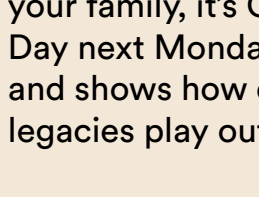


FEBRUARY 16, 2024

THE PRATT FAMILY A CANADIAN ART DYNASTY

To mark Family Day next Monday, we're looking at the famous Canadian art couple Mary and Christopher Pratt, the tremendously successful careers they each forged, and the legacies they passed on to their children, artists Barbara Pratt and Ned Pratt.

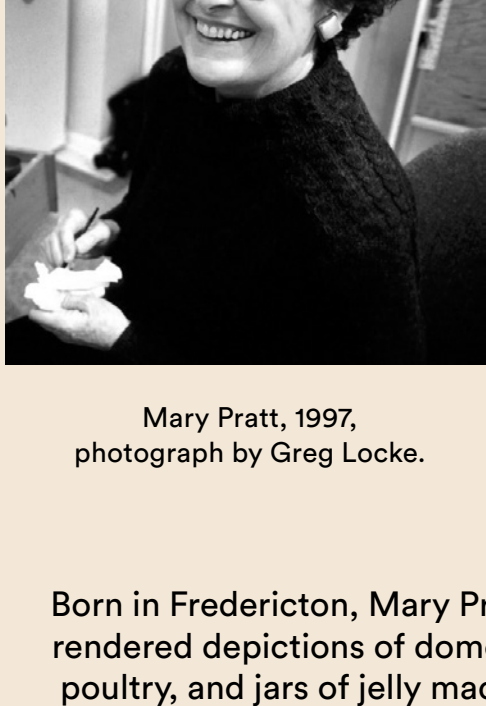


Mary Pratt (1935–2018) and Christopher Pratt (1935–2022), two of Canada's most renowned realist painters, were married for forty-seven years. "The fascination with Christopher lay almost entirely with his mind," [Mary wrote](#)—"that part of his thinking that concerned images and ideas." In 1961, after finishing their studies at Mount Allison University, where the couple met, they moved with their son John and daughter Anne to St. John's, Newfoundland. There, they had two more children, who would later become artists: painter Barbara Pratt (b.1963) and photographer Ned Pratt (b.1964). This story is a key part of the Art Canada Institute publication [Mary Pratt: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin, where he shares that although Mary's art teacher, Lawren P. Harris, told her, "Now you have to understand in a family of painters, there can only be one painter, and in your family, it's Christopher," she would prove him wrong. With a nod to Family Day next Monday, this week's newsletter dives into the Pratts and their work and shows how domestic scenes, family relationships, gender dynamics, and legacies play out in their art.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

MARY PRATT



Mary Pratt, 1997, photograph by Greg Locke.

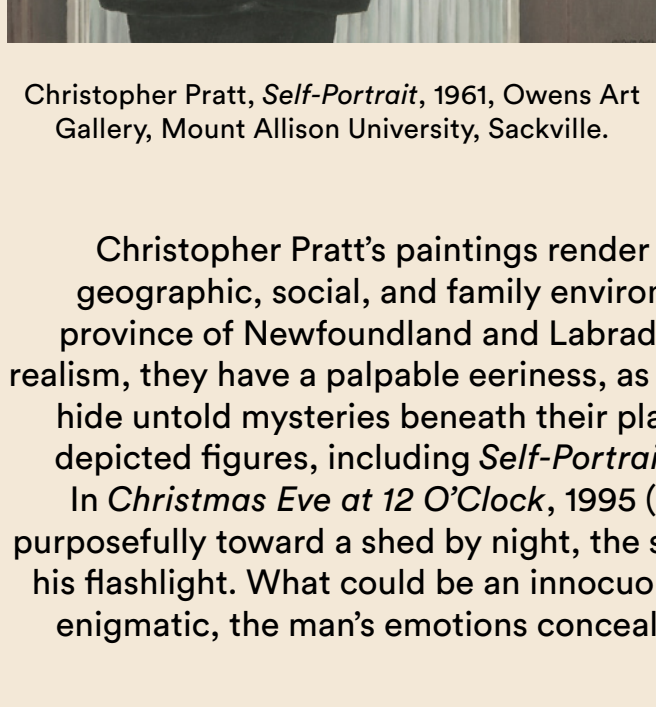


Mary Pratt, *Eggs in an Egg Crate*, 1975, Memorial University of Newfoundland Collection, The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's.

