

5 Mary Frances Pratt

CC OC RCA 1935 – 2018

Girl in My Dressing Gown

oil on board, signed and dated 1981 and on verso titled on the exhibition labels
60 ½ x 30 ½ in, 153.7 x 77.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Equinox Gallery, Vancouver
J. Ron Longstaffe Collection, Vancouver
Equinox Gallery, Vancouver
Private Collection, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Joan Murray, *Mary Pratt*, London Regional Art Gallery, 1981, listed, unpaginated
Sandra Gwyn and Gerta Moray, *Mary Pratt*, 1989, reproduced page 121
Tom Smart, *The Art of Mary Pratt: The Substance of Light*, 1996, reproduced page 93 and the related photograph reproduced page 91
Mireille Eagan and Sarah Milroy, editors, *Mary Pratt*, The Rooms & Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2013, reproduced page 83 and listed page 154
Ray Cronin, *Mary Pratt: Life & Work*, Art Canada Institute, 2020, reproduced page 37 and the related photograph reproduced page 37

EXHIBITED

London Regional Art Gallery, *Mary Pratt*, June 19 – August 16, 1981, traveling in 1981 – 1982 to the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon; Glenbow Museum, Calgary; Art Gallery of Windsor; Art Gallery of Hamilton; Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa; The Gallery, Stratford; New Brunswick Museum, Saint John; Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton; Memorial University Art Gallery, St. John's; and Aggregation Gallery, Toronto, catalogue #46

Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, *Mary Pratt*, 1995
The Rooms, St. John's, *Mary Pratt*, May – September 2013, traveling in 2013 – 2015 to the Art Gallery of Windsor; McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg; MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina; and Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax

IN 1981, MARY PRATT painted *Girl in My Dressing Gown*, based on a slide she selected from 20 images taken by Christopher Pratt during a photographic session with the model Donna Meaney in late 1978.¹ Meaney had previously modeled for Christopher when living and working with the family from the late 1960s to early 1970s. It was during this earlier period that an affair had developed between Christopher and Donna, but despite this charged history, the Pratts remained on good terms with Meaney. Although no longer living with the Pratt family, Meaney had visited unexpectedly following the Christmas holidays and agreed to sit for Christopher under Mary's specifications.

Pratt had already painted *Girl in a Wicker Chair* (1978) for her successful second solo show at the Aggregation Gallery that spring. She felt Donna was the perfect subject to paint and later reflected that “if anybody had a right to paint a woman, it was another woman.”² Pratt further stated: “I don't think [men] see things like we do. And I don't think that when they go to paint the female figure that they have a clue. They don't understand where the weight is.”³ By repurposing this genre of the female nude, long dominated by male painters, Pratt soon began to outmaster the old masters, including her husband and their teacher Alex Colville. When viewing a touring retrospective of Christopher's work from 1985, Pratt wrote in her journal on his female nudes: “A man's notion of women—static—unthinking objects.” She further noted: “Girls seen through keyholes—they are too simple—too obligingly good.”⁴

Yet Mary also recognized that Christopher took exceptional photographs of Meaney and that the chemistry between them was compelling. Although she did not enter his studio, she had an image in mind of Donna in a dressing gown. Christopher used





CHRISTOPHER PRATT
Slides of Donna Meaney
 Ektachrome 35 mm slide, 1979
 Mount Allison University Archives, Mary Pratt fonds, 2021.35/5
 Courtesy of the family of Mary and Christopher Pratt
 © Estate of Christopher Pratt

Not for sale with this lot



Ektachrome 35 mm slide film. He posed Donna against a white wall with a fluorescent light on one side and an incandescent light on the other, to highlight the greenish shadow and colour contrasts.

As her title suggests, the dressing gown was Mary's own—improvised, after Meaney's unexpected arrival at the house. The model's stature is more petite than Mary's, hence the gown's excess fabric draped on the studio floor. Out of the 20 images that Christopher took of Donna in Mary's dressing gown, Mary selected one that showed the model half turned, the left side of her face in deep shadow. Using her photo-realist technique of working from slides allowed Pratt to concentrate on the luminous light, and to sensually paint the undulating folds and wrinkles of the satin gown.

