

*Maurice Yacowar*

### **The Paintings of Mary (vs. Christopher) Pratt\***

Although Mary Pratt's paintings are significant and moving in their own right, they often assume other meanings from the context of her husband Christopher's work. It is by now a critical commonplace that the meaning of any individual piece may draw upon its relationship to the artist's other work, and further again from the individual talent's relationship to the tradition, beyond even the parameters of the given art. When two such powerful artists as the Pratts live and work so closely, one might expect especially lively cross-reference and contrast. For each person's work becomes even in its stages of process an important element in the partner's experience.

As a case in point we might look first at Mary Pratt's 1978 oil on board, *Reflections of Lillies*. Formally, the work is an accomplished but familiar exercise in realist painting: a few stalks of bright lillies are seen reflected on a closed outside window. But when the work is considered in the context of some of Christopher's,<sup>1</sup> then some telling implicit choices are seen to have been made. The comparison is invited by the white clapboard exterior house-wall, already familiar from Christopher's architectural images.

But the differences register immediately. Christopher typically presents his exterior walls on a flat plane, from a distance, and without the intrusion of such emblems of access as doorknobs and window handles. These three specifics give his buildings an air of remoteness and inaccessibility. They rather express the general idea of refuge than any particular building or experience. In contrast, Mary's painting starts so near the wall that part of the outside window-frame is not visible.

\*We thank Mary and Christopher Pratt and McGraw-Hill Ryerson, publishers, for their assistance in providing illustrations for this article. McGraw-Hill Ryerson will shortly publish in the fall of 1989, *Mary Pratt*, with an introduction by Sandra Gwyn and a critical essay by Gerta Moray.

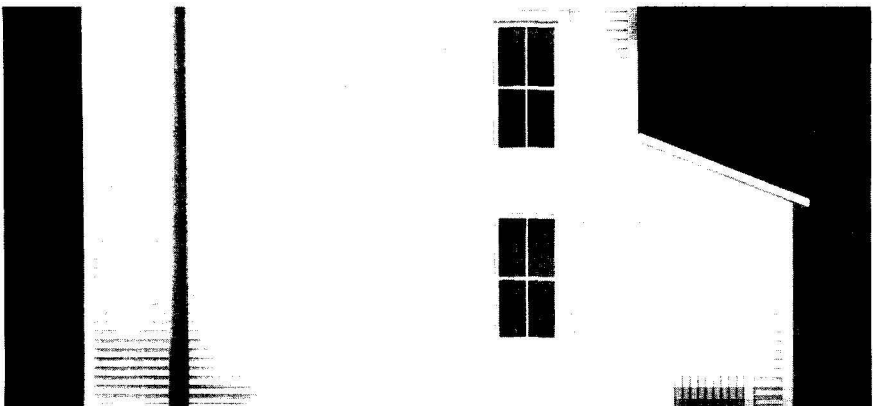


Mary Pratt, *Reflections of Lilies* (1978)

She presents her wall at a slight diagonal, which both draws the viewer toward the building (and into the painting, so to speak) and conveys its closeness. She also details the lock on the inside of the window and the unevenness of light and shadows as they play across the window-frame and wall. Her focus on flowers contrasts to Christopher's abstracted nature, which does not admit flowers except when he invents a wall-paper backdrop.<sup>2</sup>

There is further contrast in the form of the reflection. Christopher's windows reaffirm opaqueness. They are closed off by blinds and drapes (*House in August*, 1969; *Shop on Sunday*, 1968; *Front Room*, 1974), their closure perhaps a sign that someone has died.<sup>3</sup> His mirror reflections are usually barely visible inflections upon darkness (as in *Dresser and Dark Window*, 1981; *Station*, 1972) or they cast back the unpopulated vacancy (*Night Window*, 1971; *Subdivision*, 1973; even the fleshly pink void of *Pink Sink*, 1984). The "reality" that his window reflects in *Coley's Point* (1973) is rather a Magrittean surrealism. Otherwise Christopher's windows open out into stylized geometrics of land and sea (*Basement Flat*, 1978; *Trunk*, 1979-80; *Shop on an Island*, 1969).

