

## Cover Story

*She was just a nice girl from a nice family in Fredericton but she followed her husband into the Newfoundland bush, raised four fine kids and, one amazing day, became* **Mary Pratt, artist**

By Stephen Kimber

On a sparkling morning in the summer of '74, Mary Pratt discovered what the rest of us have been finding out ever since: That she is a painter of uncommon significance, a major Canadian artist. Ironically, the day had begun as badly as any she could remember. By the time the National Gallery in Ottawa telephoned with the news her paintings were to be included in a major exhibition of Canadian women artists, Mary was already in the bathtub nursing a bad case of hives and a worse case of tears. The hives and the tears both followed the none-too-soon departure of some particularly horrific houseguests.

Because Christopher Pratt, Mary's husband, is a fine painter of international reputation and because Mary, in addition to being a gifted artist is an open and gracious hostess and finally, because the Pratt place on the banks of the Salmonier River at the head of Newfoundland's St. Mary's Bay is as delightful a chunk of real estate as God has created, the Pratt home has long served as a summer drop-in centre of Canada's culturati.

After a day spent sailing on Chris's yacht or fishing in the river that meanders past the house or perhaps just sitting on the porch waiting for a moose to saunter through the backyard, the guests would retire to the Pratt's rambling house to nibble on something sweet that Mary had baked and allow the evening to slip away in good conversation. About art, about people they all knew, about the sea, about kids, about life. For Mary, who has no really close friends in the local community ("Even after 17 years here," she says with a laugh, people still regard us as being 'from town.'"), those summer evenings were as pleasant as any she could imagine.

But these visitors—the ones who brought on the hives and the tears—were different. They were culture-vultures, a couple who had come to the Pratts with their kids and their tape recorder to talk for the posterity of their machine with Christopher Pratt about his Art. For a week, they earnestly questioned Chris and just as earnestly ignored Mary. It didn't matter to them that Mary was also a serious artist



Usually, what she painted was edible

and that, at her first major exhibition in St. John's in 1967, smart collectors had grabbed up every one of the 44 paintings she had for sale. For them, Mary Pratt was simply a convenient appendage to her husband, a woman who could cook and clean and knew enough to keep quiet when the tape machine was running.

On the surface, it's easy enough to understand why the culture-vultures passed up Mary. To begin with, she's not pushy. She's part earth-mother—her husband and four kids will always be as important to her as any painting she will ever paint—and part the well-brought-up lawyer's daughter from Fredericton who still knows enough to speak only when spoken to. Even Peter Bell, the curator of the Memorial University Art Gallery who arranged her early exhibitions, only finally twigged to the fact there was another Pratt who painted when he came to talk with Chris about his paintings. She is, Bell explains, "very, very modest about herself." The woman from the National Gallery who ultimately brought her work to national attention also stumbled on Mary's paintings by accident when—while visiting the Pratts one summer—she happened to walk by the open door to Mary's studio. Mary, not wanting to appear forward about her

work, usually kept the door locked when visitors were in the house.

But there were more subtle reasons why the culture-vultures couldn't take Mary seriously. At a time when women's liberation was the talk of all the fashionable Toronto salons, she seemed hopelessly unliberated. She had tossed over her own planned career as a painter back in 1957 so that she could marry Christopher and then, over the next two years, had moved 13 times while he struggled to find himself and his calling. When they did settle down in 1961, it was to a Pratt family house in the Newfoundland hinterlands, far from Mary's friends and the comforts of city life. Even today, Mary—who still isn't an outdoorsy sort and has never learned to drive a car—confesses that she misses urban life. Mary appeared to be the ultimate caricature of "the little woman," the dutiful wife who followed her husband and bore his children and performed all of the domestic doings without complaint.

Mary began to paint again only after her four children were old enough to need less of her attention and, in the beginning, her motive was more personal therapy than professional ambition. The subject matter of her paintings seemed oddly old-fashioned. At a time when some feminists were reacting against anything that linked a woman to the kitchen, Mary was painting homey pictures of a head of cabbage or a salmon lying on a piece of saran wrap.

