CHRISTOPHER

PRATT

Master of archetype or laureate of the middle way: a dramatic appraisal

By Gary Michael Dault

That Newfoundland painter Christopher Pratt is a Canadian artist of genuine importance and real distinction is scarcely ever, I think, disputed. What has not been examined closely enough, however, is the true source of that importance, his actual meaning as a painter. Despite the considerable amount of critical attention paid to him over the years (most of it respectful to a degree just short of idolatry), Pratt's work continues to be regarded — rather muzzily — as the work of a painterly Platonist, a visionary with X-ray eyes for the reality that somehow lies beneath the sham of particularity.

For a quarter of a century now, Pratt's spare pellucid meditations on the messages suspended within evacuated rooms, the translucent precision of the painted light defining his clapboard walls, the mute eloquence of his serene seas, have come together to form what most viewers and critics see as a world of idealized forms. The force of these images lies in their apparent ability to lift us from the banalities of the everyday into the grandeur of generality.

"In experiencing his images, we experienced their archetypal power," writes Joyce Zemans, dean of fine art at York University, in the book-length catalogue to her current retrospective exhibition of the artist's works. Zemans, whose study carefully charts Pratt's progress from his student days to the present, makes frequent use of this not entirely gem-hard concept: "Making universal statements from local experience would become Pratt's consuming passion." In her discussion of Pratt's painting *Shop on an Island* (1969), she points out that "once again, poetic reality surpasses its origins and reveals larger truths." Referring to Pratt's figure painting, she suggests that working closely and continuously from the model is essential to him "not because he wishes to capture the character of his model ... but so he might better understand the essential structure of the archetypal ideal and find confirmation of the basic life force that pervades all of nature...."

