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William Nevens

October 30 to November 17
Or Gallery

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William Nevens: Paintings

William Nevens's paintings of contemporary herald signs are like stigma on the surface of his canvases, acting as scabs of an antiquated language system that, for him, illustrates the dilemma of finding and making meaning in painting. *Three Stripes Shaping a Canvas* can be seen as both a starting point and finishing point in his inquiry.

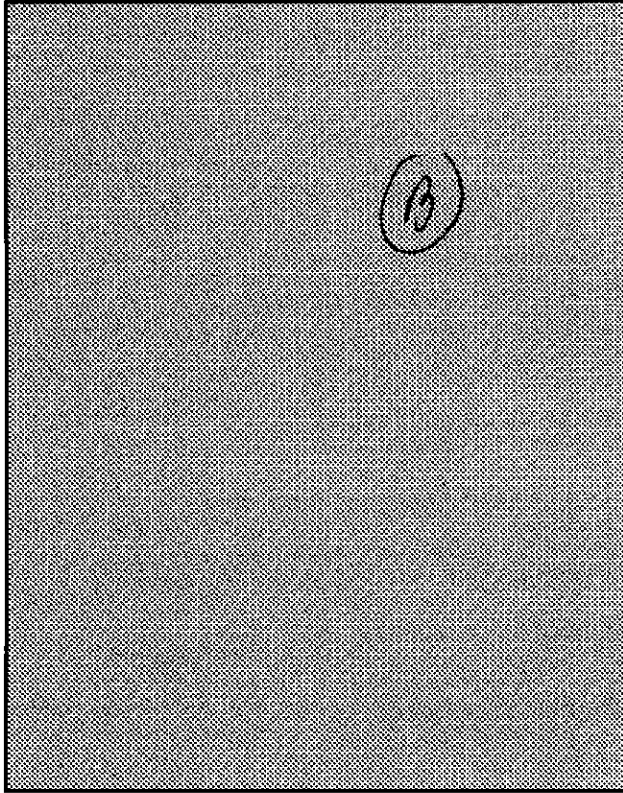
This painting, the only abstraction in the exhibition, consists of a shaped canvas that appears to collapse inward. It is supported only by three monochrome colour bars that crisscross the surface in an attempt to maintain the regular rectangular shape of the other five paintings. The other paintings represent a variety of heraldic expression, ranging from the bombastic *Coat of Arms of John Paul the Second*, to the *Hells Angels* emblem (which looks the most uncomfortable within the confines of the rectangle, needing some kind of skin as ground to be truly appreciated). In between are the arms of the *Manitoba R.C.M.P.*, the *Correctional Service of Canada*, and the *Victoria Cross*. Each emblem is painted meticulously and centred on the canvas.

Heraldry is the the science of "armorial bearings," controlling and denoting position and presence of the bearer of these arms. Historically bestowed by the head of

state — monarch, city councils or pope, etc. — they ascribe one's successes and the reasons for that success, whether it be militaristic, mercantile, or political. A coat of arms determined status, defined difference and, in short, gave the bearer the privilege of political existence. The structure that made up this language of commerce was visual, standardized and complex. It relied primarily on the shield shape as ground, the surface of which was dissected and divided by lines that halved, quartered and crisscrossed. Blocks of colours, abstract shapes such as chevrons, and more literal illustrations such as wines cups and lyres supplied a meaningful syntax describing the bearers and their status.

As a painter, Nevens finds himself locked within the circumscribed structure of modernist discourse. His use of heraldic sign is an attempt to understand this confining structure and to articulate the difficulty in speaking to the issue of painting and, ultimately, the exodus of meaning from the modernist canvas. His shield, *Three Stripes Shaping a Canvas*, is emblematic of that struggle in representing both the collapse of the canvas and the possibility of recouping meaning within the monochromatic bars.

The extreme standardization of the heraldic system appeals to Nevens, whose



Coat of Arms of Pope John Paul II, 80" x 60", acrylic on canvas, William Nevens, 1990

paintings are inextricably connected to the project of modernism. He attempts an analogistic strategy by placing these figures of heraldic meaning on the ground of the modernist canvas, therefore bringing into question the significance of these anachronistic signs in relationship to himself as painter. Coats of arms determined the lan-

guage of dominance in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, whereas they now act only as obscure signs of dominance in an ailing culture. Images as antagonistic as the Victoria Cross and the Hells Angels emblem are reduced and revealed by Nevin's treatment to be equal and devoid of polemic confrontation. These regressive figures, despite their careful painting and privileged composition, end up flat and empty, their condition vacuous.

Simultaneously, Nevens questions the validity of any mark made upon his standardized canvas, whether it be figure or abstract, thus challenging himself with the impossible task of making a mark. The canvas is colourless, flat and mute, yet it holds the authority of art history, resulting in the distress of a collapsing canvas: a crisis of meaning where even the blank slate implodes. Nevens's answer to this perplexing problem is a "return to the future," wedging in three thin bars of monochrome. Less than marks or emblems, they just hold, not re-establish, the rectangle. This proposes that despite the apparent co-optation of modernism into a historical and therefore arcane mode, it still offers, if just as a support, the possibility of establishing an authenticity of meaning.

Phillip McCrum, 1990

William Nevens is an artist living and working out of Vancouver. He is a 1988 graduate of Simon Fraser University. Exhibitions include; *Helen Pitt Award Winners Show, 1988/1989*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver 1989; *Artropolis '87*, Vancouver, 1987; and various Simon Fraser University student shows.

Phillip McCrum is an artist, working and living in Vancouver. Director of the Or Gallery from 1987-89. He is currently working on a collaborative project with Gerald Creede, entitled "Don't Call Me Buddy, Buddy."

Cover photo: *Three Stripes Shaping a Canvas*, 80" x 60", acrylic on canvas, William Nevens, 1990.



Or Gallery

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Gallery hours: Tuesday to Saturday 12 to 5 pm**

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