

Her Own "Frame of Reference": A Feminist Reading of Mary Pratt's Painting

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ABSTRACT

Art history has made the word "artist" synonymous with man; woman has been excluded from *mastery* of the privileged genre of the female nude, *object* of male speculation, desire, and consumption. Feminist criticism has provided an alternative set of signifieds for the nude image produced by a woman. In Mary Pratt's paintings of her husband Christopher's models, the feminist critic reads a complex meeting of the subjectivity of the artist and the model. In another part of her oeuvre, the still-lives, more often associated with women artists and metonymic with the domestic spaces of female experience, the feminist critic reads erotic images which are, simultaneously, appealing and disturbing.

RÉSUMÉ

L'histoire de l'art a fait que le mot «artiste» est devenu synonyme d'homme; la femme a été exclue de la *maîtrise* de ce genre privilégié du nu féminin, *objet* de spéculation masculine, de désir et de consommation. La critique féministe a offert une autre série de signifiés pour les nus dépeints par les femmes. Dans les peintures de Mary Pratt qui représentent les modèles de son mari Christopher, la féministe interprète cela comme une rencontre complexe de la subjectivité de l'artiste et du modèle. Dans une autre partie de son oeuvre où les natures mortes sont souvent associées aux femmes artistes et sont métonymiques de l'univers familial de la vie d'une femme, la féministe interprète cela comme des images érotiques qui sont en même temps attirantes et gênantes.

MARY PRATT'S OEUVRE OFFERS A FITTING SITE for feminist intervention because she works within her own "frame of reference," recording a woman's perception of life and art:

"Women are different from men" [says Pratt]....
"Their special role is to convey to men their own reverence for the small and the seemingly unimportant. It's almost like the apple that Eve gave to Adam. This is what I give to you, this is what I have, this is what I understand and you don't." (Qtd. in Gwyn and Moray: 19)

She paints "women's" things: foods, wedding dresses, a baby's bath. Margaret Atwood says that

when men use domestic images in writing—and the same can be said for painting—they are considered realists, but if women use such images, they are considered to be revealing "an unfortunate genetic limitation" (1982a, 199). She has remarked upon the lack of critical language by which to describe women's art that is responsible for what she calls "the Lady Painter Syndrome," or the corollary "she paints like a man" comment:

I call it the Lady Painter Syndrome because of a conversation I had about female painters with a male painter in 1960. "When she's good," he said, "we call her a painter; when she's bad we call her a lady painter." "She writes like a man"

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is part of the same pattern; it's usually used by a male reviewer who is impressed by a female writer. It's meant as a compliment.... Thus the woman writer [or painter] ... has two choices. She can be bad but female, a carrier of the "feminine sensibility" virus; or she can be "good" in male-adjective terms, but sexless. Badness seems to be ascribed then to a surplus of female hormones ... "femaleness" ... [is] a handicap of deficiency. (1982a, 197-98)

Feminist criticism provides a language with which we can describe the content of a work of art, the subjectivity of the artist, and our own subjectivities as viewers. It provides the critical language that Atwood could not find in 1976. Estella Lauter claims that under formalist theories, the very term *art* was a "normative" rather than a "descriptive" term (93), and that "gender has always been a factor in judging art when art is explicitly or implicitly associated with women, even when women artists have met criteria of excellence set by men" (97). A feminist reading of Pratt's painting can make us aware of things which formalist theories of art cannot; for the feminist art critic, "form is important for its potential to shape subject matter into content or to disrupt the system of representation, but not as a thing in itself" (Lauter, 103). That is all the more evident in a discussion of another part of Pratt's oeuvre, one which might make her seem to be painting in a male tradition: her female nudes.

Feminist criticism has challenged an entire tradition in painting by declaring the female nude to be a product of a privileged "sexual politics of looking" (Pollock, 85) that by long-established convention has made unclad women *objects* for male speculation, desire, and consumption rather than symbols by which women can recognize their own sexuality. French feminist Luce Irigaray declares women "use-value for man, exchange-value among men. Merchandise then. Women are marked phallically.... This stamp(ing) determines their value in sexual commerce" (105). Post-Marxist feminist Griselda Pollock located the nude female image in a bourgeois ideology of supply and demand: "one of the dominant significations of woman is that of sale and commodity" ("What's wrong with Images of Women" 136). However, Lisa Tickner indicates an even more insidious reason for the absence of

women as *subjects* from art: "the female image in all its variations is the mythical consequence of women's exclusion from the *making* of art" (248). "Artist" is synonymous with "man":

There is not a female equivalent to the reverential term "Old Master." The term artist not only had become equated with masculinity and masculine social roles—the Bohemian, for instance—but notions of greatness—"genius"—too had become the exclusive attribute of the male sex. Concurrently the term woman had become loaded with particular meanings. The phrase "woman artist" does not describe an artist of the female sex, but a kind of artist that is distinct and clearly different from the great artist. (Parker and Pollock, 114)

Until the beginning of this century, women were prohibited from formal study of the nude in the art schools.¹ Unless a woman had the private means by which to employ her own model, she simply could not work from the live human figure. There was no alternative set of signifieds for the nude image produced by a woman. Women were thus denied not only the educational tools for painting nudes, but also the language with which to express the subjectivity of their figures. In the phallogcentrically validated myth, a nude was always read as *object* because "a privileged group of men determined and controlled the meanings embodied in the most influential forms of art."

Control over access to the nude was but an extension of the exercise of power over what meanings were constructed by an art based on the human body. Thus women were not only impeded by exclusion from the nude but were also constrained by the fact that they had no power to determine the language of high art. (Parker and Pollock, 115)²

Woman's relationship to the grand tradition of figurative art could only be one of muse or object for study. Furthermore, as an image within that tradition, she could only affirm the power relationship between men and women: "woman is present as an image but with the specific connotations of body and nature, that is passive, available, possessable, powerless" (Parker and Pollock, 116).

