

MARY PRATT

Paddy O'Brien

Mary Pratt est une des peintres de natures mortes les mieux connues du Nouveau Brunswick.

Mary Pratt, one of Canada's best known painters of still-life, had a major one-person exhibition at the London Regional Art Gallery, from June 19 to August 16, 1981, which is travelling to various centres across the country until the end of 1982.

In 1957, Mary West graduated from the Art School at Mount Allison University, New Brunswick and married Christopher Pratt. For the next 10 years or so, she devoted herself to raising their four children, running the household, and supporting *his* career as an artist. Although she did some painting of her own, it took a back seat to the daily round of her domestic life.

In 1969 a simple, but momentous, thing happened. Struck by the appearance of their dining room table after a meal, Pratt wanted to paint it — knowing that there wouldn't be time enough before the dishes had to be cleared away. Christopher solved the problem by taking a photograph of the table, and, by recording it, gave Mary Pratt the means to control the amount of time needed for the routine household chores, and the time required for her art.

The resulting painting *Supper Table*, is a significant work in the sense that it represents Pratt's striking out on her own, and thinking of *herself*, as an artist after a decade of pushing this kind of activity into the background. The subject shows the family table, set for six, but with the appearance of the whole family having left somewhat suddenly before the end of the meal. The glasses of milk are unfinished, a hot dog still lies untouched, an orange is peeled but only half-eaten, the lids are still

off the ketchup bottle and relish jar. This sense of the transitory was captured in the slide, and Pratt's painting is faithful to *that*. There are no emotional or nostalgic overtones — simply the re-creation of a slice of 'reality' as it existed in a certain place at a certain time.

Nevertheless, the choice of subject itself is of vital importance in the context of Pratt's own statements about the strength of her feelings for her family, her home, the domesticity that surrounds her with the objects she loves. It is necessary to remember this, since it is all too tempting to regard *Supper Tables* as a symbol of 'liberation.' Her husband took the slide, thus tacitly giving his support and blessing to the idea of his wife becoming a full-time painter; her children were now old enough not to require her full-time attention and their absence from the table symbolizes another phase in her life. Another artist gains her freedom from domestic bondage.

Closer to the truth perhaps is the fact that Pratt had nothing to be liberated from — her life was not a question of bondage but of free choice; she was not relinquishing any of the deeply felt responsibilities and rewards of the wife/mother role, she was incorporating them into her role as an artist. She thoroughly enjoyed her life as a whole entity, she wanted to celebrate it and in 1969, the time came when she sat down and painted it.

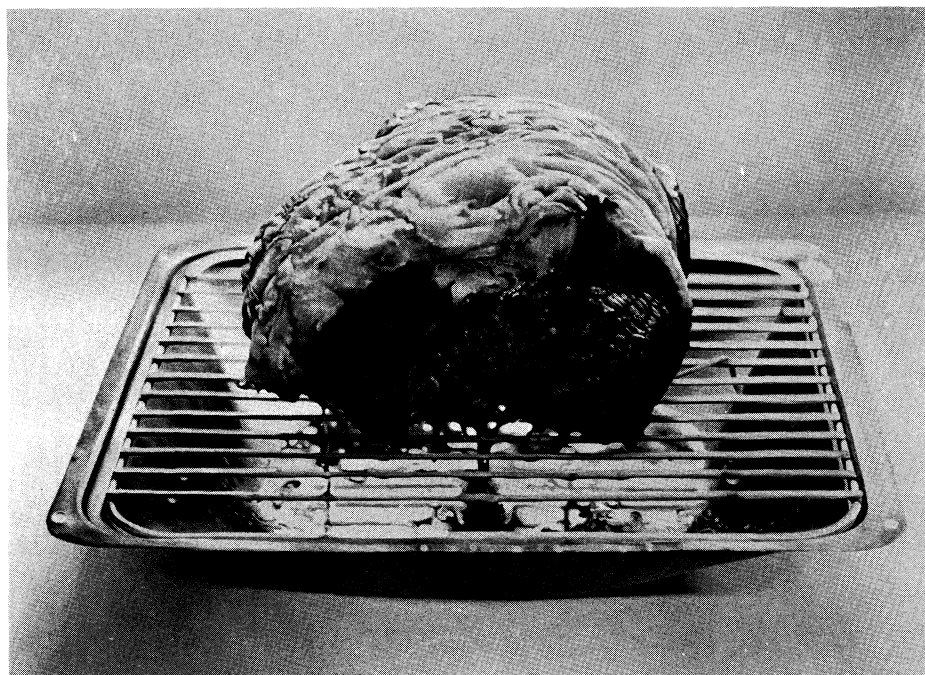
Perhaps this is over-simplification, but the subsequent production of a prodigious number of still-lives (considering her time-consuming technique) supports the notion that Pratt is recording those things which, however hum-drum, give such visual pleasure to the very substance of her day-to-day existence. A sampling of the titles of the



paintings indicate the process of celebration: *Baked Apples in Tinfoil* (1969); *Eviscerated Chickens* (1971); *Salmon on Saran* (1974); *Eggs in an Egg Crate* (1975); *Preserves* (1978). To quote Pratt: "The things that turn me on to paint are the things I really like. Seeing the groceries come in for instance. Or cooking. I'm getting supper, and suddenly I look at the cod fillet spread out on tinfoil and I think "that's gorgeous, that's absolutely beautiful" and I take a photograph right away. Then I work from the slide.¹

This clearly explains the motivation behind the process, but it is only the first step towards the re-constitution in paint of those elements permanently frozen in the slide that 'turned Pratt on.' Light — there is a sense of luminosity always, even when there is nothing as explicit as a cast shadow (as in *Supper Table*). The kind of light that shimmers from the inside flesh of a split fish, that gleams translucently from a broken, empty egg shell, or that crackles from crumpled tinfoil. It is this, combined with colour, that creates a kind of sensuousness as she explores texture and flesh. The painting of *Roast Beef* (1977) is almost brutal in the ruthlessness with which she describes every roll of fat, every fibre of the roasted meat. It is in no way an appetizing spectacle as far as the palate is concerned, but the play of light on the fat almost brings Rubens to mind, while the impact of the reality of the *presence* of this hunk of meat is redolent of Mark Prent. The total effect has gone far beyond the mere duplication of something captured in a slide.