But what the culture-vultures who ignored her and the radical feminists who ridiculed her work failed to see is that underneath that reassuringly soft, stereotypical exterior was a remarkable solid centre, a steely core of confidence and humanism that was as much a part of Mary Pratt's life and art as the salmon she cooks and paints. Even in the bathtub with the hives and the tears brought on by a week of having the culture-vultures violate her home and her self-image, it was clear to anyone who knew her that the centre would still hold.

That centre was moulded, intriguingly, in one of the most genteel homes of one of Canada's most genteel cities. She was born in Fredericton in 1935, one of two daughters of Bill West, a non-smoking, non-drinking, Establish-



ment politician, and his wife. Despite the fact that her father was a mover and shaker in New Brunswick Tory politics and, in fact, served for a time as the province's attorney-general, Mary and her sister were cocooned from the rough-and-tumble of that real world. Whenever her father was campaigning for re-election, for example, the family would be shipped off to Prince Edward Island or to a remote cottage at the mouth of the Miramichi River. Campaign rhetoric was not fit stuff for young ears. "We were protected to the nth degree," Mary admits, "and probably spoiled outrageously too. It was a delightful childhood."

Both her parents dabbled at painting (her father used to illustrate her bedtime stories with drawings), and they naturally encouraged Mary's artistic leanings. "They would look at one of my paintings and tell everyone, 'Oh, Mary's so good at this,'" she remembers. "The truth is those paintings were awful; not nearly as good as the other kids'. But that kind of encouragement is so important for a child. They'd put my pictures in scrapbooks or they'd frame them and put them on the wall. After a while there almost became an obligation to succeed—I don't mean that the way it sounds. It's just that my parents allowed me to believe that I could be the best at painting, that it was my thing. I know everyone probably says it about their parents, but I do feel that I was really privileged to have them."

The confidence they instilled in her was bolstered further when she was 11 and one of her paintings was selected for an international exhibition in Luxembourg. "From that point on," she says, "I was committed." Only once in her youth did she even for a moment consider she might be something other than a painter. "On the day that I went to register at Mount A, the people at the registrar's office told me I didn't really have to go into fine arts, that I was smart enough to do something more important like be a teacher or a nurse. Before that, I had never even considered any other possibility." Her father came to her rescue. "He told me that if I didn't do what I wanted to do now, what would I be when I was 40? 'You'll be crazy,' he said." Mary took fine arts.

Her seatmate in first-year English was a brooding Newfoundlander named Christopher Pratt. Though he was then a pre-med student (he switched later to engineering and finally to art at Mary's urging), he had no idea what he wanted out of university. To amuse himself, he did watercolors. What intrigued Mary

**She found inspiration on the kitchen table: From top to bottom, Cod on Tinfoil, Eviscerated Chicken, and Salmon on Saran**

## Cover Story

most, however, was the fact that he was poet E.J. Pratt's nephew. "That cut a lot of ice with me then," Mary says. "I was very impressionable." She occupied herself for most of that first year trying to get Chris to notice her. She did watercolors of her own, so they'd have something in common. Slowly but surely, she won his interest. "After a few dates, I knew there would be no burning of bridges. I knew that what I wanted most of all was to marry Christopher. Everything else would work itself out."

It ultimately did, of course, but in those early years of marriage—when Christopher was roughing in the outlines of his own important reputation as a realist painter and Mary was keeping their brood clothed and fed and cared for in the way she believed children must be looked after—it seemed inevitable that Mary would never return to her own career. Even she sometimes believed that having two children in her arms and another two underfoot was a permanent condition. But she would not have traded those years for all the paintings in the world.