Modernism did not change the power structure, but may in fact have confirmed the "naturalness" of it, validated it as myth even more in a community of male artists. Woman, long a source of inspiration, loses her corporeal being, her subjectivity, even further in a passage Beaudelaire intends to be idealistic yet which reveals the misogyny of such "naturalized" philosophical idealism. For the male artist:

"[woman] is *far more* than just the female of man. Rather she is divinity, a star ... glittering conglomeration of all the graces of nature, condensed into a single being; an *object* of keenest admiration and curiosity that the picture of life can offer to its [*male*] contemplator. She is an idol, *stupid perhaps*, but dazzling and bewitching.

No doubt woman is sometimes a light, a glance, an invitation to happiness, sometimes she is just a word." (Qtd. in Pollock: 71, emphasis added)

Another way that the "great" male artists of early modernism commodified the female nude object was by painting—for the benefit of other men's gaze—women whom they possessed sexually. Manet, Degas and Lautrec all presented women of the working class "often suspected of touting for custom as clandestine prostitutes" (Pollock, 74).³ Gauguin and Renoir celebrated their intimacies with the models who were also their mistresses:

In the artist-model relationship there seemed to be a "natural" elision of the sexual with the artistic: the male artist was both lover and creator, the female model both his mistress and his muse. Some male painters explicitly connected their artistic powers with their sexual potency. Auguste Renoir ... was alleged to have said "I paint with my prick." *The connections [sic] between phallic and creative power became a well-worn theme in the discourse of artists and critics of the time.* (Berteton, 224, emphasis added)

In other words, the phallic/creative connection entered modern art history as a much-enhanced myth about modernist painters.⁴ As for art theory, Lauter says that "ego is not as much on the line [in feminist theory] as in the formalist paradigm" (103).

Griselda Pollock claims the spaces of modernity can be diagrammed, and that the spaces represented by male painters are significantly different from the spaces represented by female painters. While early women modernists painted the same parks and theatre loges that their contemporary male counterparts did, the female artists did not enter into the otherworld of fallen women, the backstage of the theatre, the follies, the cafés, and the brothels (73, 80). The artist and his model belonged to a world from which the woman of virtue was excluded, once again, because of a differential morality which is part of a dominant and hegemonic male culture and its myth:

the other world of women was inaccessible to [Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morissot] while it was freely available to the men of the group and constantly entering representation as the very territory of their engagement with modernity.... Femininity in its class-specific forms is maintained by the polarity virgin/whore which is mystifying representation of the economic exchanges in the patriarchal kinship system. (Pollock, 78)

The problem of female exclusion from art as anything other than object of desire (and "muse" is but a variation on that theme) is intensified in cubism and surrealism and many later modernisms, which violently disrupt the anatomical woman. In such art the female nude (or synechdochal parts of her) can be seen as a symbolic rendering of men's fear of women's sexual difference, a fear that makes disembodied woman an ambivalent representation of desire/hatred for the erotic image. However:

erotic imagery is no more controlled by mere personal fantasy *in vacuo* than any other type of imagery in art.... Certain conventions of eroticism are so deeply ingrained that one scarcely bothers to think of them: one is that the very term "erotic art" is understood to imply the specification "erotic-for-men." (Nochlin, 136-37)

Nochlin's interest here is in "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art," but she acknowledges that the title is redundant and falsely

linked to any time period: "There really is no erotic art in the nineteenth century which does *not* involve the image of women, and precious little before or after" (137).⁵ Because men are the consumers of all erotic products—and the customer is always right, says Nochlin—women have consequently ended up with no imagery, visual or verbal, with which to express their different erotic desires.⁶ Replacement of the female figure with the male figure only serves to parody but not to redefine the language of eroticism.⁷

Against this hegemonic display of the female nude as an object for consumption or as a psychosexual symbol of erotic focus—in whole or in fetishized part—how do women define a female re-possession of their own bodies and their sexuality? How do they revise the myth of woman as desired/hated object? The answer lies in feminist theory which privileges the artist "who best shows art's centrality to its context" (Lauter, 103). A feminist reading of Mary Pratt's work begins, then, with a discussion of the challenge her female nudes offer to the specularized nudes of male art. There are two ways in which Pratt's paintings differ from more obviously objectified paintings, including those done of the same model by her husband Christopher Pratt. First, her paintings act as "*mediators*" between her model (who is also her friend) as subject and herself as subject; both women have been objectified in Christopher Pratt's paintings. Feminist critique claims that, in all portraiture, there is a need for "the meeting of two subjectivities: if the artist watches, judges the sitter, the sitter is privileged, by the portrait relation, to watch and judge back" (Nochlin, 99). For Mary Pratt the nude study is a portrait. Second, Pratt's works problematize the relationship between photograph and painting, making us fully aware that the painting is a discourse upon the photograph, which is itself a **discursive** art form and not a "mirror" of a **phenomenological** reality.

It is difficult to talk of Mary Pratt's nude studies without speaking of her subject position in the making of those paintings. They began as a result of her having salvaged from discard some of the slides her artist husband had taken of his former

models. David Silcox tells us that Christopher Pratt "photographs his models for reference and study, but not to draw or paint from since he finds the emotional presence of a woman necessary to the vitality of his drawing" (Silcox and Weiler, 26); his desire to discard the slides seems perfectly "natural" against Silcox's description of Pratt's painting technique. However, Mary Pratt's explanation of the genesis of *Girl in a Wicker Chair* (1978) bespeaks another and different "natural" response to the discarding of the slides:

This painting is the first in a series I've done over the past ten years of Donna Meaney.

