

# Realism through everyday images

By ROBIN LAURENCE

**I**n this age of photo-conceptual, neo-geo and image-text art, "realism" is something of a dirty word. It's a word that leaves writers and curators scrambling to find critically viable alternatives.

Take Christopher Pratt's style of painting and printmaking, for instance: it has been variously described as "abstract," "hard-edge," "anti-realist" and "precisionist."

All these terms aim to free Pratt from any association with the more bloated and banal realisms, while also suggesting an approach to image-making that is both immensely conservative and thoroughly modern.

They're also meant to help us identify a form of representation that is more given to geometric generalization — to austere reduction and mathematical ordering — than to photographic itemization.

In town for dual openings of *The Prints of Christopher Pratt 1958-1991*, — at the Burnaby Art Gallery (6344 Deer Lake Ave.,

Simon Fraser Gallery (Simon Fraser University AQ 3004, Burnaby, until June 17) — Newfoundland's most famous artist sits and chats in the BAG's turret room.

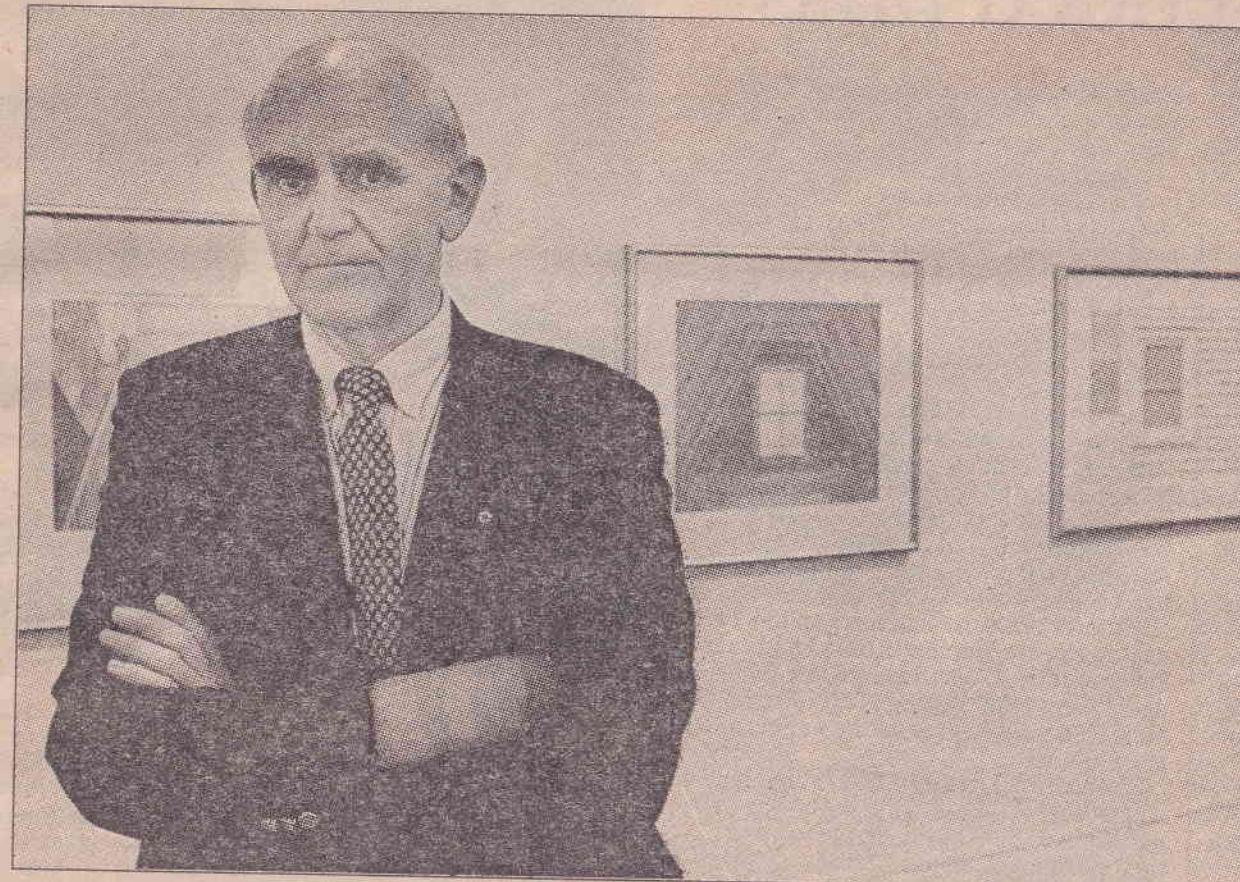
Sun streams through the windows as he muses on all the critical tags that have attached themselves to him. "I can accept any of those terms," Pratt says, "depending on where they're coming from."

