# ART LIES
A Contemporary Art Quarterly

William Betts: Surveillance, January 9-February 13, 2010
Holly Johnson Gallery, 1411 Dragon Street, Dallas, TX 75207, 214 369 0169

By Charissa Terranova

William Betts replicates the "world picture" in his latest body of work, Surveillance. For the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, it was not a good thing when the world became "grasped as a picture." It meant everything – moving and inert, natural and artificial – was at the utilitarian service of humankind. All (including you and me) had become cogs in a giant machine – tools for an unseen master shaped by the technology we create and control.   The act of picturing is, in its most precise and literal sense, a mechanization of seeing.
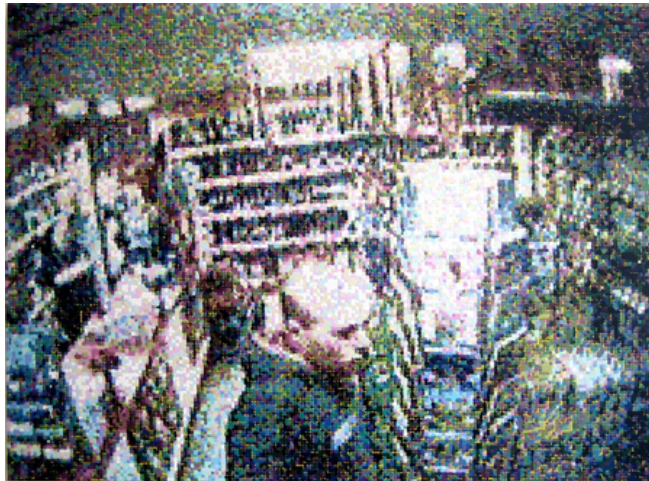
The machine is central to Betts' process of painting. In the past, Betts made big brightly colored moiré patterned and striped paintings from a large computerized painting machine. He has tweaked the software and changed the data. The information is now photographs of highways, cities, and interiors of package stores downloaded from the Internet. They are, for the most part, images taken surreptitiously by cameras – surveillance shots stolen twice over, first by the camera and then by Betts. With Betts' painting machine, the surveillance camera, and the photographic still, machine meets machine meets machine in these paintings. They are layered with mediation. "Skinhead" (2006) shows a man taking a bottle from a crowded shelf in a small package store. Tiny painterly spots render a space distorted and bowed by the fisheye lens of the surveillance camera mounted in the corner of a small mart.

The effect is pointillist. The thousands of perfectly circular little dots that make up disarticulate abstraction up close and articulate form from afar place Betts in a lineage of painters, which includes Georges-Pierre Seurat, Paul Signac, Roy Lichtenstein, and Chuck Close. Separating Betts from this group is his hands-off, digital approach. Betts's machine-made paintings are the apotheosis of automated art, and I mean this with all the powerful post-humanist integrity that such a

highpoint entails. The dots further approximate the washed out grain of the pixilated image.

There is three-part legerdemain that fuels a powerful sense of the authorless work of art: Betts' use of the Internet as open source; the Internet-based photographic still as fundamental image; and Betts' hands-off use of the machine to render each photograph as a one-of-a-kind painting. While stealth courses through all of the paintings, Betts did not, in fact, steal all of the images. Betts gained permission from the Texas Department of Transportation for satellite shots of highways, which are the basis of "US54 Hondo Pass, El Paso, Tx, November 15, 2006, 6:12pm" and "I-10 and Los Mochis, El Paso, Texas, May 31, 2007, 6:09 pm." While all of the work in this show is a visual delight, the most conceptually provocative are the three photographs of Amber, which, unlike the pilfered or borrowed images, were staged – but look caught on the sly. Black, white, and grainy, "Amber, 03/19/04, 20:30:45," "Amber, 03/19/04, 22:25:12," and "Amber, 03/19/04, 22:31:04" show a naked woman in a hotel room presumably anticipating or post-coitus. They bring to mind the ambivalent voyeurism aroused by French artist Sophie Calle's photoconceptualism. Similar to Betts' subtle theatricality, Calle documented what she found while nosing through people's personal belongings as she "performed" the role of chambermaid in Venice and, in another project, followed people around Paris as artist-cum-sleuth.

While remaining focused on the parameters set by the algorithm of the machine, Betts has opened up to new ideas and form in this fantastic body of work.