

Jeff Beall

Encryption Painting



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Essay by Ellen Birrell

Angles Gallery
2230 Main Street
Santa Monica, California 90405

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.

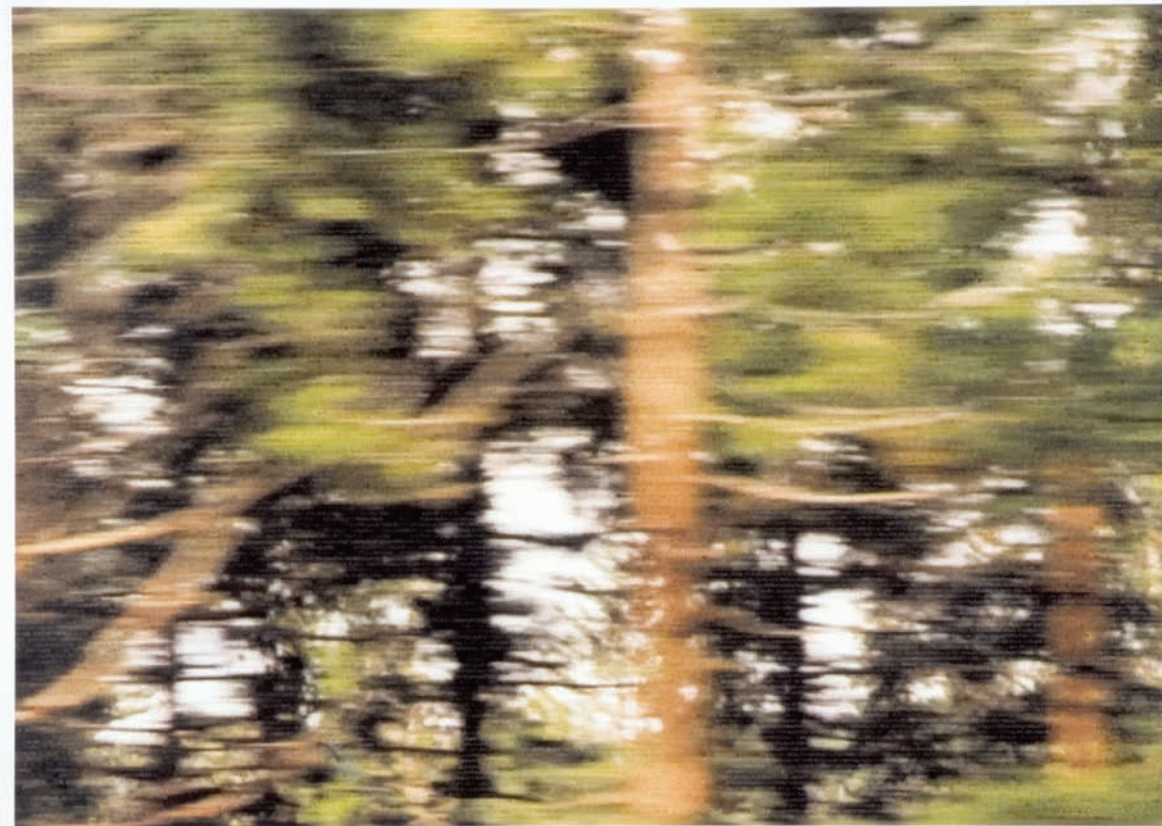
Fast slow, photograph painting, analog digital: what are these unstable works? Here is how they are made: a photograph of nothing in particular; translated into an encrypted digital cipher; printed digitally, one superimposed on the other, with the letters, numbers, and punctuation marks of the cipher “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 ¾" x 45 ½"

1. 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."¹ 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"



Empty Wall (gesso) 1994
Gesso on paper bags, dimensions variable
Installation: Angles Gallery

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.² 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 3/4" x 21 1/4" x 2"



Untitled 1989
Tinted paraffin, photograph on wood panel, 26" x 20" x 2"



