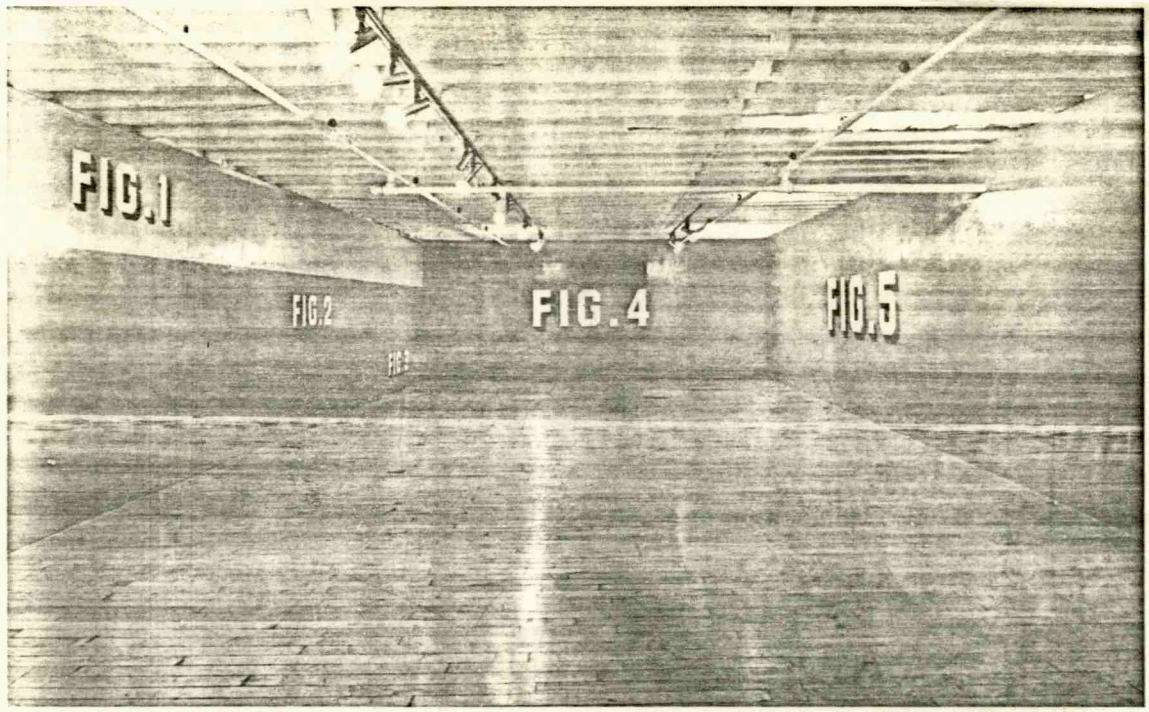

Garry Neill Kennedy, Figure Paintings, 1984. *Installation view. Courtesy 49th Parallel Gallery, Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art.*

GARRY NEILL KENNEDY

This is a case of imperialism overtaking varying shades of nationalism. Garry Neill Kennedy's *Figure Paintings* exhibition is a reminder of how America's neighbors, north and south, strain under its "friendly persuasion." Kennedy's installation stripes the gallery's large front room with the grays used by Canada, Mexico, and the United States to paint their warships. This work turns on a chromatic equilibrium that subtly visualizes the immense and unequivocal dominance of the United States in this hemisphere. Numerals, figures, like those that distinguish naval vessels, serialize five gray zones on three walls. An explanatory panel in the exhibition reveals that while the first three stripes represent the grays used by Canada, Mexico, and the United States, respectively, zone four represents a mixture of the Canadian and American colors "in quantities proportional to the amounts required to cover the fleets of Canada and U.S.A." Likewise, zone five represents the proportional mixture for Mexico and America. Remarkably, there is virtually no distinction between zones four and five and there hangs the balance of Kennedy's point.

Like the dominant half of any sour relationship, America's impetuousness is boring when it is not callous and deadly. It is this curious mixture of weariness and sheer terror that tempers international diplomacy where common geometry has become indenturement; when a government always serves its best interests by serving those of its more powerful neighbor. Attuned to these themes, *Figure Paintings* naturally invites thoughts of imperialism – the ability to be so radiant that one obscures shades of difference that might otherwise show through. The play on battleship gray becomes another way of expressing the global presence of the United States armed forces and the knowledge that "the sun never sets on the American Empire." It is a metaphor for relinquishing cultural diversity to universal militarization.

