admits that the quest for beauty in the context of contemporary art has its limits. "It's a slippery slope," she says. "If you go over the edge, it's going to be all about wallpaper."

Photo courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery

# DEPARTURES

## Portrait Gallery

The art of fashion frames seven New Yorkers who have, quite literally, changed the artistic face of the city.

SEPTEMBER 2003

Dress, Carolina Herrera. Shoes, St. John. Earrings, Tiffany & Co. Paintings courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery.

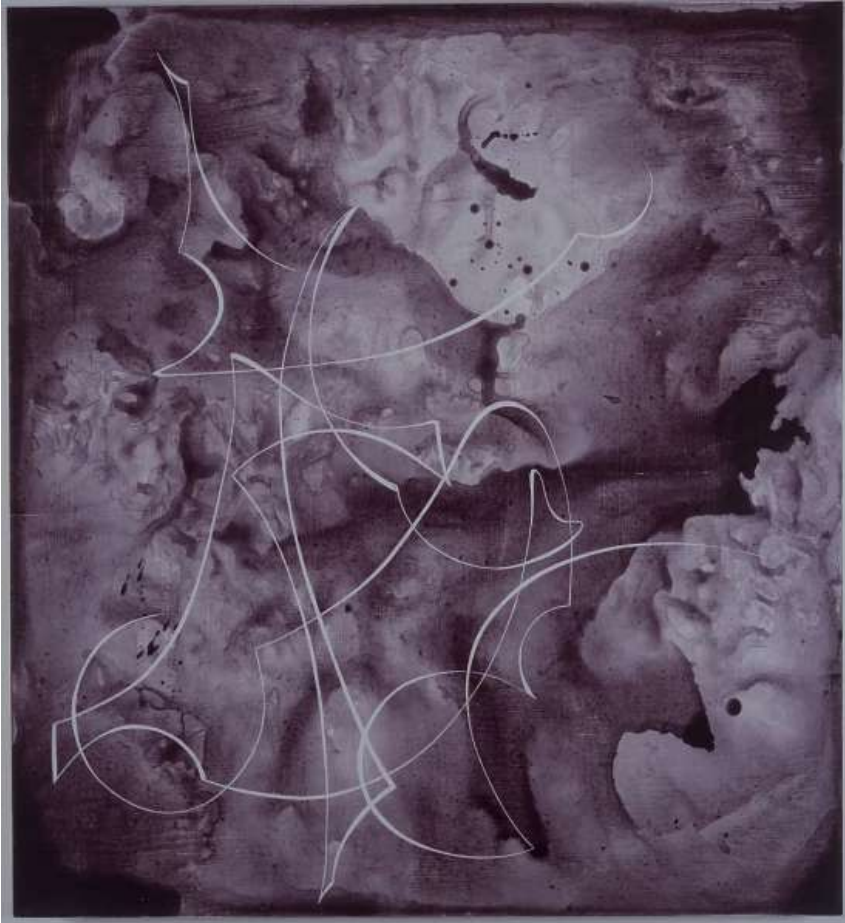


### Elliott Puckette *Painter*

**ART HISTORY** I have a deep connection to the gray painting here, called *Ocece*, which is a river down South that my father, a great canoeer, used to run. **WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?** I've done some very big drawings on handmade paper, and paintings similar to *Ocece*. There's a gray one, and a blue one, and I'm thinking about the color orange. **INFLUENCES** Among the old masters, Tiepolo, Pontormo. Among contemporary artists, Brice Marden for his interest in calligraphy and Ellsworth Kelly for form. **I COLLECT** old paper. It could be a letter, or just a piece that has been touched, handled, that has had a life. **I WOULD COVER MY WALLS WITH** Correggio's *Zeus and Io*, a Vuillard, a Chardin, and maybe an Ellsworth Kelly. **WHO WOULD YOU WANT TO PAINT YOUR PORTRAIT?** John Singer Sargent. **WHERE DO YOU GO FOR INSPIRATION?** The Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Sometimes I wander the halls at the Metropolitan—some days it's the Islamic galleries, others the Chinese. **YOUR MOST PRIZED POSSESSION?** My great-grandmother's pearls. Actually that's not true. But that's what it should be, right?

## Elliott Puckette at Paul Kasmin Gallery

ELEANOR HARTNEY  
DECEMBER 2002



Elliott Puckette, *Nantahala*, 2002, ink, gesso and kaolin on wooden panel, 39 x 36 inches; at Paul Kasmin Gallery

Elliott Puckette creates harmonious abstract paintings by superimposing disparate elements from different artistic universes. In each of these works (all 2002), a washy monochromatic ground has been marked with white whiplash lines. The colored layer is painted on wood panels prepared with white gesso. Each ground is airy and amorphous, composed of thin layers of saturated ink which seem to billow and shift as pockets of color collect in watery pools, or settle like a thin veil over the white underpaint. These wispy fields of color suggest a landscape space, filled with rolling clouds, torrential water flows or drifts of smoke. The colors themselves imply metaphors for emotional states—*Mistral*, for instance, is a crisp pale blue, while *Chariot of the Sun* is an intense, fiery orange. Several works employ a variegated gray that evokes the indefinite space of Chinese ink paintings.