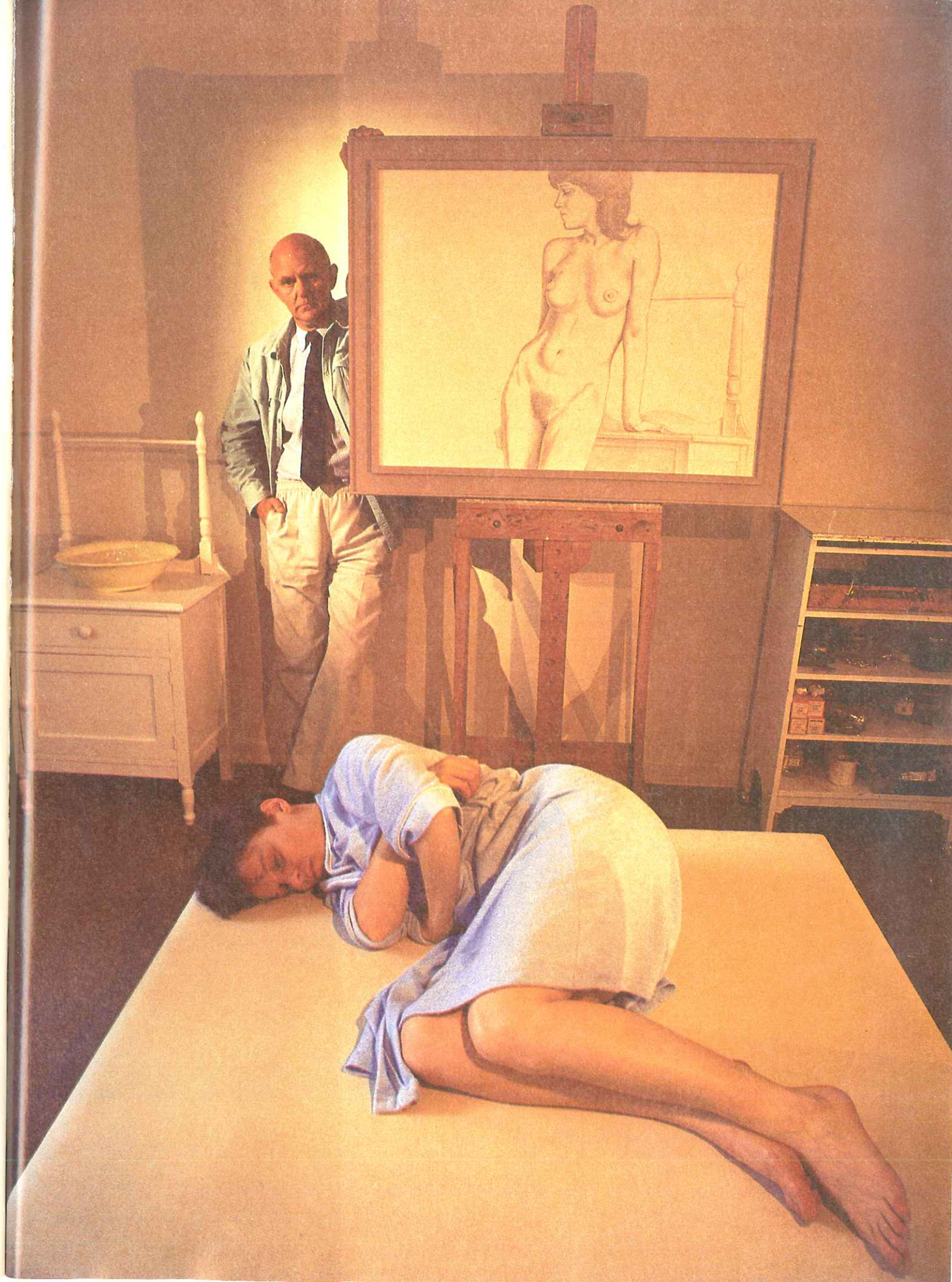
Of the curious and highly ambitious *Me and Bride* (1977-1980), a five-panel painting depicting the artist at one end of a dark veranda drawing a seminude model who poses three panels away from him at the far left, Zemans comments: "*Me and Bride* is antirealistic and generalized. Abstracted sky and water suggest infinite time and space. The dynamic proportions of the composition impregnate the very structure of the painting with meaning. Through subtle control of light and the harmony of the system of proportions, Pratt again forces the medium of paint and the structure of his composition to his will. But the work asserts Plato's contention that the chaos that surrounds us belies the internal order underlying reality." I don't know whether there's an internal order underlying reality or not. It doesn't often *feel* like it. But if *Me and Bride*, which is, admittedly, an extraordinary painting, as perverse as it is penetrating, *asserts* this proposition (Plato's or not), I'll eat my typewriter ribbon.

It's not as if Zemans is a lonely outpost of optimism about Pratt's abilities to strike through the clutter of everyday existence. David P. Silcox, in the essay that begins his book about Pratt (*Christopher Pratt*, Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1982), also writes, in what is still the handiest introduction to the artist and his works: "Pratt's works are... metaphors of his experiences and insights, time-markers or epitaphs of his ideas, which reside beneath representation."

Like most other painters of serious pictures — even abstract or, more particularly nonrepresentational pictures — Pratt aligns himself naturally with the structural givens of our world. He understands as well as any painter alive the way horizontal lines (the railings of porches, window ledges, the far reaches of the sea) become reliable signs for quiescence, peacefulness, continuity, eternity; the way verticals, by contrast, bespeak our yearning for the transcendental; the way obliques, set against these eternal x-y co-ordinates, invariably read as finite passages of localized energy (in the process of hoisting themselves up to become verticals or falling flat to become horizontals). Pratt also makes heavy use of the sets of dichotomies by which our lives are bound: darkness and light (evil and goodness), freedom and curtailment, enclosure and endlessness, Eros and Thanatos, male and female. Indeed, Zemans's catalogue is laced through and through with references to the presence within Pratt's pictures of these omnipresent sets of differences and the promise (if not a demonstration) of how they lend significance to his work.

