

Artists eye Olympic branding

VISUAL ARTS

**BEIJING-VANCOUVER:
GARRY NEILL KENNEDY
AND CATHY BUSBY**

At Centre A until October 24

◆ Beijing-Vancouver is a big, bold, and timely exhibition. It alludes to cultural identity, commercial exchange, corporate branding, and China's place in the globalized marketplace. And its sideways references to the 2008 Beijing Olympics also make for provocative viewing as Vancouverites are drawn closer and closer to their own Olympics vortex.

The Centre A show is a restaging of large-scale works that Halifax artists Cathy Busby and Garry Neill Kennedy each produced during residencies in Beijing in 2007 and 2008. Both artists fully command Centre A's huge and high exhibition space, creating a powerful dialogue between site and content.

Kennedy, one of this country's leading conceptual artists and a long-time presence at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, is represented here by two big—really big—painting installations. Paint, in this artist's hands, is a paradoxical medium. He often uses it to refute itself, to critique what conceptualism long ago condemned as an overly commercialized and fetishized art form. As Stephen Horne wrote in a 2008 catalogue essay, Kennedy “purges” personal and expressive elements from painting, focusing our attention instead on the medium's capacity to represent institutional dynamics and social relations. As seen here, he also uses paint as a way of engaging the architectural spaces in which he locates his work.

In *I Don't Want to Pay the Full Price*, Kennedy has taken the work's title phrase from the 2006 edition of the *Lonely Planet Phrasebook—Mandarin*. Here, it's installed in flat,



Cathy Busby's large, billboardlike cubes play colliding images of Olympics-era Beijing off one another. They may also foreshadow Vancouver's own transition.

institutional-style paint, in both Mandarin and English, across the entire south wall of Centre A, an area of more than 2,000 square feet. The Chinese characters, painted in white, are overlaid on the highly abstracted English letters (a variation on the font Superstar Shadow), which are keyed to the colours—red, green, blue, yellow, and pink—of event banners commonly seen on the streets of Beijing. (Five monochrome flags hang on poles in front of the painting, although they tend to be overwhelmed by its scale.) By highlighting elements of translation, transaction, and the complex symbolism of flags, *I Don't Want to Pay the Full Price* prompts us to consider the subtleties of language, the relationship between local and global systems of commercial exchange, and our connections with what is fast becoming the world's biggest economy.

Also working on a grand scale, Busby has adapted the billboardlike

vinyl banners she encountered in Beijing during the Olympics to display her own intentionally grainy photos. She has employed this advertising format and material to mount four immensely enlarged snapshots on the outside of a huge cube that sits in the middle of the gallery, as if it were hoarding around a construction site. Her images range from a supermarket display to bicyclists peddling past a “Beijing 2008” banner, and from the English phrases found on the T-shirts of Chinese youth to graffiti cellphone numbers that offer fake ID for migrant workers.

A social-issue artist, Busby here examines aspects of marketing, branding, and the everyday manifestations of globalized, regulated, and “incorporated” life in Beijing, before and after the Olympics. It's not too big a leap, visually or conceptually, to imagine Vancouver's transition from before to after. Not too big at all.

> ROBIN LAURENCE