Swirling across each of these surfaces is a precise pattern of white lines. These loop, meander, take sharp turns and double back in what appears to be a mix of calculation and controlled spontaneity. They have an almost machinelike

exactness, but in fact it turns out that they have been scratched with minute incisions into the wooden backboard to expose the underlying white gesso. This labor is not visible in the final work. Instead, the lines seem to float effortlessly over the cloudy grounds like gently curving ribbons.

The patterns created by the lines are abstract but suggestive. They flirt with script, resembling at times elaborate precision skywriting. In some paintings this element takes the form of a single continuous line, while in others it includes shorter line fragments drifting off as disembodied arabesques. In each painting, the linear component has a distinct identity, conjuring Arabic calligraphy, musical notations, Rococo decoration or abstracted figure studies.

The visual interest of these paintings comes from their reliance on a set of contrasts—airy, illusory space is invaded by flat unmodulated line; improvisation is juxtaposed with calculation; a reductive esthetic is disguised as an additive one. However, the contrasts yield no tension or conflict. Instead, figure and ground provide a model of buoyant, harmonious coexistence.

Puckette notes that inspirations for these works include Constable's cloud studies and Tiepolo's drawings. Like those artists, she unapologetically pursues an esthetic of visual immediacy.

## Goings on About Town

Elliott Puckette

SEPTEMBER 16, 2002

### ELLIOT PUCKETTE

In a Zen variation on a grade-school art-class technique (scratching black-crayon-covered paper to reveal colors layered underneath), Puckette scratches ink-washed canvases to reveal layers of white. Her undulating, sassily flouncing lines mimic milk swirling in coffee, smoke rising, and clouds moving—the artist cites Constable's skies as an influence. Their curvy, razor-incised calligraphy can also look, up close, like Arabic or a colorful John Cage score, though it is Puckette's great pleasure to mimic the conventions of script without actually offering anything to read. Through Oct. 12. (Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave., at 26th St. 563-4474.)

# The New York Times

## Elliott Puckette

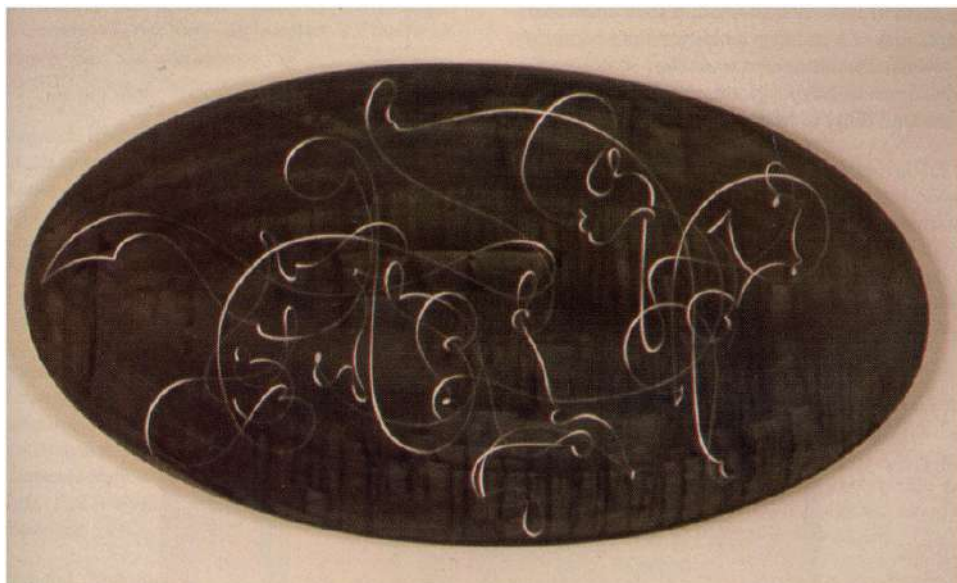
SEPTEMBER 13, 2002

**ELLIOTT PUCKETTE, Paul Kasmin, 293 10th Avenue at 27th Street, (212) 563-4474 (through Oct. 12). Ms. Puckette continues to work with her trademark device of crisp, tapering white lines that suggest improvisations by an 18th-century engraver. The whiplash calligraphy is actually cut with a razor into blotchy, watery fields of gray or a single color painted on wooden panels, but it gives the impression of floating in front of atmospheric space as though it were painted on glass. The play between surface and depth is appealing, in part because it seems so ripe for further complication and development (Johnson).**

# Tennessee Historical Quarterly

## Elliott Puckette

TERRI SMITH  
SPRING 2002



Untitled, 1998, Ink, gesso, and kaolin on wooden panel, Courtesy Paul Kasrmin Gallery and the artist, 24" x 48".

