THE PRINTS OF CHRISTOPHER PRATT

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Cover: Railway (detail) 1978 original signed screenprint 26 x 30 inches Edition: 39

THE PRINTS OF

CHRISTOPHER PRATT

Essay by David P. Silcox

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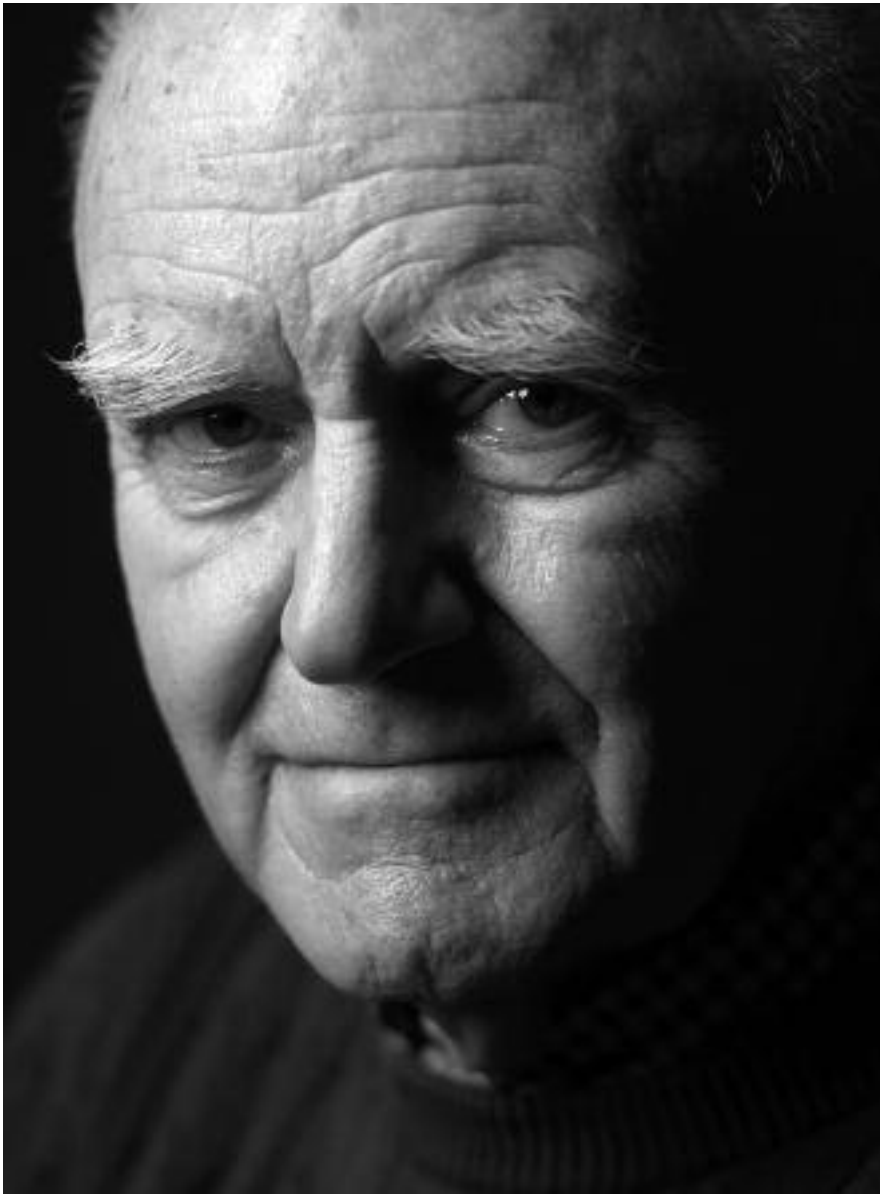

Photo credit: Ned Pratt

CHRISTOPHER PRATT was born in 1935 in St. John's, Newfoundland. He attended the Glasgow School of Art, Scotland, from 1957-1959 and in 1961 he received a B.A. in Fine Art from Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick.