But Mary's painting catches the exuberance of summer flowers. In effect, she imposes the richness of the outdoor world upon the ascetic formality of Christopher's characteristic wall and reflection. Moreover, as her flowers are the wild, not funereal, lilly, her painting may be read as a deliberate alternative to Christopher's *The House at Path End* (1978). He relates his title "to the mood of the print or maybe to the mood I was in at the time. The last few years have forced me to come to



Christopher Pratt, *The House at Path End* (1978)

grips with death.”<sup>4</sup> Christopher’s serigraph, like *Wall Facing West* (1980) and *March Night* (1976), shows a solid, persevering wall, a flat and unyielding image of the refuge and security promised by a house but futile defence against mortality. His work speaks of pervasive human absence and a landscape sapped of vitality and spirit (yet both qualities are implicit in the artist’s act of confrontation and activity). Hers reflects a vital, bright organism however fugitively a reminder of mortality. Moreover, in presenting the reflected image of an absent (i.e., out of frame) organism, a projection of the flower rather than the thing itself, Mary affirms a kind of memorial immortality, a register that continues beyond death, as the image is caught beyond the flower itself and (of course) as the painting survives the seasons.<sup>5</sup>

In yet another irony, the flowers seem to be growing inside the house. The image is a paradox of natural beauty caught, embraced and preserved without violating its natural term of life. In its every specific, especially in its plush colors, Mary’s painting affirms the value and sensation of a lively nature, in contrast to Christopher’s colder, contemplative generality. Where his walls stretch into an unoccupied infinity, unpunctuated by nail, joist or joint, unmarked by eroding experience in time, Mary’s wall seems the modest embrace of a single human grasp. Her subject is the richness and stretch of the individual life, where presences can be remembered across loss.

Perhaps there is something especially feminine, if not indeed feminist, in this articulated difference. In Mary’s painting the flowers are imaginatively possessed and treasured without uprooting them, yet beyond their term of substantial being. She also makes for a more intense engagement of the senses, attending more pointedly to the textures and idiosyncratic inflections of things. Her surfaces seem to respect rippling pulses, especially as time and experience mark even the inanimate. There is the sense that Mary has not been sitting back and meditating upon her subjects but has been in there working the stuff: scaling the fish, gutting the chickens, crinkling the aluminum wrap. Christopher’s agenda subordinates the particular to the general, the quirky subject to the (often geometric) uniform pattern. He emphasizes the structure, she the subject. Hence the more pronounced inclination to metaphor in Mary’s work and symbolism in Christopher’s. Where he leaves the particular for the profundities of the human condition, she draws equally compelling art out of the quotidian business of living.

In this light, there may be an implicit feminist politic in Mary’s frequent choice of domestic, sometimes even bathetic, subject matter.

In lavishing a painter's eye (not to mention time) upon the paraphernalia of kitchen work, Mary validates the domestic arena. Both her choice of subject and the painstaking detail in her realizing of cod fillets, wrapped or naked, her herring, baked apples, even the macroscopic cityscape rhythms of her *Supper Table* (1969), pay respect to the tasks and sensory experiences of her "woman's work."

The process of choice behind the work may point to its meaning. Her 1972 painting, *Doesn't That Look Just Like Our Anne?*, reproduces an August, 1968, calendar from McDonald's service station, featuring a young girl standing by a slough. The title personalizes the work, indeed casts a colloquial informality over her immortalizing of a throwaway calendar. By recreating that archetypal image of childhood, Mary does more than celebrate the Pratts' older daughter, Anne (born 1960). She discovers the mythic child in the particular person, or conversely, uncovers the archetype in the immediate. Where Christopher removes close detail in order to abstract a mythic sense instead of the particular, Mary finds the mythic in the individuating reality of the individual. She moves closer to the thing itself to find its noblest property, where Christopher tends to move away for the universal. Finally, in the contrast between the personal creation and the permanence of a painting and the mass production and ephemerality of a calendar, Mary establishes the vital tension between the mortal's short life (and the even briefer moment of childhood) and the greater stretch of the significance of a life.