This exhibition is mutable to the extent that it registers beyond the specific circumstances in North America. The dominant gray signals a warning that the United States and the Soviet Union are united in their struggle to fashion societies by the same measure. It echoes the ambivalence over the deployment of Cruise missiles in some European countries. Appearing at a time when irrevocable acts of corporate irresponsibility are flashed daily across the news, it also turns slowly to pronounce the ecumenical doctrine of corporate (small c) catholicism. Grounded by the Union Carbide fiasco in India and the on-again-off-again settlement for the victims of Agent Orange, this work urges one to respond to the enfolding of business and governmental priorities, where corporate interests become foreign policy. At those points, imperialism, as it is classically defined, gives way to a streamlining of corporate and political interests that animates a unified culture. In this sense, *Figure Paintings* portrays a unified culture that veils its precise objectives by flaunting extreme power. As Jean Baudrillard has observed, the "convergence of language between the economic and political is . . . what marks a society such as ours, where 'political economy' is fully realized." Kennedy partially visualizes Baudrillard's notion of "political economy" in this work as it pushes off the side of current events to glide to a precise albeit complex meaning.

To regress for a moment, the invitation for this exhibition, a gray and black facsimile of the distinctive Mary Boone/Michael Werner announcements, originally encouraged thoughts of appropriation, but appropriation to the extent that it occurred beyond the realm of the work of art. First sight of the exhibition suggested quite a different reading, a global vantage, a view that alerts us to the unified culture and, by virtue of that alert, creates a broad gulf between itself and the narrow avenues of the art world. It is a margin so expansive, so vast that to bridge it means submitting to something artfully entropic, self-conscious, and thus self-serving. Regrettably, this may be Kennedy's primary intention laid bare in the final paragraph of the published statement for the exhibition. It reads: "While the work is presented within the borders of the American empire, it is at the same time nestled in the heart of figure painting country – SoHo, New York City. Acknowledgment is made of this location on the invitation to the exhibition which states (in parentheses) that the 49th Parallel gallery is just across the street from the Mary Boone/Michael Werner Gallery."

Here the exhibition falters. It obliges itself to too much and in the process is betrayed by its own ambitions. To argue that the Boone/Werner enterprise is not the product of a staggering marketing talent is to put oneself in an unenviable position. Few would object to the assessment that Mary Boone did play a seminal role in capitalizing on allegorical picture-making or its establishment as the official style. But to couch serious arguments at that level of parley was left to the less articulate long ago. After all, the oligarchy Kennedy sees embodied in the Boone/Werner Gallery is not exclusively an American phenomenon, but rather the result of an international merger. While it is not doctrinaire to cast that gallery as a side effect or a token of the "political economy" Kennedy's installation so ingenuously visualizes, it seems less than astute to single out the art world for special treatment by it. To do so is to be stricken with overkill; to create an impressive critique only to demean it by recalling shared objections to how the cogs of the art world are greased. Kennedy underestimates his own sense of things and thus places his art's full meaning in detention. If this kind of art is to have real opportunity at changing the course of events, to be more partisan than political, it must resist the ease with which predeliberated, one-dimensional arguments can be telegraphed. It must do this because, for many on both sides of these questions, the stakes are higher than Kennedy may suspect. (49th Parallel, *December 1-22*)

Ronald Jones

Arts Magazine.

Garry Kennedy
49th Parallel Gallery
New York
December 1 to 22

In the past Garry Kennedy's art activities have reflected the influence of both modernist and conceptual art. Whether in painting or in installation work his approach has involved identifying observantly and systematically the givens of a situation and using these givens as the means for making the work. Such a self-sufficient methodology, while eschewing representation, symbolism, and metaphor, did not however produce works whose sole appeal was to the eye. Many of the monochrome paintings from the mid-seventies emphasized the relationship between the process of execution and the physical properties of paint and support. It was this particular acknowledgement of the support which set Kennedy apart from other practitioners. That he could find in the little idiosyncracies and inconsistencies of canvas, paper, dowel, etc. sufficient limits within which to make a painting provided much of the power, and at times charm, in the work.