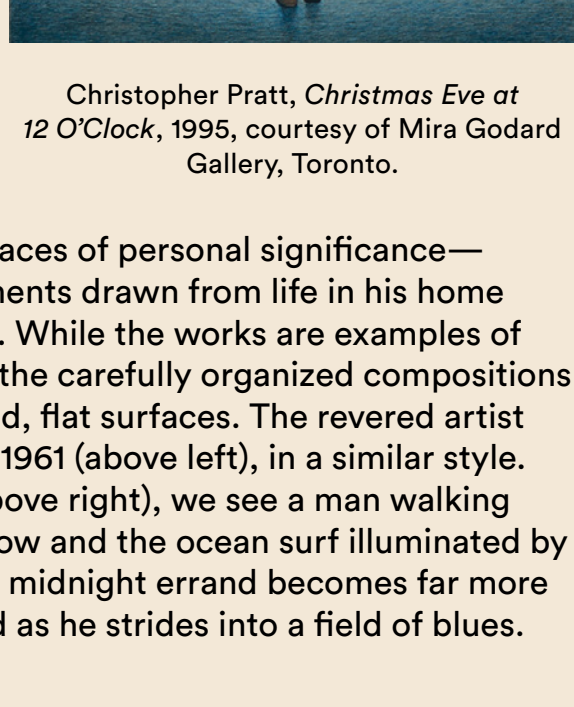
Born in Fredericton, Mary Pratt (above left) was known for her meticulously rendered depictions of domestic life. Her paintings of subjects such as fish, poultry, and jars of jelly made her one of Canada's most celebrated artists. In *Eggs in an Egg Crate*, 1975 (above right), we see just that: the shells of six eggs nestled in a carton for a dozen. The painting glows—and tells a deeper story. Mary, who had recently lost twins, [recalled](#): "The light shone on the slippery interior of the empty shells.... The textures and colours combined to create an image symbolic of life and abandoned life." The luminosity and tactile detail of Mary's paintings emphasize the care and spiritual significance behind homemaking and family life.

Read more in ACI's [Mary Pratt: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin

CHRISTOPHER PRATT



Christopher Pratt, *Self-Portrait*, 1961, Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University, Sackville.

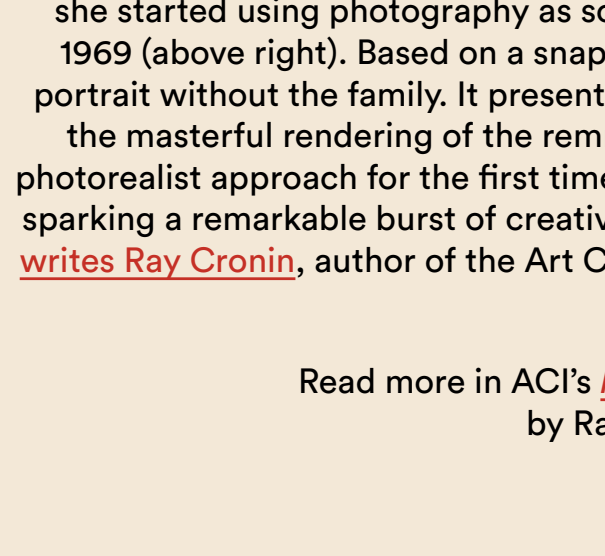


Christopher Pratt, *Christmas Eve at 12 O'Clock*, 1995, courtesy of Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto.