Another kind of implied process informs *Preserves* (1978). Three jars of imported English marmalade, jelly and jam stand eye-level on a shelf. The marmalade is still unopened, a bit of the jelly has been consumed and more of the jam. Different placement of the "Turn to open" and arrow signs on the lids confirm that the three jars represent stages in the same latent process of consumption. The subject of the work is not just the jars but the whole process of appreciation, which is not just the eating but anticipation as well. Again the close detail conveys appreciation, whether anticipatory appetite or the painter's fascination with light, color and texture. There is more to these preserves than the joy of eating. So too her painting *Red Currant Jelly* (1972) and her 1978 serigraph, *Jelly*. These little things, frills of the appetite, seem validated and accorded more varied appeal in these larger-than-life images.

In the more explicitly mock-epic *Romancing the Casserole* (1985), a majestic stoneware meal stands majestically in the golden temple of the microwave. The work affirms a domestic alternative to the frenzied

adventure film cycle launched by the Indiana Jones series. Mary posits a feminine heroism in place of society's trivial male one. There is also something intensely personal here in the painter preserving the image of what the painter has cooked. The aesthetic imperative transcends the domestic duty. Something needed for sustenance gives way to something that feeds the less utilitarian needs for the beautiful. And again, the casserole eaten survives as the heroic image painted. In *Supper Table* Mary records the dinner scene after the family has left it. It is like a street at dusk, with light flashes picking out the wake of experience, emptied cups and glasses, abandoned peels—shards of pleasure taken and forgotten—still unopened catsup and relish peaks and a lone wiener neglected in its open bun. The dinner done, the family gone, the cook's duties fulfilled, the painter can take over and define her own universe.

So too the pivotal process implied in Mary's painting of freshly-baked loaves of *Bread* (1974). The protruding oven-rack animates the planar surface and draws the viewer in visually as the bread likely would olfactorily. The baker's work over, the painter's begins. But the two functions are compatible. For the painter celebrates the task, the product, its tradition, and that moment of sensual charge when the appetite anticipates the food. To judge from what little we see of the oven, it is as traditional (read:old) as the home-baking of bread. In contrast to the various sensory addresses of Mary's close-up, when Christopher paints the family stove (*Three O'Clock*, 1968), it is a long-shot more fascinated with its shape and nostalgic aura than with the appeals of its immediate use. So he approaches it when it is not in use, the kettle resting between the burners. Without declaring any preference, one might infer that these two works show the female and feminist experience in contrast to the more detached aesthetic meditation of the male. The two Pratt stoves suggest that sometimes one of Mary's works may be antithetical to a particular piece by Christopher.

More often the contrast may be more general. In her *Wedding Dress* (1975), a simple wedding dress hangs on a prosaic wire hanger on a closed white door, framed by two thin sides of wallpaper and the moulding. In itself the image catches the dignity and sentiment of the event in one central emblem. The props speak touchingly of and for the unseen characters in the implied narrative. But the work can also be read in the context of all of Christopher's doors, where the symmetry of shape and melancholy attitude are unencumbered by the prosaics of real life and sensory experience, such as doorknobs. Mary gives us one, as if a parallel to the gown that is about to open out into a new life for