Throughout his career, Pratt has received many awards and honours. In 1965, Pratt became an Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (ARCA) and a member of the Canadian Society of Graphic Art. In 1969, he was a member of the Canada Council Visual Arts Jury. In 1973, Pratt was named an Officer of the Order of Canada and in 1983 he became a Companion of the Order. In 1980 Pratt designed the Provincial Flag of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Christopher Pratt was the subject of a major touring retrospective organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1985, a touring print retrospective and catalogue raisonné, The Prints of Christopher Pratt: 1958 - 1991 in 1992 and a major travelling exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Canada in 2005. In 2015 the exhibition **Christopher Pratt: The Places I Go** was featured at The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's Newfoundland.

Pratt's work can be found in numerous international public, corporate and private collections including Art Gallery of Hamilton; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia; Art Gallery of Ontario; Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, New Brunswick; McMichael Canadian Art Collection; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; Museum London, Ontario; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland; Vancouver Art Gallery; Bank of Montreal; London Life; RBC Financial Group; Scotiabank; Shaw Communications; Torys LLP and UBS Securities, Canada.

Christopher Pratt lives and works in Mount Carmel, Newfoundland and has been represented by Mira Godard Gallery for 50 years.

THE PRINTS OF
CHRISTOPHER PRATT

About sixty-seven years ago, Christopher Pratt, still in high school, was seriously considering the possibility of studying to become an architect. Something about the precision required by that profession caught his attention, for he was a precise and exacting person in his hobbies and his other interests, such as collecting historic Newfoundland stamps, fishing for Atlantic salmon, and sailing racing yachts in competition.

Pratt always knew what the idea was behind any work he was setting out to create or organize. The same may be said of other artists, usually those who, like Pratt, work at high speed and are fully immersed in their work and make sure their intellect, eyes, intuition, hands, emotions, all these sensitive and complex senses are working at full alert.

While not abandoning his fascination with architecture, Pratt found himself leaning toward art and specifically painting. When he realized he would need some instruction to become an artist, he applied to the Fine Arts Department of Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick.

Pratt discovered quickly that making a work of art, whether a drawing, a watercolour, or an oil painting, was far from being an easy thing to do. He also thought that while what he had learned at Mount Allison was a good way to start, he should be looking ahead and planning for more advanced instruction.

I've thought a lot about what it is that forms an artist's style and character. Usually when I've asked what the impulse is for an artist to become a dedicated artist, I don't get an answer because the artists, mostly, don't have one. Basically, they don't want to know where the impulse came from. The only thing that matters is that whatever the impulse was or is, it's still there and still functioning.

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A former head of the Philosophy Department at Victoria College introduced a member of his staff who was about to deliver a lecture and gave him the most effusive compliments I've ever heard. His fulsome conclusion was: "He is a Triple Threat Man: A Philosopher!, A Painter!!, and A Poet!!!"

Christopher Pratt deserves the same introduction. He writes and publishes poetry with some regularity, and writes with considerable skill following his great uncle, E.J. Pratt (1882-1964), a major Canadian poet and author of the majestic epic poem *The Titanic*.

Pratt was initially a novice as an artist, as every artist is, but he was an eager and hard-working student. Although the Faculty at Mount Allison University was, in general terms, conservative, it provided the basic needs Pratt wanted, along with some of the traditions of being a painter. The legends of Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, and others, was enough to draw novices to the profession of being an artist. Further, it is clear that one doesn't have to read much art history to discover that there are myriad examples of artists who learn from other artists, who studied Old Master paintings carefully and attentively. With this in mind and after some careful research, Pratt applied to the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland.

He was accepted for two years and for two years he was was exposed to experienced teachers, and to paintings from many countries in the Public Art Gallery and in the National Museum of Scotland.
For Christopher Pratt, the world of art began to expand rapidly and he had to work hard to keep up with the information and inspiration he was getting from nearly every direction.

