



Mirror Stages: William Betts and the Reflective Surface

We live in a society where image is everything. It is not surprising, then, that the mirror figures in the work of many contemporary artists. Whether employed as a substrate or within a more sculptural context, of course, the mirrored material itself contributes to the meaning of such works in as many ways as whatever is reflected in its surface. William Betts' recent work uses this double structure in a curious way to load the physical surface with meaning while simultaneously withdrawing it. Utilizing mirrored Plexiglas panels, Betts creates an ambiguous space where interpretation of subject matter shifts with the slightest movement or change in light. What emerges is a series of images that can read as subtle, sexy, ominous, or provocative—often all at once.

Betts' initial approach to the picture plane takes television and computer screens as a model. The painted image is derived from a photographic source that is sometimes

appropriated but more often taken by the artist himself. The paint itself, however, is embedded beneath the surface of the picture plane. After drilling tens of thousands of small, shallow holes into the back of the Plexiglas panel, the artist manually fills the holes with acrylic paint. Each spot of paint is a three dimensional unit encased beneath a transparent surface. Like a mirror image, then, the painted image is something seemingly tangible, yet unattainable.

The resulting visual effect initially appears similar to a screen with pixilated images, and it suggests many of the same associations. Such screens are everywhere, bringing the world into our lives and homes, allowing us to “connect” with friends, a source of “contact.” Of course, neither the world we see in this way, nor the contact we achieve, is the real thing. Our connectedness is many times removed; our mediated attachments are often superficial. Screened off in this way, any intimacy we achieve is simultaneously alienation.

This notion of alienation and removal is at the heart of Betts' mirrored works. Each series -- whether color saturated or monochromatic, whether bearing images of figures or of inanimate objects -- demonstrates just how delicate the balance between subjectivity and objectivity can be.

Thematic content in the works, in combination with the ensconced unit of paint and a reflective picture plane, results in an image that is fraught with tension from without and within.

While seemingly unrelated from one series to the next, Betts' motifs are in fact linked in a very elemental way. By basing his images on photographs and video stills that he himself has taken, the artist plays the roles of auteur, voyeur, and tourist. This gives these paintings a compelling yet strangely indefinable point of view, one that complicates the act of observation. When, he seems to ask, are our gazes sinister? When are they innocent? When are they simply *there*?

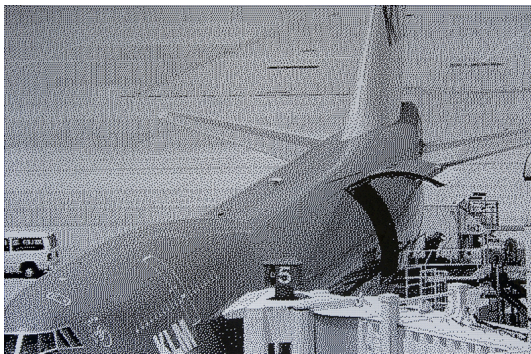
In many of his works, particularly those depicting commercial aircraft, the dominant point of view seems to be a kind of childlike wonder. By obtaining clearance from airport security Betts was able to photograph stationary aircraft at close range. When asked why he selects this particular subject matter, the artist confesses that he finds it interesting that a single subject can inspire fear, wonder, nostalgia, as well as many other impressions—at times all at once. Betts also reveals, in an offhand but telling manner, that since childhood he's always “liked

Above: Untitled, 11:34 am, 2010, Acrylic paint on reverse drilled mirror acrylic, 23 x 35 inches

planes". This statement recalls the innocence and awe that young boys and girls have while watching a train go by or a plane fly overhead, and, through the works, the viewer too is afforded the kind of thrill such children might have upon being allowed to get close to the object of their wonder.

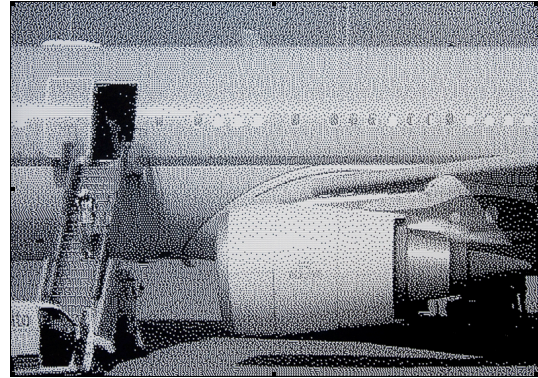
While a certain guileless quality can be felt these compositions, however, images of docked aircraft being loaded by trucks, or with gaping baggage compartment doors, cannot help but engender far less innocuous feelings these days. This is facilitated by the way these images are embedded beneath the mirrored surface and rendered entirely in white, which gives the viewer at least three distinctive points of view.