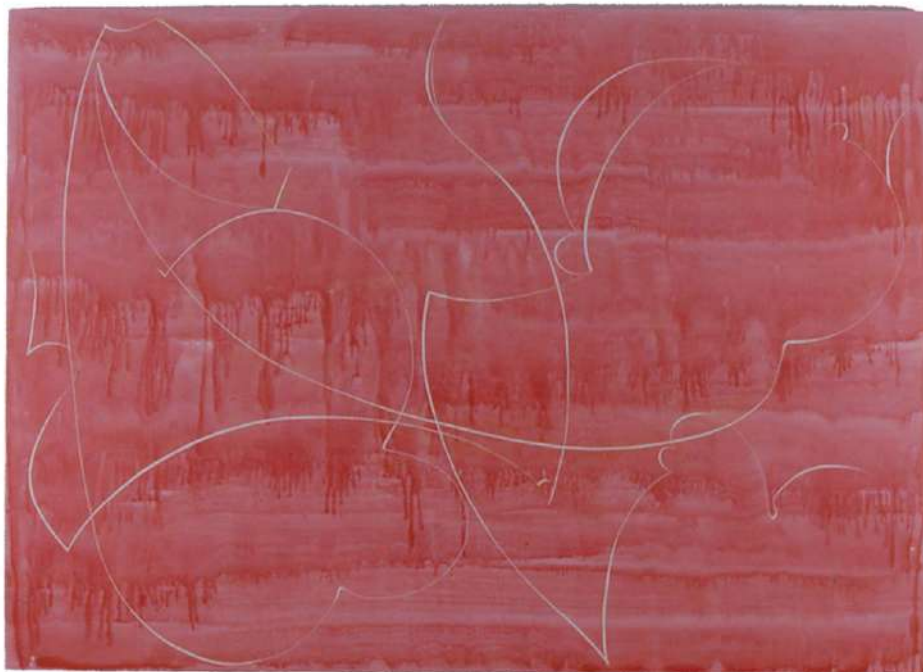
The fluid lines in Elliott Puckette's paintings are actually painstakingly rendered. Reminiscent of musical notations or an unknown calligraphic language, the white marks that float and curl in her compositions seem to be applied in a continuous motion to the top of their drippy ink backdrops. In reality, after Puckette coats a panel with gesso and ink, she creates her winding compositions by laboriously etching the pigment off with a razor blade. This method adds a distinctive character to the lines by creating tiny yet discernable scratch marks. The contradiction between process and imagery adds an element of tension to Puckette's graceful compositions. Puckette then covers her paintings in a layer of wax, adding a sense of luminous fragility to their surfaces.

With *Untitled* (1998), Puckette applies an especially musical contour onto an oval, wooden panel. While many of Puckette's works are on rectangular-shaped surfaces, the use of ovals or circle is also frequently found in her oeuvre. The spirited line in *Untitled* commands the eye's attention as it defies the very gravity that forced the black back-drop to drip and run. In addition to the musical associations recalled by her lines, Puckette's compositions also invoke language. By presenting the viewer with text that has no known meaning, Puckette asks us to respond intuitively rather than intellectually to what artist/curator Will Berry describes as her, "new or forgotten language; perhaps one still whispered among the vines of an overgrown jungle or the ancient written language of some desert civilization."

# ARTFORUM

## Elliott Puckette

DONALD KUSPIT  
FEBRUARY 2000



Elliott Puckette, *Reckoning*, 1999, ink, gesso, kaolin on wooden panel, 60 x 84 "

The word "decorative" has carried a pejorative connotation in criticism ever since Clement Greenberg. What makes Elliott Puckette's paintings interesting is that, rather than integrate the decorative in a larger expressive purpose, the artist finds expressive purpose within the decorative itself. Her meandering lines, which at times scroll baroquely incised with a razor, they recall the elaborate linear fantasies that Albrecht Dürer inscribed in the margins of his unfinished prayer book for Maximilian I communicate excitement, perhaps because they lead nowhere in particular, even as their curves evoke the female body. They bring to mind the scrambled contours of an odalisque, fragments of an intricate idea of the feminine.

Puckette's washy, drippy surfaces which, in their own way, brood on the void have a similar erotic nervousness. Her decorative conveys a desire unsure of yet excited by itself for perhaps only a sense of misguided *jouissance*. Indeed, automatism, which is implicit in her lines, is a kind of masturbatory activity, a spilling of the seeds of self-excitement in a naive search for originality. If, as Roland Barthes says, *jouissance* is "pleasure without separation," that is, erotic transcendence, then the free-floating contours, or boundaries, in Puckette's *Reckoning* and *Tyne*, both 1999, can be read as traces of separation. But they also suggest a discomfort with pleasure a dissonance within the field of radiant color that is the substance of her paintings. Sensuousness abounds in Puckette's works, signaling their homage to the pleasure principle, but there is something jarring about her unsettled lines. They seem foreplay to a consummation that never quite comes off. Weirdly forced, her lines are the most interesting indeed, redeeming



aspect of her paintings, because their suggestion of aborted pleasure throws a monkey wrench into the abstract luxe of her titillating surfaces.

