

# Eleven Rivington

## *Istdibs*®

Published May, 2013

WORKING PRACTICE: JERONIMO ELESPE

By Julie L. Belcove

The email arrives in New York at 10:23 p.m. on a Thursday in late March. There's nothing particularly out of the ordinary about it until one takes into account that the message originated in Madrid, where the time is 4:23 in the morning. The sender, artist Jeronimo Elespe, is neither an insomniac nor an early riser. He simply prefers to paint from sunset to sunup, when the city is at its quietest and the mood, its most mysterious.

"I concentrate much better in the silence — the feeling of knowing there's nothing else I can do," Elespe, 37, says by phone a few days later from his Madrid apartment, which also serves as his studio.

When you take a closer look at his oil paintings — aluminum panels small enough to hold in your lap, or some in the palm of your hand — the grays, blacks, deep blues and dark purples, along with a prevailing murkiness, speak of the night. There's an enigmatic quality to his portraits, landscapes and interiors, which are now on view through June 14 in a solo exhibition at Eleven Rivington, on New York's Lower East Side.

Painted at length in layers — his process involves both adding and subtracting coats of paint — the figurative works are heavily abstracted, some nearly completely obstructed by veils of cracked-looking color, mirroring the dream state most of us occupy at night. Elespe's subjects, whether rooms or people, are born in his memory, but he shapes them the way a novelist draws his characters. "I've always been interested in the domestic — my interior life, both literal and metaphorical, and family life," says Elespe, who has frequently used friends and family as "points of departure" for his portraits. "I'm building a fictional family."

Born and raised in Madrid, Elespe received his earliest art training from his father,

who, though he has never exhibited his work publicly, has long been a passionate painter. “He saw I had a facility with drawing,” Elespe recalls. “He basically took me to the store one day and bought a bunch of supplies.” Elespe’s father was an economist and businessman, and his mother, a civil servant. Theirs was an intellectual, open-minded household. “I grew up surrounded by books,” Elespe says. Still, he did not seriously consider a life as an artist, believing it out of reach.

Elespe spent a year as a foreign-exchange student in tiny Durant, Mississippi, then returned to Madrid to study business. “I wasn’t really painting,” he says. Neither was he studying much. He thought about a career as an architect but then decided to make a go of it and apply to art school. He ended up at the School of Visual Arts, in New York, where the looseness of the curriculum suited him. “I lucked out. You could choose what you wanted to do with your time. That freedom really helped me.”

After SVA, he went straight to Yale for his MFA. “I don’t know how I got in,” he says, attributing his admission to nice letters of recommendation from his teachers. In his final year there, he began experimenting with small-scale paintings on metal. Some were abstract, as now, but most, from a fork to a couple in bed, revealed his ongoing interest in the domestic. For his final project, he painted scores of miniatures, each roughly one square centimeter — to create them, “you have to be completely sober,” he says with a laugh — and he spaced the teeny pictures widely apart in an installation. “You would go into the room and see small dots on the wall,” each like a clue or a mark hanging in the gallery.

Even with his more recent paintings, which range from one-and-a-half by two inches to 20 by 15 inches, “the space between the paintings is very important — the whiteness of the walls, the nothingness,” Elespe says. “In the end, the gaps between the paintings become almost as important as the little marks, which is what the paintings are.” The intimate dimensions also serve, in the artist’s mind, to give the paintings the feel of “personal objects, like mementos,” in keeping with their dreamlike, memory-based subject matter. Elespe back to New York after graduating, in 2001, and was soon showing at Von Lintel Gallery and John Connelly Presents. The paintings’ diminutive size did not prevent them from catching critics’ eyes. One review in *The New Yorker* observed, “The quieter the pictures, the more they radiate a clenched, unsettling emotional power.” Karen Rosenberg wrote in *The New York Times* that their size “may be less relevant than their weight, which is formidable.”

Although his career in New York was progressing, in 2007 Elespe decided to move back to Madrid with his now-wife, an experimental filmmaker originally from Thailand. “All our artist friends are in New York and we miss the artistic dialogue,” he says, adding that the couple hasn’t ruled out returning. “But we’re happy here, and it’s cheaper, and we’re always home anyway. We’d be up at 4 a.m. [in Brooklyn] and say, ‘We could be doing this in Madrid and pay half the rent.’ ”

Elespe typically starts painting around 7 p.m. but doesn't really get going until midnight. He finishes at dawn and sometimes will take a walk before going to bed. "I miss mornings — my favorite time of day," he says. "I feel bad for my wife because I'm making her a vampire also. She's not as nocturnal as I am."

Night painting is also suitable to Elespe because he has always preferred painting with artificial light. He tends to work under tungsten halogens, a type of incandescent light that is warmer than fluorescents. "It's much easier to read the different textures and touch of oil under tungsten than under just fluorescent tubes," he says. Plus, he finds fluorescents "so depressing." He did, however, also install fluorescents in his small studio, mainly so he can check how the paintings will look when exhibited. "I have them in there because I know what's hip right now — so many galleries have fluorescent."

Out of curiosity, he also occasionally takes the paintings into the daylight of his living room or kitchen, where the domestic settings give them context. "The fact that I live with them is a very important part of the process," Elespe says. "They function almost like diaries."

Elespe paints his aluminum panels while sitting or standing at a desk. He has roughly 20 to 30 paintings going at a time, stacked in boxes. He looks at each of these active paintings at least once a month, "even if it's just five minutes out of the box," Elespe says. It's not uncommon for him to abandon a picture for three or four years and then return it to active duty, trying out a different technique. "I let the painting's logic follow itself," he says. The repeated reworking — scratching, sanding and repainting — gives the surfaces a dappled patina. Reflection from the aluminum underpinning adds to the haunting effect.

One painting he is planning to show at Eleven Rivington was begun in 2004, when he was still living in Brooklyn. "I think it's done, but we'll see. I've said that before." The panel depicts two black, dead flowers, though he says it borders on abstraction. "The flowers are still there, I think," he says but then adds, "If I didn't tell you they were flowers, you probably wouldn't know."

In the American press, Elespe is often compared to Spanish masters Velázquez and Goya. Elespe says his references, such as the balance between the ethereal and the austere, are "more unconscious than people think." He continues: "It's more like part of my painting DNA. It's part of the Spanish sensibility." He also finds it ironic that "in Spain they see me as an American-trained painter. In America, they see me as a deeply European or Spanish painter. I guess both are true."

This Eleven Rivington exhibit — his second solo show with the gallery — marks the New York debut of Elespe's drawings, which are abstract and can resemble calligraphy. As of this reporting, the final selection of both paintings and drawings was still pending. "Last night I was still painting," he says. "I have to stop soon — they need time to dry."