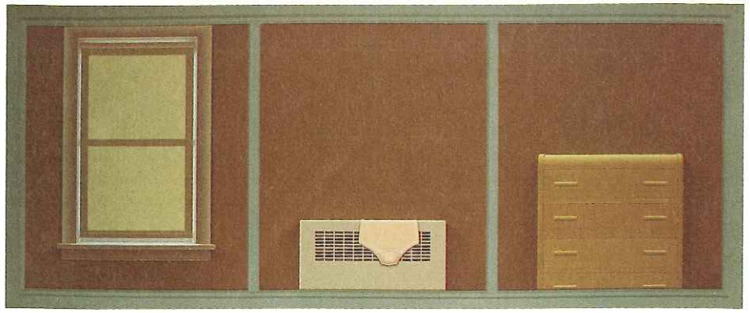
But while these structural imperatives and poetic dichotomies are useful tools upon which Pratt, like other artists, draws for certain effects, I am not at all sure that they constitute as profound and as all-pervasive a set of underlying, archetypal truths as Zemans and various of Pratt's well-wishers would have us believe.

Take the dichotomies. Certainly they are there in lyric abundance. In *Shop on an Island* (1969), there are two kinds of emptiness — the bereftness of the empty shelves in the store, the utter disappearance and



Pratt, here contemplating his reclining model, admits that figure work has been "a great frustration" to him. The irony is that nudes ought to break down his careful dichotomies, but this hasn't happened.

JOHN REEVES



The Visitor (1977), oil on board, 94 x 226 cm (37" x 89"). Collection: National Art Gallery of Canada. Courtesy: Mira Godard Gallery.

The Visitor, according to Pratt, recalls his sojourn in a guest house. The underpants are a found object, abandoned by some previous occupant.

witholding of people, and the undifferentiated immensity of the calm sea beyond the shop's window. There is the need*ful*ness of the human being (which this store is entirely too abstract to provide for) and the need*less*ness of the ocean. There are two kinds of time contrasted in the picture: the timelessness of the sea, and the chronological time of the people on land — closing time and vacation time and a time beyond which the store will have outlasted its usefulness and will descend into a long plangent time of decline. The picture seems structured primarily upon these contrasts.

