

**NAP Annual Prize Winner: William Betts by New American Paintings - January 20, 2012**



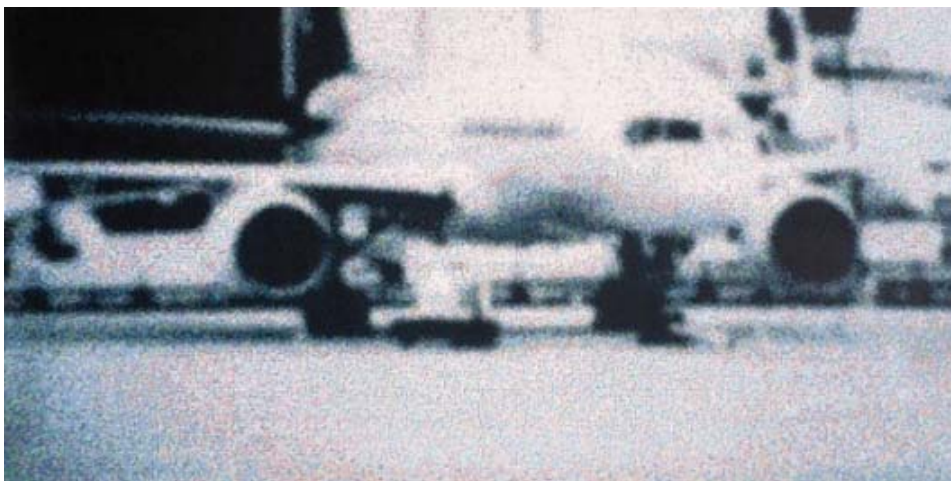
**William Betts**

This year's *New American Paintings Annual Prize* has been awarded to William Betts. If you're a longtime subscriber to *New American Paintings* you're probably familiar with the work of the Houston-based artist. Betts has appeared in editions #60, #72, #84 and most recently as an *Editor's Pick* in #96. Even if you've never picked up an issue there's a chance you've seen his work somewhere — he's represented by galleries in New York, Chicago, Dallas, Albuquerque and Denver, and is currently preparing for a group show at Kunstmuseum Stuttgart. In other words, William Betts is an artist that's hitting his stride, and this year's Annual Prize is one more item in a growing list of accolades.

Selected by a jury of distinguished curators and previous jurors, Betts will receive a cash gift of \$1,000, courtesy of the magazine, and a \$500 gift card sponsored by Blick Art Materials, for supplies. And, thanks to NEXT ART CHICAGO, Betts will also have a painting hung at the fair in April.

The panel for the Annual Prize consists of three previous NAP jurors who have *not* made selections in the last year, including Bill Arning, Director, The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), James Rondeau, Curator and Chair of Contemporary Art, Art Institute of Chicago, and Peter Boswell, Senior Curator, Miami Art Museum.

Fellow *NAP* contributor Ellen Caldwell and I caught up with Betts earlier this week to talk about his work and process. —  
*Matthew Smith, Washington, D.C. contributor*



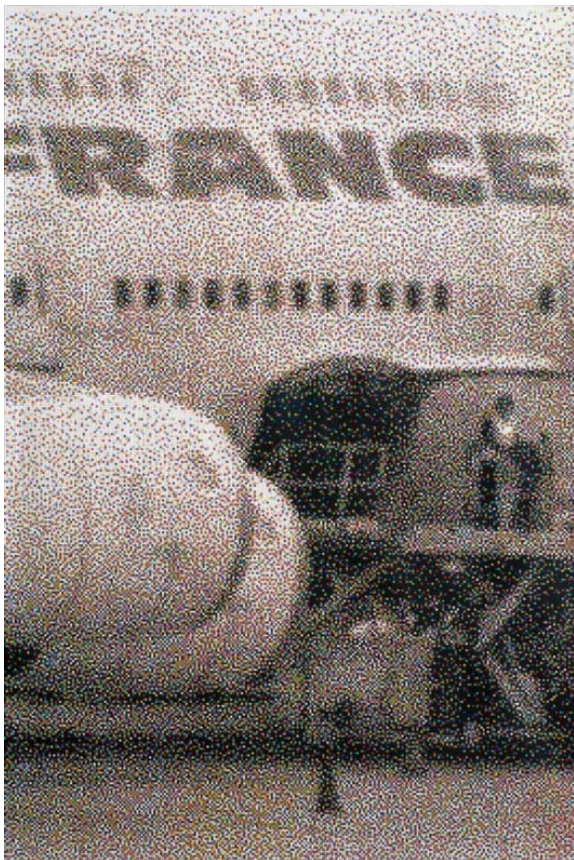
William Betts | *Untitled YYZ 10-30-2010*, acrylic on canvas, dimension5: 36" x 72"