Puckette is at her best when she uses the ellipse and tondo to frame her abstractions. Their curvilinearity gives the works body, even as it reaffirms the suaveness of her lines. The rectangle disrupts the flow of the lines, making them less suggestive of the infinite less like gestures in a void. One cannot help thinking of Ingres's harem tondo and seeing Puckette's lines as illicitly heaving and embracing bodies, as vestiges of transgressive passion. Such associations hardly add up to full-fledged interpretations, but they do convey the lively, complex sense of pleasure, however distilled, in Puckette's pictures. In short, abstraction remains home to pure pleasure as well as pure transcendence—the two are not unrelated—which makes one wonder why there has to be any attempt to represent reality, that is, to construct an illusion that laboriously communicates what can be spontaneously evoked by surface or intimated by carefully manicured color alone.

# finding the familiar

Exhibition catalogue, November 7–December 18, 1998

WILL BERRY

WHEN I BEGAN to think about curating an exhibition of abstract drawings, paintings and sculpture, there were already five artists whose work I admired and felt had a strong relationship with nature, as does my own painting. I grew up on a farm in Middle Tennessee. As a child I often walked behind the tractor as it turned under a new field for planting, tracing with my bare feet the cool, smooth furrow made by the polished plow. We began at the perimeter of the field and slowly, over the course of a morning, wound toward center.

Every civilization has observed and recorded similar forms in nature. For example, the spiral is universal. The work in this exhibition illustrates this experience of nature in art, although sometimes in unexpected ways. I believe this show offers an insight into how an artist's mind uses line or plane in its individual quest for, and identification with, a given form. These works are the maps of how each brain lights up. Reaching beyond the experience of nature, the uninhibited nerve endings (the artist's hand) puts down the familiar: the mark of the universe.

AUSTIN ACKLES' work reflects his interest in Japanese silk-screens, as evidenced by the clustering of clouds and empty pockets. These seem to get internalized into layered screens of brightly colored cloud bands that are both diagrammatic and poetic. Ackles' new watercolors evolve from meditations on the *Chi*, and his large oil paintings seem to acknowledge the internal chambers of human digestion or the intimate corridors of animal burrows.

DAVID DUPUIS' glass-inspired Sumi ink drawings are amorphous and rock-like and comment on his experience of the black and white rocks of the Seattle coast as well as its glass-blowing culture and the Japanese artistic community in which he grew up. Delicately applied, these shapes are set in motion as they bubble and stretch, fighting and giving in to the force of gravity.

ELLIOTT PUCKETTE's calligraphic, incised paintings on wood, and pen & ink drawings on old paper have a clear thin line drawn with a razor's accuracy. They are whimsical and speak of either a new or forgotten language, perhaps one still whispered among the vines of an overgrown jungle or the ancient written language of some desert civilization.

TOM WALDERON's work reminds me of the rocks that seem to be inspiring David Dupuis—although here there is less of a sense of being shaped by eons of water than of being forged in the heat of the Southwest desert where Waldron lives. Tom's shapes are rolling like I imagine the hills that inspired Georgia O'Keeffe, with a sensual, body-like smoothness to them. Tom tells me he is interested in the way the sheets of metal naturally warp and bend as the molecules in the steel heat up. Rock-like and rolling, these steel works are three-dimensional links with the earth.

ERIC WOLF's drawings and paintings are crisp, clear black lines on white ground that seem to stylize the pattern of clouds or tumbling water. Eric says that each work is the result of a single session painting in the garden around his studio in rural, upstate New York. He talks about these drawings as "skeletal," internal journeys begun in nature. These handsome drawings remind me of the Mandelbrot experiments with water currents which resulted in a theory of chaos in which we now understand that the spiraling patterns witnessed in nature are basic to the pattern of the Universe.

These arabesques and paisley swirls are found in my own work, which continues to be influenced by Eastern ceramics, Arab and Chinese calligraphy, and Persian and Turkish rugs. For me, this spiraling motion is the dragon—the life force as an active line or as light changing, shifting, creating subtle *abrash* in color.

The way the galaxies form and swirl is the same as the pattern of water moving on the earth. Leaf formations; vines stretching for the sun or the solar winds themselves; tides and the ocean floor; the air we breathe; the way blood circulates through the body; the way heated molecules of iron warp and curve; the way rocks are smoothed by years of lapping water—are similar. What occurs to me as I reflect on my own work and that of my peers is that when we turn to nature and earlier civilizations as a point of meditation, we are attempting to experience something that we are only vaguely aware of in our modern world: that when we are still, in the presence of the eternal, we can almost glimpse the 4<sup>th</sup> Dimension.

## People are Talking About

ELIZABETH HAYT. PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS HALARD  
SEPTEMBER 1997

