

THE ART OF MARY PRATT

"Anything you can see, you can paint."

By Carla EKY Lam

Privileged to have garnered a copy of this hardcover publication, I looked nervously forward to meeting the subject of the gorgeous book and progenitor of the exhibition by the same name. I was thrilled to be interviewing someone whom art aficionados are calling "one of Canada's foremost artists." After quickly, but intently studying the keepsake featuring 74 colour reproductions of Pratt's major paintings I was ready to go. Tom Smart, the author of the publication, and curator of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, has outlined the life and art of Pratt with an insight which is at once intimate and thorough, artistically astute yet comprehensive. Best known for her uncannily realistic still-lives and photo-realism, you've probably seen her work in, or on the cover of, magazines such as *Saturday Night*, *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Art* — on billboards and cookbooks. But she's not likely to tell you any of that. Remarkable for her ability to see and arrest the beauty in the obscure—fish, fowl, and other seemingly humdrum domestic objects, (i.e., *Roast Beef* 1977, *Eggs in Egg Crate* 1975, *Salmon on Saran* 1974) Mary Pratt offers a distinctive brand of subjective-objectivity. A coded social query is extended to those who manage to get beyond the lucent superficiality of her realism. But she'd never tell you that. She wants you to look with your own eyes. Her work cannot be subject to "master" interpretation. I had to resist the urge to do this to both art and artist. It would be a heinous crime, and what's more - antithetical. So without further ado... I give you Pratt almost as I was in company with her ...

P.S. (See her work and buy the book at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. The exhibition which opened on September 17 runs until November 12. It's a free presentation and open to the public.)

Spirituality and Light:

I think anybody who paints or writes, does music, does anything, they hope that there will be a spiritual significance but you're never sure, so you go with what you see—with what you feel. I go with what I seem to think is right, and I hope that there's more there-or enough there to give people a sense of a higher order of things but I'm never sure. I don't think about that first—what I think about first is that I just love what I'm looking at.

Sight:

I think I'm very fortunate in that I get turned on by visual things—and I don't intellectualize on life and then decide what to paint, I just kind of wander around like a lost soul and something appeals to me—something looks too beautiful to lose. It's a moment I'm trying to save, it's a vision that the world is giving me—not that I am giving the world but I kind think that -it kind of goes through my mind and is distilled by the net of my experience and then emerges as a painting. For some people it would emerge as a piece of music—but the substance of light is a kind of interesting conception—it's not my idea it's Tom Smart's idea and I think originally it came from the idea that my mother told me as a child that there was no point of my trying to paint stained glass windows because you just couldn't do that—but I believed that anything that you could see, you could paint so.... (an interruption) a rather ostentatious older man steps halfway into the room to offer flattery: "The Dali's begin to pale by comparison...." Pratt laughs naughtily then modestly offers: "The Dali's don't have as much light on them today..." laughing again.

Beginnings:

I was only 6 or 7 years old.... when I began to paint. It's just that I wanted to keep things that....this business of sitting in the church and trying to figure out how the light came through stained glass windows and turning my hand over and trying to draw it on my glove and to say well, there's a little bit of dark right here and there's light right here. If I can see it I should be able to paint it, anything you can see—you can paint. And I think that that goes through really, to the whole understanding of my life about the world is that everything is natural. We belong to a huge order of things—and that everything within that order is more or less the same and we should be able to cope with all these things. There's millions of things around us in this room that we aren't seeing because we haven't found them yet. And I just hoped I'd find something.

Vision:

Well, at first, I liked to paint when I was a child. That was what happened first. Before I went to any art classes or anything... the minute I went to an art class I realized that these people who were in that art class were not like me—they were

messy, they were throwing paint around and you know this was just children—that they didn't understand things the way I did. They didn't want to make the same kind of thing that I wanted to make. And that continued really, right through university—right through my formal training in art. I seemed to be surrounded by people who didn't

really understand that there was this...sort of ... wonderful importance about vision, and that happened until I met Christopher. And Christopher and I shared this... idea that there was something very important about what you saw, and what you felt, and what you thought—we didn't feel or see the same things at all, but this intensity of importance was what was important.

