# Jeff Beall

**Encryption Painting** 



# Writing in Veils

Ellen Birrell

I am a new writer. After half a century of loving words but not owning them, I embark on a new art. What are its qualities? Language formalizes the shape of thought and expands its territorial reach. We know this. But there is a cost. Words name—and in naming, they fix and thicken thoughts, stopping their electric momentum. How is this possible? Language maps, and in mapping, the territory clogs. A "tree" is no longer an experience, but just, not a "flower," or, not a "monkey." But I write because the mapping allows you and I to share the map if not the thought. Like all representation, the map is only intermittently transitive, but it is still the best we have.

I write and Jeff Beall unwrites, or tries to—the results are never perfect. After all, once written, the territory never quite recovers. In incremental stages of concentrated tiny gestures, not unlike writing, Beall restores one representation perforated by another.

Fast slow, photograph painting, analog digital: what are these unstable works? Here is how they are made: a photograph of nothing in particular; translated into an encrypted digital cipher; printed digitally, one superimposed on the other, with the letters, numbers, and punctuation marks of the cipher "knocked out" (as they say in the printer's trade) of the photograph; the pierced and halted image then carefully restored through the tedious and, I imagine, meditative application of tiny amounts of watercolor. As a photographer by training, take my word for it; this is a monumental spotting job.

A photograph of "nothing in particular," or so Beall tells me. Of course, he has chosen just these among a potentially infinite number of other

nothings in particular. These are certain kinds of things: I see smeary trees in some and smudgy blobs of brilliant orangey yellow in others. But the camera's glance is restive, the shutter's split second blink being too slow to still the moving light and fix a legible image. How fast is that? Sixty miles an hour versus 1/60th of a second. Whatever it is, it is hurry at mechanized speed. No time to stop and smell the flowers, for that is what the fuzzy blobs turn out to be. No time for the bucolic grounding witness to nature's magnificent slow pageantry. Is nature an exhausted form of beauty, now only generic—trees here, flowers there—to be noted casually out the passenger window on our way to someplace else? Staple of countless art history lectures, perhaps landscape's language has mapped and clogged the territory to a thoroughly intransitive state. But we still want transcendence, from both nature and art.

Beall does. Beall went for architecture at Berkeley, and then painting at CalArts. He describes his commitment this way: "I am looking for experience in Visual Art."

Where is one to have experience in a clogged territory? Jeff delivers his photographs of nothing in particular up to the computer. In those secret circuits, the analog of silver salt and daylight becomes just more data, stored in memory next to all the other kinds of data. Words, numbers, pictures—they are all ones and zeros to the computer. Just like nature as a list, these data wait indifferently for the Finder to reconstitute them as pictures or email or spreadsheets, according to their coded instructions. Once recumbent in the circuits, the data can be reconstituted in many different ways, depending on



Untitled (I'm Not There (1956)) 2004 Iris print and watercolor on paper. 33 \( \frac{3}{4} \) \( \times 45 \) \( \frac{1}{2} \).  He was talking about representations and territories too—water for purification, bread and wine for body and blood.

the instructions—your spreadsheet as a picture, perhaps. But here, according to an instruction called an encryption program, Jeff asks the Finder to reconstitute these photographs of nothing in particular into their exact equivalent in unreadable yet perfectly legible ASCII text. The fable of the monkeys and the typewriters immediately comes to mind when I look at the encrypted version of Jeff's images. All the characters are familiar—letters, numbers, orthographic marks—but clearly the monkeys have not typed long enough to make any ordinary sense. Or, perhaps the answer is that in the face of this language, I am the monkey.

The two versions of the same image—the blurry trees/poppies and the ASCII text—lie down together in the instructions of some layout application, and emerge from the computer with the help of an Iris printer and watercolor paper. The composite image is strange indeed. The warmth and tooth of the paper supports an image of the trees here or the poppies there shot through with this language I cannot read. This monkey, blocked by lack of access to the language here, keeps stopping at the surface, the digits, frustrated that she cannot have the lustral bath of the complete image, purifying and passive.

Which is the veil, image or text? "Veil" is such a feminine word. One thinks of devout women, or the hidden female sex, or Salome, dancing. A way of sustaining suspense, a deflection, a veil is an obstacle in the direct path, something that sustains pursuit by slowing it down. The frisson of deferral, the veil is a resistance to closure, here producing an erotics of delay in the path of the technological hurry to get to the point.