### people are **talking** about **arts**

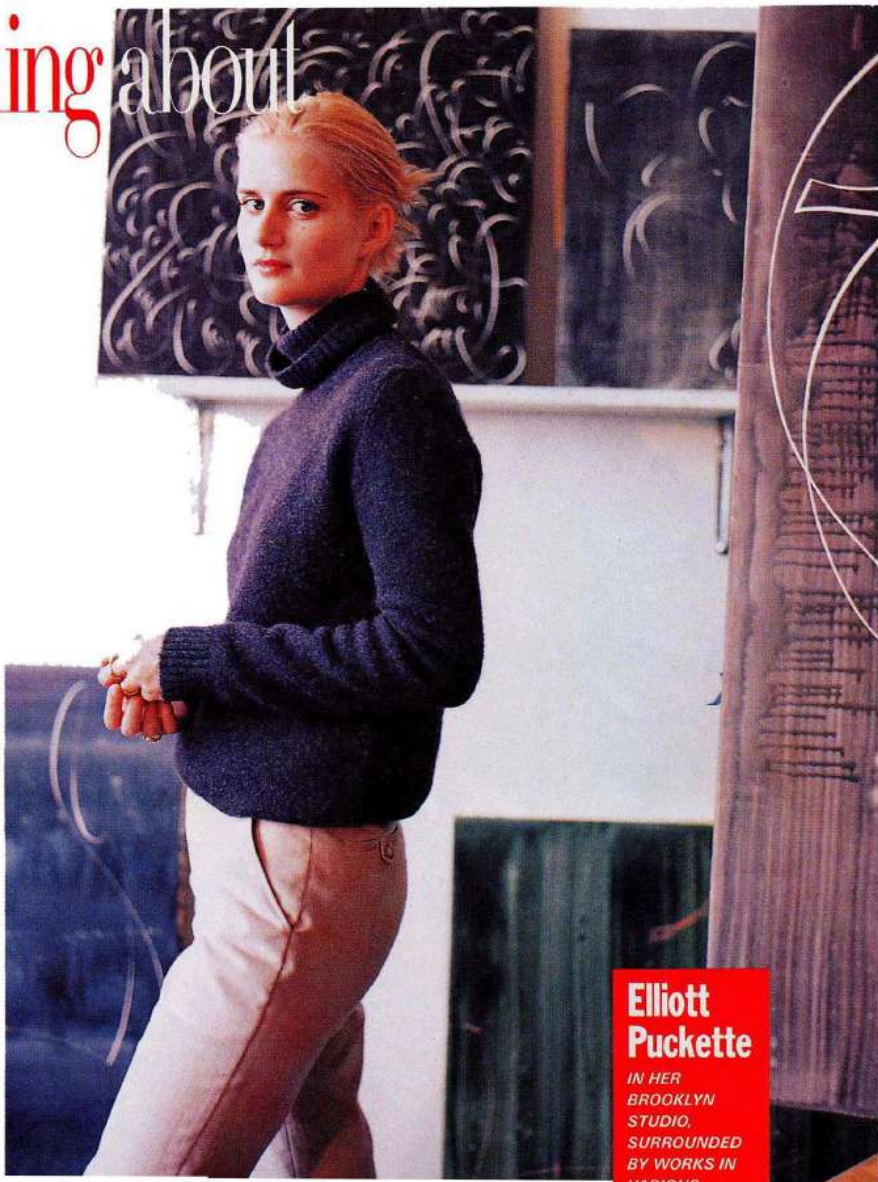
*For young women artists now, no style reigns, no ideology dictates. ELIZABETH HAYT meets, and FRANÇOIS HALARD photographs, six whose only common ground is their success.*

Pastor's fixation with craft—she regularly attends holiday-decoration trade shows and wood-bird-carving competitions as part of her research—is matched only by Elliott Puckette's obsessive use of "sgraffito," or etched-line, painting. A 29-year-old Tennessee belle, Puckette creates lyrical, calligraphic images that appear impetuously rendered, though it may take a month to complete a modest-size painting. She uses chalk to sketch curlicue patterns, reminiscent of Arabic writing or the long history of decorative arts, on wooden panels covered with washes of dark jewel-toned pigment. The composition is actually *arts* ▶466 one continuous line that "ends when the snake bites its tail," says Puckette, smiling. To give her paintings true bite, however, she goes over the chalk patterns, incising them into the wood, bit by bit, with a razor.

When Puckette protests if the decorativeness of her paintings is deemed femi-

nine—"It's downright sexist!"—it's a rare moment of politics taking precedence over aesthetics. For she and Pastor—as well as Elizabeth Peyton, Liz Larner, Katy

Schimert, and Rita Ackermann—are emblematic of a new generation of women artists who are achieving success without necessarily having to explore feminist issues, grapple with the biological nature of being a woman, or use traditionally "feminine" handicrafts. They simply aim to be good at what they do. "Being a woman affects my life experience and point of view," says Puckette. "But I have no agenda in that area."



#### **Elliott Puckette**

*IN HER BROOKLYN STUDIO, SURROUNDED BY WORKS IN VARIOUS STAGES OF COMPLETION*  
SITTINGS  
EDITOR: MIRANDA BROOKS

# PAPER®

## Gallery Go 'Round

VICTORIA PEDERSEN

JUNE 1997

In her this New York show, Elliott Puckette continues to explore the ripeness of line as it emerges like a butterfly from the vaporous backgrounds of her darkly tinged panel paintings. Using a razor blade, Puckette carefully etches a line into a wooden panel coated with gesso and ink. Echoing ornamental trceries found in lacework and calligraphy, as well as the radical canvas-piercing of Lucio Fontana, these works transcend their decorative inspirations by centering on the expressive independence of shape and line. Swaying between Eastern and Western traditions of art-making. Puckette practices a kind of baroque minimalism, modulating the tone and timbre of line and color so as to strike a delicate balance between the sober and the sensual, the passionate and poetic. These paintings are like courtesans: they beguile and tease both the eye and the mind, seemingly open and full while retaining an air of mystery.

