

WILLIAM BETTS: *TERMINAL*

“LIKE IT OR NOT,” artist William Betts seems to say, “Big Brother is watching you.” With *Terminal*, the current exhibition at Albuquerque’s Richard Levy Gallery, Betts creates computer-generated paintings based on stills from surveillance videos. He explores the omnipresence of security cameras in modern society, and in doing so exposes the disquietude that comes with the act of watching and being watched. Before choosing to make art a full-time career, Betts worked variously in gas, real estate, and software technology. Upon moving to Houston in 2003 to focus exclusively on painting, he secured a license that permitted him to view surveillance videotapes from the city’s department of transportation. Utilizing a software system of his own design, Betts translates security video stills into paintings comprised of computer-generated acrylic dots that stand in for photographic pixels. The closer one gets, the less distinguishable the subject; what appear at first glance to be blown-up, fuzzy photographs are in fact highly technical, digitized acrylic paintings.

To consider the underlying implication of these images is a provocative exercise in which the very process of *looking* forges an intriguing relationship between the act of observation and the object under observation. Assuming that it is easier to see something from up close than it is to see something from far away, Betts poses an uncomfortable proposition for his viewers: The closer we get to what we look at, the less recognizable it becomes. Counterintuitively, the farther we distance ourselves

from what we see in front of us, the abler we are to truly see—and watch—it.

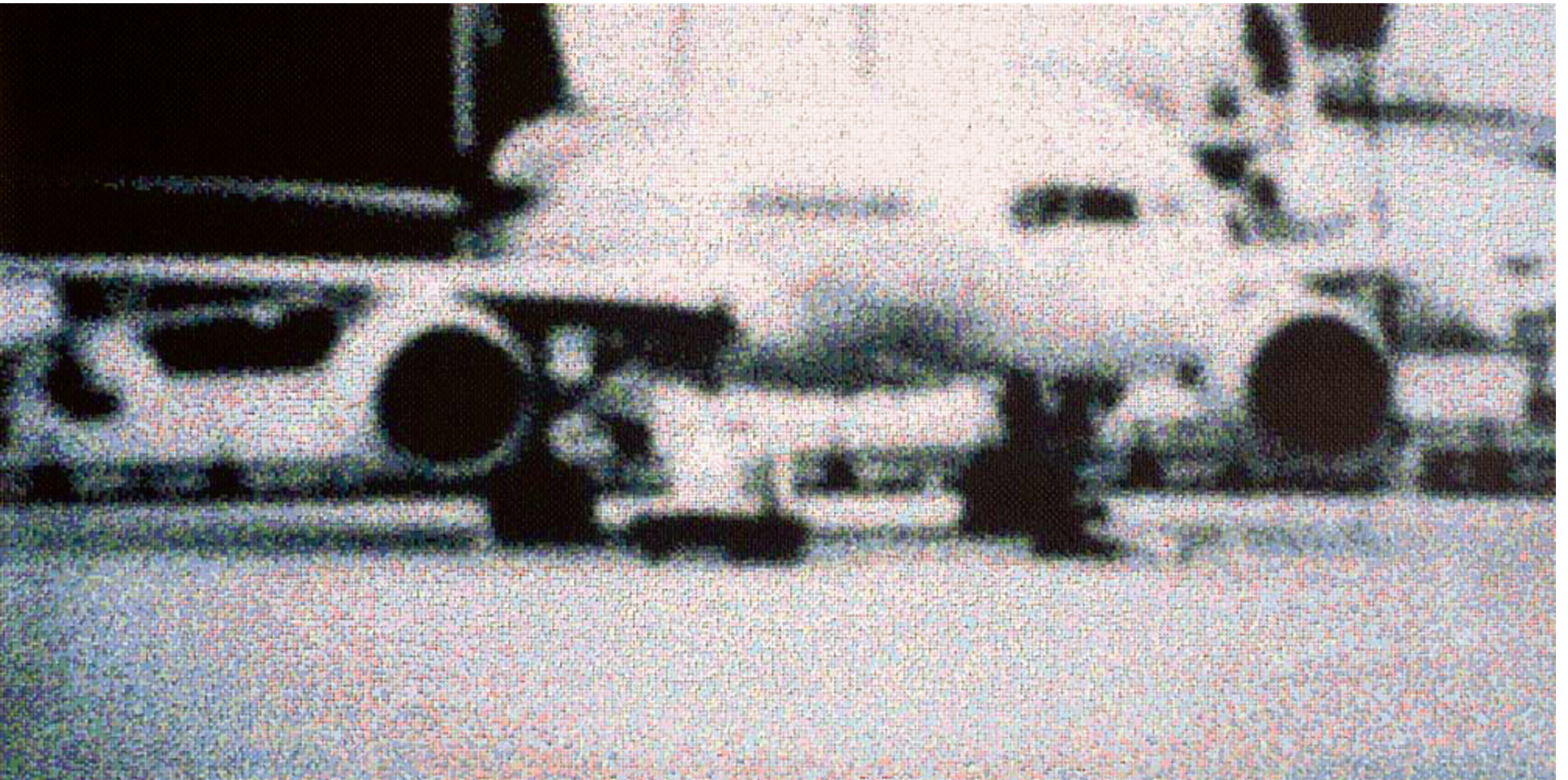
In the most impressive group of paintings from *Terminal*, we are confronted with black-and-white stills taken from airport security video footage. I don’t imagine that these unorthodox depictions of airplanes would appeal to a wide audience—they are bleak and grainy, and from across the room they look like grotesquely enlarged segments from security photographs. Close up, they dissolve into thousands of tiny pixilated dots, evincing a bizarre twist on pointillism. *YYZ 10.30.2010* is a massive, fuzzy portrait of an airplane. The black jet engines face us, and the strangely mammalian muzzle of the fuselage points straight ahead. Even the two windows of the cockpit look humanoid, like eyes wearing black sunglasses. The plane takes on a strangely familiar quality, becoming less of a vessel and more of a relatable thing. Although we indeed feel a sort of squeamish voyeurism, any suggestion of imminent danger or overt tension is absent. After all, these scenes are recognizable to anyone who’s ever walked through an airport terminal, but distorted just enough to make us instantly aware that we are viewing them from a camera’s perspective. Betts has capitalized on America’s perceived need for widespread security surveillance, particularly since the September 11 terrorist attacks. The now-ingrained notion of homeland security can also be seen as the overbearing obligation we face as a society to be even passively on guard for such an attack.