Veils are also about privacy and interiority: the nun's habit, the Muslim woman's hijab, the veil in the tabernacle of the ancient temple, the rood screen in the church. They are all manifestations of an interior belief, an elsewhere of significance. Thomas Cranmer in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1604, put it: "An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Such veils are signs of belonging, subscription and belief. They are both testimonial to and burden of a membership legible but unreadable to those who do not share it.

Veils appear over and over again in Beall's work, sometimes impenetrable as in the "Reterritorialization" photographs from 1992, or in the "Empty Wall" installations of 1994.

In these works there is always a behind, and in the case of "Empty Wall (gesso)" a work made of open paper bags, a literal depth. Whether the depth of the paper bags is waiting to be filled with groceries or the Deep Hidden Meaning—that is the question Beall asks playfully, but I think, very seriously. The literalness of the "Empty Wall" produces a rueful humor. They appear solid (a whole wall!), yet we know them to be flimsy. We can't put our trust in them, but we want to.

Beall plays literal against metaphoric depth in many of these veiled works. It is his persistent question. The most literal of moves is a tautology. In Logic, a tautology is a form of proof, for example: "X is X." This dumb reiteration of the obvious is what makes it reliable, a proof. In Rhetoric (or writing, as here, where I am inscribing the territory of facile thought to share meaning with you), a tautology—the stating of the same thing twice in different words—is considered a fault, a stupid



Reterritorialization Photograph I 1992 C-Print. 26 1/8" x 39 1/2"



For those who believe in Bob Dylan, the word or phrase in parentheses in these titles are titles of very obscure songs known only to deep initiates.

stutter, an irritant in what is supposed to be the seamless surface of style. Consider two earlier works: Here we have images of trees mounted on plywood veiled in wax [see the next page]. The veiling is less opaque here, allowing some hazy access to what is behind. But what is behind? Wood on wood, a kind of reiteration yes, but like all tautologies, composed of absolute flatness that leaves us nowhere else to go, certainly not into the trees.

I return to my question in these new works, the works under consideration here: Which is the veil, image or text? And what does Beall's elaborate retouching do? The monkey is sure the text is the veil, because it stops her at the surface of the paper. The logician sees only the proof, the flatness of the tautology. The writer and the artist know that the sprayed ink forming whatever remains of these trees or flowers (even after the tautology has nattered its flattening insistence) is the actual veil. After all, the object before us is only watercolor and paper, the woods and fields were always already elsewhere.

ASCII, American Standard Code for Information Interchange, is, according to Wikipedia, "a character encoding based on the English alphabet....ASCII specifies a correspondence between digital bit patterns and the symbols of a written language, thus allowing digital devices to communicate with each other and to process, store, and communicate character-oriented information." ASCII is, at some computery level, about communication and access, a sort of digital Esperanto. And yet its appearance in Beall's works here is the result of the opposite impulse: the secrecy, paranoia and exclusion implied by encryption. Wikipedia's entry under cryptography quotes MIT

professor Ron Rivest thusly: "Cryptography is about communication in the presence of adversaries." An encryption always indicates an elsewhere of significance, requiring a key to access possessed only by initiates. Its impulses are private and defensive.

Beall is generous though, as if trying to mitigate the conflict. The first words in the text, and the only readable ones, tell the name and version of the encryption program. Famous in the world of cryptography, it is the encryption freeware called PGP—Pretty Good Privacy. PGP emerged in 1991 as a retort to Reagan era challenges to personal data privacy. As Jeff explains in a statement about the work: "If one were to type in all the text back into the encryption software with the appropriate password, then it would all be decoded to become the very image it is overlaying."

Is that a clue? The works are all "Untitled" with a word or phrase following in parentheses. Beall tells me that the parenthetical word or phrase is the actual password for that particular image.<sup>2</sup> Is the aspiration of this work the hope that someone might actually decode the image? And what would that decoding do? Return the image to a state of nature—a state of "grace," in Cranmer's words—that is anything but "nothing in particular?" Maybe that's why Jeff is at pains, over many months, like some monk in a medieval cloister, carefully, with tiny brushes, and acute attention, at the closest range of vision, filling in each letter of the code with his best approximation of the surrounding color, illuminating the image to wholeness, quite literally, digit by digit. This must surely be an experience.