Donna came to live with us when she was seventeen, after she had graduated from the local high school. She was very tiny, but beautifully built. She helped me around the house, baby-sat the children, and was Christopher's model.

The photograph for this painting was taken by Christopher. I did the painting quite a few years after Donna left us. Christopher preferred to work from the model, and since Donna wasn't available, he said that all his photographs were useless to him. *I didn't know whether to believe him or not*, but this particular image seemed too perfect to throw away.

When I painted it, I was aware that she was looking at Christopher, not me, and this difficult knowledge has continued to plague me, as I've worked on other photographs offered to me over the years. (Gwyn and Moray, 96, emphasis added)

The image is perfect for a feminist critique as well. Rendered from her husband's private photo, Mary Pratt's girl expresses an ostensible objectivity that is overwritten with her position as subject, written over a second time by Mary Pratt's own complicated subject position as producer of the painting and wife of the photographer, and yet a third time by feminist intervention. The "girl," unnamed in this earliest of the Donna series, is posed so as both to reveal and conceal. Her drawn up and hence slightly foregrounded legs cover her breasts, but the tight clasping along the calves causes an oval opening to be left between ankle and calf. Inside that opening is the darkened invitation of another opening. Mary Pratt locates that dark area in

almost the direct centre of her composition. It is not to the girl's genital area, however, that the eye is first attracted. The larger and symbolic compositional oval of the girl's shape, echoed in the oval of desire, is also echoed and even more pronounced in the area of the face and its frame of dark hair. Faces suggest a greater amount of individuality than do genitalia, so Pratt's emphasis bespeaks an interest in the model's subjectivity, not a fetishized sexuality as it is usually represented in all manner of female nude representations, from paintings to *Playboy* centrefolds. The viewer is drawn to the face by an underlighting that seems to come from behind the legs, a symbolic inner light perhaps, giving the face a rather stark prominence that is also accomplished by the staring, penetrating eyes. Griselda Pollock speaks of the double convention suggested by the aggressive eye topos: the confronting eye can "send out darts and arrows which pierce and penetrate the lover," and it can symbolize the female genital organs (134). In the gaze of Christopher's model, Mary Pratt "finds" an appraising "speculation" of the man taking her photograph; no longer is Donna just specularized object, she is also speculating subject. However, her subjectivity is problematic for Mary Pratt. Both the producer and the viewer of Mary's paintings are aware of the position as the third party to a relationship which, *by convention*, implies a sexual liaison between artist and model. Christopher, too, is aware of Mary's tenuous position:

"I wouldn't use the term 'voyeur,'" [Christopher reflects to Sandra Gwyn], "because that does not describe Mary's reaction. But she was looking at a naked woman who was looking at me, she was a spectator after the fact at a very private circumstance, and there is all the literary dimension about the precedents and the antecedents of the particular moment shown in the photograph." (Qtd. in Gwyn and Moray: 17)

It is impossible for Mary Pratt to have the "emotional detachment" from her subjects that Patricia Mollay says she possesses. Not only do her own comments make that clear but, from a feminist perspective, such detachment would make her complicitous with a modernist ideal of aesthetic dis-

tance which feminist art historians have revealed as an idealized male myth. Mollay's claim that "Pratt's paintings explore not the situation of the chosen objects, but their physicalities; their properties as objects of the material world of appearances" (21) sounds suspiciously like a modernist art for art's sake argument. While a feminist must agree with Mollay that Mary Pratt does not exploit nudity, she would also add that it is the issue of exploitation itself that is at stake.

Mary Pratt is producing a different kind of female nude, one aware of her own position and reflective of Pratt's own sense of the traditional role of women in art: "If women are the muse for men ... what is the muse for women?" (Gwyn and Moray, 18). Pratt has first-hand knowledge of the potential vulnerability that the model must endure, having herself been the subject for Christopher's *Woman and Stove* (1965). That experience and her experience as a mother of daughters are inevitably factors in her engaging with the subjects of her nude studies. Pratt gives subjectivity back to the traditionally objectified woman.

The subjectivity of the critics of Mary and Christopher Pratt, respectively, also contribute to the ways in which their works may be viewed. Obviously feminist in intent, the Gwyn and Moray text engages in a favoured feminist technique of announcing its collectivity of voices: first, the voice of Pratt's friend, author Sandra Gwyn; second, the voice of art critic Gerta Moray; and third, the voice of Mary Pratt as she offers some thoughts on each of the plates included in the book. Gwyn's narrative is the all-too-often ignored female story of the talented woman who gives up her career to foster her artist husband and to raise a family, but who suppresses her anger at her husband's success (9), and finally turns a reclusive lifestyle into a belated artistic triumph. Gwyn's own feminist narrative is mitigated by her knowledge that Pratt has an "ambivalent" attitude toward the feminist role in which her biographer would cast her:

"I think of myself quite consciously as a woman painter and I have quite strong feelings about the women's movement, without being really

part of it," [Pratt] remarked in 1975. "I sometimes worry that because the things I paint are women's things, people will assume I'm trying to get ahead by using the movement. I have a lot to thank it for, but not the origin of the work, not the impetus to paint. I do think that it's important for a woman to work within her own frame of reference, and not feel it is inferior to feel the way a woman feels. The minute you try to adopt the mannerisms and attitudes of men, it all breaks down." In short, while wholly female, and celebratory about it, she is at once too conservative and too independent-minded to be, as she puts it, "coerced into a sisterhood." (14-15)

To dismiss Gwyn's biographical monograph as traditional art history would be easy were it not for it being complementary to Mary Pratt's own voice as an attempt to locate the historical artist/subject within her own work; both voices are further complemented by the paradigmatic art criticism in Gerta Moray's article.