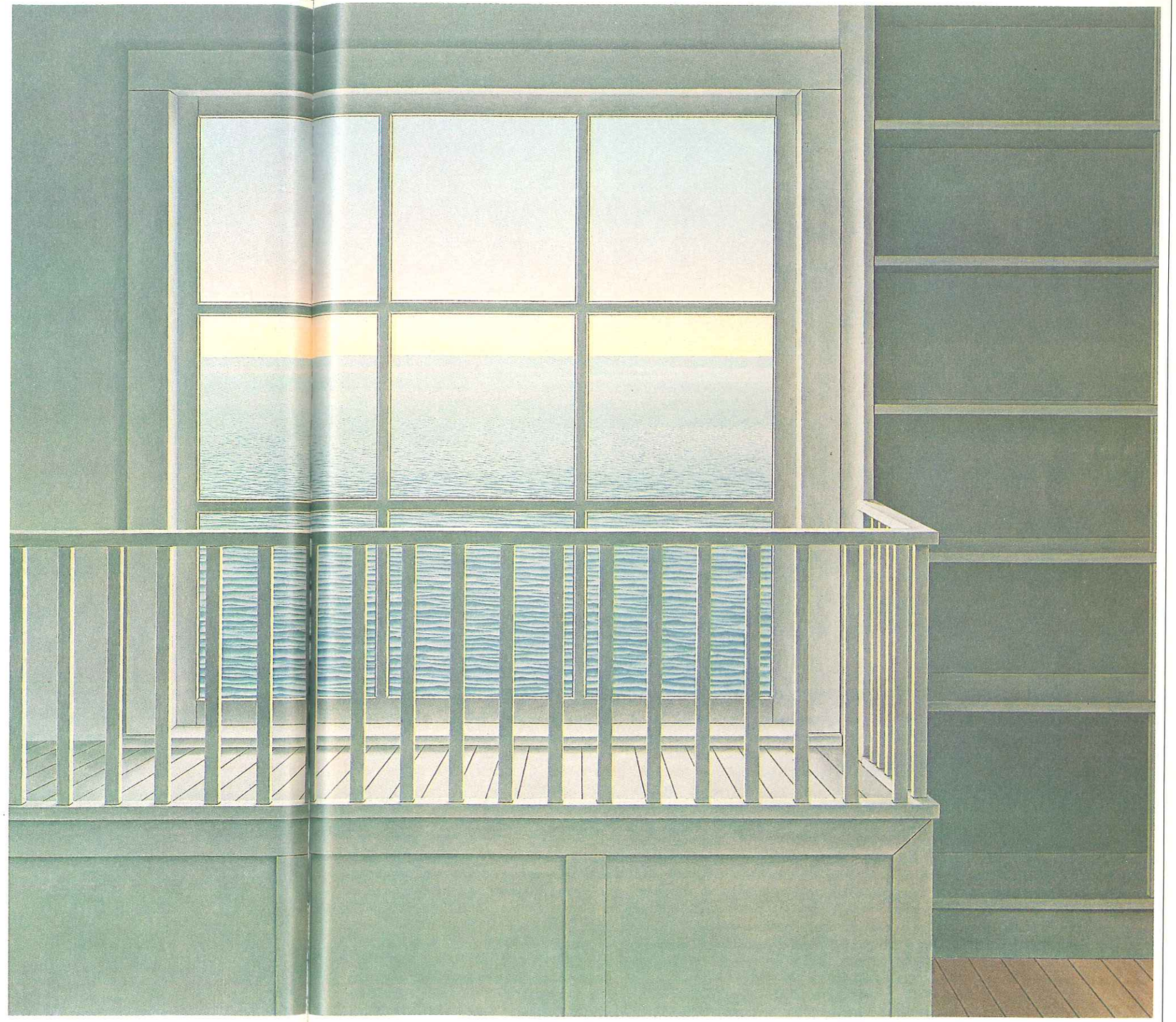
The majority of Pratt's paintings are held up by and energized by just such sets of contrasts. *Bay* (1972) is all wide sky over water, the whole expanse observable through a panoramic window — the visible versus the visionary. In *Institution* (1973), there is office-building claustrophobia and open sky, the sky's crystalline transparency threatened by the smudgy steam from a vent on the roof. *Federal Area* (1975) employs a blank grey wall, a window, a doorway into another hallway and a wire fence, all to keep us — imaginatively speaking — from the blue sea and the open sky that lie beyond.

For me, these dichotomies and radical contrasts do not lend point and poignancy to Pratt's paintings so much as they tip them into sentimentality — a sentimentality that lies in the obviousness of the twin pulls the painting is likely to start up within us. Given these oppositions — desire and prohibition, containment and immensity, freedom and oppression — there sets in a process of self-cancellation in the viewer's mind. One spatial or moral fiction of Pratt's negates the other one. What you are left with, always, is a sort of mid-ground languishing. Because there is no way to tip the balance in favour of one or the other of the two proffered dichotomies, Pratt lands himself and his viewers in a sort of Indecisive Moment. Many of Pratt's critics argue that this frozen moment of contrasts is a highly charged stasis, not unlike the collapsed times and spaces of mysticism. But Pratt's dichotomies steadfastly do *not* crumble into some luminous resolution or oneness. His pictorial squarings-off finally settle into a rationalized indecision. Pratt's twonesses remain twonesses.

