Sunbathers enjoying a midday tan, friends goofing off in a pool, a few swimmers hanging by the rocks... these idyllic images take on an entirely different meaning when presented by painter William Betts. In his new show, SPLASH, up until mid-July at Margaret Thatcher Projects, Betts uses photography at a distance to capture his subjects at play, and then converts those images into pointillated works using a CNC machine. The result is a happy moment captured through a hidden lens, in which the artist calls into question everything we take for granted while out enjoying a sunny day. Phoning in from his home in sunny Miami Beach, Betts tells us about the illusion of privacy and mixing the mundane, the cheerful, with the sinister.
William Betts, Sunbathers, Miami Beach, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 70 inches (132 x 178 cm).

Betts describes the foundation of his work, since 2004, as being technology-based, “using machines and computer-controlled painting apparatuses that I designed and built to make my paintings. And my subject matter has primarily been different aspects of surveillance and a technology-based way of seeing things.” With the work, Betts dives into “issues of privacy and personal liberty haven’t really been resolved yet. It’s kind of an ongoing dialogue.”

Betts says *Splash* is about “the idea of privacy, how everywhere we are we’re kind of on camera somewhere. I liked the idea of swimming pools and beaches because they’re places where we make ourselves very vulnerable. We’re virtually naked. And we’re playing around, having a great time, but from a physical standpoint we’re very vulnerable. And yet we also make exceptions of privacy. It’s kind of a metaphor for how we treat our privacy. It’s kind of carefree and we take it very casually. I find the idea of using beaches and pools as a wonderful metaphor for the way we’re happily giving away our credit card information to people and yet we lock up our bicycles. That’s kind of a strange thing to me.”

The placement of the viewer and the artist in these works is extremely important to Betts. “Most of the paintings have a vantage point that’s a hundred yards off, that’s kind of remote. I feel that’s a very personal vantage point. As an artist I’m seeing things from a certain distance.
To me that speaks to this very subtle alienation that we all feel, that’s a quiet undercurrent to all these technologies.”

Betts plays with the clash between voyeurism and recreation. “There is a distance to it,” he explains, “there is a removal. And when I see the show, when I walk through the show, there’s a little creepy factor to it. But I don’t want that to be overwhelming. There is this omnipresence now of cameras, of people taking pictures everywhere. I really want to explore that a little bit because on the one hand it’s very approachable, and some of that feeling may get lost because of how approachable [the paintings are], but to me these issues are pretty deep and pretty serious.”

Take a dive into this sun-soaked world of surveillance by visiting William Betts' website or seeing the paintings in person at Margaret Thatcher Projects, up until July 15th.