

PAINTING THE CHILD: REALISM IN CANADA - EXHIBITION

Jodi Schachowskoj

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The jumping off point for this exhibition was Monique Westra's chapter in *Depicting Canada's Children* entitled "Paterson Ewen's Portrait of Vincent." Westra focuses on a work by Ewen that is unique to his oeuvre: a portrait of his son Vincent. She compares this work to his abstract paintings of the cosmos, noting that these other works are universal, public, and infinite, whereas the portrait is specific, private, and finite. Westra concludes that, "although related to the rest of his work in terms of technique, medium, and scale, *the personal nature of family pictures seems to demand a separate genre, distinct and unmistakable, in which emotion is heightened and personal stakes are high.*"¹ It is this intimate relationship between the artist-parent and the subject-child, as well as the viewer, which our exhibition seeks to explore. We have decided to tailor our focus specifically to works created from the 1950s through to the 1980s by Canadian realist artists. In doing so, an effort has been made to select artworks that are of the same general style, medium, era, and subject matter so that we can consider more closely the individual variables and emotions specific to each image. The paintings that the artists created of their own children are complex and highly personal portraits, demonstrating each artist's personal style and ideals.



Alex Colville (b. 1920). *Child and Dog*. 1952. Glazed tempera on masonite.

80.9 x 60.8 centimetres. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

(Image: <cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_e.jsp?mkey=3742>).

Working from meticulous sketches to achieve balance and order Alex Colville creates works of fiction that also convey an association to the viewer. This painting is of his daughter Ann and a family pet; his specific and personal connection to the subject is used to create a universal one for the viewer. The optimal conditions of its composition are deliberately composed to define its authentic feeling and focus on the link between child and dog. The soft textures of the skin and similar size of these two subjects reflect the correlation between the young girl and her pet dog and Colville's admiration and respect for animals. In this compressed space, we focus on the relationship of Colville's subjects and, in turn, to our own connections with family and nature.

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Tom Forrestall (b. 1936). *Catching*. 1978. Egg tempura.

63.5 x 83.8 centimetres.

Collection of the Artist.

(Image: <www.forrestallfineart.com/painting.php?pid=37>).

Forrestall looks for the universal in subject matter, although his subjects are usually found at his feet. The artist comments on this image: “This is one of my paintings that stitched together two separate and remote experiences. My son Curphey with a ball and the empty blank wall of clap board.”² The image constructs and gives permanence to a fleeting moment: the act of preparing to catch a ball is viewed simultaneously with the ephemeral state of childhood. The transience of the moment in this work is highlighted by the hovering ball, which Forrestall considers to be the toy of God.

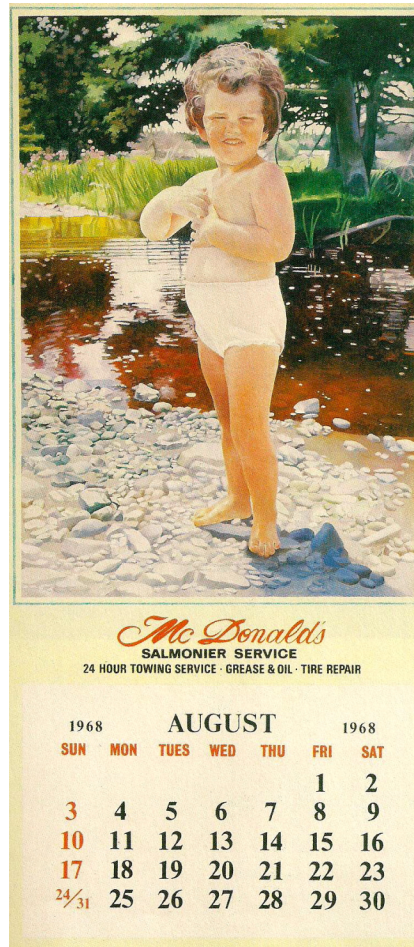
Alice Stratford-Kurus



Christiane Pflug (1936-1972). *Kitchen Door with Ursula*. 1966. Oil on canvas. 1
64.8 x 193.2 centimetres. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.
(Image: <wag.ca/art/canadian-art/modern/48697>).

Christiane Pflug's artwork is a progression of her life and aesthetic influences. This painting is created from her interest in her new home and back porch, a gateway from the closed, internal domestic space to the openness of the outdoors. She connects with her subject, daughter Ursula, and conveys the connection that children have with the ideal. Winter is depicted, cold and barren, yet Ursula is in her own world - lush, green and alive. Her subject is an expression of an idyllic state, only appearing as a reflection in the real world. Pflug sees through her child the possibilities and ideals of the world, natural and untouched by the world and all of its harsh and cold reality.

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Mary Pratt (b.1935). *Doesn't That Look Just Like Our Anne*. 1971. Oil on gesso board.

45.7 x 62.2 centimeters. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa.

(Image: Gwyn, Sandra and Gerta Moray. *Mary Pratt*. McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1989: 55).

The title *Doesn't That Look Just Like Our Anne?* is tongue-in-cheek because it is actually a representation of Pratt's daughter Anne. With this title the phrase maintains its origins in reference to Pratt as a young girl. When the artist was a child, she quite resembled Anne (as she is presented here) and her grandmother would often point to a calendar child, whose arms were filled with yellow chicks or kittens, or puppies, and say, "Doesn't that look just like our Mary?" By referencing her own childhood while portraying that of her daughter, the portrait conveys two childhoods and two children. Past and present are linked through the image. The connection of mother and child is present as is the correspondence between child and child.

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Jack Chambers (1931-1978). *Sunday Morning #2*, Jack Chambers, c.1976-77, oil on wood. Private Collection.



Alex Colville (b.1920). *Dog, Boy and St. John River*. 1958. Oil and synthetic resin on Masonite. 60.9 x 81.3 centimetres. London Regional Art Gallery. (Image: <www.imagemakers.mb.ca/canart/colville/colville06.jpg>).



Tom Forrestall (b.1936). *Backyard*. 1971. Egg tempera. 61 centimetres in diameter.

(Image: Tom Forrestall and Alden Nowlan. *Shaped By This Land*.

Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1974: 100).



Mary Pratt (b.1935). *Child with Two Adults*. 1983. Oil on board.

54.5 x 54.5 centimetres. Private Collection, Toronto.

(Image: Fadis website - Smart, Tom.

The Art of Mary Pratt - The Substance of Light, 1995: 103).



Christiane Pflug (1936-1972). *Kitchen Door with Esther*. 1965. Oil on canvas.

159.5 x 193 centimetres. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

(Image: <www.ccca.ca/history/isaacs/isaacs_seen/works/pages/04_kitchen_door.html>).

ENDNOTES

¹ Loren Lerner, ed., *Depicting Canada's Children* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009) 420.

² Natalie Forrestall, *Forrestall Fine Art: Featuring the Art of Tom Forrestall*
<<http://www.forrestallfineart.com/painting.php?pid=37>>.

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<www.forrestallfineart.com/painting.php?pid=37>.

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