

As a child, Mary West (as she was then) was fascinated by the effects of light pouring through the stained-glass windows of Fredericton's Wilmot United Church. The rich colours cast throughout the building as the sun moved across the sky captured her imagination: "All light, all wonder—here one minute, gone the next."<sup>1</sup> The fleeting beauty she witnessed each sunny Sunday morning enchanted—and challenged—her. "I began to wonder how to keep magic. Perhaps it couldn't be kept."<sup>2</sup> Her parents didn't think so, she remembered, "they proclaimed that it was impossible to paint stained glass, impossible to paint a sunset."<sup>3</sup> Parental doubts aside, she knew she wanted to try.

Light didn't just sparkle and fascinate in stained glass, of course, and as she looked around her she found "magic" everywhere. "When my mother lined up jars of jelly on the kitchen windowsill, they blazed in the same way as the church glass."<sup>4</sup> Trying to recreate the experience for herself, young Mary filled jars with water tinted with food colouring. She put these on her windowsill, "to keep the magic of that brilliant, coloured light."<sup>5</sup>

That memory of light stayed with Pratt throughout her life. The first painting where she considered that she came close to doing justice to the magic of light was 1968's *The Bed*, which captured the morning sun streaming into her bedroom, shining on the rumpled red bedcover: "The red chenille bedspread was dripping onto the floor, and there was this pink blanket laid over it like a piece of skin. It was like a punch in the gut—it was the closest thing to an erotic reaction that I could imagine."<sup>6</sup>

But the light was fluid, changing and moving as she tried to capture her impressions with pencils or paint. Later that year she was experiencing similar frustration trying to capture the fleeting light effects on the family dinner table. Her husband, Christopher, took a colour slide of the table, giving it to her with little comment a few weeks later. The result was galvanizing. When she started using colour photographs she was able to still light, to fix it so that she could paint the effects that had fascinated her for so long.

Preserves, the jams and jellies that were so often Mary Pratt's subjects, are another attempt to capture the ephemeral. In the all-too-short summers of the Maritimes, the canning season proceeds from strawberries to raspberries, plums, cherries, blackberries and blueberries, in a steady progression. Jams and jellies capture the flavours of summer and early autumn, saving them for a less bountiful day. Is it any wonder that an artist so interested in stilling the passage of time, in fixing beauty before it fades, would spend so much time painting jars of preserves? In paintings like *Red Currant Jelly*, 1972, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, and *Preserves* Pratt focuses on the ephemera of domestic life, imbuing with a quiet dignity the day-to-day work of caring for a family.

The three jars lined up against a blank white wall in *Preserves* gather the ambient light of the room, holding it even as they hold the preserved fruit. Is there some message in their order? The seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Pratt, *A Personal Calligraphy*, Goose Lane Editions, 2000, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Murray Whyte, *Toronto Star*, Jan. 17, 2014.

untouched marmalade, the lightly sampled red currant jelly, and the strawberry jam, a third gone? It's reminiscent of Goldilocks and the three bears: one, obviously, was just right. The only hint of the room beyond is in the subtle reflections on the silvery lids of the jars, giving no hint of where this painting is set, whether in Pratt's home at the time, or in a home that lived only in her memory. This is close observation, a meditation on the momentary effects of light, yes, but perhaps also on something both more fleeting and more enduring: the simple pleasures of being alive and of seeking, and finding, magic.

Ray Cronin