Returning to Sackville, armed with what he had first learned there, Pratt was able to add two key things: a clearer sense of the immensity of the field of art from numerous countries, a dictionary of artists of great stature, from Piero della Francesca to Dürer to Michelangelo to Raphael to Vermeer to Rembrandt, with many equally great talents among those few giants. Pratt's mind was soon filled with images, ideas, and an exciting assortment of varied techniques and useful ways of applying paint to canvas and how compositions could be arranged in ways that could be sinister or dramatic or informative. ***The Lynx*** is an example; Pratt saw a lynx while out walking and then spent some time studying one that was caught and caged; close as he was to it, it never allowed Pratt to get a profile view; the lynx always had both its eyes steadily focused on Pratt's eyes.

Once Pratt was back at Mount Allison University, he knew what subjects he wanted to tackle as an artist and those were the images of Newfoundland and Labrador as he had seen them with his keen eyes and sharp attention as a teenager. He was eager to begin what quickly became a work agenda that was expanding almost daily and it stimulated his determination to get on with a slew of tasks that needed his urgent attention.

Pratt was ready to apply all the skills he had learned not only for oil-on-canvas paintings, but for drawings, linocuts, silkscreen prints, lithographs, and woodblock prints. These various ways of making art fed into each other and were also altered or affected as he saw how some art relates to other art. Although Pratt was still at a preliminary stage, he was now working at a more rapid pace and with sharper and stronger artistic skills.

What's more, his work suddenly became stronger and sharper than one might expect from someone with a limited amount of experience.

Pratt had already worked in different print mediums such as woodcut and linocut, which can be seen as related to other prints that have a 'family' resemblance. One might group together, for example, ***Front Room, Good Friday, Sunday Afternoon*** (p. 65), and ***Coley's Point***, or interiors such as ***Easter at My Aunt's*** and ***Sackville Attic*** (p. 55). These works hint at Pratt's understanding of the ways in which architecture can express moods of the human heart, such as the respect for the ways in which architecture can express the lonely emptiness of the staircase in ***Easter at My Aunt's***.

The lowered blinds in ***Front Room*** may reflect a family's habit or might indicate a death in the family. Pratt has written about ***Front Room***: *I'm not sure what's happening inside. I prefer the ambiguity; even grief is relative, ambiguous, and rarely absolute.*

Most of Pratt's remarkable production in terms of numbers, has been in silkscreen prints. His prints are greatly varied, but many can be seen as related to other prints to which they have a 'family' resemblance. They are quite different in subject, treatment, and colour. Further, the colours, the light and the seasons all change the overall environment so that each print provides a slightly different story to viewers who can take the time to imagine a different narrative for each print or who can imagine what may have inspired each of these related prints.

Clapboard siding is typical of many small houses in the rural regions of Newfoundland and is also a major part of the prints that Pratt has studied and recorded with unfailing precision: ***Wall Facing West*** (p. 71)***, Spring at My Place*** (p. 57)***, House at Path End*** (p. 33)***, Winter Moon*** (p. 73) and ***Summer on the Southeast*** (p. 63). These works are aesthetically appealing but also show a respect for the owners of these modest homes, and for the families who live there. The clapboard shows up in many prints as a subject seen from varied points of view. Although these works are all related by subject, the colours, the light, and the seasons all change the overall environment so that each print provides a somewhat different story to viewers who can take the time to imagine a different story for each print or who can imagine what may have inspired each of these related prints.

Pratt wrote of another print, ***Railway*** (p. 53), which evoked another strong image: *In Newfoundland, the railway often ran close to the sea; in many places the tracks were literally laid along the beach. You crossed them to go walking on the shore. I always liked these parallels: crisp, iron-brown rails against sea greys and blues and greens; regular but ragged lines of waves, back to the sky at the horizon. It seemed a perfect metaphor.*

There is also a dark side to Pratt's prints. I don't suggest this as a psychological state, but rather that Pratt has more of Tom Thomson's reaction to night and the painting of nocturnes in muted moonlight. Thomson painted more nocturnes than all the members of the Group of Seven (all ten of them) combined, and discovered, as Pratt has, a profound mystery and magic in the night sky, especially when the moon is present.