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514 CENTRAL AVE SW, ALBUQUERQUE

Elsewhere Betts uses vibrant color to create scenes where people lounge poolside or sprawl out on sunny beaches. In *Untitled 1:20*, two women sit on chairs in the sand, heads bent in conversation and barely visible from underneath straw hats. There is no detectable drama, no action—but despite the breeziness of this relaxed scene, we feel chilled nonetheless. The discomfort comes from the fact that we have a bird’s-eye view, really a lens-like view, of these oblivious strangers. We have the singularly creepy, robotic sensation of watching people who are unaware of being watched.

Betts’s astonishing artistic technique challenges the very notion of what paintings are supposed to look like. There is something calculating and detached about the digitized work in *Terminal*, and rightly so. Betts’s space-age method of conveying the futuristic act of digitized observation results in an exhibition of resoundingly science fiction proportions, full of work that is as strangely beautiful as it is radically compelling. In using digitally created artwork to visually translate the mechanical act of video surveillance, Betts creates a clever symmetry, reminding us of our role in a culture that deems observation as not only a necessary societal component but as an increasingly pervasive aspect of modern existence. In viewing this exhibition, we appropriate a voyeurism usually reserved for hidden cameras, causing us to question our increasingly passive acknowledgment that being scrutinized is simply a natural part of American life.

—IRIS MCLISTER



William Betts, *YYZ 10.30.2010*, acrylic drops on canvas, v