Second only to Pratt's feeling for light is her fascination for those contemporary materials that are associated with the packaging of food. She has developed a technical mastery in painting saran wrap, tinfoil, glass jars, cardboard cartons, salt bags, wax paper, that is impressive. These are not used for their background or compositional effects — as earlier still-life painters have used drapery or tablecloths — but as elements that turn Pratt on in their own right and for exactly the same reasons that the food itself does. Her



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paintings show that there is nothing she enjoys more than the contrast in textures between jam in a glass jar with shiny metal lid for example, or between the soft crumpled skins of baked apples and the hard, shiny, crumpled tinfoil surrounding them.

Curiously enough, with all this ability to render material and flesh, Pratt seems almost uncomfortable when she moves outside the still-life area and deals with the human figure. *Girl in a Wicker Chair* (1978); *Nude on a Kitchen Chair* (1979) and *Girl in my Dressing Gown* (1981) are somewhat artificially posed and artificially lit for dramatic effect.

She treats them as still-life, and, although well painted, there is a stiffness about these girls that makes it seem as though their very humanity has imposed a barrier of a certain shyness on Pratt the painter, and that her own natural reserve and courtesy have prevented her from delving into human flesh with the same uninhibited delight that she gives to inanimate flesh.

A woman painting a nude woman is unexplored territory as yet, and it is to be hoped that Pratt will persist in her efforts to come to grips with it. Not only because it is a real challenge to her in her development as an artist, but for what it might open up for other women artists breaking through other psycho-

logical or emotional barriers in feminine creativity. Certainly not because she is 'regarded by the (women's) movement as a heroine, an example to other women who are depressed by their inability to pursue careers because of the demands of domesticity'², but, in the larger sense, of the progress towards self-awareness, the development of the nerve and the drive to probe and push aside stereotypes, conventions, intellectual and emotional platitudes — that every artist must grapple with en route to maturity of expression.

'I think of myself quite consciously as a woman painting,' Pratt has said, 'and I have quite strong feelings about the women's movement without really being a part of it. I sometimes worry that because the things I paint are women's things, people will assume I'm trying to get ahead by using the movement. I have a lot to thank it for, but not the origin of the work, not the impetus to paint. I do think it's important for a woman to work within her own frame of reference, and not feel it is inferior to feel the way a woman feels. The minute you try to adopt the mannerisms and attitudes of men, it all breaks down . . . '³

An atypical work, but the most powerful image Pratt has created to date, is the *Service Station* of 1978. In



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essence it is a still-life — extended to include the interior of a building in the background. The skinned and gutted hind quarters of a moose hanging from a hoist on the back of a truck parked in the garage, with blood-stained sheets of paper scattered over the floor, evoke the sort of response induced by Rembrandt's *Flayed Ox*, the sense of fascinated revulsion associated with the work of Francis Bacon, or — again — of Mark Prent. In some sense this is a crucifixion. Pratt herself describes it as a 'female statement about a male world'⁴ and, in the context of a crucifixion, it is a thorough condemnation of slaughter, butchery and general savagery that are traditionally deemed to be masculine rather than feminine attributes.

In the 12 years since *Supper Table*, Mary Pratt has established herself as one of the most consistently involved and searching artists working in Canada. Her still-lives in parti-

cular, although small in scale, are imbued with the implication of mortality — of the change and decay that underlie the superficial fascination of once living flesh, and the transitory disposableness of artificial materials that shine and reflect and seduce the eye. It is this kind of awareness of the substance beneath the surface that distinguishes Pratt's work, in spite of the fact that she has said, 'I don't take myself seriously . . . I paint what I like and it's nice to have people like it. What's really important is what the viewer brings to a painting, not what the artist intends. . . At my exhibitions I hope that viewers enjoy themselves. I do play to the audiences because the least anyone should do is to pursue an activity or job they like. It's a shame anyone has to be miserable.'⁵

So speaks a sensitive and thoughtful woman who is engaged in being as Mary Pratt as Mary Pratt can be.

Footnotes

- 1 Sandra Gwyn, 'Mary Pratt on Mary Pratt,' *artmagazine* 7 n.25 (March/April 1976), p. 40.
- 2 Dennis Kuchera, 'Mary Pratt top artist despite busy role as wife,' *London Free Press*, May 13, 1979.
- 3 Sandra Gwyn, *op. cit.*
- 4 Joan Murray, 'Mary Pratt: The Skin of Things,' *Mary Pratt exhibition catalogue*, London Regional Art Gallery, June 1981.
- 5 Sandra Gwyn, *op. cit.*

Photos and Artwork by Mary Pratt

- 1 *Service Station*, 1978, oil on panel
- 2 *Roast Beef*, 1977, oil on panel
- 3 *Supper Table*, 1969, oil on panel