Transition:

No matter what you think, or want to do you have to find a way to do it, and when I had four little children suddenly the camera became an indispensable tool to me. It wasn't my idea really, it was Christopher who took the first picture for me and said "There now, you see if you'd had that to look at you could have finished that painting." We had to eat it otherwise... see. And ah, "it's just too bad...why don't you use this picture?" and when I decided that I would use a camera, I really sort of gave up on painting—I thought that I had let down my profession—let down the whole thing and that I probably shouldn't be a painter at all, but that I would do this because I loved it anyway.

...that was in 1967-1969 or something that I first started to use slides and I had to really learn how you did that—learn a lot. I kind of had to kick away all of the stuff that I'd learned in school and had been learning and learn to see things very, very objectively which I had been trying anyway but...

Reality & Art:

When you're in the process of living you can't think about everything all the time, there's just so much to do [especially with the children] Yes, and so I just had to do stuff all the time and I couldn't, I didn't have the time—I didn't have the luxury of sketching and painting from sketches or anything like that, if I was going to do a painting I had half an hour to do it maybe, if I was going to sit down and actually do it from life—so I did a lot of that, but they never were important enough... they never were major enough... they never had the weight—quality that I wanted. They looked like transitory things and I wanted paintings to look like icons—I wanted people to be able to look at them for a long, long time and keep discovering new things in them, and the camera gave me time...and that was great.

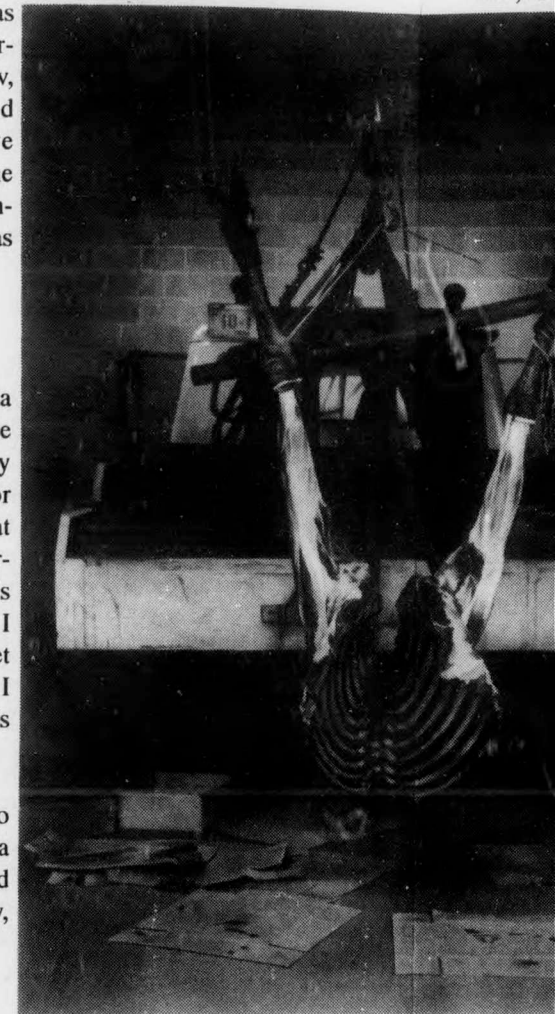
Being Woman/Artist:

I never thought about myself as being a role model, I can assure you, and although there's certainly a lot of things in the Women's Movement that I really identified with—I couldn't help it—I was a woman....still am (laughter again) Still I didn't want to use it, I didn't want to sort of hook into that—I thought it was as silly as the



COD FILLETS ON TIN FOIL, 1974
oil on panel, 53.3 x 68.0 cm
Collection of Angus and Jean I runeau

Mark Landry Photo



THE SERVICE STATION, 1978
oil on masonite, 101.5 x 76.5 cm
Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario



CHILD WITH TWO ADULTS, 1983
oil on board, 54.5 x 54.5 cm
Private collection



BARBY IN THE DRESS SHE MADE HER
oil on panel, 90.8 x 60.3 cm
Private collection