Within Pratt's painterly indecisive moment lies the source of his so often being labelled cold, aloof, passionless. Pratt, as a painter, is really none of these things. What he does seem to be, however, is so doggedly all-inclusive, so resolute about showing us both the inside and the outside of things, the yearning differences between all our screened front porches and the great democratic ocean beyond them, that his generalizations are too majestically all-inclusive. Pratt is the laureate of the middle way, the great sitter on the fence. He is — pictorially speaking only — not so much cold and unsensuous as he is analytically determined to depict both halves of an experience at the same time, and therefore to seem, by the very nature of his wide embrace, unfeeling. What sensuousness there is in his paintings is derived from the artist's having thrown the onus of choice and interpretation back on the viewer, where the picture's sensuous meaning is released by the viewer's own memory.

Pratt is one of the great mnemonic painters of our time. Zemans sees him as an imagist, of the William Carlos Williams variety, with all of that poet's heightened absorption in the mute but meaningful immanence of objects in the world. It seems to me Pratt wields something closer to T.S. Eliot's objective correlative, in which the meaning and desire locked in an object (or an idea) are unlocked only by virtue of that object's having escaped the personality of the artist and been set free, as it were, to trigger meaning in the viewer's mind.

For example, in Pratt's painting *The Visitor* (1977) (a window to the left, a pink



Shop on an Island (1969), 81 x 91.4 cm (32" x 36"). Collection: London Regional Art Gallery. Courtesy: Mira Godard Gallery.

Shop on an Island is concerned with emptiness (vacant shelves, no human presence, immeasurable waters outside) and time (eternal seas, land-based closing time, an infinite future of gradual decline).

Me and Bride (1977-1980), oil on board, 113 x 273 cm (44½" x 107½"). Private collection. Courtesy: Mira Godard Gallery.

In the curious and highly ambitious *Me and Bride*, a half-dressed model keeps her distance, standing three panels away from the artist, as if to remain an aesthetic problem, rather than an actual woman.

dresser to the right, a radiator in the middle with a pair of rather bulbous pink underpants hung over it), the centrally located underpants, homogenized by their smooth, slick detail-less rendering, do not function at all as any particular pair of underpants. Any meaning they are going to have (beyond the merely compositional) comes merely from one's own past. The fact that underpants are not grand enough to be generalized about (as contrasted, say, with the sea) ultimately makes *The Visitor* into a piece of pictorial *bathos*.