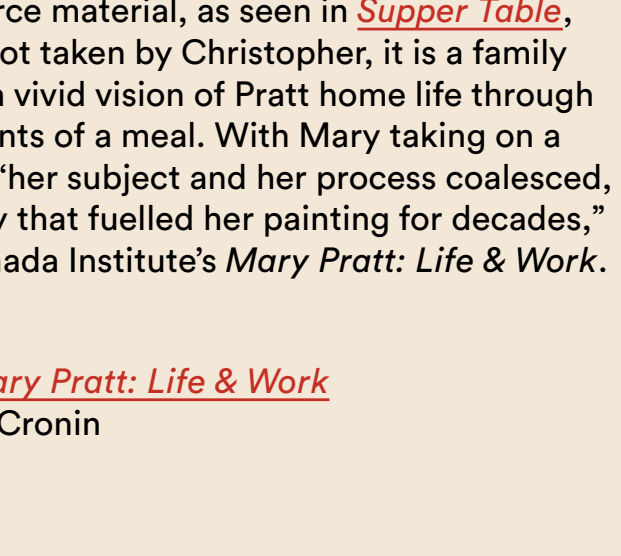
Christopher Pratt's paintings render places of personal significance—geographic, social, and family environments drawn from life in his home province of Newfoundland and Labrador. While the works are examples of realism, they have a palpable eeriness, as if the carefully organized compositions hide untold mysteries beneath their placid, flat surfaces. The revered artist depicted figures, including *Self-Portrait*, 1961 (above left), in a similar style. In *Christmas Eve at 12 O'Clock*, 1995 (above right), we see a man walking purposefully toward a shed by night, the snow and the ocean surf illuminated by his flashlight. What could be an innocuous midnight errand becomes far more enigmatic, the man's emotions concealed as he strides into a field of blues.

[Learn more about Christopher Pratt](#)

FAMILY LIFE AND ART



Mary Pratt with her children, (left to right) John, Ned, Barby, and Anne, 1964, photograph by John Kerr (Jack) Pratt. Jack Pratt was Christopher's father, known in the family as "Daddy Jack."



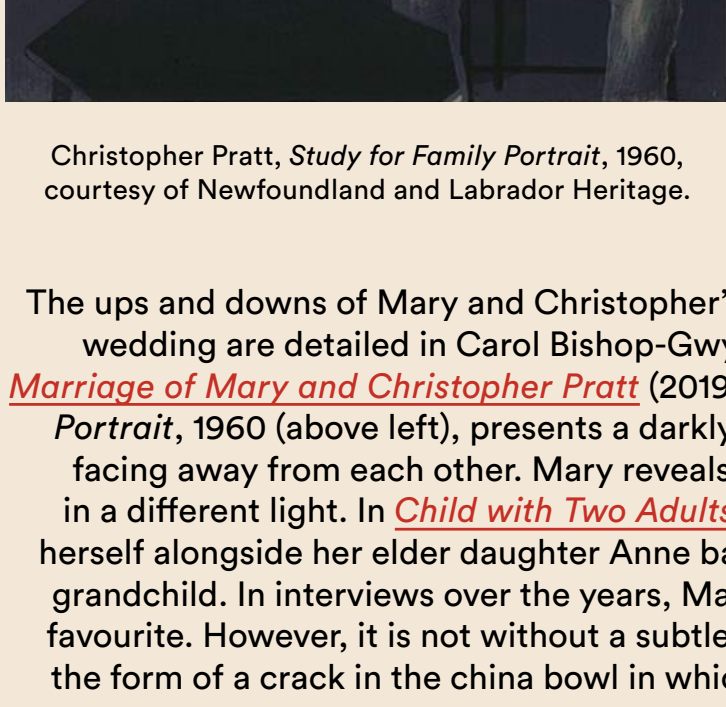
Mary Pratt, *Supper Table*, 1969, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton.

Running a household didn't allow Mary much time to paint, and she watched Christopher's career ascend as hers stalled. But a turning point came when she started using photography as source material, as seen in [Supper Table](#), 1969 (above right). Based on a snapshot taken by Christopher, it is a family portrait without the family. It presents a vivid vision of Pratt home life through the masterful rendering of the remnants of a meal. With Mary taking on a photorealist approach for the first time, "her subject and her process coalesced, sparking a remarkable burst of creativity that fuelled her painting for decades," [writes Ray Cronin](#), author of the Art Canada Institute's *Mary Pratt: Life & Work*.

