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VISUAL ARTS

Kennedy takes stock of phrases

Words and colours take on new meaning in art legend's Diaz Contemporary exhibit

DANIEL BAIRD
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"This is what I call one of my Ethics 101 paintings," says the dapper, wily 77-year-old artist Garry Neill Kennedy, standing in the midst of his immense new painting, *Quid Pro Quo* (2012), which encompasses three entire walls, floor to ceiling, of Diaz Contemporary.

"I'm really fascinated by stock ethical phases like 'tit for tat' or 'eye for an eye' or 'quid pro quo.' They seem like they are superficial, but they actually touch on something quite deep."

Garry Neill Kennedy is a legend in Canadian art. When he was appointed president of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1967, he was just 32, and over the course of his 23-year tenure as president, he brought NSCAD from being a provincial art school to a centre of international standing; his memoir of his pivotal years at NSCAD, *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1969-1978*, was published last February.

Kennedy has exhibited extensively over the course of his 50-plus year career both in Canada and abroad, including a major exhibition in 2000 at the National Gallery of Canada. In 2004 he received the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts and was also invested as a Member of the Order of Canada.

Kennedy is best known for his site-specific works in which paintings are made directly on the walls of the gallery, museum, or building, and in which the specific character of the architectural and social context of the work is taken into account. For *Quid Pro Quo*, which in common usage means "this for that" or "a favour for a favour," Kennedy rendered the phrase in black Chisel typeface flanked by vertical bands of red, yellow, and blue.

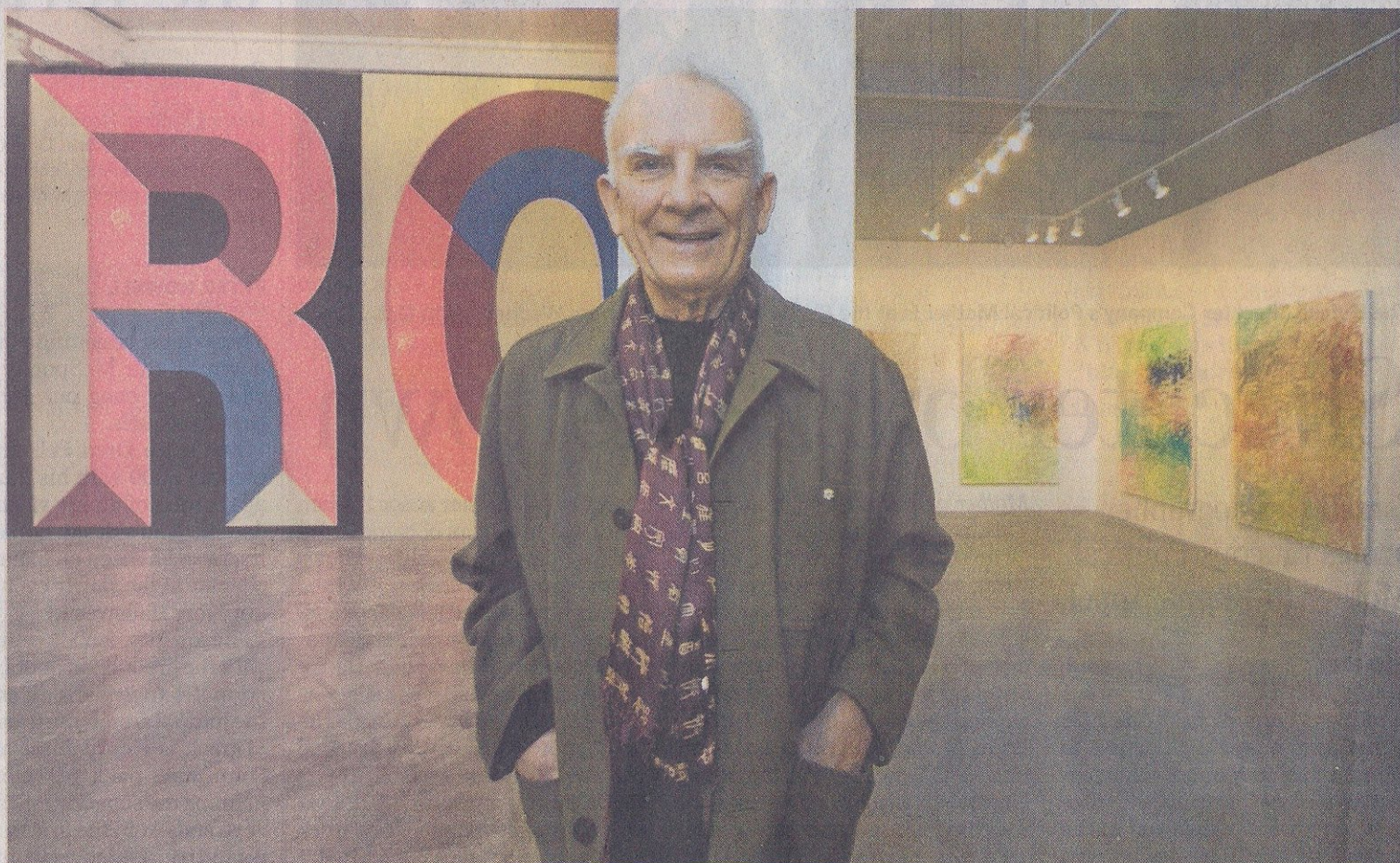
The letters, which on the north-facing wall are broken up by the industrial iron grid that covers the windows, are, literally, monumental: applied with ordinary latex house paint, the colours bright and shining, they are like classical pillars, less graphic than they are sculptural.