For nearly five years, she didn't paint a single stroke. What finally brought her back to her easel was the unflagging encouragement of her husband and his family. Ironically, it was Mary who'd once sold Christopher's family on the idea that painting was a respectable enough career for their son. Her own parents, though they had given her the confidence to pursue her painting as a child, now felt she had a "nice family and a good husband" and should not do anything to detract from Chris's role as "head of the house." "But Christopher was very insistent that I not give up my painting and when his parents came to visit, they would always ask me, 'And where's your work?'"

After illustrating a scientific book about the snipe that Christopher was just too busy to bother with, Mary took a new interest in the domestic scenes around her. Snatching an hour here and there, she would paint a fruit bowl or a freshly baked cake or some fish on the kitchen counter. Soon, she had a cupboard full of those "very small, quick paintings." Peter Bell, enchanted by their "slick crudeness, their spontaneity," offered her a show of her own. It was the first real cash income she'd got as a painter and, after that, she began to take her work more seriously.

Mary's paintings became more ambitious, more calculated. At Christopher's suggestion, she began to use color slides to capture her subjects—still the familiar food and fixtures around her in her kitchen—at the perfect

moment when the light slipped through the window in some peculiar way that Mary found fascinating. Once, she had dashed off a painting in an hour or so; now she spent weeks and months with her slides, getting down on canvas exactly the right nuance of color and shading. In 1972, after Toronto's Aggregation Gallery began to act as Mary's national agent, it couldn't even begin to keep up with the demand for her work.

For all that, right up until the moment when the ringing telephone interrupted her tears, she still did not



Camera helps Pratt freeze scenes



She spends weeks on work like Preserves

consider herself an *important* Canadian artist. She was a woman who painted when she had the time. When painting, she fretted that she was cheating her high school-aged kids of the special kind and quantity of attention adolescents require. She worried that the young girl they had hired to manage the house wouldn't do things exactly the way she did them. But when she wasn't painting, she agonized over that, too. The conflicting roles—wife, mother, painter—all seemed to be pressing in on her, weighing her down.

The culture-vultures couldn't have happened by at a worse time. She was

39, in the early stages of a pregnancy her body was no longer capable of handling, and she felt deathly sick. When they left and she was finally able to retire to the bathtub to wash away the hurt and the anger, Mary Pratt was as depressed as she had ever been. She wondered for an instant what the hell was the point of it all? Any of it.

Then the phone rang. "I remember wrapping myself in the biggest towel I could find and staggering to the phone. When they said they wanted to include me as one of their seven women artists, I couldn't believe it. You've never seen anyone in your life stop crying so fast."

The centre had held.

Today, there is no longer any question in anyone's mind about Mary Pratt's importance to Canadian art. "Pratt's work," wrote Joan Murray in *Arts Canada*, "has a quality of love and even of eroticism—if you define eroticism as an intimate association with something about which you really care."

That uncanny knack of investing the ordinary stuff of everyday life—an unmade bed, chickens waiting to be cooked, trifle in a bowl in the garden—with a loving magic that makes them extraordinary explains why the prices of Mary Pratt paintings now range from \$2,000 to \$10,000. And why there are so few available at any price. "We have a long list of clients and individuals waiting for a Mary Pratt and we are getting new inquiries all the time," David Tuck of Aggregation Gallery says. He adds that the prices for her work will almost certainly go up. "There is such a demand that there is no place else for prices to go."

But just as important to Mary as her success as a painter—more important, in fact—is her success as a mother. Her four children are now all headed into adulthood, as bright and fine and talented as any mother could hope for. With the youngest off to private school in New Brunswick this fall ("I have real problems with the idea of a private school," says Mary, "but the physics and chemistry courses Edwin wants are just not available locally"), Mary and Chris will, for the first time since they moved to the Pratt place in '61, be alone. Together.

That will be all right too. "It's difficult to know sometimes where Chris begins and Mary ends," says one old friend. "They are a wonderfully tight fit as a couple." Christopher says, "Mary is important to everything I am." Mary reciprocates. "I couldn't imagine my life without Christopher." Back in '57, Mary West was right. The important thing was Mary and Christopher. Everything else has worked out. Very nicely. ☒