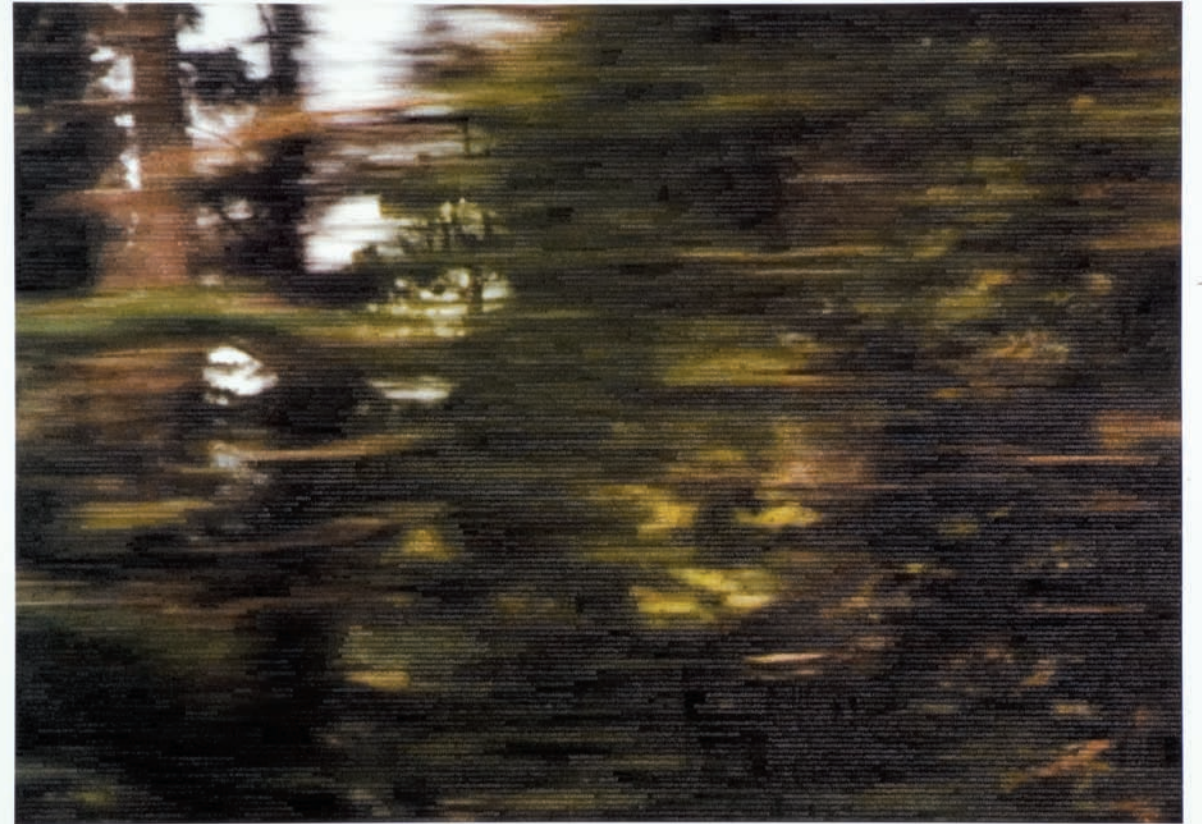
Untitled 1990
Acrylic, paraffin on wood panel, 26 1/4" x 38 1/2" x 1 3/4"