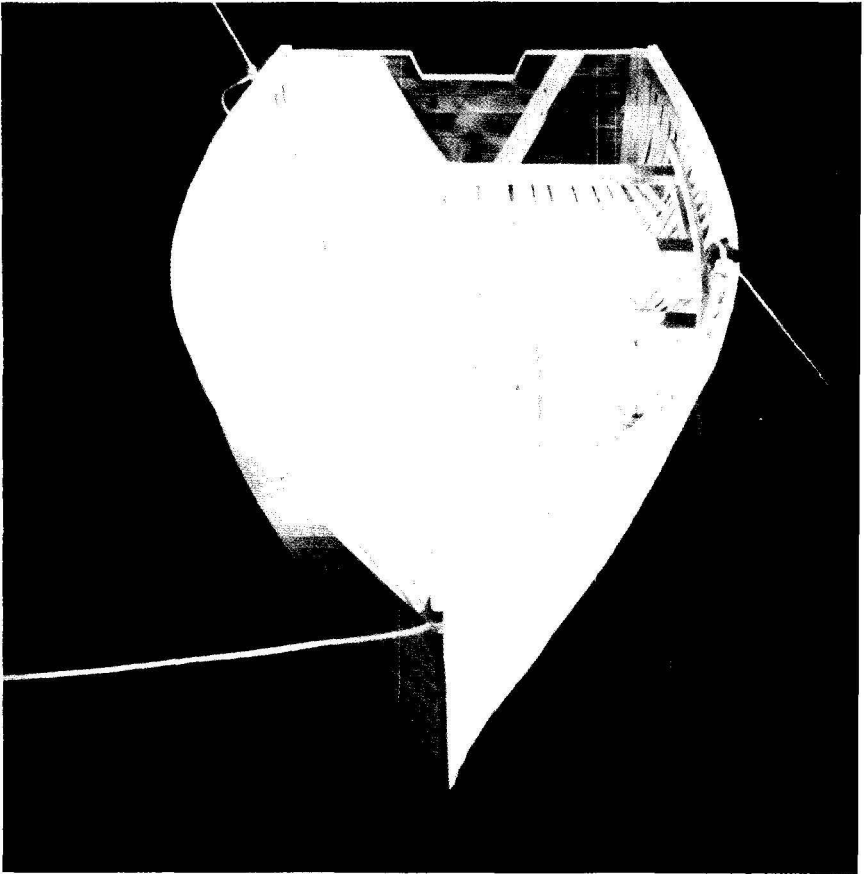
its imminent wearer. Indeed the austere pink panties that so jar in Christopher's *The Visitor* (1977) suggest that he may have been learning from his wife's difference (aesthetic).

On the other hand, Mary's *Fire Barrel* (1981), a close-up of a rusted old barrel burning in the snow, can in theme be compared to Christopher's *Institution* (1973). Both works establish a tension between the human quality of warmth and a cold metallic/institutional context. In Christopher's view from a hospital window the only saving life and warmth is a wisp of smoke, duly reflected. "I enjoyed painting the steam. It was an escape from the impersonality of the other elements in the painting."<sup>6</sup> The volume and intensity of the smoke seem to have steadily diminished across the series of his preparatory drawings.<sup>7</sup> In Mary's work there is a charge of heat not just in the dancing flames but along the glowing sides of the old barrel. She asserts the value of intensity and warmth in the abandoned (weaker?) vessel. Christopher's painting is about the impersonality of institutions, Mary's about the surviving pockets of personality and warmth. Alex Colville has suggested that Mary Pratt's "use of photography implies a faithfulness to optically perceived reality which is much greater than mine, thus an acceptance of the physically existing world...which is greater than mine."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps their difference rather involves her readiness to discover meanings in the sensations of her life experience rather than in the ideas beyond it.

The importance of such context may help to explain occasional mysteries in Mary's work. For example, there are a number of seeming "errors" in her realistic painting, *Tied Boat* (1980).<sup>9</sup> The image is of an empty rowboat tethered in the water. But some details jar.<sup>10</sup> The left rear cornerpiece is flat on the edge of the stern but the right one is at an angle. On the left side, an extra plank lies across the horizontal seatboards, without function, not even nailed into place. The floorboards that should be long and continuous down the length of the boat are fragmented, short, some even crooked. Some appear to end in the air (in the right rear). Others do not match up or connect. Where the floorboards should rest upon the hull frame, here they appear to float above it. The middle and widest board most obviously breaks at each seat without apparent cause. The floorboards appear flat despite the curve of the boat's bottom. There seems to be a confusion between the floorboards and the supports for the seats, which renders this boat inoperable. The unreality of the middle of the boat contrasts to the precise realism with which the back and front sections, the front exterior and the left reflection in the water are treated. There is a

further inconsistency in the viewer's perspective upon the boat. The dead-on view is violated in at least three ways: (1) the centre-board at front starts off-centre from the bow; (2) we have a greater exposure of the left side of the boat than the right, yet a larger front reflection of the right side; (3) only one stem-side is shown. So the viewing angle is rather from right of centre, despite its apparent frontality.