Read more in ACI's [Mary Pratt: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin

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ART AND RIVALRY



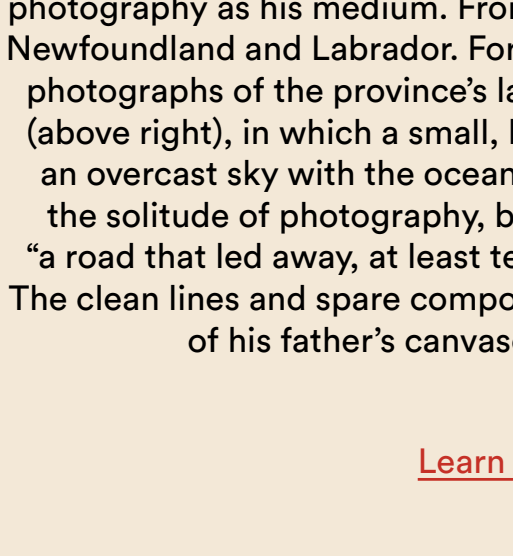
Christopher Pratt, *Study for Family Portrait*, 1960, courtesy of Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage.



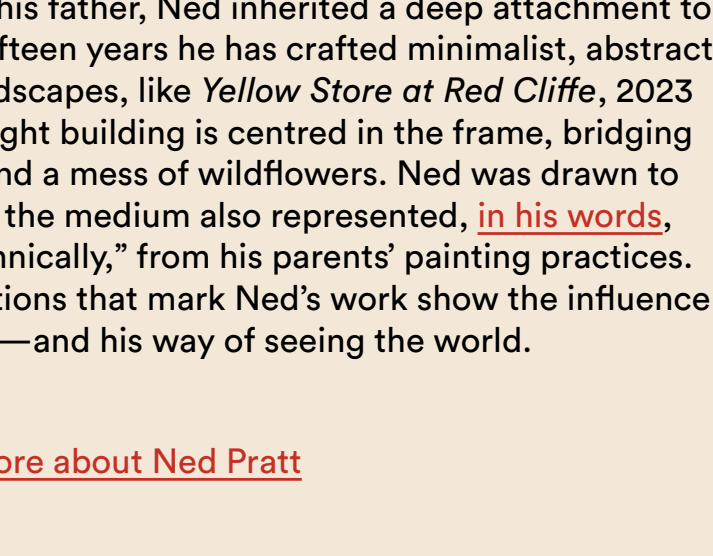
Mary Pratt, *Child with Two Adults*, 1983, private collection.

The ups and downs of Mary and Christopher's relationship following their 1957 wedding are detailed in Carol Bishop-Gwyn's book [Art and Rivalry: The Marriage of Mary and Christopher Pratt](#) (2019). Christopher's *Study for a Family Portrait*, 1960 (above left), presents a darkly lit scene of a couple resolutely facing away from each other. Mary reveals the challenges of domesticity in a different light. In *Child with Two Adults*, 1983 (above right), she paints herself alongside her elder daughter Anne bathing her and Christopher's first grandchild. In interviews over the years, Mary repeatedly called this work a favourite. However, it is not without a subtle element of discord which takes the form of a crack in the china bowl in which her granddaughter is bathed.

NED PRATT



Ned Pratt, photograph by Don Craig.

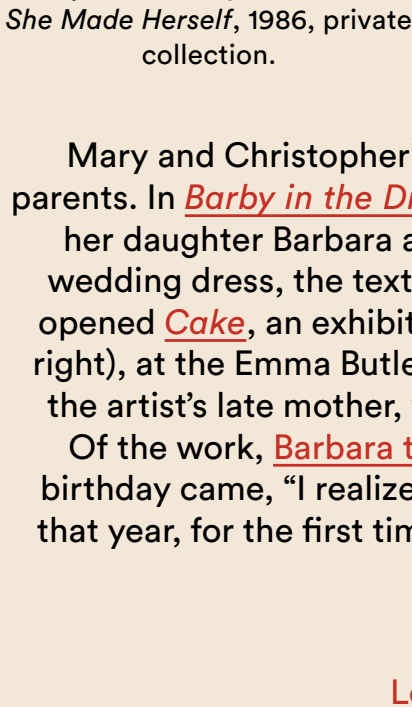


Ned Pratt, *Yellow Store at Red Cliffe*, 2023, courtesy of Christina Parker Gallery, St. John's.