In this context, a relatively familiar phrase becomes strange and even a little sinister, the bold black letters suggesting secretive back room deals and pervasive corruption.

"In my work, I have to deal with specific spaces as well as with colour," Kennedy says. "And for me, colour always refers to something, always has a meaning."

Excellent examples of this are the working drawings installed on the wall, itself painting in blocks of latex black, yellow, orange, red, and blue, opposite *Quid Pro Quo*. *The Colours Of Citizen Arar* (2007), a long, horizontal felt tip pen on graph paper study for an installation at the Zwicker Gallery at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 2007, has the letters in the same sequence of colours as on the wall behind.

According to Kennedy, the colours refer to Canadian citizen Maher Arar's description of the prison attire he wore, the bruises he suf-



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

Garry Neill Kennedy stands in the Diaz Contemporary gallery, where his new painting, *Quid Pro Quo*, fills three entire walls.

fered, and the instruments of torment used upon him after he was detained at Kennedy airport in New York in 2002 and deported to his native Syria, where he was imprisoned and tortured for the better part of a year.

Kennedy is unusual among conceptual artists of his generation, like Sol LeWitt and Lawrence Weiner, for his active dialogue with painting and its history.

Painted using the latex house paint familiar from his site specific works, Kennedy's four seasons series takes on a theme that threads through the history of art, from Renaissance masters to Abstract Expressionists like Mark Rothko.

In *Four Seasons* (2000), executed on chipboard and arranged into a single four-panel picture, the paint is applied in thick, slat-shaped daubs on the wood's rough, flat surface, the colours ranging from cool winter greys and blues to lavender, red, and brown.

The second cycle of paintings from the same year, this time painted on four separate canvases, is more traditionally atmospheric, moving as it does from mid-winter blizzard whites to April lavenders, refulgent, late summer greens to burnished October gold.

Concurrent with the show at Diaz Contemporary, Kennedy has taken over the external laneway wall facing the parking lot of the Guelph University affiliated G Gallery. The worked is titled *Pattison* (2012), after the Vancouver billionaire Jim Pattison whose group funded the piece, and, not surprisingly, it consists of the name "Pattison" in big white typeface against a deep blue ground, the blue echoing the blue trim of the auto shop on the other side of the parking lot.

The letters of Pattison's name are sugges-

tively painted around a sign reading "Private Property/No Dumping of Garbage/Violators will be prosecuted." Kennedy has, in fact, done work for Pattison in the past — he made a sign for his company for the Vancouver Olympics that simply read "New!" — but it is impossible to read this new work as anything other than a comment on the power and ubiquity of mega-wealthy businessmen like Jim Pattison.

When asked whether he asked Pattison permission to use his name, Kennedy smiles mischievously and says, "Well, no, I didn't, but what I painted is actually subtly different from his logo, which has a circle around it, so I didn't really have to."

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