

MODERN DALLAS

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WILLIAM BETTS: COLOR SPACE at Holly Johnson Gallery

Achieving the machine made look has been an obsession with many artists since Warhol and Lichtenstein burst onto the scene. Lichtenstein used projectors to draw many of his paintings. He also painted his signature dots to create simplified images that reflect a printing technology used in comic books and advertising. Warhol used the machine like process of serigraph printing to push the ink onto canvas or paper. Even today you can look at a poured painting by Peter Zimmerman or the late work of Scott Barber and you feel that the paintings were made with machine rather than by hand.



Reverb, Color Space Series, 2017

You might be a little put off by Betts' process. If you are, you might like to know that if you enjoy 14th century painting, you may be shocked to find out that it too used mechanical means to help in production. As evidence, Albrecht Dürer depicts the Sighting Easel in his 1525 etching. Illustrations of camera obscuras and perspective machines litter the history of art. I know revealing how the sausage is made sometimes takes away a bit of the magic. However, I think it adds to Betts process, and is what stands out in his work.



Color Space IX, 2017

In the case of William Betts, a machine did the hand work of distributing paint on canvas. Betts has achieved the goal of removing the hand by removing the hand. But really this is only one step removed, because after all, digital art still requires hand manipulation. Whether it is in coding or using graphic software, Betts is still producing art pieces that come from his labor. It is just one step removed, but is this really that unusual? Printing making has had a long and rich tradition in which the artist and printer work together to produce an art piece. Many times the artist was removed in the production part of the process. In recent history we can look to the art of Sol LeWitt. LeWitt's paintings and drawings are being reproduced again and again through his instructions. Betts is also giving his machine instructions to produce his work. I would call LeWitt and Betts style and process of art a human algorithm. In other words, they use input data to follow a set of rules and arrives at a creative solution which is produced by something or someone other than themselves.

Process is nice, but what about content? Once you get past the process, you start to really look at his paintings. When I first encountered his work, I saw his Morie series. The works consist of thin lines of paint that made Op like images. These works played in abstraction, but achieved a highly clean line and color painting. I felt he exceeded the goals of Op and geometric abstraction. But the use of dots, took the machine to a new level. His CCTV series was dark and sinister. He took shots from video surveillance and translated them into paint. The dots produced a graininess that reflects the video quality. Now, in this series titled Color Space you see his return to abstract, but with the dot application of paint. Unlike his past dot painting, the illusion of graininess has disappeared. Now the fields of color seem to flow like waves. Betts has limited his palette to the primaries, black, and white. But the range of color is increased by your eye blending the colors together. Unlike his CCTV series, these painting feel calmer and help to alleviate my anxiety.

Where can you see William Betts' show? The same gallery that shows my work, Holly Johnson Gallery. Betts' show will be up through June 10th.