# ART & TEXT

## Elliott Puckette

MARK GISBOURNE

OCTOBER 1996

### ELLIOTT PUCKETTE

FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON

MAY 24 - JULY 13, 1996

Today it is a commonplace to speak of the living interstices of art in the postwar contemporary world, of the *entre-deux*, that condition of becoming which somehow never quite becomes. It is not a question of simply a staged doubt, but of the insubstantial yet living reality of mark-making which has come to mediate the space between the visual and the written. If a link is to be found between American artist Elliott Puckette's incised surfaces and Jackson Pollock's "drip," it would perhaps be this lack of subject matter which itself becomes the basis of a subject.

Puckette's practice is to prepare a gessoed panel, cover it with a gray-black ink wash or gouache solution, and then to incise into it calligraphic or arabesque lines with a razor blade. By this means the hidden surface of gesso reveals itself and at the same time problematizes many of the parameters of drawing, print technique, and painting. However, like most postmodern concerns, there is an added layering of reference, not least of which is the shape of her panels—a series of classicized tendencies represented by the use of the rectangle, square, oval or ellipse, and the circular *tondo*.



ELLIOTT PUCKETTE, *STEM*, 1996.

A paradox is also set up intentionally by the artist in her use of somber coloration and the pleasurable rhythms of the arabesques. This reminds one of the strange interface that once existed between the aristocratism of eighteenth-century rococo and the radical romanticism of line found in artists like Philipp Otto Runge, a fact that has been heightened in the Frith Street Gallery exhibition by the inclusion of Puckette's 1994-96 series of black-on-white silhouettes.

The idea of incising surfaces in order to "reveal" has a long metaphoric art history, but Puckette's work differs in a meaningful sense from those found in the traditions of engraving, etching, and the woodcut. Whereas the main intention of the print principle is the reproduction of a reversal image, her drawings stand rather as a challenge to the postwar practice of painting. For while the aristocratic love of arabesque decoration became determined as the psychopathology of repetition in the psychological literature of the late nineteenth century (anthropologists like Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso characterized it as a form of degenerate mark-making), by the post-Second World War period artists returned to it as an essential form of expression. One has in mind here the incised surfaces of 1940s Dubuffet, or a Tàpies, though without the concerns for *matière*, but with an ephemerality that links to Fontana. More cogently, the violated surfaces of an Artaud drawing are evoked by the use of a razor blade.

The juxtaposition of this austere controlled blade and its decorative results only furthers the antipathy of means to expression, an added paradox that expands upon the drawings' condition of the subjectless as subject. Intimately installed in the Frith Street house-cum-gallery—ideal for drawing shows—the works increase their mystery and act upon the viewer by slow effect. It is a show of works which needs to be dwelt on, at the same time proving the old saw that a simplicity of means can often present the eye with a rich and lasting visual experience.

MARK GISBOURNE

ELLE DECOR

ELLIOTT PUCKETTE

NEVILLE WAKE. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELANIE ACEVEDO  
AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1996

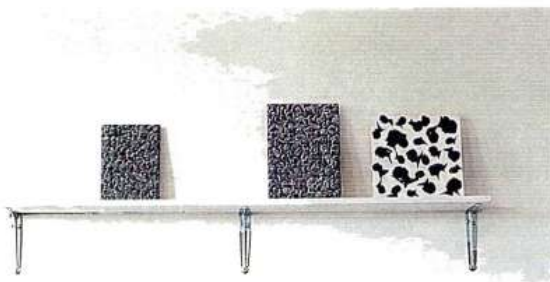
# ELLIOTT PUCKETTE



***BLURRING COMMONLY HELD NOTIONS ABOUT  
"DECORATIVE" PAINTING—WITH RAZOR-BLADE PRECISION***

**TEXT BY NEVILLE WAKEFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELANIE ACEVEDO**

# ART ELLIOTT PUCKETTE



Top to bottom: Small works by Puckette line a wall in her studio. *Hala*, 1995 (ink, gesso, and kaolin on wood; 48" x 60"). *Radiator*, 1990 (ink, gesso, and kaolin on wood; 36" x 48").

On the ascending scale of art-world pejoratives, "beautiful," "decorative," and "ornamental" have spent much of the last few decades jostling for lead position. Rehabilitated considerably in the work of such artists as Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe, they nevertheless have yet to shed the stigma accrued during a century of modernism. Twenty-nine-year-old artist Elliott Puckette acknowledges that while they are no longer grounds for dismissal, they are still "very dirty words." In her hands, though, the ornamental and the decorative have become part of an assured vocabulary, one that combines the aesthetics of delight with the guile of the perverse.

Puckette practices what might be best described as rococo minimalism. Dark panels stained inky black provide low-key stages for the artist's elaborate romancing of the line. Across these surfaces, filigreed tracteries weave delicate and erratic paths, like fireflies in the night. The artist compares her markmaking to handwriting without language. "I was trying to emulate those first impulses of trying to write something," she explains, "when you pretend that you can write by making up narratives as you scribble; those narratives immediately evaporate when you stop making the marks."

