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, _Embarkment_, 2005
Acrylic on composite
49 x 97 inches; Edition of three

“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 triller 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.