Light Northeast (p. 37) is an image Pratt registered mentally as he sailed his yacht very cautiously into a harbour dense with fog that made it impossible to see any markers or get any sense of where in the harbour his yacht was in relation to the shore. The image of ***Light Northeast*** is of the lighthouse at Cape Race, the eastern most point of North America. ***Night on the River*** **(**p. 45**)** to the railway ***Night Trestle*** (p. 49), which frames a dark blue expanse of water. ***Night on the Verandah*** (p. 47) may be more easily understood with its domestic setting, but the dark water beyond the white frame of the porch portrays silhouetted trees of *the unknown beyond the known,* as Pratt wrote in a note for this print.

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In 1913, American Ezra Pound (1885-1972) wrote: *The artist is always beginning. Any work of art that is not a beginning, or an invention, or a discovery, is of little worth.*

A terse two lines of thought, but Pound put his finger on a live issue. Although also known for his dark side as a fascist sympathizer, Pound was an intelligent man and a canny editor of poetry and prose (e.g. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*), Ernest Hemingway and other writers.

Because what Pound wrote is true [that is, if what is being created is not a new beginning, or an invention, or a discovery], we can understand why it is that much of today's art is ephemeral and is unlikely to survive the ultimate test of time.

The legendary American dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham, formulated the definition of the spirit that lives in every artist and in all art disciplines: *No artist is ever pleased. There is no satisfaction whatsoever, at any time. There is only a* ***divine dissatisfaction*** *that makes us more alive than all the others.*

What Graham tells us in her few well-chosen words can be applied to all artists; it is ***divine dissatisfaction*** that prods all artists at some point in their careers.

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The men of the Pratt and Dawe (Christopher's mother) families usually motored in Pratt's Uncle Chester Dawe's ship, *The Hemmer Jane*, down the Labrador Coast each summer. Years ago I was fortunate to be invited to accompany them and see that remarkably rugged coast, which had waterfalls dropping 1500 feet off the high plateau above the ocean. *The Hemmer Jane* was a mahogany-hulled ship with two 600 Horsepower diesel motors, a pleasant lounge, a comfortable deck from which to watch birds, whales, other boats, clouds floating in the sky or icebergs in the ocean.

At one point we motored into Hawke Bay, a small bay just south of Hamilton Inlet and dropped anchor. Hawke Bay was a Whaling Station, but was abandoned years ago. Christopher and I went ashore to see the

rusting and decaying machinery that was used to winch whale carcasses up to the area where the carcasses were cut into sections and then rendered into whale oil: the part of the whale that would produce a modest profit for the captain and his crew of whalers or possibly indicate a total loss for the entire whaling season.

What upset Christopher most were the rude and almost unbearably crude huts where the crew slept in coarse, rough, narrow, three-deep wooden bunks with whatever blankets or covers they owned or the clothes they were wearing. The terse messages carved into the walls and bunks were full of anxiety and despair, and it was blatently obvious how much the crew despised both the place and the work. The visit left us both with vivid and unpleasant, but sympathetic, memories.

Hawke Bay was a place of great misery, without a doubt. Pratt used the title '*Whaling Station*' for a stark, dark, oil painting of bunks that portrays the angst wafting out from this dismal place. One hopes that the killing of whales will soon be a thing of the past everywhere in the world.

Sailing is one of Pratt's great recreations and he is both passionate and competitive when it comes to sailing or to high-performance racing yachts. He is also a skillful skipper and a pleasure to serve as a crew member when one is invited to share in his excitement and his ability to guide his craft with thoughtful care.