Ellen Birrell is an artist, editor, writer and farmer. She teaches at CalArts.







Untitled (II) 1988 Tinted paraffin, photograph on wood panel, 27 %" x 21 %" x 2"

Untitled 1989 Tinted paraffin, photograph on wood panel, 26"  $\times$  20"  $\times$  2"



Untitled (Makin' a Liar) 2005 Iris print and watercolor on paper, 33 ¾" x 45 ½" [In progress]

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Ggz7mEYasc9+voc5hCOEGdl/pGiFNdeemz1tqkbrYn6/16RWdkMa	aKDxZ6B2hldKfJaxbuX3 NiDp6XRG7A isor8E82m4lSZyGHuhoT/GmluszGixM8014OvM6BEI/Hagpi Newlife and 325 Ox Xx2 r
Djh4lP3A3YqTirwfrflodJaQg80jznMQXYgfc+nRt+2dgZ5gldlutltKI	DTYSjivm00Wiwlz9Fxn95 VV. VI. SV. Klix750aG-vii3BAJu48RCAHd-X6ZY774GIJ-18-s-18219400 aRdalMMdaHuMidpaViintee
uT9wGfEDc+ZFmo1WJWu0CObaPGvAbwHuc+ttC9mmjyjXJP/+/6	Sgwsk3bLZ4nuTHvIQMFEseFE13ap1KdbWoo2028at 1 51pe3fga18at 1 51pe3fga18at 1 51pe3fga18at 1 51pe3fga18at 1 51pe3fg JYe4ntfmarzNw7+qSXaabdbToaRAu96M4RnOQMwZJ2ce4VJ2ce4
kPri6NaMOx.lt+32val BEmo/dYdEcEBIAffk.1854frYz7kvi4oErPAII	Vedntfmarz Nw7+aSYaahdhToaRAu96MARaOOMw7





Untitled (Makin' a Liar) 2005 Iris print and watercolor on paper, 33 ¾" x 45 ½"

Untitled (Enough is Enough) 2002 Iris print and watercolor on paper, 33 ¾" x 45 ½"