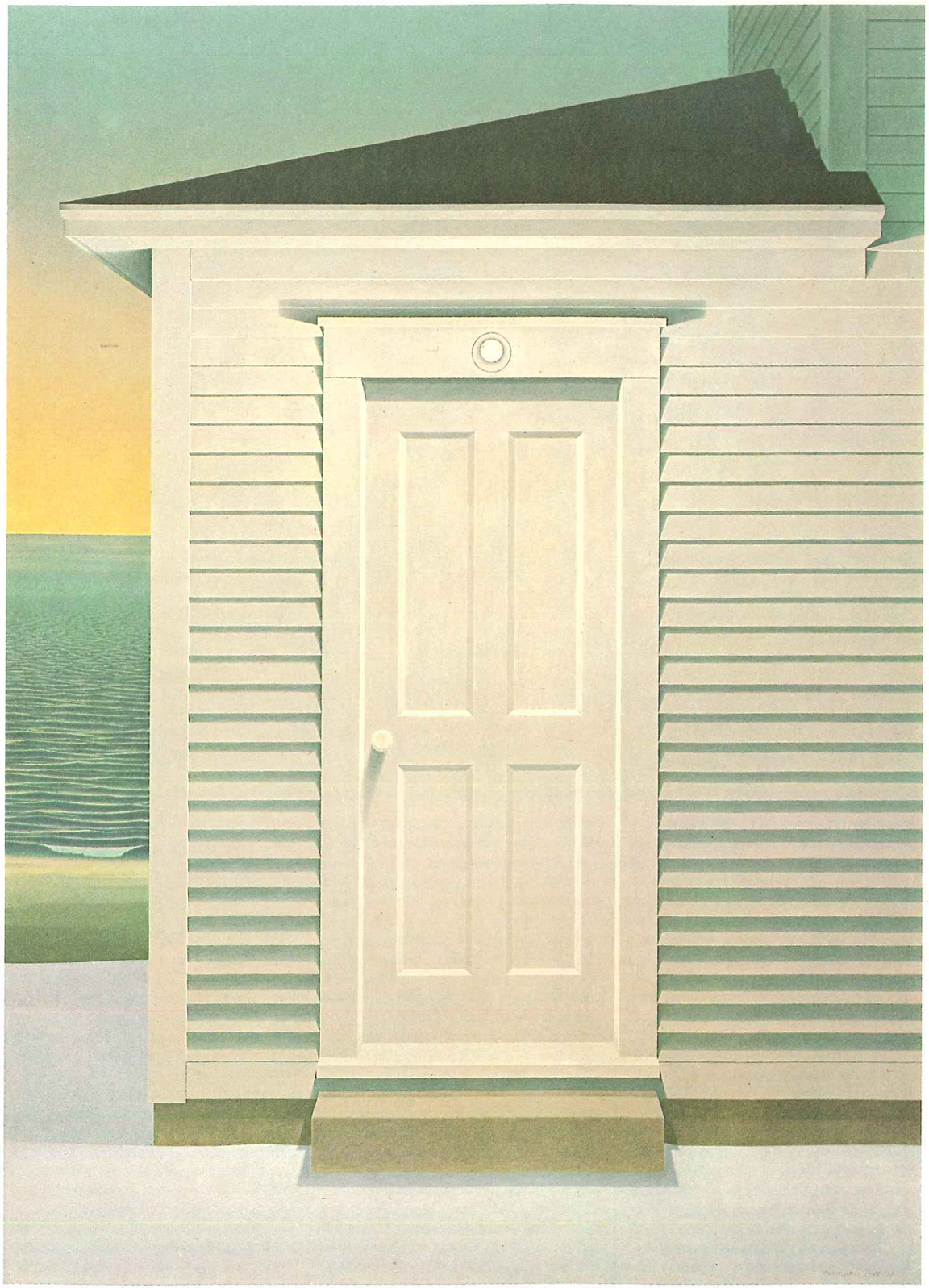
Pratt is not an aloof, removed, or arid painter. Not only does he not lack emotion or feel too little; he (paradoxically) feels too much. He wants it all. Temperamentally unable to regenerate emotion from the grammar of nonrepresentational art, he pastes up instead a picture of coloured strips of paper one above the other and labels it *Ice* (1972). He brings together pure lined rectangles of paper and calls the resulting collages studies for his screen-print *Ocean Racer* (1975). He extends the clapboard wall of a house graphically across seven-eighths of the picture's surface in *March Night* (1976), only to bring it up short at the right edge, where it meets a slab of deep blue sky. Pratt sidles up to abstraction, leaching his houses of doorknobs, hinges, anything that might smack of particularity, and then denies virtually any claim to mainline abstraction. He cannot abide, on the other hand, the messy incident mongering of the so-called high realists — Andrew Wyeth, Alex Colville, Tom Forrestall and Ken Danby — to whom he has been frequently, if mistakenly, linked. What I see in Christopher Pratt's painting is the encyclopaedic desire to live in and out of the world and never to give either up.