Moray implied that Pratt practices what in literature Alicia Ostriker calls "revisionary myth-making" because "her paintings of the female nude invade a domain which has been a masculine creation and prerogative" (Gwyn and Moray, 33). Against the painting of the nude as "the alibi for the male gaze," Moray poses women painters as "interpreters of their own bodies" (34). Moray admits that the challenge is a problematic one, for many feminists refute the nude female image as "too loaded with its past function as an agency conditioning women into a psychic role of passivity and sexual subordination to men" (34).

As my description above of *Girl in a Wicker Chair* indicates, I would disagree with Moray's claim that Pratt's "first choices [of the female model] produced simply elegant formal studies of the female body" (34), for as I have tried to indicate, the "girl" in that first Donna painting is very conscious of the centrality of the sexuality she offers as model to a male artist. Even that earliest of Mary Pratt's nudes, transposed from photographs she did not take, includes "the character and agency of the woman model herself" (34). For Mary Pratt, the result of the challenge to the tradition of male

painted nudes is a re-evaluation of the myth of passivity. About a later painting, *Donna* (1986), Pratt says that:

After painting women with no clothes for several years, I ceased to consider them helpless. It has been a tradition to consider the naked woman as vulnerable.

While I understand this reasoning, I prefer to think that women who have abandoned their clothes have also abandoned layers of artifice. (154)

The voices of Gwyn and Moray announce that Mary Pratt's paintings of the female nude include several subjectivities: the model's, the artist's and the viewer's. The extent of Pratt's mediation in her paintings on behalf of her subject and herself points the way to a revisionary myth of the female nude. Mary's willingness to consider the model as a subject is in direct contradiction to Christopher's more conventional notion of the artist's relationship to his model; Christopher's "desire to possess" is reflected in his description of what transpires when he paints a nude model. He says that the private act of creating the painting:

"comes close, in some dimensions, to a sexual experience.... I consider painting to be a private act, but it's not a look through the keyhole. I want the woman to be unconcerned, not unaware. The viewer is welcome. But I am the viewer. I don't care about any other view. I am making an *object* for myself, and I am concerned that there is no rejection of *me*. I like to feel that people who pose for me want to be there, that they consider it a privilege, arrogant as that may sound." (Silcox and Weiler, 184-85, emphasis added)

Christopher's statement of the privileged one-way speculation of the artist is a far cry from Mary's two-way intervention on behalf of the model. Christopher's stance is, as indicated above, the traditional prerogative of the male, and it is echoed in a painting like *Bride and Me* (1977/80)—reminiscent of his teacher Alex Colville's painting of artist and nude model—and in the specular myth perpetrated by David Silcox who claims that "the female figures that populate Pratt's work are virginal but

also arouse the senses" (13). Even Silcox must admit that Christopher Pratt robs his models of their individuality—a prerequisite of erotic art for male consumption:

The figure drawings, despite the sensuous poses and surfaces, often convey a stilted quality, an impression that the figures were assembled in sections.... Pratt flattens and generalizes his images, and when this tendency is transferred to human figures, it tends to rob them of their individuality. The stylized treatment, most evident in the prosthetic elbows and knees, is directly opposed to the sense of roundness and fullness that figures and faces demand.... His painstaking and calculating method creates figures that sometimes resemble manikins with soft skins stretched over wooden armatures, and these may occasionally live up to his betraying of them as maps of the human figure. (Silcox and Weiler, 28)

Mary Pratt, on the other hand, finds a way to celebrate the individuality of her female nudes. The nude "girl" in the wicker chair in 1978, and of *Nude on a Kitchen Chair* (1979), *Girl in My Dressing Gown* (1981) and *Blue Bath Water* (1983), takes on the singularity of a friend in *Donna* (1986), *Donna with a Powder Puff* (1986), and *This is Donna* (1987). By naming the now familiar sitter, Mary Pratt endows her with personhood:

It is difficult for me to paint a person if that person is looking out of the painting at me. There is almost no freedom to think of the person in a general way. She becomes an individual, with her own persona. The whole painting begins to serve that persona, and gradually any ideas I might have about the image dissolve, and I give way to a portrait. (Gwyn and Moray, 122)

Donna of 1986 is an older version of the *Girl in the Wicker Chair*; she is more self-possessed. Her pose, though reminiscent of the 1978 work, disrupts the perfect oval of the earlier painting by inscribing a diagonal from upper left corner to lower right along the legs drawn to the side. The disruption exposes a single breast, a round orb which reflects more light than any other part of the picture; its shape is repeated in *Donna's* rounder face with

shorter hair. The space between the legs, which are now clenched less tightly, paradoxically admits less light, and the eye of the viewer is invited to concentrate on the hands emerging from between the calves rather than on the darkened inner genital area. Those hands offer resistance to entry and possession; by contrast, the genital oval of the *Girl in a Wicker Chair*, though also darkly abstracted, is brightly and suggestively framed by orange coloured thighs. The entire palette of the 1986 painting is much more subdued than is the 1978 painting, but the later work still evokes the emotional and aggressive Fauve-like colours that were so evident in the earlier work. The woman in *Donna* seems at once more relaxed and more conscious of being backed against a wall; with "layers of artifice" abandoned, she appears almost to sneer at the viewer (or photographer). *Donna* is not a typically erotic picture; the model is too actively and seriously engaged in looking back in a manner too evaluative to be evocative.