R1M/u35rHCyEvS55TpDD43il71FTYcVJpap+gquazfJM7cl3aJjbtTDflW6x1na8tNrOEPpotxChgTUNN516WazcbDd6hgHvegGleHPbUmaDjNT0Z00U/lxwBuC9ZZvP3M+k6i t5oLbQ6OKJ6/Fk1dEktK/BuQjke8W3w8705N3RWUQpdkkojhm8WkbQKcH/oQRswXNH5X5kDlLSm0xjs3uZec9QPslkUTCE0UJ3422GTJcU8yFhHTy1WnEFVWiRUVOI 2FUsZXfgRLjC8BGwH6V2erqyGoq+7szYgSerJB8x97DCp2gasm9ANIKIRLXQ/moqoCFIvmE+uehmbHkHDaLshC/dkuZ4o8dJ8PIVGkoelgroodCXKAnUxw5DvDgrotbJP MBfyLxSfv/+7EyB5wb62E+rTq6MqvOD/u6NM2tKH1RPm1RPqv0P1CqiWJCjqLMiPnpyzsCHzOLv3xU7eNJl3Duo+Fz4NnlE6V6MQf2uWie81Y14lYMPv/7fxyMda045Wgr 13+QsGOk1wcxhAlAn4zrC1+Fv7eLMeX8MenXbESx+N3vK3audBbFe/hkc++QrlUEna6nDQwX2YiuePd7M6NFDFGMA5ai8BxyssCJUbkhutHZ24eGEWAmkZ8BJU66j60 XKZq76Qc1Hou7/Q8R2Tlsz89E2iueVT+c73QD5c1CeYjGk4ibeJ08soSzqZUq29OoWcWxlAR5EjSnEzk/8xBWz69jmtxFt0fXJdwWmFHKk3GcxHcs0tum4zjnBTqaXXjhmfV WpwJ5t4sGSzywi2Xj9YSQVoB5y6yhJPPEqJoAuM9NtJBGMgbiCiqGTvTigS1sn2c/leNM8lTQKxhCbskhxQnxpN6oOYPUJi+jWcLfdxMFGS+eJsWcQp9JvVbgjdkGlSTas ZuVUZYEEFT97DnFfTuk00FXiri3QC5DMH/s6gl4EPoZfllT+re3FElhg5Ubp9sNaUuXHJLucETtm8RHek1QzlH6f0xnTMvurAOASqxP6tmFlqYqeZP0ljUrydkLsgf9dk/s8T9o MA+SWNQUMovePQDRd5yTBdc0GxzqqApx+I+5DQvbJv2BQbaKcyPeAOWnYTKMhJZMU3F4ae6nNLYIM4X6WBE-sVLzoPavnGGC9qtnokl9uWWDBhczIlluRO6WFW p2W/W70IYM9pPXmXXEwAI/V6d7N2n32koD6806rrOslh6Dzul7RWIyTpBt0F+qcN4nxOqpPPWy+E18lo+Gj2tb2/Y6lsimNyiP4rwYD20s86ROqA5Bfw5KBwa0B4+ESEbJ/st xwvhDZZQscZUYdxQQvKWDqkdRmO2ZOSNU2XQxYNTf4Iy3V8KLNiEr5LPT1HOTXI+LBm56yWx6oxuE ImWLp9OvRZNALy/8fZceva6EP97Bckot/s9CUv1q20 Kb/oUL9H8tsXsF1IQV/QMOIX1jd9xeNzbIMiSjA3sEAw2SWNSp9V7QWn0EYGNpuhNRFOa9Xf6G66ZH/AssawiliyolsyntxsZrQxwMVHUAy1mjZV6AdeKuY8fxF6SyZ+rN xWVIwt6l3WUJMqN1wd9n12pWKgCqV1n9lymH/NictmEollRrjCdKB62JWAvLeNVTvqx0d3LqhFkv6beq765RNH966KilRtCo upJ61WL5kVztVQnBJsHSPmPL0PlrichUn4L 6CVJ6u6VLNsJQcV4Tc0Arif9eyrqVxM3Y+rWRvPsDDtJz8A4JW/dODZ85u2M0uosd465QpaUlom 8EW3m33 3Aaty8bam7 HCiWKuhbWd6AE+GWmnzhSbTPZ9oaYE +RwEjjP8oUyyjbDqaGgatC5JLmY1f+3QR8Z5GSiWtg27pfNf0Esav1g29TL5fVpt05ebjZyYDmgwLzE6filedUv9jUZ\_h/9LRqBn1qcaJoFH5XlCO+mSLgA8E/P00M4BT6v3 Ip6ICr+GIUph6ut8CPdcEOHPfad7cGlroX4vhbMS9v1G2isrA3PC7mjQV91KjJDX; slb.7K5XScc.action; blood and a second control of the contro tHqp3X8/7JF3wXCDPBzlojaYdl9rx0LS/lWrUezRG46Kt8Kl0uErFkrqcL4HLYIzbF7wuv2 tubEqu8/7\_5b24254444444444444444444444 (N17IkOvH0jbBT1BqNLg6Za4bYsRww4u12006nUL@prd)/E7iss\VzFojls-latvij6tHvozNBQlujE4xuUmOk1kD/zVDuGS4bxg5aa55aa65ab2TRNgURzwik9xCrDnjeTmtOxEBb 7iZ6LFQftPjjB3U20gM+PAoncQgtdAViUWzWv@bZmb3pE0xrpf6ig6Djid5kxiHhm6w8k9bkFn9VgcL2gygiafay20u5fXd4v7loL141M, 1930bg7L117x1gSA3g+ec7wT9H ZM5Q59scvcShES47f6+kAakr4unfVqX6rrEM@UA65020xA Csd4lo2ydRuNjLGM6rp1/uzm8BjZvehw4M NF7rL2TK6DZbIATofo2FjDxDBHF VXtUmxmJXKRUksaGSmm | | gY+MtNsXBZbdp0TfgB8V fiZljutlEfWSATu8ieX9D S68oKbAhrBL9HXf9C0 osX61HNbNS5cQDf91 6VIO8Uy1+VvgvbgY 54PFPXMhrMXtB nb0J2Hlu8l3vf675F -throzin/7/HDbw9/x; http://doi.org/10.100/11/17/xqefvi/x/dsp5/xqua/F0H0GoRNektqMakeHqwnZJ89stWLimiJaN4Chuleimi/Focktol