If seen from an angle, and in such a way that your own mirror image is included, you might – if you are old enough to remember when flying was anything but an everyday experience - - be drawn into a nostalgic mood. If not, you might find yourself cringing at the thought of being herded into tubes like cattle to be conveyed across the country with all the glamour of an overheated bus ride. Seen from a different angle, however, the ghostly image of the aircraft arouses apprehensions of terror, fear. After 9/11 no traveler can avoid a certain anxiety, a suspicion about what the trucks could be there for or about what might find its way into the plane through those gaping cargo doors. Finally, viewed from straight on one finds a clean, almost blank, white scene with whatever surroundings happen to be reflected in the mirror.



The fact that Betts executes this subject entirely in white brings to mind the ambiguity of that color, most notably analyzed in Melville's *Moby Dick* or Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. White is innocence; it is hope, an untainted beginning. But it is also terrifying, a place to lose one's sense of space and direction entirely—an antiseptic environment in which identity is crushed within a system. That

airplanes, huge faceless, and mute, are a part of a network or system is something that truly unsettles the artist and also sparks his fascination for it.



Then again, when ultimately encountering this white, it's blank; it's whatever the viewer and surrounding space happens to bring to it.

When Betts shifts to color, and from inanimate objects to human figures, he provides an entirely different meditation on the role of casual observer. His richly and vibrantly hued *Pool and Beach* series, for example, involves the viewer in a way that contrasts starkly with the monochromatic works. But it is not just color that generates this difference; the effect derives equally from a difference in the way paint is applied.

Unlike the aircraft paintings, which often have large areas of negative, paint-free space, William Betts' images of people swimming or standing about in shimmering blue swimming pools almost completely cover the reflective surface. This reduction of negative space affects how these images situate the viewer.

While maintaining the capacity to refract light and exterior environs as the aircraft series did, the density of the image here seduces the viewer into a more voyeuristic stance. The opulent hues, concentric ripples upon the water, the bathers themselves, immediately convey associations with vacations, resorts, recreation and leisure. The resulting initial impression, then, can be interpreted as fun, sexy. Rays of sunshine or

Above Left: KLM24, 2010, Acrylic paint on reverse drilled mirror acrylic, 23 x 35 inches, Above Right: KLM2, 2010, Acrylic paint on reverse drilled mirror acrylic, 20 x 30 inches

ambient light cast onto an already vibrant scene contribute to the image's vibrancy and seductiveness.

Sustained examination *could* bring a different reading: Like Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, where interpreting the same words from different points of view yields an innocent and then an ominous meaning, the figures in William Betts' populated scenarios initially seem familiar. It is in our nature to try to understand what they are up to. Are these happy couples cavorting in the waters on their vacations? Are they couples having an extramarital affair? But the composition clearly dictates that these are not typical tourist photos, and we soon abandon our futile search for meaning. Ultimately it is the fact that these people are strangers that hits home. If figures in conventional figurative work tend to provoke our desire to identify their narrative function, Betts' people seem to insist on their anonymity, and we lose ourselves in the saturated spherical units of paint while the mirrored surroundings fluctuate on the surface. This is our reward; these paintings are voyeuristic eye candy, and you don't have to analyze them to be transported.



Some of Betts' figurative work is monochrome and, tellingly, removing color from the equation tends to bring back the menacing quality found in the aircraft series. As with the swimmers, we question what the people are doing, where the crowd is going, why we're looking at them at all. But the absence of color suspends us in this interrogative mode and thus lends to the mysterious movements of the people a sinister cast.

Do Betts' compositional and thematic selections deliberately convey meaning as ambiguous and fluctuating, or are they just there

because he's "always liked" watching people? Ultimately it matters little. Multiplying points of view in this way redefines the role of the artist as invisible auteur like never before. As did Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirror paintings in the 1960s, Betts' work allows viewers to include themselves in the compositional equation if they will, to interpret their involvement as they wish.

However, unlike the works of Pistoletto -- which portray sometimes ambiguous tableaux that mirror the surroundings in their negative space -- Betts pushes the notion of invisible auteur a step further. Pistoletto's figures are opaque paintings on the surface of the mirror. The viewer sees himself only in the negative space. In contrast, by locating his paint modules below the surface, and by virtue of the fact that they compose images of tiny pixel-like units, Betts makes sure that even his subjects—the planes, the crowds, the swimming pools—are permeable. In one sense, then, the viewer can enter into the subjects themselves; yet in another he or she can no more "connect" than he or she can with images on the television or computer screen. The three-dimensionality here is below the surface and beyond grasp.

William Betts thus offers us connectivity and alienation, physical involvement in a space that denies physical entrance. He pushes the boundaries of painting by transforming it into a screen with movement, and in so doing gives us our world. At a distance.

Laura Lark
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Above: Untitled, 10:55am, 2010, Acrylic paint on reverse drilled mirror acrylic, 23 x 35 inches