Unless one is to assume that the artist nodded and lapsed from her accustomed perceptiveness and care, these inconsistencies must be accounted for. Perhaps we have one clue to the work's non-realism in the boat's tethering. It assumes a universality from the three directions of its tethering ropes, one down into the water, one up toward the sky and one across to an assumed dock on land. The anchoring line seems



Mary Pratt, *Tied Boat* (1980)



redundant given the two ties provided by the continuous line on the left. But the anchoring rope rather anchors the picture in the motif of refraction. The inconsistencies within the boat may also be explained by the metaphor of refraction. This is not just a painting of a boat, but a view through a planar median that refracts the middle portion of the image, violating its clarity the way the water does the boat-sides it reflects. Again Mary paints a vessel in implicit contradistinction to her husband's. Not only is it an image of a restrained, tethered vessel, but in the act of perception there seems to be an explicit acknowledgement of interference and mediation.

Mary often seems to challenge male traditions in art. In *Muriel Fergusson's Flag on the First of July* (1975) she diminishes that phallic archetype, the flagpole, by surrounding it with a thickly treed sky, the top of the building and the colors of the unfurled flag. The visual power of the pole is further reduced by the implicit perspective of the viewer, which seems to be from a position lying down under the flag, i.e., a passive, or "feminine" position, but the flagpole seems to have the same position. Similarly, in *Salmon Between Two Sinks* (1987) the gleaming salmon that arches across the sink divider seems to parody the traditional *Field and Stream* image of the caught fish curving in the air.

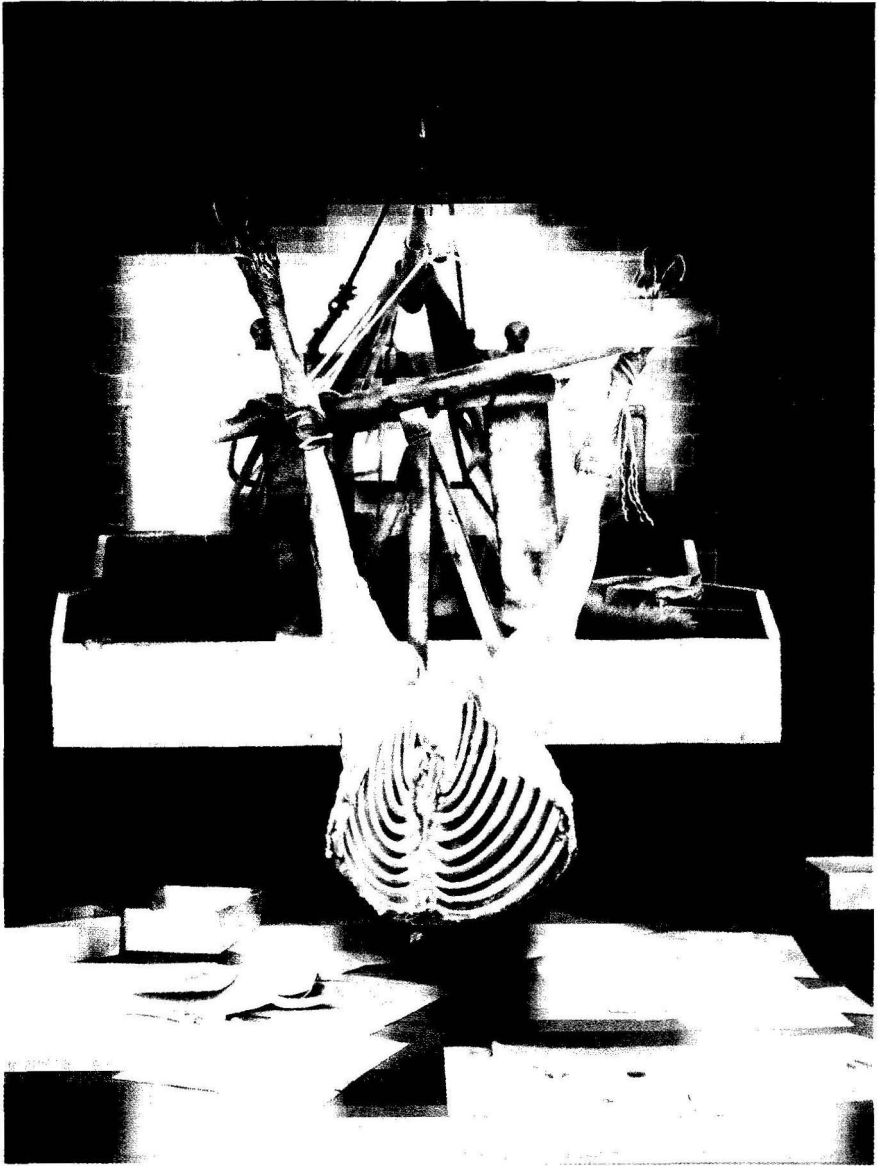
Mary has admitted that what is arguably her most powerful work, *Service Station* (1978), is "a female statement about a male world."<sup>11</sup> The image is a rear-view of a tow-truck, parked in a brick garage. On its hoist hangs the skinned rear half of a moose's carcass. The front of the garage floor is littered with cardboard boxes, most flattened. This incidental rubble suggests a full, rounded shape that has been squashed, reduced, an implicit parallel to the moose. Or conversely: flat shapes not yet plumped up to exploit, an equally reductive analogue to the animal. In any case, the litter suggests the unseen man's—here "person's" won't do—attitude of carelessness and waste. Of course, the central subject is the carcass. More precisely: the carcass as a term with human signification. For a man to preserve such a trophy, or even to display it splayed on his truck, shows an unshared pride in having destroyed the animal. This woman's image deflates the man's pretense to power by emphasizing the imbalance between the natural creature's power and the machinery of the truck. The moose clashes against the brick walls and the litter. Here Mary confronts the tradition of "carcass art" typified by Chaim Soutine's series of slaughterhouse images, most recently sustained by Chemiakin. For them the richly colored, rotting meat were both aesthetically challenging and an