Another way in which Pratt evokes the subjectivity of the model is by focusing on small imperfections on the body that would without doubt be ignored in a male rendering of a nude because they would be distasteful to him, both as viewer of female nudity and as producer of a work that improves upon nature. With the briefest of details Pratt seems to undermine the typical fetishism of specular art. In *Donna*, for example, she draws the viewer's attention to the horizontal markings on her model's legs left by the elastic of *Donna's* knee socks. Such detail also locates the image in time; it cannot be "mystified through representation into a timeless moment" (Betterson, 230). In another painting, *Girl in Glitz*, the odalisque figure of a partially clad young girl is marred by the indentations left by the zipper and stitching of her jeans. Once again Pratt's sensibility of the girl's subjectivity provides fuel for a feminist critique of the reclining female figure so familiar to visual art: "She's not looking at me, she's looking at Christopher. There's a tentativeness in her eyes, she doesn't know whether to be sexually interested or not" (Hume, 22). In other words, she has a choice; despite her prone position she looks at the viewer—not up to him, as the traditional odalisque must.

It is in *This is Donna* (1987), however, that Mary Pratt makes her most remarkable statement of mediation. The title indicates that Pratt is concerned with the subjectivity of her model. The viewer of the vertical female is as aware of the larger-than-life shadow she casts as of the model herself. The shadow is a grotesque replica of Donna, painted in a violently emotional green. It proclaims the model's emotional life, the other side of her specular existence, a life that has no importance for the male artist set on making for himself, as Christopher Pratt claims to be doing, an object. With her title, Mary Pratt seems to be proclaiming the complete woman who embraces the female Other so grotesque to the male producer or consumer of art, the "hag" (as Mary Daly would call it) within her. The other thing that Mary Pratt does for Donna in this painting is to give her back her underclothes. Though the partially clad female figure is often portrayed by men for its *potential* for specular erotic pleasure, and despite what Mary Pratt says about the abandoning of artifice with clothes, the garments that Donna wears in this painting increase her stature and self-confidence; the chin is lifted, and the head and shoulders are back. She seems to look down upon the viewer, but with an even steadier, more evaluative glance than the younger Donna. The features of the face are more angular, more determined. Pratt has said that, in this latest of her paintings of Donna, someone whom she has known for twenty years, she "hoped to indicate the strength that has sustained her over many turbulent years" (Gwyn and Moray, 160). Her description of Donna's strength can delight the feminist in a way that Christopher's description of a young girl who lived with them, did the housework and eventually came to model for him, cannot. Again, his attitude reflects the passivity and possessibility inherent in the specular myth.

Another variation on the nude in Mary Pratt's work can be read as revisionary through feminist intervention. In the figures self-absorbed in play that Mary Pratt creates, she feels herself engaged in voyeurism. Regarding *Blue Bath Water* (1983), she says that:

[Donna's] body gleamed almost pearlescent against the dark blue; she kicked the water to swirl in froth around her. She forgot the camera. I didn't try to inflict my preconceived ideas on this spontaneity. I became what the viewers of the painting would become, a voyeur. (Gwyn and Moray, 124)

Pratt's respect for the subjectivity of her models and her discomfort with her own subject position may be the reason that *Blue Bath Water* and *Donna with a Powder Puff* (1986) are the only two paintings of the active nude that Pratt has so far attempted. She knows how to turn nude into portrait when the woman is facing her, but her comment suggests she has greater difficulty if the model is disengaged from the looking process. I would suggest that Pratt's ambivalence itself offers resistance to the assumed joy of viewing the "natural" woman, an assumption that is part of the specular myth as well. My suggestion requires a revisionary critique of the kind that Rosemary Betterton offers regarding Suzanne Valadon.

Valadon (1865–1938), a nude model who became a painter, chose the subject she knew first hand for her revisionary paintings of the "modern" nude, no longer veiled in history or mythology" (Betterton, 227) that Degas was attempting in his ten pastels of nudes at their toilet for the 1886 Impressionist Exhibition. Degas wanted to show:

"a human creature preoccupied with herself—a cat who licks herself; hitherto the nude has always been represented in poses which presuppose an audience, but these women of mine are honest and simple fold, unconcerned by any other interests than those involved in their physical condition ... It is as if you looked through a keyhole." (Qtd. in Betterton: 228)

However, Betterton points out the contradiction:

between [Degas'] stated desire to represent the nude in a way which denies its traditional voyeurism and yet which reinstates voyeuristic looking in an even more intense way ... the viewer is given a privileged access to a private,

narcissistic moment: seeing a woman alone and caught unaware, intimately framed. (228)

By isolating her women in space, uncomfortably posed, by using a viewpoint placed artificially high in the picture plane and hence distorting space, and by omitting the soft and sensuous pastels of Degas' work, Suzanne Valadon was trying to offer her own revision to "the natural woman" of late nineteenth-century realism, for that figure turns out to be just another version of the female specular myth.