The allover patterns of her paintings, often made up of a single line—Puckette has called them "one-liners"—animate the otherwise impassive surfaces, their acrobatic scrollwork filling the spaces with a promise of meaning. Like lacemaking, needlepoint, or even the medieval practice of illuminating capitals, Puckette's picturemaking is solitary and painstakingly devotional; some paintings can take a month or more to complete. She begins by squeegeeing gesso onto a wooden panel and then impregnating the surface with dark ink. The result is a light-absorbent field with

the feel and density of dark slate, although lately the artist has let tonal variation creep into these neutral grounds. The stain is now handled more loosely and allowed to pool and puddle into gentler skeins and washes of charcoals and grays. Onto this surface the line is approximated and drawn in chalk. Only then, when she's completely satisfied with its designated course—its strength, velocity, and cursive harmonics—does Puckette incise the line into the picture surface, using the cutting edge of a razor blade.

The process has more in common with etching than painting. "I wanted a very severe line," she says, "and painting it on just never felt quite right. It always felt as if you could peel it off, as if it were a decal. But when you incise it, it becomes a much more violent gesture, and a lot more obsessive." The apparent flourish and spontaneity of these lines, seemingly the marks of a gestural virtuoso, turn out to be a ruse.

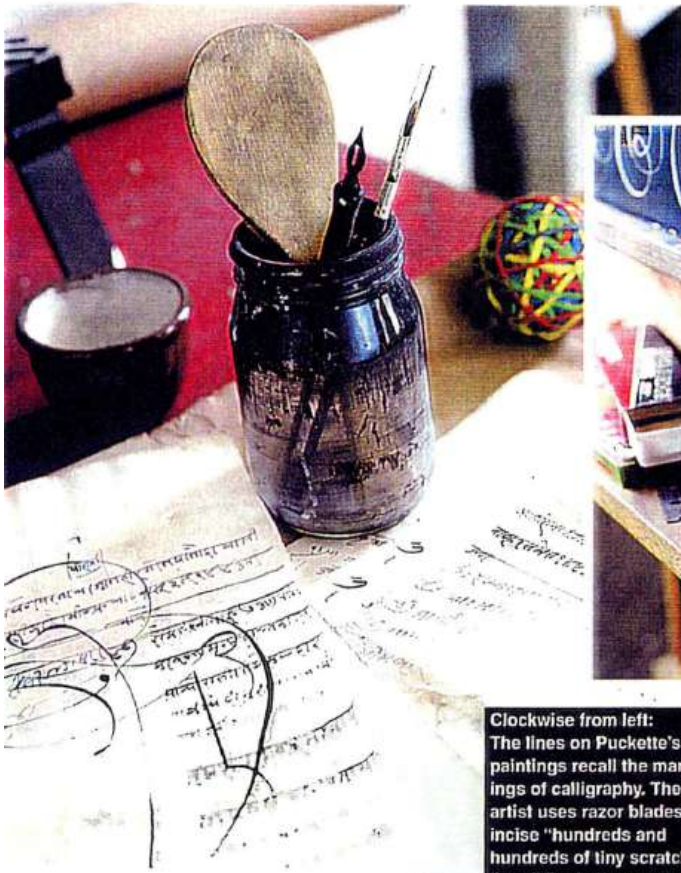
"There is a contradiction between the way the pictures are made and the way they read that I like," says Puckette. If the results sometimes bear a resemblance to the calligraphy of James Nares and Brice Marden, or even the ubiquitous markings of Mark Tobey, the process could hardly be more different: "Rather than doing a fluid gesture, I am creating it out of hundreds and hundreds of tiny scratchy lines." She smiles and adds, not without a hint of twisted pleasure, "It makes a terrifically awful noise."

Born in Kentucky and raised in Tennessee, Puckette grew up among a family of mathematicians and musicians. If her paintings are on one level a deliberation on probability and the random walk of a line, then music, too, can be found in their tonal gradations, flourishes, quavers, and grace notes. Also present is the graciousness one might expect from a ▶

CENTER, COURTESY OF PAUL KASMIN GALLERY, NYC



# ART ELLIOTT PUCKETTE



**Clockwise from left:**  
The lines on Puckette's paintings recall the markings of calligraphy. The artist uses razor blades to incise "hundreds and hundreds of tiny scratchy lines." Puckette prepares a "painting surface." Materials against the wall of her studio.



proverbial Southern belle. Airy and light, Puckette's pictures side with flamboyance over profundity. Some resemble the billowing and voluptuous skies that set the tone of Fragonard's or Boucher's landscapes of bucolic mischievousness. Arabesques hang in the empty space, much like the licentious thought bubbles that in the language of 18th-century landscape erotica passed for clouds. As to whether the gentle eroticism in the fligrees and cartouches is informed by Southern sensibilities, the artist merely draws, "Well, they *are* mighty pretty down there," admitting that some of her paintings "are indeed very flirty pictures."

