

## William Betts: Sliver of Clarity

Holly Johnson Gallery

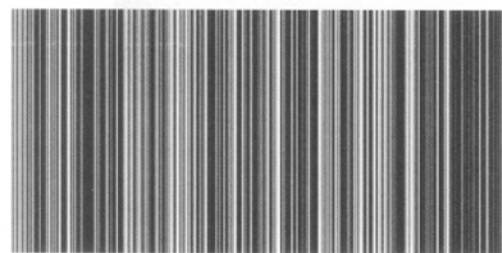
Charissa N. Terranova

*Once the technological differentiation of optics, acoustics, and writing exploded Gutenberg's writing monopoly around 1880, the fabrication of so-called Man became possible. His essence escapes into apparatuses. Machines take over functions of the central nervous system, and no longer, as in times past, merely those of muscles.*

—Friedrich A. Kittler

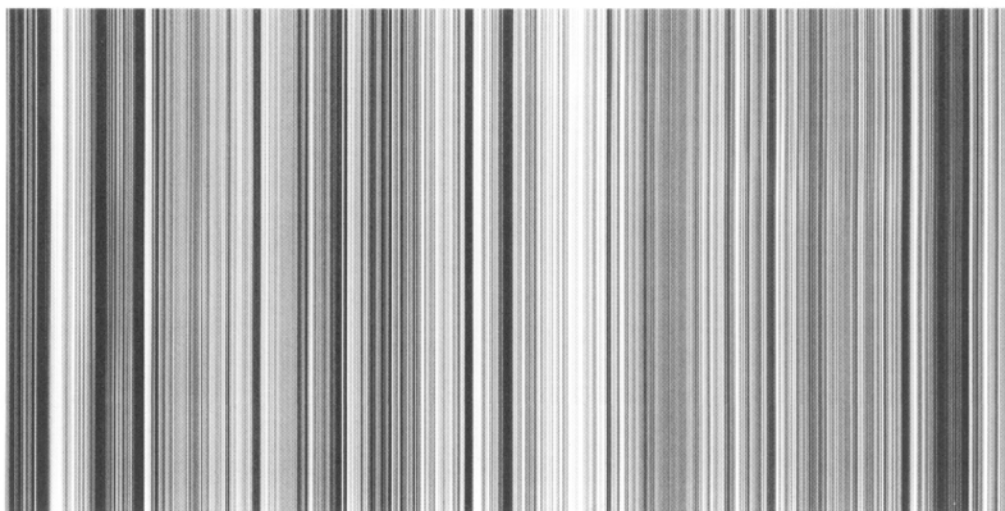
*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 1999*

By now we should all be hip to the idea that perception is not *a priori*. Yes, we, (most of us that is) are born with the ability to see, hear, smell, touch and taste. But exactly *how*, in what *way* and to what *extent* these senses act is still up for grabs. Actions and energies constantly flow in variant directions, the ever-protean vectors of perceptual experience. As our senses are carried astride by the latest doodads, gimmicks and technological prosthetics. They become something other than what they were: with each technological invention comes another twisting, untwisting and re-twisting of our aesthetic coil. In short, when it comes to art, technology is the great enabler. As the German cultural scientist Friedrich Kittler informs—as Marshall McLuhan did before him—we become what we plug in; we are what we dial up; we see and inhabit virtual worlds as we surf wireless waves.



William Betts, *Canopy*, 2005  
Acrylic on composite  
49 x 97 inches; Edition of three

The latest paintings by William Betts at Holly Johnson Gallery are proof of a post-Vitruvian existence if there ever were. The automatic marks of Betts' pristine, color-lined surfaces register the humanoid life-world which the above Kittler quotation invites. Betts' is an *élan vital* for the new millennium, a life force that is equal part organic flesh and metallic motherboard. With a will to paint instigated by the kick of a computer switch, Betts'



William Betts, *Embankment*, 2005  
Acrylic on composite  
49 x 97 inches; Edition of three

work instates a new mode of humankind: the technocratic *bricoleur*.

If the technocratic part of this new archetype reinvigorates that old figure of automation—the posthumanist subject—then Betts' *bricoleur* breathes life into the creative tinkerer, or artist as emotive being. This dialectic of two forces—impassive automation and sentimental exploit—inspires the figure. Though Betts' paintings might appear to lean more toward the former than the latter (their perfection suggests robotic mechanical production above human gesture and drip), it is with sentimental exploit that he begins each project.

Instead of drip, emotion comes in the form of a line; in place of instantaneous action, we have the photographic memoir. The line after line of different colored acrylic paint that constitute Betts' nonobjective works begin with very personal mementos: photographs of figures taken by the artist. He manipulates the photos on his computer and, as if distilling the life force of each figure down to a precise range of colors, reduces them to abstract digital bits.

Next, Betts routes that information through a machine of his own design, which, in turn, produces a multihued line painting in carefully chosen, custom-mixed hues. Though it sounds like painting at the push of a button, this process is actually fastidiously choreographed, akin to dancing on a high wire or, as Betts himself has suggested,

"think Rube Goldberg or Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*." A different spin might give us HAL—the talking behemoth from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*—on LSD.

While indexed at increasing remove, Betts' gesture is nevertheless present on each canvas. It is a new kind of gesture, one that reveals the power of metaphorical deference in that it is always just outside literal feeling—one step or more away from actual human touch. It is this remove—in the distance of authorial gamesmanship—that makes his paintings succeed. In looking at the thin yellow lines that pop from the blue lying adjacent in *Things Left Unsaid*, you find yourself looking as though on autopilot, like a technocrat taking inventory in the art gallery. Then you feel the trifer and begin to wonder why the colors line up in the precise order that they do. As Betts admits, the order of colors, though based on an original image, is ultimately the result of instinct and pragmatism—intuition combined with "the practical application" of color—and the result of personal choice.

While one is wont to see these decisions as arbitrary, the result of the artist's insights brings us back to the dialectic at work in the mind of the technocratic *bricoleur*. Betts works like a machine, laying down lines one after another, each in proportion, as well as according to the nature of the tinkerer's curious psyche, mindfully uniting nice colors on a surface.