In describing himself to strangers, though, he uses "realist" — because that's the term people understand." That's the term that connotes recognizable imagery, meticulous application of materials and obsessive attention to the depiction of things.

**T**he things Pratt depicts have more to do with the metaphysical than the physical world. His realism seeks to convey the way things eternally are, rather than the way they immediately look.

In Pratt's art, you see the everyday images of Newfoundland — the shops and sheds and clapboard houses, the boats and docks and pebbly beaches, the hills and cliffs and frigid expanses of saltwater — converted into timeless and placeless symbols.

To achieve this end, Pratt simplifies forms, eliminates details and imposes a rigid geometric order upon his subjects. When I ask him if he views the world in



IAN LINDSAY/Vancouver Sun

CHRISTOPHER PRATT'S WORLD has more to do with the metaphysical than the physical

terms of archetypes, he shakes his head.

"There are certain things that appeal to me and mean something to me, and I don't even

know why they do . . . But I do gravitate to forms and experiences that seem to be prototypical of their kind, that seem, somehow or other, to be imbued with an essence."

Although he is "primarily a painter," Pratt has produced, over the course of his career, some 70 original prints, in editions that range from 35 to 70. Rather than handing their production over to a master printer or printmaking workshop (as most successful painters do), Pratt has created the majority of these works himself, using the silkscreen medium.

The show includes some very early block prints, created when Pratt was a student at the Glasgow School of Art, and three lithographs, produced at St. Michael's Print Shop in St. John's. Otherwise, though, it is composed of deft and accomplished screen prints.

Pratt's affinity for the silkscreen medium is, he says, both esthetic and practical. The practical aspect is the minimal and portable nature of the equipment needed.

"It's a medium that I can use where I live," says Pratt — where he lives being St. Mary's Bay, an hour's drive from St. John's. "I don't need access to a press or pro-

fessional print shop, my prints are made entirely by me . . . In reality, it's a kind of cottage industry."

More importantly, the silkscreen medium seems exactly to suit Pratt's reductive images, precisionist sensibilities and subtle atmospheric effects.

"I like the way the screen print looks, I like the surfaces that silkscreen provides," he says. "There's a way in which I consider my approach to silkscreen to be like multiple paintings."

**I**n creating each stencil (making a "negative" image by applying glue or lacquer to the screen), Pratt uses the same tiny, sable brushes he employs while painting. The effect is much the same — a slow and ungestured layering of opaque and transparent color.

Pratt has written about the

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gradual emergence of an early print image, *Boat in Sand*, 1961, as if it were materializing "out of the fog." *A Boat and the Moon*, 1991, is shown here as it developed, through 12 screens and nine "states," from a pinkish-cream priming layer, through subsequent applications of watery greens and midnight blues.

Although they may develop the same themes and preoccupa-

tions, Pratt's prints never duplicate his paintings — they are quite separate entities. "There are certain subjects which, for some reason, usually intuitive, commend themselves as being material for prints, as opposed to painting," Pratt explains. "It has to do with scale, complexity, what kind of surface I want, how I want to present it."

The prints, he says are "slightly more narrative, slightly more lyrical, slightly more romantic" than his paintings, which more directly reflect the artist's deepening pessimism. Not that the prints are exactly sweet and light: their colors are often sombre and their forms austere.

Pratt's silkscreened landscapes are chilly and unfruitful, and even his residential scenes are unpeopled. The effect is one of great loneliness and alienation, of being stranded in a desolate place at the still end of time.

Pratt's massive, deserted, human-made forms — his bridges and breakwaters, lighthouses and railway trestles — are like monuments to engineering, but they also communicate a kind of post-industrial angst.

In the race of environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources — including the collapse of Newfoundland's cod fishery — Pratt believes, more than ever, that "things need to be controlled and managed."

It's one of the reasons, he says, that he so closely "controls and manages the environment" of his own art. On the small field of a print or painting, Pratt can order and balance the wide, unruly world.♦

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