Puckette has also produced a series of silhouettes in the manner of 18th-century physiognomic studies. Created during the last four or five years, they read as a diary of the people who have passed through her studio. Reviving an art form virtually lost to photography, she extracts a startling degree of likeness from the trace of the profile. Artists and art-world habitués including David Hockney, Adam Fuss, Nancy Rubins, Clarissa Dalrymple, and Puckette's dealer, Paul Kasmin, are all clearly recognizable from these simple blacked-in outlines.

"Elliott's work," says Philip Taaffe, "is fundamentally about finding new approaches to drawing, to which she brings a delicacy that's extremely attractive and at the same time very fragile, tenuous, and vulnerable. They seem to be less about dismissal, erasure, or rupture than a weaving together of things." But behind the grace and delicacy lies the meticulous, obsessive-compulsive attention Puckette brings to the activity itself, which carries with it the spontaneous gesture and the labor of its creation, both pleasure and pain. Flirtatious these paintings may be, but the play with line is rarely anything less than razor-sharp. ✱

The artist in her Brooklyn studio. Facing page: *Harmattan*, 1995 (ink, gesso, and kaolin on wood; 46" diameter). The work's title derives from the Arabic name for a type of wind. See Resources.

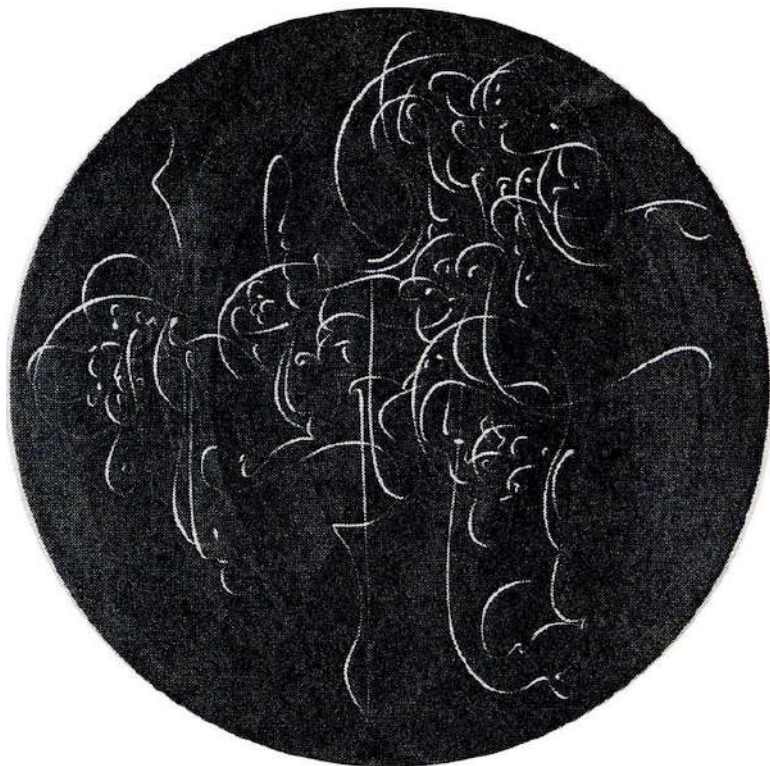


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# ARTFORUM

## Elliott Puckette

INGRID SCHAFFNER  
NOVEMBER 1995



Elliott Puckette, *Harmattan*, 1994, ink, gesso, and kaolin on wood, 46" in diameter.

Wood panels covered in a sparse tracery of calligraphic lines, Elliott Puckette's works are ethereal. Her latest efforts are named for great winds, *Sirocco*, 1995, and *Harmattan*, 1995, while in another work, *Hala*, 1994, the thin white lines that cling to empty space echo the surface roots of the eponymous Hawaiian tree. Throughout these paintings, darkened grounds appear to have been scrubbed over gesso with a soft cloth or brush. Light soaks back through translucent veils of ink, creating an effect similar to the glint of pale stones from the bottom of a pool at night. This serenity, which can sometimes verge on stasis, is new for Puckette; her earlier work featured a compulsive, all over line that looked like a handwriting exercise gone haywire. These images seemed tooled by a scratchy stylus, while the current forms have all the free-moving grace of Asian brushwork.

And though it appears that the slightest disturbance might blow these fragile images away, they couldn't be more permanent if they were tattoos. Like Simon Leung's pinprick drawings, Puckette's paintings are based on scarification. The white line isn't applied, but revealed: the black ink is etched away with a razor blade to expose the white gesso below. Thus, what looks to be all elegant simplicity is actually an elaborate process, which, like many deceptions (the wasp-thin waistline created by a corset, for example), entails an element of perversion. The process in Puckette's work recalls the obsessive-compulsive behavior known as delicate cutting, a patently feminine form of

self-mutilation that involves the adolescent cutter snipping into her flesh to distract herself from the traumas of puberty. In terms of Puckette's art, the laborious intensity of her blade counters the breezy appearance of its effects: here, the decorative (amateur and feminine) meets the abstract (assured and masculine), the East encounters the West. Traditionally these realms have stood for opposites that cancel one another out; in Puckette's paintings they coexist in exquisite tension.