After one of his rare sailing trips outside of Newfoundland and Labrador, Pratt made the print ***Above Montreal*** (p. 19) and later wrote: *On our way down the seaway, in the Beauharnois Lock above Montreal, we could see nothing ahead of us but sky; a humid smog-red glow of the sun rising over the city and the St. Lawrence River to the east. It was easy to believe that there was a void beyond the gates; that past them we would, as ancient sailors feared, sail off the edge of the earth.*

Pratt's yachts have, in succession, been C&C yachts, which are manufactured in Oakville, just west of Toronto. His love of these yachts is celebrated in ***New Boat*** (p. 43), a perfect sailboat, suspended above the sea on straps that seem to disappear into high, thin air. Or ***Yacht Wintering*** (p. 75), a frozen and evocative image of a C&C yacht out of the water, weathering the winter's conditions, and waiting until the ice melts and the weather turns at last to spring and summer.

On one of Christopher's visits to Toronto we went to the C&C factory to see a custom sixty-one foot yacht that had been commissioned and was, when we arrived to see it, already carefully nestled and tied into its lengthy cradle, ready to travel to Southern California, where it would, without doubt, compete successfully in its class against the best yachts of American manufacture. We walked on board to see the details of the interior and then had a chat with the man who was driving the whole rig, cradle, ship and all, to the other side of the continent. He said that he had taken much more than three weeks to plan and check the route that he would be taking, mile by mile, starting very early the next morning. I could see Christopher's eyes light up when the driver spoke of the long drive through deserts and the Rocky Mountains, as if he was about to ask if <u>his</u> Custom '61 yacht could be delivered to St. John's, Newfoundland, instead.

The silkscreen print he made of this trim and exquisite ship, one of his best, is ***My Sixty-One*** (p. 41). That indicates that it is Pratt's in his mind and in his heart. Here's what he wrote about it:

From that Spring day in 1972 when I first sniffed the resin inside Eric Bruckmann's custom shop at C&C, I dreamed of owning a Custom '61. It was a day-dream, and a persistent night-time dream as well; in that dream, we were always getting ready to put to sea; to slip our lines and be off into the pre-dawn hours. I have sailed in everything from Lasers to a '43. I have never owned a '61, so it remains a dream of glory. I found the thrill of sailing to be exponentially related to the size and power of the boat. The compass and cabin and running lights are coloured partly by hand, using Polychromos pencils.

The drawing for the print is also a work of remarkable precision and careful measurement, although I haven't seen it except as a photo reproduction. At first glance, it looks like a brilliant architectural plan for a very special machine, although the print itself does not look like a machine, of course; it does have the quality of emanating a source of power and high energy. The mast stands at the division of the image at what I think may be the point of the Golden Mean. A perfect decision for Christopher to use as a starting point for his preliminary plan. He often uses the Golden Mean as a starting point to allocate the space allotment for some of his drawings and his paintings. It's an old and trusted measure that has been used by Old Masters for centuries and by young apprentices.

Another happy distraction for Pratt is his stamp collection and his knowledge and interest in Newfoundland's historic stamps. He was a member of the Stamp Design Advisory Committee for Canada Post for several years—a stimulating group which included Canada's Ace typographer, Allan Fleming, who was best known for his Canadian National Railway logo, Doris Shadbolt, Senior Curator, Vancouver Art Gallery, Montreal artist and designer Charles Gagnon, and Karl Mangold also a Montreal designer and a stamp collector of high reputation. The experience started Christopher on a road he already knew quite well, and he made a number of silkscreen prints of early Newfoundland stamps: codfish, seals, Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and several others. They can be admired at the E.J. Pratt Library, named after Pratt's great uncle who was a professor at Victoria College for many years. The earliest Newfoundland postage stamps were made in England, which was good money for the English stamp trade, but the English engravers never seem to have seen or studied a codfish or a seal, at least not as closely as Pratt had; Pratt had seen them alive and seen them dead and he knew the difference between alive and dead.

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The prints Pratt makes are, each of them, unique. Each may be part of an edition of 35 or 55 or 75 or even 100, but they are works in their own right and the uniqueness of each print does not diminish the fact that it is related to all the other prints and owes most to Pratt's creative expertise.