emblem for the rotting social order. But Mary confronts the meat hanging brazenly as a herald of male power. In the truck and the rubble she summarizes the process of the animal's abuse. And that spread-legged hind establishes a more human character than the traditional rotting sides of beef. For Mary's spread animal as a male trophy alludes also to the coarser male traditions of "leg art," the male reduction of women to meat, trophy and object of the hunt. When Mary does paint a slab of beef it is a cooked roast open on the oven rack, not a meditation upon rot or an assertion of a rotten conquest but another of her moments of sensuous appreciation.

Mary's fish and chicken paintings may derive a further meaning from her confronting the male tradition of meat art. When she presents chicken and fish in various states of wrapping she may well be playing against the male obsession with the exposure of flesh. Certainly she brings a feminine delicacy and subtlety to her focus on the white and pink flesh of chicken and cod, in contrast to the (Soutine again) tradition of dripping reds. In her *Arctic Char* (1978) there is an engagement between the prone piece and the supine and a further sense of the processes in life (and the afterlife) in the fact that the supine piece has been sliced ten times and that two kinds of meticulously detailed paper lie between the fish and the green plank surface. In such works Mary seems more involved in feeling things than in just looking at them. Her craft makes us see how they feel. As she has said, "the surface is what informs us. Our senses react to surfaces. We see them; we touch, taste, and feel them. It is only after this initial confrontation that we can judge. My work is, for me, a celebration of this immediate reaction."<sup>12</sup>

In the aluminum-wrapped *Christmas Turkey* (1980) the enchanting (like an electrified Christo!) surface expresses Mary's fascination with the light and shape, but it also expresses the dignity and mystery of a character concealed from view. We know and appreciate the creature without its exposure to our view. Indeed its discrete concealment is all the better for its preparation/development. The vitality implied under the covering's contours differs markedly from the funereal covering of Christopher's dead-shark-like *Yacht Wintering* (1984).

On the other hand, as Joan Murray has argued, "For [Mary] Pratt, drawing is an erotic experience....The pencil point is a probe leading the eye into secret places."<sup>13</sup> Mary told Marie Morgan, "I actually found the things that I painted erotic....If you don't have any erotic reaction to a thing, there is simply no point in painting it because this is what it's all about. As far as I'm concerned, I don't think of painting as



Mary Pratt, *Service Station* (1978)