She later acknowledged to Sandra Gwyn: "I was aware that she was looking at Christopher, not me, and this difficult knowledge has continued to plague me, as I worked on other photographs offered to me over the years."⁵ The complexity of gazes was not lost on Christopher, who admitted to Gwyn: "I wouldn't use the term 'voyeur' 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."⁶

In the year the work was painted, the journalist Ann Johnston wrote that "Mary's painting *Girl in My Dressing Gown* stripped Donna of all her innocence, exposing a sullen worldliness that Christopher had not seen." He told Johnston that "Mary has unwrapped a parcel, which can't be rewrapped because the shape will always show through."⁷ The curator Tom Smart suggests that a "conversation between Christopher and Mary was taking place through art," particularly in her paintings of Donna.⁸ This intriguing concept can be seen in a number of works, such as *This Is Donna* (collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery), painted in 1987.⁹ More recently, in a 2017 interview, Christopher shared the complexity of these visual dynamics, suggesting that "the too-big dressing gown" was Mary's way of saying Donna would never fit into her robe, or into her role.¹⁰

Sarah Milroy, in an essay for the catalogue of Pratt's 2013 touring retrospective, writes: "I find myself wondering if the Donna paintings aren't in fact paintings of Pratt herself, embodying aspects of her own drive and sexuality, temporarily thwarted."¹¹ This assertion plays out in a number of these works, which suggests these extraordinary paintings also served as a cathartic outlet for the artist.

What endures in Pratt's work is the long-held friendship and collaboration that developed between the artist and her model in

these sessions and in others that followed, when Mary took the photographs.¹² Many of these paintings portray a woman's vulnerability, rare in the tradition of the female nude, and assert her as naked, rather than as nude. The feminist painters Alice Neel, Sylvia Sleigh or the later painter Jenny Saville are perhaps Pratt's closest contemporaries who continue to challenge this history of the female nude.

We thank Anne Koval, author of *Mary Pratt: A Love Affair with Vision* (2023), for contributing the above essay. Koval is an independent curator and professor of art history, museum and curatorial studies at the Pierre Lassonde School of Fine Arts, Mount Allison University.

1. Mary Pratt fonds, 2021.35, Christopher Pratt, Ektachrome 35 mm slide processed January 1979, Mount Allison University Archives, Sackville, NB. Also from this batch of slide film Mary selected a seated image of Donna for *Nude on a Kitchen Chair* (1979), now in the AGO collection, which preceded her painting *Girl in My Dressing Gown*.

2. Mary Pratt, interview by Mireille Eagan at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, January 18, 2014, online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nwor8wnxsg.

3. Interview by the author, June 10, 2017. Pratt acknowledged that only "Freud doesn't mind giving weight." The English painter Lucien Freud was one of her favourites.

4. Mary Pratt fonds, 2008.31/1/3/17 notebook entry 8 July 1986, Halifax, Mount Allison University Archives, Sackville, NB.

5. Quoted in Sandra Gwyn and Gerta Moray, *Mary Pratt* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1989), 96.

6. Christopher Pratt quoted in *ibid.*, 17.

7. Ann Johnston, "A Brooding Vision," *Maclean's*, September 21, 1981.

8. Interview by the author, July 8, 2019.

9. For more on this topic, see my chapter "This Is Donna" in Anne Koval, *Mary Pratt: A Love Affair with Vision* (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2023).

10. Interview by the author, June 14, 2017.

11. Sarah Milroy, "A Woman's Life," in *Mary Pratt*, ed. Mireille Eagan and Sarah Milroy (Fredericton, NB: The Rooms & the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, in assoc. with Goose Lane Editions, 2013), exhibition catalogue, 80.

12. Pratt's depictions of Donna Meaney include *Girl in a Wicker Chair* (1978), *Nude on a Kitchen Chair* (1979), *Girl in a Red Turban* (1981), *Girl in My Dressing Gown* (1981), *In the Bathroom Mirror* (1983), *Blue Bath Water* (1983), *Cold Cream* (1983), *White Cat on Front Porch* (1984), *Donna with a Powder Puff* (1986), *Donna* (1986) and *This Is Donna* (1987).

ESTIMATE: \$150,000 – 250,000