His paintings, produced via mechanized industrial processes that push the very definition of what it means to paint, depict placeless bits of Americana captured from the grainy perspective of surveillance technologies. They're placeless yet intimately familiar because they're everywhere — parking lots, ten-lane highways, airports, suburban motel rooms. Equally as pervasive are the grainy visuals, from traffic cameras to the evening news, they're reminders of our increasing willingness to trade privacy in favor of access to information. Indeed, Bett's elegant representations of an experience that is mediated by technology hum with pointed familiarity.

**Matthew Smith: Your paintings capture a sense of placelessness that is common in much of the American landscape. They're spaces without any meaningful cultural signifiers, and yet we're so familiar with them. Is this idea of placelessness something you think about when sourcing photographs for your paintings?**

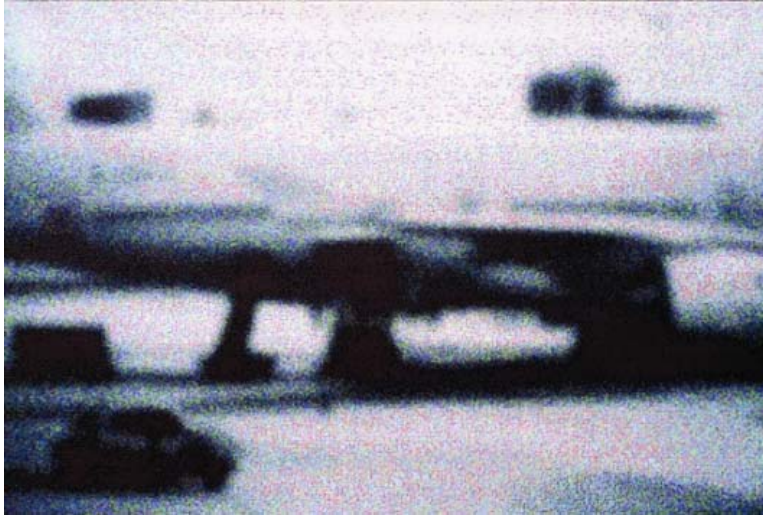
William Betts: Yes, absolutely, for several reasons. I think that its one aspect of American modern culture that cuts across all of the typical cultural differentiators. Its a strange irony; I think as a culture we feel comfortable in these void spaces and yet there is nothing that gives us a personal connection that we typically find comfort in.

Also, as artists, we have to be aware of our point of view, where it comes from — how did we arrive there. For me, its a comfort in that placelessness, that space between things — between situations. I come to it naturally. As a kid, I was dyslexic and ADD and spent most of my time outside of class, between schools, sitting on the bench observing sports and not participating. As an adult, I worked in software sales for several years traveling constantly. I got very comfortable in hotel rooms and airports — between places, disconnected from things. This gives me a specific point of view as an observer.



William Betts | *Untitled, Miami International Airport*, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 48"

Lastly, when I started painting from video, I struggled with how to represent in paint a slice from a time series. Sure, I could just look at each frame on a formal basis and paint what's there but I wanted the viewer to participate more in the work. I wanted the viewer to look at the painting and be able to imagine the events on either side of the piece — what just happened and what could happen next. It seemed like the only way to paint from a time series.