Untitled ((We're Living On) Borrowed Time) 2006 Iris print and watercolor on paper, 33 ¾" x 45 ½" [In progress]





Untitled (More Than Flesh and Blood) 2005 Iris print and watercolor on paper, 33 ¾" x 45 ½"

Untitled (I Looked as Far as I Could See) 2003 Iris print and watercolor on paper, 33 ¾" x 45 ½"

Jeff Beall resides in Santa Monica, California with his wife, Lori Jean Swanson, and their sons Wyatt and Jackson.

### **EDUCATION**

MFA 1987, California Institute of the Arts BFA 1986, California Institute of the Arts BA in Architecture 1983, University of California at Berkeley

# **SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

2007	Angles Gallery, Santa Monica
1994	Empty Pleasures AMO, Amanda Obering Gallery Los Angeles
1991	Angles Gallery, Santa Monica
1990	Terrain, San Francisco

Engraption Pointing

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS		
2006	Hi Res / Lo Res Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University, Orange, CA	
2002	The Great Silence Beyond Baroque, Venice, CA	
2001	Recent Acquisitions Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA	
2000	Defining the Sublime Carnegie Art Museum, Oxnard, CA	
	A Lasting Legacy: Recent Acquisitions to the Collection Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA	
1999	Warmer Still Videoland, New York	
1996	Ether Angles Gallery, Santa Monica	
1995	Smells Like Vinyl Roger Merians Gallery, New York	
1994	Constructed Views Woodbury University Art Gallery, Burbank, CA	
	Installations The Drawing Center, New York	
	Serial Angles Gallery, Santa Monica	

Introductions '93

New Evidence:

Haines Gallery. San Francisco

Recent Art & the Photograph

Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA

1991	Rene Pierre Allain / Jeff Beall /
	Robert Dean
	Gallery Moos, Toronto

The Chapman Market Show Chapman Market, Los Angeles

Five Day Group Show Thomas Solomon's Garage, Los Angeles

## 1989 I to Eye Cirrus, Los Angeles

Logical Conclusion
Jan Kesner Gallery, Los Angeles

Disappearances
Nahan Contemporary, New York

Uta Barth / Jeff Beall / Paul Boettcher Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa Monica

Los Angeles: Current Abstract Painting Marc Richards Gallery, Los Angeles

1988 *21 Artists*Dennis Anderson Gallery, Los Angeles

1987 Breaking Through the Looking Glass:

Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Breaking Through the Looking Glass: West

Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles

# SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Alan Baron, New York

Miriam Bensimohn, New York Paul & Melanie Boettcher, Los Angeles Tom Bonauro, San Francisco Chipper Boulas & Isabelle Fevrier. Portola Valley, CA Rainer Crone, Munich, Germany Continental Corporation, Cranbury, NJ Tim Ebner, Los Angeles Fred Fehlau, Los Angeles Glen Edward, Santa Ana Richard Green, Los Angeles Louis Gutierrez & Gretchen Seager, Altadena, CA Gerard Jennings, Toronto Susan Landau, Los Angeles Daniel Melnick. Los Angeles David Moos, Toronto Peter Norton, Santa Monica Todd Oldham, New York Luciano Perna, Los Angeles Alan Power, Santa Monica James Reinish. New York Rottzieper Family, Remscheid, Germany Sarah Seager, Los Angeles Security Pacific Bank, Los Angeles Linda Stark, Los Angeles Nancy Solomon, New York Mitchell Syrop, Los Angeles Horst von den Steinen, Germany Joel Shine, Santa Monica Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA Carnegie Art Museum, Oxnard, CA Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA Oakland Museum of Art. Oakland, CA Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Oregon

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Clearwater, Bonnie, "Los Angeles: It's Happening at Home," *The Journal of Art*, September/October, 1989

Knight, Christopher, "Loaded," Los Angeles Herald Examiner, August 4, 1989

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Clearwater, Bonnie, "Our Gang," Visions, Summer 1989

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French, Christopher, "La La Land Goes Legitimate," The Journal of Art, April 1989 Special thanks to:

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