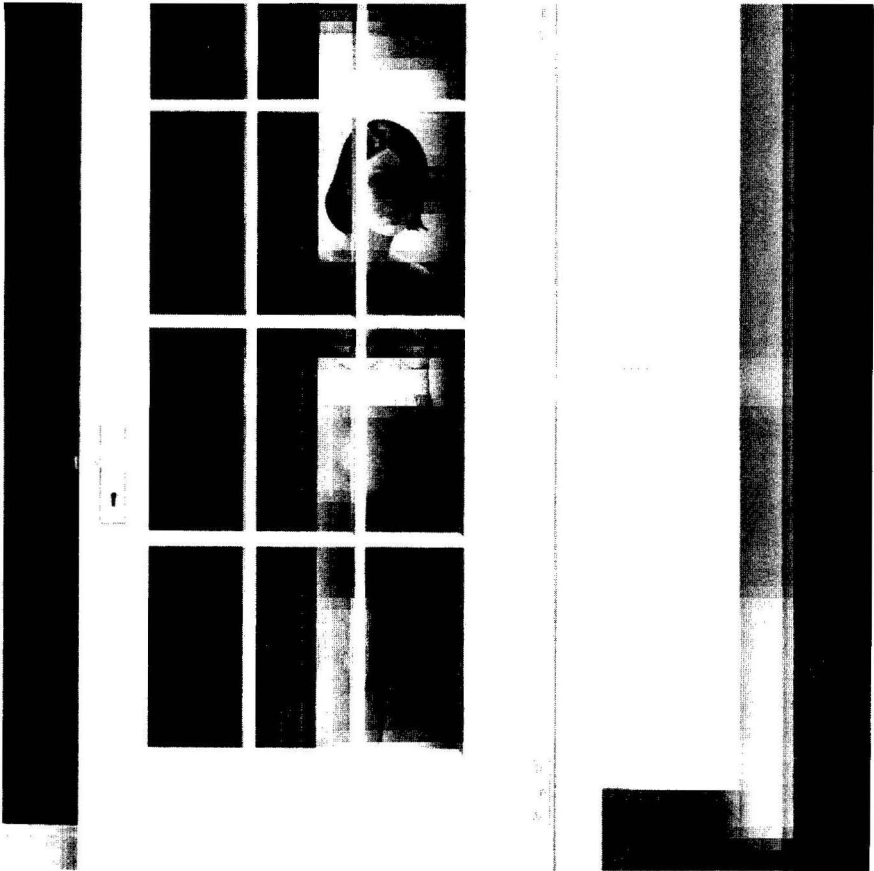
a cerebral exercise, I think of it as erotic. So, you know, why not celebrate a little?"<sup>14</sup>

Mary proves even more sensuous in her nudes than in her kitchen fleshes. As she points out, "women can be erotic, in a sense, about other women. I mean, women are just plain beautiful. That woman in the *Blue Bathwater* picture (1983) is a kind of pearly, lush, warm and sensuous thing....I don't think [Christopher's] nudes are the same. They're much more cerebral, they're distanced....I think I dare to be sensuous because this is what I feel about women. I know what it's like to be a woman."<sup>15</sup> As she relishes the woman's reality, Mary has done a series of works dealing with women applying make-up. In contrast, over the years that Christopher developed his *Pink Sink*, he scrupulously removed the specific images of cosmetics, clothing and medicine that were part of his original memory and conception and that betoken the actual human presence.

The Pratts converge most tellingly when they use the same female model. Joyce Zemans has suggested that Christopher's figure work changed from passively posed characters to more active confrontational views, influenced by the current debate over the male subjection of the female nude.<sup>16</sup> His *French Door* (1973) marked an unusual departure from his idealized image of woman to express what he thought his model, Donna, must have felt about her life with the Pratts: "She was just on the periphery, endangered, exposed to our ideas, which were not viable for her. She was outside looking in. She wasn't part of our lives. But we were dominating hers—I saw that after she left."<sup>17</sup> Here Christopher seems to have adopted an important element of Mary's ethic and aesthetic, restoring the particularity of the subject and respecting her experience.<sup>18</sup> As Mary Pratt has written, Donna became a "partner in the business of making images of the human female figure."<sup>19</sup> The result is the more assertive and confrontational models of *Model on a Mattress* (1983), *Madonna* (1981), and *Girl Sitting on a Box* (1981). Christopher earlier had explained his generalized nudes: "I guess my not bringing out those things in the model which I see from time to time is rather the same as not showing glass broken in a window or paint peeling off clapboard. It's a kind of personality detail of the subject that somehow doesn't seem important."<sup>20</sup> Later, however, he acknowledged that "You can't ignore the individuality of people or overlook the details that identify their separateness as arrogantly as you can ignore irregularities that make a wall or room particular."<sup>21</sup> Of course, Mary has luxuriated in precisely this kind of physical individuation, whether depicting people, dresses

