

# SemiConductors: Painting the Transmission of Information

Craig Drennen, curator

Avantika Bawa, New Dehli/Savannah, GA  
Brett Callero, Chicago, IL  
Lauren Clay, Atlanta, GA  
Craig Drennen, Savannah, GA  
Fred Jesser, Savannah, GA  
Heath Ritch, Los Angeles, CA  
Jessica Schnebel, Oklahoma City, OK  
Michael Scoggins, Savannah  
Eric Standley, Blacksburg, VA  
Alexis Terry, Savannah, GA

By 1874 it was found that electricity could carry both power and information. In 1906 an American inventor made a vacuum tube triode that allowed for the amplification of audio signals. In 1947 Bell Labs invented the first working transistor, a compact device that administered the transmission and resistance of electrical energy. By 1958 Texas Instruments demonstrated the first working integrated circuit that predicated the technological world we know today. In 1959 “planar technology” was introduced at Fairchild Semiconductor, wherein multiple circuit pathways were evaporated onto thin wafers of silicon—the most easily obtainable and frequently used semiconductor.

This history is convenient because the history of circuitry is concurrent with the reductive history of Modernism. The leap from vacuum tube to portable transistor mimics the move from painting’s traditional pictorial space to the abstracted pictorial space after Cubism. The subsequent move from transistor to integrated circuit runs parallel to the radical flattening of the picture plane after Barnett Newman. As the scale of electronics hardware became exponentially smaller, its capacity to store information increased. In other words, the amount of manageable information increased as its materiality decreased. Early appliances required electrical power to operate component sequences, but as the integrated circuits became smaller and smaller the components became redefined as a means to reroute and decode the flow of electrical information. The rush to privilege information, coupled with the manic drive toward immateriality could just as easily describe the first generations of conceptual artists. As late ‘60’s conceptual art became “dematerialized” it came to increasingly depend upon memory storage and retrieval. (wall works by Lewitt and Weiner can be infinitely reborn as long as the initial instructional code exists). And if the cultural energy directed toward advancing complex circuitry reads as a sublimated desire to recreate the processes of the human mind, then to value information over material legitimizes “mind over matter.”

Painting found itself in an awkward position, caught in a seeming aporia. Participation in the practice of painting suggested a retrograde attachment to materials over ideas, and a complicity in the worst aspects of bourgeois commodity culture. Artists striving for relevancy within the art world were expected to apostatize painting in favor of nomadic relationships with varied processes. The recurring “returns” of painting tend to valorize only the most predictable tendencies, whether the manic machismo of the Transvanguard to the *pompier* figuration of Currin or Yuskavage. With notable exceptions (Levine, Komar & Melamid, Polke, et al) painting has never been treated as a viable arena for critical practice.

*Semiconductors* is meant to acknowledge a young generation of artists who choose to occupy a more nuanced position. These artists are all—some broadly, some narrowly—painters. Their work becomes a site, like the surface of a silicone chip, where both information and materiality are managed. They've chosen to navigate contemporary art within a vehicle that is both static and active, both very old and always new. Some painters in *Semiconductors* use sophisticated forms of mechanical reproduction, while others use anachronistic versions, and others none at all. Painting's commodity status, which seemed so problematic two decades ago, is handled deftly by these painters who each incorporate their own hand into the process. They submerge themselves into the act of painting without accepting the binary absolutes of previous generations. Painting becomes a permeable membrane with its own history on one side and contemporary culture on the other. Like a capacitor controlling electrons, these painters modulate just how much information is transmitted through their work from both directions. The *Semiconductors* artists allow part of painting's tradition to flow through. They also allow aspects of their own lives and the greater culture to flow through as well. The end result is both painting as a material object that emits information, and painting as a flow of information governed by materials.

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Brett Callero creates works he calls "remakes." The name derives from his inverted processes. Callero begins his creative work by creating a freely-associative installation in his studio from images and text fragments derived from the culture around him. Non-sequitors from radio, television and print media are combined and re-combined on paper, post-its, or even the wall. Callero draws and writes voluminously to create a refracted collage environment that is as much personal as political. He then photographs the walls of his studio and downloads the images for a second level of manipulation. Callero eventually selects image/text combinations to be printed onto canvas using a photomechanical process. The printed canvas is stretched onto modular stretchers and exhibited as "remakes." The last step of the process is to stretch a canvas, but the first step remains the creative space of the studio and activity of the artist's hand.

Jessica Schnebel is involved with a project she calls "Glamour Incomplete." Schnebel has a one-year subscription to *Glamour* magazine and each time a new issue arrives, she begins a 5'10" painting of the cropped cover. She works on the painting for one month, or until the next issue arrives. She then starts a new painting for that month's cover, leaving the previous month's effort incomplete. She will end the year with twelve paintings of *Glamour* covers, all incomplete. The gesture contains more subtlety than its Pop surface indicates. The paintings are incomplete for multiple reasons. They are unfinished in the traditional sense only (surface coverage, paint quality, convincing image, etc.). The images themselves are not of complete magazine covers, but truncated versions that minimize the magazine's name and maximize the constantly changing model. Each issue is "new" without pointing to the modernist caveat of progress. Each painting is presented on its own shelf, a reminder of magazine display that simultaneously announces itself even more dramatically as a painting.