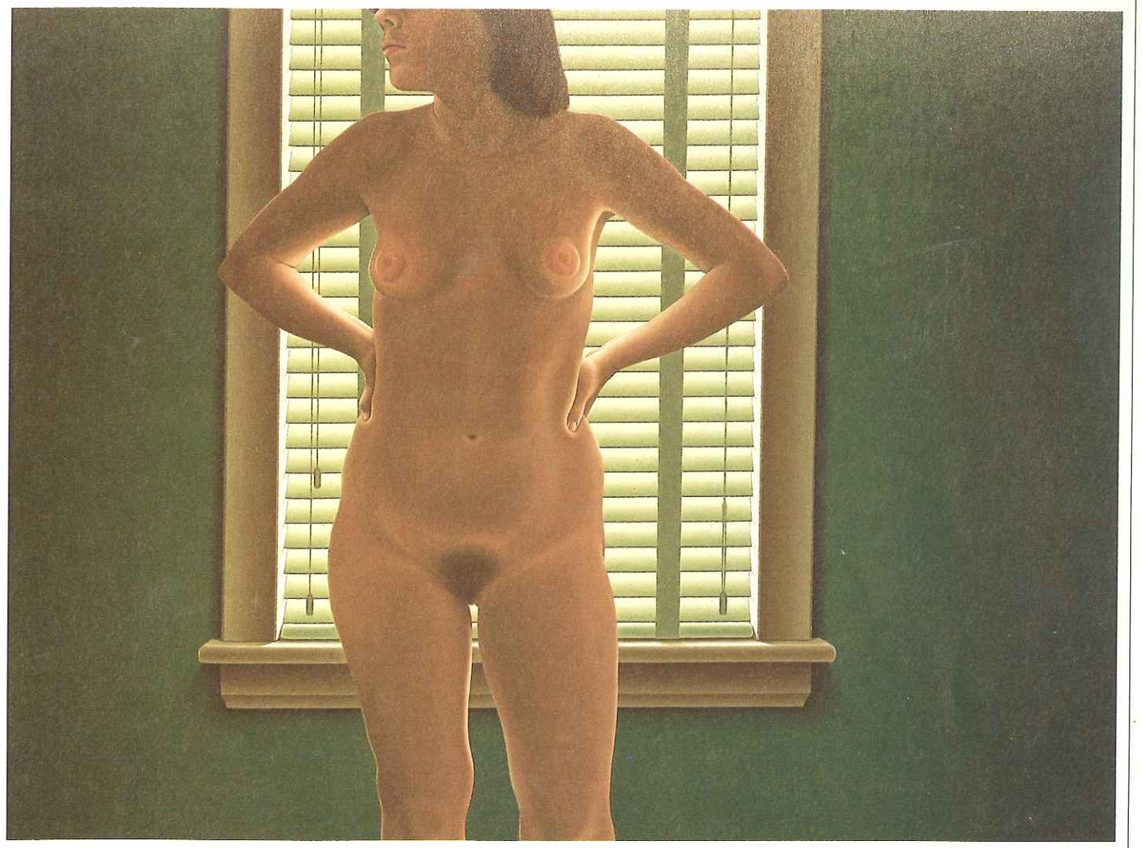
One of the supposed on-ramps to Pratt's highway to universal truths is his much praised efficacy as a dreamer or at least meditator upon the unchanging givens of the world that are obfuscated by day-to-day life. Dreaming, it seems to me, can proceed only through a matrix of peacefulness and serenity. Pratt's paintings may be radically still but they are scarcely ever peaceful. More often than not, they are tinctured with apprehension, congested with anxiety. The dreamer, writes the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Reverie*, sees time simultaneously suffusing both the dreamer himself and the larger world. "The eye which dreams does not see," writes Bachelard, "or at least it sees with another vision. This vision is not constituted of 'leftovers'" — the detritus of daily experience. Bachelard's cosmic dreamer has no experience of the gap between himself and the perceived world. The cosmic image (as opposed to merely isolated images, like the ones in Pratt's pictures) is immediate, giving the whole before the parts. This is precisely what Pratt's paintings do *not* give us. Rather, they give us parts first and foremost — part of a clapboard wall, the edge of the sea, half a window, the bottom of a staircase, a section of sail.