While the work since that time has moved from the self-sufficient to the site-specific the interest in supports has remained. But now the political and social as well as the physical properties have come to interest him. For instance, in *Finchwell, Finchwell, Finchwell, Finchwell and Osborne*, (1983) a business office was chosen as the site. Through the installation of office cartoons (like those found in magazines) at locations such as the watercooler, the boss's office and the reception area, Kennedy was able to highlight the hierarchies and divisions of labour which exist between administrators and employees.

His most recent installation, *Figure Paintings*, at the 49th Parallel Gallery on West Broadway in New York, continues in this direction. The work exploits the unique location of the federally funded Canadian gallery and it's function as a "diplomatic" showcase for contemporary Canadian art.

Taking everything into consideration, Kennedy began the piece with the exhibition announcement. Kennedy's announcement duplicates the distinctive format and typestyle of those issued by the Mary Boone/Michael Werner Gallery, which is well known as the showcase for 'new' painting. Among the artists which they handle are 'figurative' painters such as David Salle and Georg Baselitz.

The three walls of the front room of the 49th Parallel Gallery were painted floor to ceiling with grey paint. The first wall was painted in three horizontal bands, each a slightly different grey, and the bands labelled fig. 1, fig. 2 and fig. 3 respectively. The second wall, labelled fig. 4, and the third, fig. 5, were continuous surfaces of one grey only. The large chunky type used for labelling was identical to that on the hulls of military ships.

On the fourth wall an invitation was displayed along with a legend which read:

Fig. 1 paint used to cover the ships of the Canadian navy.

Fig. 2 paint used to cover the ships of the American navy.

Fig. 3 paint used to cover the ships of the Mexican navy.

Fig. 4 mixture of figures 1 and 2 in quantities proportional to the amounts required to cover the fleets of Canada and U.S.A.

Fig. 5 mixture of figures 2 and 3 in quantities proportional to the amounts required to cover the fleets of Mexico and U.S.A.

From the legend alone it was easily deduced that there would be no perceptible difference between figs. 2, 4 and 5.

The intention, then, based on oppositions of American/Canadian and American/Mexican, is to comment on the military and cultural hegemony which the U.S. exerts on it's 'neighbours'. This opposition, then produces a number of other themes such as neighbours, borders, figures, horizons, etc. upon which ironies and puns can be be worked. For example, the Boone/Werner Gallery, which rests exactly across the street from the 49th Parallel, is both an international and local 'neighbour'. The term 'figures' designates both 'figurative' paintings and figs. 1, 2, etc. which Kennedy had painted on the walls of the 49th Parallel. The Gallery itself is named after one of the borders mentioned in the work.

The piece is clever, even elegant, in it's conception. But this may be it's problem. The effectiveness of many of Kennedy's pieces can usually be measured in the amounts of nervous laughter which they elicit. I think this comes from the tension produced between the cool, distanced presentation and the empathy found in humourous elements. By shifting focus to peripheral details such as the ties men wear, the plants in a gallery, an altered letter on a typewriter or by giving misinformation to curators and thereby subverting the manufacturing of his own history Kennedy shows irreverence for what is at times a too serious world. What appears to be rigourous, systematic, even scientific, can be turned into parody on the discovery of such humour.

However, in *Figure Paintings*, what is implied from the ratios of paint used to cover the three North American navies is a serious matter but one which is common knowledge to most. I realize that the majority of those seeing the piece would be Americans; perhaps they, when confronted with scepticism of American exceptionalism might experience some discomfort. But as Canadians, it is unthinkable that we should not be aware of the hypocrisies behind diplomatic jargon and euphemisms such as 'neighbours'. It seems that the plainness of the fact presented allows itself to be upstaged by the means used to present it. Many of the puns and inner relations of the work draw attention to themselves. The artfulness with which this statement is articulated seems to describe their work more than it offers an analysis of the political issue. In philosophy and criticism 'figures' of speech such as puns and metaphors are used if they can facilitate understanding of a complex situation, otherwise they exist as surplus rhetoric and express themselves.

Some time ago the relationship between critiques of authority in the art world and authority in the art world changed from being adversarial to symbiotic. In this work, as in much gallery oriented critical work, it is a question of whether a highly informed art knowledge has been used as the means to present a political issue or whether a political issue has been used to make a work of art.

Les Sasaki