Betterton's argument in "How do women look?" represents a feminist intervention into art history that can be used as a model for a feminist reading of Pratt's *Blue Bath Water*. Like Valadon, Pratt locates the viewpoint artificially high; the tub seems to float in an undefined space. The colours in the painting are not soft pastels, but richer and powerfully suggestive of a wide range of *female* symbolism. Donna is not posed, but rather has been caught in a specific moment by the camera; Pratt, in turn, renders her painting from a slide which captures a movement that no model could sustain for long because of its awkwardness. The other thing that Pratt captures is the playfulness of a specific person; this is not a painting intended for voyeurism even if that is the way that a dominant culture might read it. Instead—and this may be the reason for Pratt's ambivalence—the painting evokes for a woman the joy of the bath, the private, relaxing moment. Whether or not Pratt realizes it—and her ambivalence suggests she does not—she has captured in her revisionary realism a woman's myth which, like the mythology of a dominant culture, seems so "natural" and personal but which is really part of the *construction* of a woman's muted definition of herself in a dominant culture. Pratt's sense of voyeurism can thus be redefined through a feminist intervention as the right "to look all she wants and paint what she knows—no scrutiny" (Collins, 62). Feminism allows a revisionary myth of female experience to challenge a male specular myth; the former recognizes itself as a construction in a way that the latter does not. Betterton says that women—feminists would have been a better term—"look" at nudes in a different way because women critics possess mobility:

a certain ability to move between and to acknowledge different viewpoints at once, to look critically "against the grain" while still enjoying the process itself. I am not arguing that this ability is innate to women by virtue of biological sex, but that it is a condition of women's viewing under patriarchy. Men too can look critically, but within forms of culture made for and by men they are less likely to be forced constantly to negotiate that viewpoint. (222)

The artist's mediation within subjectivity is a complex aspect of a feminist reading of Mary Pratt's paintings, but that mediation is made even more problematic when one realizes that Pratt is making paintings from coloured slides. Not only must a feminist reader deal with painting as a signifying system grounded in a culture which has historically excluded women, but she must now also deal with a second signifying system, photography, and all of its inherent contradictions.

When she first began painting from slides, Mary Pratt felt torn between a recognition of the camera as her "instrument of liberation" because she no longer had to "paint on the run," and a fear that she had lost her integrity as an artist (Gwyn and Moray, 13). Her confusion is understandable given the paradoxes that Linda Hutcheon defines as particular to photography:

After all, the camera records and justifies, yet it also imprisons, arrests, and thus falsifies the fleeting moment. Taking pictures is a way of both certifying and refusing experience, both a submission to reality and an assault on it.... Cameras can engender in the photographer both aggression and a passivity born of impotence. (47)

A feminist intervention highlights even more the ways in which photographs as objects naturalize engendered readings.

Again, the nude paintings of Mary Pratt are instructive. The camera, credited both with documenting reality and, paradoxically, with framing it selectively, captures Donna's response, for example, to a situation dictated by the photographer and read

out of context by the viewer. Against a convention of complicity between model and artist which figures into the ambivalence of Mary's paintings of her husband's models is the duplicitous "evidence" that "justifies" the camera record from which she works: "despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between truth and art" (Sontag, 6). Put another way, if the photograph is a form of power over what is photographed—and that is the premise of magazines like *Penthouse*—for Mary Pratt, who reclaims Christopher Pratt's slides and revisualizes through her own subjectivity and the subjectivity of the photographed object, the nude is a means of indicating how fragile a construction of society that power is, and how to divest that power. The camera as phallus is deconstructed along with the artist/model myth when Mary Pratt paints from photos of female nudes.

Though Pratt's nudes are an obvious subject for feminist critique, they constitute but one part of her oeuvre. Most of Pratt's paintings are still-lives which are metonymic for the domestic spaces in her muted experience as a woman. They also provide an interesting site for feminist intervention, especially because they, too, are painted from colour slides. Mary's still-lives are "just things I saw, things that were in the kitchen. It's just things that turn me on, things that I like to look at" (Murray, 38). Her version of the "muse for women" is "women's stuff ... the energy that accrues to women out of small things around them" (Gwyn and Moray, 19). Her art affirms, as Gwyn points out, the astute self-appraisal of her diary entry made many years ago: "I only have what is inside this house, this garden. I have to think everything is valid.... My only strength is finding something where most people would find nothing" (11). Pratt produces a woman's eroticism by redefining the term—"eroticism is the intimate association with something you really care about" (Murray, 41)—in the textures of crinkled foil, waxed paper, brittle egg shells, Saran Wrap, chicken skin, with "the same kind of tiny sable brushes that Queen Victoria's daughters used for their watercolors" (*Mary*

Pratt, n.p.). She is both traditional and modern in her technique, and always evocative of the camera which provides her with her images. She uses oils instead of acrylics, like many photo-realists to whom she might be compared, to make her pictures "look old." The agedness of her paintings can be read as evoking a nostalgia for the mythical ideal home where homemade preserves are prepared by a loving mother. *Red Currant Jelly* (1972) is an image for just such a myth. Against the primaries and geometries of squares of blue tin foil and luscious red jelly in varying sizes of circular containers, Pratt uses a pervasive yellow light which bespeaks the aging of a colour slide and emphasizes the attendant sense of absence or loss that Sontag says is characteristic of the photo:

photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched by pathos.... All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. (15)

Pratt's images are not, however, comfortably nostalgic. Sontag says that "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (23), so like all erotica and all photographs, Mary Pratt's paintings made from photographs hide something—a fear, a distaste, a questioning of things as they appear to be, perhaps. While Mary Pratt can talk of images like the ones she captures in watercolours form *Across the Table: An Indulgent Look at Food in Canada* as "beautiful stuff ... so nostalgic" (Wine, 11), and while Wine and readers of the cookbook might find Pratt a most appropriate documenter of food preparation, a feminist intervenor also points out Mary Pratt's impatience with such idealism: "nostalgia simply irritates me" (Burnett and Schiff, 166). The tiny brushes that Mary Pratt uses in her oils may be a way of maintaining a woman's traditional technique in art making, but through a feminist lens darkly they are also symbolic of the tedium and lack of recognition of much of women's experience. The

"knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism" (Sontag, 24), and such sentimentalism is a symptom of a culture that naturalizes discourses from which women are excluded. Photography as a signifying system entrenches a patriarchal nostalgia which sees woman's place as in the kitchen. By making painstaking paintings of photographs of food preparation, Mary Pratt may indeed be salvaging some sights that she does not want to see forgotten, but she may also be rewriting an idealized domestic myth in a "visual reinvention of the domestic world" (Collins, 56). Patricia Moray says that Mary Pratt "combines elements from different visual codes"—high art and photography—"in such a way as to make us freshly and strongly conscious of the operation of those codes." She takes:

the formal language of classicizing artists such as Christopher Pratt and Alex Colville as the foil for her observation of everyday domestic objects. Her specific positioning in relation to the variety of art traditions on which she draws cans thus be seen as a politics of the image. In her paintings she carries out an invasion of the realm of the ideal with the mundane, a subversion of its controlling authority with the assertion of the contingent and transitory elements of everyday life. (Gwyn and Moray, 31)

Gwyn indicates that Mary Pratt was fascinated as a child by advertising images and that she "cut out the advertisements in *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal* that showed jars of yellow Aylmer peaches and quivering mould of Jell-O" (7) for her scrapbooks. Many of her paintings look like old advertisements, complete again with the yellowing that a feminist can read as an expression of the mutability of images made conventional for women by society, but challengeable by women because they are only man-made conventions. Burnett and Schiff speak of the "Nostalgia for the Absolute" which has arisen in a much enlarged world in which we have lost "innocence and its attendant mystery." The nostalgia of which they speak can also be called:

the fantasy of the real, the most pervasive expression of which is the mass-media advertis-

ing transmitted substantially by photography.... It is a fantasy whose photographic immediacy can persuade us to accept it as natural. (168-69)

It is not "natural," however; it is the nostalgia for the "bourgeois" mythic past that Fredric Jameson discusses in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society."⁸ Feminist intervention allows us to make sure the "dominative pleasures of the patriarchal visual field are deciphered and disrupted and, in the gaps between, new pleasures are being forged from political understandings of the conditions of our existence and psychological making" (Pollock, 15). Deciphering and disruption come in the form of recognizing that the images that Mary Pratt creates are of *dead* fish and chicken, of emptied eggs, of items consumed in the same way that woman as object is consumed, or as the efforts of women—including art making—are subsumed by a hegemonic patriarchal culture. Hence, many of Pratt's images, though appealing for their promise of a good meal or their evocation of nostalgia, are also images of violence, of life taken away, equating themselves to photos which divest their subjects of individuality and life while promising immanence. Read this way, her kitchen images become a companion for the stark and disturbing image of *Service Station* (1978). It is an image of part of a bloody moose carcass with its two remaining legs splayed and tied to the hoist of a tow truck. Mary Pratt describes it this way:

The man who killed this moose owned a service station, and he simply hoisted the carcass onto the back of this wrecking truck.

Knowing that I painted fish and chickens and other dead and bleeding creatures, he kindly asked me if I'd like to see his moose.

He's a good businessman. He has brought up a family of seven. He and his wife run a neat little shop. They are our neighbours.

He had no idea that I would be upset by his moose. But to me it screamed "murder, rape, clinical dissection, torture," all the terrible nightmares hanging right in front of me.

I couldn't understand why he hadn't thought of all that. (Gwyn and Moray, 94)

Her comments, published in the 1989 Gwyn and Moray book, betray a more securely feminist

perspective than do her 1978 comments about the same image:

"It's quite a different kind of image than the things I've done in the past. I found it very interesting to do. I found it a female statement about a male world. I didn't do it because of that, but that's what it looks like in the end." (Murray, 39)

That the image struck her as remarkable in some way is seen in the fact that she took a whole roll of film, but she did not paint the moose remains for a number of years. In the 1978 interview with Joan Murray, Pratt says she does not want to make a "social comment," but in the 1989 text, Gwyn says that Pratt describes her "darker pictures" as "social comment" (16). Gwyn indicates that the dark paintings are few in number but perhaps the most memorable, and echoes a common critical complaint against Pratt's work:

even as they admire, critics express regret about what they construe as a lack of coherence in her work, a tendency to advance an idea, seemingly out of the blue, but not to pursue it through other images, an unwillingness to push through difficult concepts to a conclusion. (16)

Gwyn's explanation is that these works are "gut-wrenching" experiences that cannot be sustained through an oeuvre. However, if *Service Station* is instead seen as a variation on the theme of dead fish and chicken, albeit a more direct statement of violence and violation, it becomes part of Mary Pratt's general concern with *consumption*, and can even be extended to the nude, thus belying the idea that her work lacks coherence—if indeed that traditional claim need be answered at all.

Pratt's own thoughts combine with a feminist reading, then, to provide the deciphering and disrupting of the patriarchal visual field. Such activity is the negative endeavour of feminisms. Their positive endeavour, the asserting of "new pleasures" as Pollock calls them, is the celebration of images with which women can identify, a revising of nostalgia, a cure for the "melancholia caused by protracted absence from ... native place" (Webster's,

1542). Pratt's magic realist paintings—magic because they engage with realism to reveal its constructedness, and because, as Dennis Reid says of Alex Colville's painting, their precision suggests "arrested action, the 'magic' moment" (266)—are revisionary because they return woman to her body and her home aware of the roles in which she has been cast, and ready to proceed from that position. Finally, and most celebratory of all, Pratt's paintings are those images of the small endearing moments of a woman's experience: the bath of a first grand-daughter, wedding portraits of daughters. Pratt's images are certainly reminiscent of rites of passage, but they are passages that respond to a woman's nostalgia, a woman's "frame of reference." Such images have long been affixed a sentimental reading, when in fact they may be, as I have tried to show that a feminist reading of Pratt's art reveals, at once both a subversive comment on the process by which they are denied affiliation with high art, and an expression of the joy that women can know even within the constraints of a patriarchal society. From a feminist perspective, Pratt is a keeper of women's memory; she makes the personal universal through a process in which the viewer becomes part of the art. The female artist engenders and contextualizes her art: she is the one, like Atwood's ideal writer, "to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others" because they "identify" with the experience or "imagine" they like it (1982a: 348, 342).