Heath Ritch makes what at first glance seem to be competent abstractions with subtle surface variations. The truth is more complex. Ritch starts each piece by carefully painting an image found in the pages of current art magazines. When the paint is still wet, Ritch presses a separate piece of unprimed canvas onto the surface, pulls it up, then presses it down again. The result is a "stamping" process that soon obliterates the original image. Ritch continues this process, often with the addition of mineral spirits, to create a modulated expanse of color and texture. He exhibits both the painting and stained "stamp" that created it. The painting has several layers of decision making by the artist, but the stamp's paint application is purely accidental. Through this process Ritch creates a reverse evolution, where each piece begins with a heavily mediated image from art culture that acknowledges the most advanced forms of mechanical reproduction. The next step resembles a primitive, though labor intensive, form of mechanical reproduction. And like Rauchenberg's *Erased DeKooning*, it becomes difficult to see the painting as truly "abstract" once the negated image is known.

Eric Standley destabilizes the use value for painting while continuing to spend long hours in the studio. Standley makes modest scale representational paintings on linen using traditional techniques of underpainting and glazing. The images portrayed are often jars or containers of some sort in both interior and outdoor settings. However, when the paint has dried, Standley carefully cuts the linen to make a shoe pattern. He sews a pair of shoes for himself from what had previously been a painting. For the next stage he builds a lined wooden box for the shoes that he then displays on a low shelf. The exterior lid of the box contains a small photographic image of the original painting. Painting becomes transformed from a craft-based pictorial form whose use value may be debated, to a pair of functional shoes in the artist's size. The works oscillate from sacred to profane--and at least partially back--as every new manipulation alters the existing meaning. Each piece starts within the most private and historically stable definition of painting, but is then shoved onstage into the world of commodity and retail sale. By the end they plateau in a nether world that has aspects of both, but allegiance to neither.

Lauren Clay primarily makes large paintings on paper. The titles of her works usually indicate that each piece is a "proposal" for a subsequent work, but like Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, the final work never exists. Clay manages to create pieces that are physically large without seeming monolithic. She leaves much of the surface area white, so her work tends to blend in to the surrounding wall easily. Geometric images occur in these works and are complemented by rhyming 3-dimensional forms that actually hold the paper to the wall. The rounded corners of the paper and the soft edges to the forms give the impression, at this scale, of miniatures made inordinately large. The work invites investigation, yet defers attention away to the "final" work that it proposes.

Alexis Terry has begun making elaborate wall installations from cans of pigmented plaster. The cans are the simplest variety reclaimed from the trash by Terry, who has also done endurance based performance work. She cleans each can, then fills it to the brim with colored plaster, while extending a screw from the bottom of the can. When she has finished this step, the cans may be screwed directly into the wall. The original commodity function begins to vanish as the cans become cylinders of pure color. For a recent piece she arranged 500 cans on the west wall of a gallery to form the sunset constellation pattern for the nighttime sky. Cans that were abandoned and earthbound come to convincingly represent the distant sky. And one of the formal problems of painting-- how represent great distance while maintaining the physicality of the paint--is given a new and seemingly effortless solution.

Avantika Bawa makes aggregates of painting, installation, and sculpture that are simultaneously humble and ambitious. Bawa often begins by applying blue housepaint to simple corrugated cardboard that then becomes a component within a larger arrangement. The lightness of the cardboard often combines with the solidity of the architecture to form an absurd theater where a painted box clings to the side of a wall. The history of painting since the 14<sup>th</sup> century has involved portable paintings clinging to walls, but in Bawa's hands it's given an unexpected twist. Her invocation of the readymade tradition allows the utilitarian origin of cardboard boxes to leak through, but not without becoming recoded to fit Bawa's agenda for altering sites with the unlikely combinations of color, line and shape.

Michael Scoggins also makes large-scale works on paper. In his case, he creates oversize reproductions of notebook paper. The notebook paper becomes the form within which he revisits imagery from childhood, or more exactly, a male childhood. The fantasies, neuroses, and power relations of childhood are writ large with deadpan coolness. He has exhibited what looked like oversized homework assignments, punitive sentence repetitions, and fantastically complex drawings of staged battles. More recently, he has manipulated the oversized notebook paper to form paper airplanes, paper footballs, and crumpled wads. The unexpected scale alone allows a viewer a flash of remembrance of a time when standard notebook paper seemed huge in comparison to the body. Scoggins uses this form as a delivery system for an ideology that gains complexity from extended viewing.

Fred Jesser begins his work by stretching printed materials over traditional stretchers. He then devotes himself to studying the pattern and locating ways within which he can insinuate his own presence. For Jesser it is almost as if each painting begins as a wrestling match where he allows the commodity status of the printed material to pin him, before working his way back out. The more he paints onto maps or printed fabric, the more vocal his refusal to reject what the material asserts. He begins by allowing the full transmission of the fabric's information, then interferes with the transmission by inserting his own hand into the mechanically reproduced image. His interventions into the print pattern may be readily perceptible, but might just as often require close examination.

I am Craig Drennen, and in my own work I refer to the 1984 movie *Supergirl*. *Supergirl* is an information cluster that I explore the way a diver explores a shipwreck. The information is static and forgotten. The drawings and paintings I make function as searchlights, whose power to reveal is still becoming apparent to me. I am attracted to the idea that *Supergirl* was a costly failure, both critically and financially. *Supergirl* allows me to look directly into the nature of "success" and "failure" and examine the subsequent usefulness of those terms. *Supergirl* affords me the opportunity to comment on the ascendancy of film and video within contemporary art from the vantage point of drawing and painting-- technologically simple forms. I do not have the resources to create a film that can compete with the major studios or well-funded contemporary artists, but I can entirely inhabit an existing film and re-code it according to my own investigation.

Craig Drennen  
704 Stuart Street  
Savannah, GA 31405  
home: (912) 352-1765  
cell: 912-220-1144  
adrennen@scad.edu