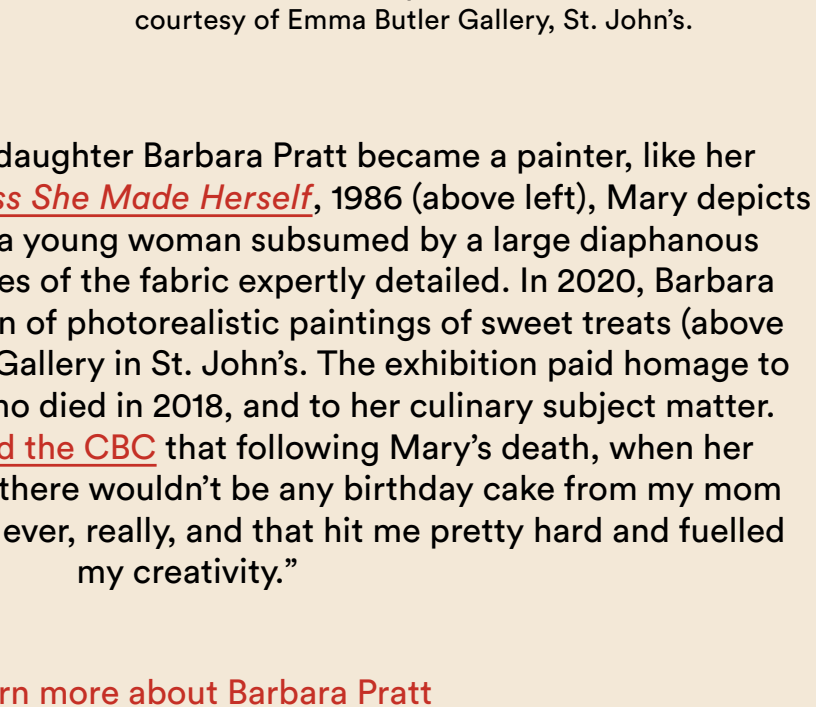
Mary and Christopher's son Ned Pratt (above left) became an artist, choosing photography as his medium. For his father, Ned inherited a deep attachment to Newfoundland and Labrador. From fifteen years he has crafted minimalist, abstract photographs of the province's landscapes, like *Yellow Store at Red Cliffe*, 2023 (above right), in which a small, bright building is centred in the frame, bridging an overcast sky with the ocean and a mess of wildflowers. Ned was drawn to the solitude of photography, but the medium also represented, [in his words](#), "a road that led away, at least technically," from his parents' painting practices. The clean lines and spare compositions that mark Ned's work show the influence of his father's canvases—and his way of seeing the world.

[Learn more about Ned Pratt](#)

BARBARA PRATT



Mary Pratt, *Barby in the Dress She Made Herself*, 1986, private collection.



Barbara Pratt, *Winter Birthday*, from the series *Cake*, 2020, courtesy of Emma Butler Gallery, St. John's.

Mary and Christopher's daughter Barbara Pratt became a painter, like her parents. In [Barby in the Dress She Made Herself](#), 1986 (above left), Mary depicts her daughter Barbara as a young woman subsumed by a large diaphanous wedding dress, the textures of the fabric expertly detailed. In 2020, Barbara opened [Cake](#), an exhibition of photorealistic paintings of sweet treats (above right), at the Emma Butler Gallery in St. John's. The exhibition paid homage to the artist's late mother, who died in 2018, and to her culinary subject matter. Of the work, [Barbara told the CBC](#) that following Mary's death, when her birthday came, "I realized there wouldn't be any birthday cake from my mom that year, for the first time ever, really, and that hit me pretty hard and fuelled my creativity."

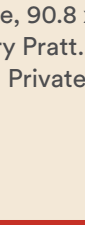
[Learn more about Barbara Pratt](#)

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