NOTES

1. Griselda Pollock and Whitney Chadwick, in separate works, use the example of Johann Zoffany's *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771-72) as an example of what it meant to be a woman belonging to an academy which forbade women access to the nude human figure. The painting is a group portrait of the men of the academy assessing a male nude; Zoffany was suggesting a conventional artist's pose. There were two women members of the academy at the time, but a painting used to document the membership could not include them in the presence of the nude. So, Zoffany painted them in facial portraits hung upon the wall. As Pollock points out, however, it is very eerie to lose the portraits amidst the other artifacts arranged around the room: "[the women members] become material for the men to discuss and utilize" (45). I use the example to indicate how feminist intervention in art history and

criticism has made us rethink images we take for granted. Without such intervention, the women in question are obliterated from the documentary work because they are so easily missed; the feminist intervention also makes us aware of the status of woman vis-à-vis art making and consuming.

2. Female inclusion in the institutions of art would not necessarily have ensured a different view of the nude. The problem for women was a deeper cultural one rather than one related to the education they could not get. Rosemary Betterton states the case more explicitly: "For a woman brought up within definitions of bourgeois femininity which tabooed the sight of her own body, let alone anyone else's, painting the nude must have been fraught with difficulty. *Intervention in a genre bound up with the fundamental premises of male creativity involved problems far beyond institutional exclusion*" (225, emphasis added).
3. Betterton presents a scenario of the place of the model in society during the early years of modernism: "In the 1880s, the suburb of Montmartre was becoming a favoured area for artists looking for cheap studio space and picturesque views. Women in search of work stood in the Place Pigalle waiting to be viewed and picked out by artists in search of models. The parallels with prostitution are clear: a model also offered her body for sale, she was usually of lower-class origin and dependent upon her middle-class "client," her rates of pay were low and established by individual negotiation. *Even if a model led a blameless life, she was clearly defined outside the codes of respectable femininity*" (226, emphasis added). The last part of Betterton's remarks are emphasized in order to indicate how easily the sexual connection between artist and model came to be a social given, a myth.
4. Pollock is struck by the number of "canonical works held up as the founding monument of modern art [that] treat ... sexuality, and this form of it, commercial exchange. I am thinking of innumerable brothel scenes through to Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, of that other form, the artist's couch" (54).
5. Nochlin continues with her thesis by claiming that even homoerotic art has an almost exclusively male audience: "The notion that erotic imagery is created out of male needs and desires even encompasses the relatively minor category of art created for or by homosexuals; it has always been *male* homosexuals who are taken into consideration, from Antiquity through Andy Warhol. Even in the case of art with lesbian themes, men were considered to be

the audience" (137). Lesbian feminist painters and writers might of course take issue with Nochlin's point.

6. Luce Irigaray provides a psychoanalytic explanation for men's fear of women's sexual difference in "This Sex Which Is Not One": "Woman's desire most likely does not speak the same language as man's desire, and probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks. In this logic, the prevalence of the gaze, discrimination of form, and individualization of form is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman finds pleasure more in touch than in sight and her entrance into a dominant scopoc economy signifies, once again, her relegation to passivity: she will be the beautiful object. Although her body is in this way eroticized and solicited to a double movement between exhibition and pudic retreat in order to excite the instincts of the "subject," her sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see. In this system of representation and desire, the vagina is a flaw, a hole in the representation's scopophilic objective. It was admittedly already in Greek statuary that this "nothing to be seen" must be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Women's sexual organs are simply absent from this scene" (101). Or, as in surrealist painting, woman becomes distorted, disembodied, disenfranchised.
7. Nochlin's replacement of the nineteenth-century photo *Achetez des pommes*, in which a nude woman holds a tray of apples amongst which rest her breasts, with the photo *Achetez des bananes*, in which a nude male holds a tray of bananas a little lower and amongst which his penis might easily be placed, merely evokes a laugh from its viewer. As Nochlin says, there is no erotic language that has used the male trope in high art in the same way that the female trope has been used in Gauguin's *Tahitian Women with Mango Blossoms*, for example. Nochlin recalls Meyer Schapiro's study of the breast-apple metaphor in Western cultural history to indicate the universality of the trope (139, 141). Obviously, the penis-banana metaphor has not had a similar historical universality.
8. Marxist critic Fredric Jameson distinguishes between the modernist aesthetic "originally linked to the concept of a unique and private identity" (114), and the more recent "radical ... poststructuralist position" that "not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth, it *never* really existed in the first place" (115). The nostalgia films that Jameson examines capitalize on this myth by creating "narratives set in some indefinable nostalgic past, an external '30s, say, beyond history" (117).

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Matricide

We buried the mouse
in a cardboard box
at the back of the vegetable garden.

She was eaten by her children.
They left her head among the wood
shavings,
their parent,
their provider.

"Ashes to ashes," my daughter said—
the officiating priest,
the murderer.
She doled out food and water:
she forgot.

Dreams stalk my sleep;
death visits me.
It wears white teeth;
it carries a dagger.

Life turns, like the earth—
soft as a furred belly,
crumbly as bones.
"Dust to dust," my daughter said.

Vegetables die, too.
They lie, limp and brown-edged
under the strong, tall spears
of their children.

Jill Solnicki
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