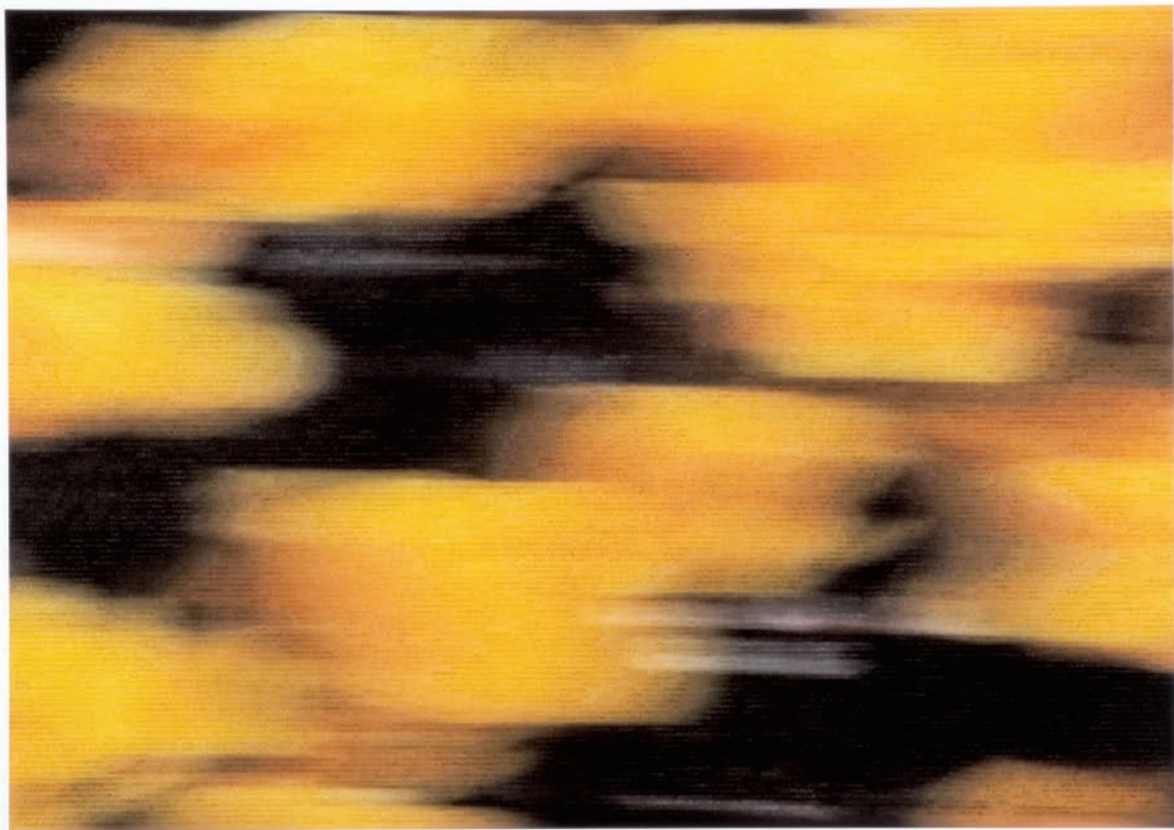
Untitled (Makin a Liar) 2005
Iris print and watercolor on paper, 33 ¾" x 45 ½"
[In progress]



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"



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 *Encryption Painting*
Angles Gallery, Santa Monica

1994 *Empty Pleasures*
AMO, Amanda Obering Gallery,
Los Angeles

1991 Angles Gallery, Santa Monica

1990 Terrain, San Francisco

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

1993 *Introductions '93*
Haines Gallery, San Francisco

1992 *New Evidence:
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:
East*
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

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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May-June, 1995,

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October 4, 1994

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September 23, 1994

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City Pages (Minneapolis), May 4, 1994

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May-June 1994

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July 16, 1993

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ART-TALK, April/May 1990

Kandel, Susan, "L.A. in Review," *ARTS Magazine*,
November 1989

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Art & Auction, November 1989

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

Knight, Christopher, "Narrative Puzzle to Please Eye," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*,
June 23, 1989

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

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The Journal of Art, April 1989

Special thanks to:

David McAuliffe at Angles Gallery for his friendship and support to these many years.

Ellen Birrell for looking carefully and for composing an essay that illuminates the work in pleasurable ways.

Aaron King at Holiday for his considered efforts in the design and creation of this catalog.

Photography Credits:

James Franklin: Pages 5, 8, & 9

Brian Forrest: Pages 1, 3, 6, 12-17

Larry Lytle: Pages 10 & 11

Jeff Beall: Inside covers

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Design: Holiday Design, holidaydesign.net

Printing: Shapco Printing, Inc.,
Minneapolis, MN

Edition of 1000



ANGLES GALLERY