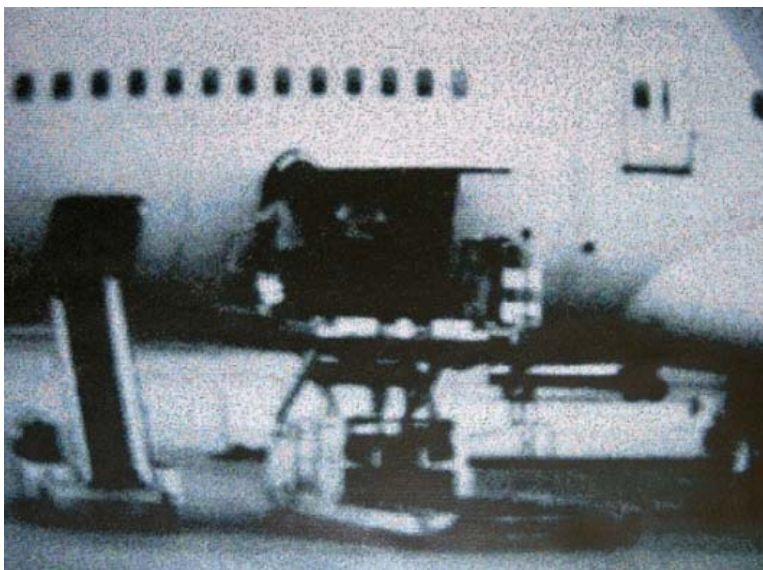
William Betts | *Untitled, Miami International Airport, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 72"*

**MS: You not only source surveillance footage for your work, you also use staged photographs with actors posing in intimate situations. From security cameras to hidden footage of a secret hotel encounter, it seems like there's a thin line between surveillance and voyeurism. Is this a connection something that you're interested in?**

WB: There *is* a thin line and the two are closely related — one is institutional and one is personal. I think it speaks to intent. It feels sometimes like being on a balance beam. But even stepping back a bit, they are both views seen from a distance although one is mediated by space and the other technology. Its interesting but I try not to weigh in with too heavy a hand. I just make it and put it out there and let the viewer decide.

**Ellen Caldwell: The intricate pixilation you create is unbelievable. You've previously mentioned industrial production methods and concurrent techniques that you use to create your paintings. Can you tell me more about this process?**

WB: I have combined several industrial technologies to create a process for making the paintings. All of my paintings are created using computer controlled machinery – CNC systems – to actually make the paintings. Think of it as a large and very precise industrial plotter that can go to very specific locations defined by X,Y, and Z coordinates. Once it gets to those coordinates, I use a proprietary control system to apply the paint in very small amounts through very precise valves. All of this adapted technology is software-controlled and the software that creates the control instructions for each image was designed by me specifically for this purpose.



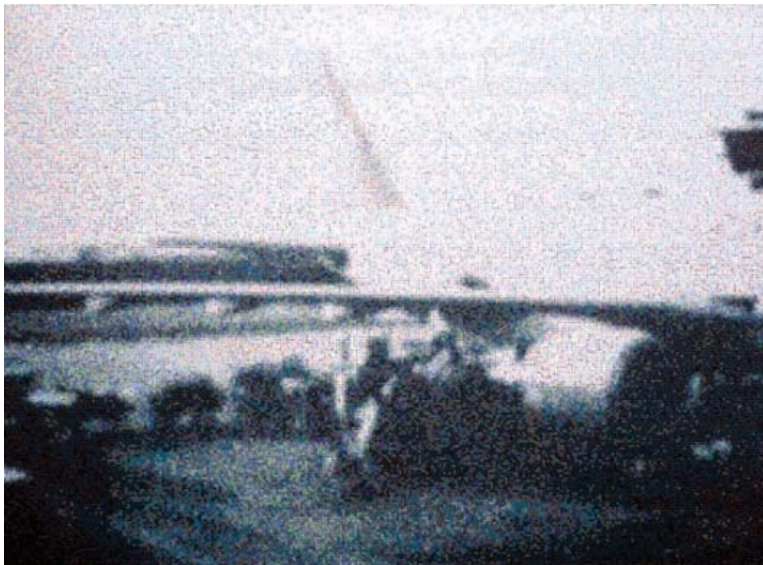
William Betts | *Untitled, Miami International Airport, acrylic on canvas, 52" x 70"*