or pomegranates. Her business has been to reclaim the rich feel of experience.<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, Christopher Pratt contends that his intention in his art "is simply to humanize myself," hence his quest for "objective, God forgive me for saying this, handsome works that have a kind of presence and a kind of dignity....I believe, and Mary doesn't, that human kind is not very noble."<sup>23</sup> Both Pratts work through their art toward a better understanding of themselves and the human condition. But their approaches are antithetical. Christopher imposes the abstracted imagination upon his perceptions. "I never paint specifics. I shouldn't say 'never'. Sometimes I come close, and when I do, I think it's the weakest part of my work....It's a collective, a generality. So



Christopher Pratt, *French Door* (1973)

there's ambiguity.... Because if a painting has no time, it has all time. Nearly everything I do is a mental or spiritual collage."<sup>24</sup> "I am more concerned with potential than with reality."<sup>25</sup> But Mary pays her primary respect to the particularity of each subject, each character. When she stylizes or alters a detail it is in service to that particularity. Thus she explains the "pull" of the *Graduation Dress* (1987 lithograph) on its hanger: "that awkward, adolescent, almost crippled look—and I also decided to go much darker in the background—moving the image from a wistful dreaming to a more urgent statement of 'passage' from childhood to adulthood.... Humans carry with them the scars of childhood. And so this pretty dress—restrained—hesitant in its design—does not fly proudly—flaunting a mindless victory—but rather hangs a little crooked on its drugstore hanger—transparent enough to let the dark show through but bright—definite—its white spots like hopeful stars against the alien dark."<sup>26</sup> These differences notwithstanding, in this respect Christopher's words speak equally for Mary: "If art has any function at all, it is to provide launching pads for examination, for speculation, for an exercise of conscious awareness."<sup>27</sup>

## NOTES

1. Perhaps my inappropriate familiarity of address will be excused as the easiest way to distinguish between the two Pratts.
2. David Silcox and Merike Weiler, *Christopher Pratt* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 63.
3. To Silcox, *Ibid.*, 115.
4. *Ibid.*, 140.
5. Not just the seasons of nature, one might add, but the cycle of fad and fashion in the critical reception of styles in art.
6. *Ibid.*, 106.
7. *Ibid.*, 104-6.
8. Quoted in Joan Murray, *Mary Pratt: The Skin of Things* (London, Ont.: London Regional Art Gallery, 1981), 3.
9. The image is among the artist's best-known, as it was featured on the cover of a poster book, *Images: Contemporary Canadian Realism*, ed. Marci Lipman and Louise Lipman (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1980).
10. For pointing out the problems and the critical solution I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Prof. Lewis Soroka, Dean of Social Sciences at Brock University, learned both as sailor and as economist.
11. Murray, 4.
12. *Some Canadian Women Artists* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 56.
13. Murray, *Loc. cit.*
14. Marie Morgan, "Masculine/Feminine," *Banff Letters*, Spring, 1985, 8.
15. *Loc. cit.*
16. Joyce Zemans, *Christopher Pratt: A Retrospective* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 1985).
17. Quoted by Merike Weiler in Silcox, 185.
18. Zemans, 55.
19. Zemans, 84, n. 28.

20. October, 1983. Quoted in *Christopher Pratt: Interiors* (Toronto: Mira Godard, 1984).
21. Silcox, 126.
22. Christopher has suggested another difference in their use of the same models: "I show them in relatively polite idealized poses. But I mean, the painting Mary did of Donna called 'A Girl in My Dressing Gown,' she just visually ravaged Donna. She makes Donna look wasted. Donna has on HER dressing gown and Donna was MY model. I mean, don't tell me...and that one with cream on her face. That one is really pretty. Mary is much more brutally objective....Mary will probably tell you she is just interested in the wrinkles of the dressing gown" (Morgan, 3-11).
23. *Ibid.*, 7.
24. Silcox, 22.
25. *Ibid.*, 56.
26. Letter to Mira Godard, July 6, 1987.
27. Silcox, 68.