

# Carol Bishop-Gwyn. Art and Rivalry: The Marriage of Mary and Christopher Pratt

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Carol Bishop-Gwyn. *Art and Rivalry: The Marriage of Mary and Christopher Pratt*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2019. ISBN 978-0-345-80842-4

The plot of this book is a simple one. Mary West, a genteel and sheltered daughter of the Fredericton, New Brunswick, social elite, went to art school, where she recognized the genius of a young classmate. That man, Christopher Pratt, came from a prosperous family in a harsh but exotic land — the new province of Newfoundland. Mary recognized Christopher's diamond-like talent beyond his rough edges. As he took up painting more seriously, one of their instructors told Mary that there could be only one artist in the family and that, of course, would be Christopher. The two married, and she sacrificed her aspirations to paint in order to wash his shirts and raise his babies, but ultimately she came out from behind his shadow to become a much-loved painter and feminist icon.

Mary left behind the comfort of her childhood for the isolation and toil of a life in the Pratt family's renovated fishing camp. Bishop-Gwyn points out the financial aid the Pratts received from their families and argues that the hardships Mary endured were sacrifices she made to support Christopher's career. As that career thrived, Bishop-Gwyn is critical of Christopher's spending on owning sailing boats, while suggesting that money should have been spent on taking Mary to restaurants and freeing her of the burden of domestic life.

By stealing 30 minutes of time here and there, and employing local girls to help with domestic work, Mary did some painting of her own. As the children grew and Mary began to sell some of her paintings, Christopher realized the order of his life would be affected by her

desire to paint still life in the kitchen, bedroom, and dining room, so he grabbed his camera and made a slide of the detritus of a meal that she had chosen to paint. His act changed her oeuvre, and she embarked on making paintings of her domestic setting that appear like photographs. Mary's career began anew.

This book contains a genealogical fallacy common to biographies in which family backgrounds are assumed to determine the choices and character of the individual. Mary's genteel Fredericton background moulded her expectations of life and her feminized role. Christopher's ancestors, Bishop-Gwyn argues, shaped his interactions with others. Coming from a self-made Newfoundland family who had risen to economic success, Christopher was driven to succeed. He obstinately brought his bride and babies to a rural place where he could paint without having to take a wage-paying job, and he was determined to never leave. Mary found herself isolated from her neighbours because she was not Roman Catholic, although she felt maternal towards a teenager, Donna, who they hired as household help. Donna, and her successors, evolved from maid to artist's model. In another example of this genealogical fallacy, Bishop-Gwyn implies those girls were predestined to give consent to become nude models because their ancestors were bred to deference to the wealthy merchants.

While Christopher Pratt is best known for his geometrically precise paintings of places that have personal associations for him, he also drew and painted a number of nudes from life. He sometimes used photographs as reference. Mary's most popular mature work was her masterful representations of her domestic sphere. Not surprisingly, Christopher's relationships with the women they employed became a source of tension in their marriage. Mary used some of Christopher's slides to make her own paintings, and Bishop-Gwyn reads those paintings as revealing a rivalry between the husband and the wife who had been betrayed, and suggests that Mary lashed out by appropriating Christopher's models. Bishop-Gwyn believed that Mary won this "rivalry" by painting images of the young model's bodies that

Bishop-Gwyn sees as superior to the paintings made by her husband. Their marriage ended, although their relationship remained close.

*Art and Rivalry* is not a biography of the two artists, nor is it art criticism, although it does both of those things. Bishop-Gwyn has relied on the confidences shared with her by Christopher and Mary, whom she came to know through her husband Richard Gwyn, their children, and their friends. She also used others' interviews with the two artists (who, like most successful artists, had managed their public persona, as their mystique was integral to marketing). Lastly, the author relies on art criticism, as well as access to some of the Pratts' written records, in writing this account of their marriage and work. But the women who worked in the Pratt household, whose relationships with Christopher and Mary are crucial in this book's narrative, did not consent to be interviewed by Bishop-Gwyn.

Artists, like authors, are public figures, and some people feel entitled to speculate on celebrities' private lives while they would be horrified to think their friends and neighbours talked about their sexual relationships. It is also not unusual for people to wonder if art is drawn from the artists' real lives or a work of imagination. The nudes drawn and painted by Christopher and Mary Pratt invite the viewer to wonder about the relationships between the young models and the artists, especially those in which the model seems to be looking out of the canvas at the artist and, by extension, at the viewer. Voyeurism extends beyond looking at the nudes; this book invites us to take guilty pleasure in peering at this family's intimacies.

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