Within Pratt's images, all of them anxious objects, we are in the no man's land between one mode of life and another, one generality and another, one real (though simplified) figure against another real (though simplified) ground. Another sign of Pratt's inability (or unwillingness) to labour in the service of the idealized, timeless image is, of course, his virtuoso handling of light effects. His light goes hand in hand with his naturalism. Pratt's light is not abstract; more often than not it's intensely realistic. But simplified, like his subjects and structures. *Wall Facing West* (1980), for example, is flooded with "the horizontal winter sun". In *Good Friday* (1973), the house is illuminated by the pale watery light of early spring. *Porch Light* (1972) takes place during "that time of day when it is light, yet dark".

This temporal approximation is, by itself, enough to prevent Pratt's pictures from being lifted up out of time and links them instead to the concrete (however simplified). Pratt's paintings are rarely timeless. They are, in fact, quite the opposite: they are time-filled.

His nudes are relevant to this discussion mainly because of the way they intrude somewhat awkwardly into his work and into critical discussions of his work. The nudes are a problem to everybody — and especially to Pratt. He tells Zemans that he feels cheated if he isn't able to draw regularly from the figure. In a long conversation with Marie Morgan in *Visual Arts* (the magazine of the Banff School of Fine Arts), however, he says, "My figure work has been a great frustration to me to the point where I have very frequently just considered forgetting it altogether." The nudes are often looked upon as cold and clinical, devoid of warmth and sensuality -- and a good many of them are. Pratt tells Morgan he sees them as "adequately sensuous". "I won't," he warns her, "be beaten into the ground or yield on that." What is interesting about the nudes, however, is not the presence or absence of sensuality in them but rather the way in which they behave as aesthetic barometers for his work in general. The nudes, for example, are pared down; the particularities of the model's body are transcended in the artist's search for clarity of outline, solidity of implied mass, and so on. (It is amusing that while Pratt will not clutter up his barns with hinges or window sills, he seems to find nothing over-specific about a model's pubic hair.) But what sets them apart from the rest of Pratt's work is that unlike his





The Girl in the Spare Room (1984), oil on masonite, 69.8 x 92.7 cm (27½" x 36½"). Courtesy: Mira Godard Gallery.

Pratt's nudes are often looked upon as cold and clinical, devoid of warmth and sensuality. But the body is undeniable in its force; he cannot abstract from it as he would from a sun porch.

Porch Light (1972), oil on board, 81 x 59.6 cm (32" x 23½"). Collection: Mrs. Christine Pratt. Courtesy: Mira Godard Gallery.

Porch Light (left) is energized by contrasts. The door is welcoming, but stern vertical lines keep us — imaginatively speaking — from sea and sky.

barns, verandas and boats, the nude resolutely refuses to become an object, a system of outlines and shadings generalized around the approximate shape of the naked female body. The human body is just too full of its own insistent narratives to drop them in favour of generalized truths. The body, no matter how tentatively explored, no matter how disinterestedly delineated, is undeniable in its force. You simply cannot abstract from the body the way you can from a sun porch.

It is with the nudes that Pratt's carefully orchestrated system of dichotomies breaks down. There is, basically, nothing around that is *opposite to* a nude. The irony is that because of that, Pratt, when he draws or paints the nude, ought to be forced, finally, into the mystical, generalized oneness that would carry him past his theatre of indecision. The nude is, after all, aggressively one thing. The nudes might have been Pratt's route to wholeness. But like his unpeopled paintings, this isn't what happened. Instead, Pratt has and has not given the nudes detail, weight, personality. They are neither icons nor people. Neither symbol nor anatomy. And it is for this reason, I think, that Pratt is defensive about them: he knows they don't behave in the same way as his other structures. His distance from them is based not on any kind of puritanism or sexual jumpiness, but rather on his wish to keep them in their place, given the potential high-voltage threat they pose to his work in general. The half-dressed model in *Me and Bride* is three panels away from the artist because he wants her to keep her distance — as an aesthetic problem, not as a woman. She, in turn, seems to look out into the world to see if there's anybody else around who would care to turn her into art. CA

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CHRISTOPHER PRATT: A RETROSPECTIVE

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