**MS: Technology is not only a part of your process, it's also visible in your compositions — in the pixelation, for example. When we chatted briefly last week you mentioned your interest in the mediating effect of technology, how it allows people to have remove from the physical world. Can you talk about how this mediating effect relates to your compositions and to the physical process of making them?**

WB: Pixilation is a structure I use but it is also the single constant of the work. Every other aspect is open to manipulation and interpretation. Again, [it's] pulled from the video and the structural composition of the images on tape. In addition, it also provides another key function; it gives me a structure to accurately describe a location on the canvas and what should happen there. I can codify that – I can explain it to someone and they can execute it. This allows me to distance myself from the process while maintaining strict control over it.

**EC: What led you to acrylics – how does it affect the look you are going for?**

WB: For many years I used oil paints but my process requires that I use different types of application technologies, valves and applicator tips and the oil paint just wasn't compatible. I found that the clean up was difficult, as I had to clean these small parts and rinse them in solvent. It took me a while to find the right acrylic paint but I finally settled on an industrial pure acrylic base.



William Betts | *Untitled, CPH, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 54"*

**MS: You have used mirrors as painting surfaces for several projects. Has this been a conceptual decision or a technical decision?**

WB: Both, mirrors engage the viewer differently than a canvas surface. They reflect the image of the viewer when seen directly and incorporate the space as a modifier when seen indirectly. This changes the relationship between the viewer and the work and I like that. The idea behind the acrylic mirrors is to drill a perfect hole that was half of a sphere. When filled with paint from the front, it would appear as a small ball of color floating half way between the viewer and the reflection. Technically, it is very complicated work — I came up with the idea several years ago and it took a few years to perfect. Drilling clean holes in plastic is hard enough but when you have to drill hundreds of thousands perfectly and then fill them with paint, it is a nightmare. I seem to like technical challenges though; I think I also really like to tinker around with the technology. I am always trying to push into new ways of making paintings — new ways to apply paint.

**MS: You have a show at Holly Johnson Gallery coming up next month in Dallas. Can you tell me a little bit about the new work you'll be hanging?**

Yes, I am thrilled with this show. It is my fourth show with Holly and I adore working with her and I love her space! The show is a group of my white mirror paintings. I have shown these in several fairs before and have done one show of the work. They are large mirrors and I use black and white images and then drill out only the white portion of the images. The pieces use the reflection of the environment and the space to complete the image so they at first seem illusive but then as you move

around them and the light changes, the images appear and disappear. I find them very satisfying although I am still trying to understand them fully. I guess that's the great part about making art, if we fully understood it, it would be boring.

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*William Betts makes paintings that explore the intersection of the digital realm and the traditional craft of painting, utilizing advanced linear motion technology and proprietary software of his own design to create paintings that would not have been possible until recently. Born and raised in New York City, Betts graduated from Arizona State University in 1991 with high honors with a B.A. in Studio Art and a minor in philosophy. Between 1991 and 2002 he held various executive positions in the technology field. Before leaving the business world to pursue his painting full time in 2002, he was a senior executive responsible for the European operations of an international application software company. Betts' work has been written about and exhibited extensively throughout the United States. He lives and works in Houston.*

*Matthew Smith is an artist and writer in Washington, DC and a frequent contributor to DCist.*

*Ellen C. Caldwell is an LA-based art historian, editor, and writer.*