

© Christopher Pratt



Christopher Pratt. *Driving to Venus: From Eddies Cove East*, 2000. Oil on hardboard. 101.6 cm x 165.1 cm. Shaw Communications Inc.

beyond them is a narrow glimpse of ocean. Curtained windows conceal domestic interiors, reflecting back a banal sameness from the viewer's side. But we also notice that what is reflected is precisely what the viewer does not see from his or her vantage point. Pratt's rendering appears factual and objective, but that reflection in the window takes note of a subjective side. What we see always reflects, in part, ourselves.

This confrontation with the viewing self is not confined to reflective surfaces in Pratt's paintings. When he turns to exterior views — the sweep of ocean beyond a window, the curve of windswept highway, a dwelling in swirling snow — Pratt challenges us with a psychological landscape most of all. The "driving to Venus" paintings show us a hypnotic road, the alluring Evening Star, the mystery of approaching headlights or a curve ahead, and we are transported to an inner space, as in the quietly terrifying *Pedestrian Tunnel* (1991), in which an underground walkway dips down and disappears from view. There is no end, it seems, to the vortex of self-reflection, but at least Pratt gives us order, precision and mathematical calculation to cling to. There is no expressionistic hysteria here, despite a claustrophobic overlay of dread.

Those who are automatically de-

pressed by emptiness or, unlike Pratt, have little tolerance for solitude, may find this body of work not merely austere but distinctly bleak. Some may be frustrated by Pratt's liking for compositions that thwart our view. *March Night* (1976) confronts us with a wall of clapboard siding that occupies almost the entire canvas with no declaration of what stands before, beside, or behind — aside from a narrow escape route for the eye, an empty space on the right through which a treeline is silhouetted in the far distance. In other

canvases, windows are placed too high to see through, giving us a cruel *idea* of a view, and through glass doorways we see fog or shadows merely. On the other hand, these devices of containment seem to express a desire for open space, a longing for possibility. And it seems that these are not unattainable desires: some of Pratt's windows open onto a serene and limitless ocean or an indigo, starlit sky.

Although Pratt's art is absolutely imbued with a sense of place, it does not yield to sentimentalism or cliché; this is a contemporary, unidealized Newfoundland that he presents. There are no folkloric dories here, but gleaming industrial boats, along with warehouses, suburbs, highways, and a hydro station beside which a captured river roils. There are references to the past, but elegy is restrained. The viewer confronts the disappointments of post-Confederation Newfoundland in a stripped-down form, without rhetoric or high emotion. Even in an overtly political painting, the recent *Winter at Whiteway* (2004), the painfully emblematic objects depicted on a wharf — an oil drum, life buoy, cod table, and the shreds of a Canadian flag — are, Pratt claims, just as he found them on a trip to Trinity Bay.²

Beneath the reticent surface of these paintings is a passion for Newfoundland and a profound understanding of

Vampire

CBC, lytes, glucose, BUN, creatinine,
INR/PTT, liver function tests,
cultures x 2,
toxicology screen,
calcium, magnesium, TSH,
cardiac enzymes,
blood gases.

Stat please on Mr. Whatsisname in stretcher 5.

After all the blood I've sucked from him
you'd think I'd have a better grip on his soul.

Gwynedd Pickett

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