Silkscreen prints are among the most complicated and tricky to create. Pratt starts with multiple stencils, (on average eight or ten per print) although some take twice as many and sometimes sixteen, as in the case of ***The Sheep*** (p. 69). Pratt wrote of this print: *Technically, this was the most frustrating print I ever made. I abandoned it three times, each time tearing up the whole works and starting fresh: A total of six months, sixteen stencils, and what seemed like a million dots! I was totally exhausted when it was done.* ***The Sheep***, however as that stately print shows, was not affected in the least by Pratt's frustration.

Every stencil is a key step leading to the final image. What Pratt does in one medium will reflect upon what he does in another medium. The silkscreen he has just finished may unlock an idea for a painting in oil; conversely an oil painting can provide an idea that will make it possible for a silkscreen print to be made much stronger than it might otherwise be.

Pratt became adept at thinking simultaneously in all the different media he created work in; this blend of varied problems and processes are what gives his work both its refinement and its sure authenticity. Creating silkscreen prints is a delicate and difficult process. It takes a sound knowledge of the process from start to finish, and it takes experience and a lot of work to determine the precise sequence that must be followed exactly so the final image is situated in the environment the artist wants it to be in. Every stencil represents a slightly different colour and a slightly different scale of the part of the final image it is establishing.

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I met Christopher and his family in 1967. I had seen a couple of his works before meeting him while I was visiting Kathleen Fenwick, the incomparable Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery in 1961. She was bubbling over with infectious glee for ***Boat in Sand*** (1961) (p. 21) or ***Sheds In Winter*** (1964) or possibly both. "They are both so well made," she said, her eyes and nose getting as close as she could to make sure she was right. One thing was certain about Kathleen: she knew talent when she saw it. Her pleasure came from the knowledge that what she was looking at was something that was of significant worth indeed.

I have had a steady friendship with Christopher Pratt since then and have greatly admired him and his work from the moment I met him and his family. He has invited me to sail with him from Halifax to St. John's; practically around the whole Island of Newfoundland; from Oakville across Lake Ontario, down the St. Lawrence River, with the intention of continuing on to the St. John's Yacht Club at the south end of Conception Bay.

Over the years Christopher and I have talked on the phone for hours. Often it was about the work he was in the middle of and work that he was thinking about doing next month. We also travelled across Canada in 1968, when he agreed to be one of the jurors for the Canada Council's Visual Arts Bursaries. We were an odd but happy quartet: Christopher Pratt; the ever-effervescent art dealer Dorothy Cameron; and the Montreal painter and sculptor Ulysse Comtois; with me as their guide, chauffeur and treasurer.

Pratt was somewhat surprised, but happily so, to find that artists across Canada knew who he was and also knew about his work. His use of colour and his ability to engage in metaphorical imagery in his art took it a stage well beyond simple representation. Most artists and curators we met knew of Pratt and his work, admired him, and wanted to meet him. The trip gave Pratt a sense that he was better known and his work more sincerely regarded than he had imagined possible.

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Pratt realized that in making art he had found a pursuit that appealed to his intellect, uncovered an aesthetic component in his makeup that he wanted to encourage since it was a part of his interest in both art and architecture. He has spent most of his life in Newfoundland and Labrador. He was aware, however, of the advice older writers give to younger writers: "Write about something you know." What the subjects Pratt makes into compelling works of art, whether abstract or representational, they are works that are hard to forget.

Eugene Delacroix, the articulate French painter, wrote in his journal that "Every artist is first an amateur". It is a phase that confronts all artists. Pratt, while not avoiding that part of his professional training was able by dint of his energy and determination to get through that period when things might be a little in doubt and might show some evidence of not yet being as finely honed as a professional artist would make them, whether in an oil painting, a silkscreen print, a watercolour or a pencil drawing. His rapid grasp of what it was he wanted to paint, or the prints he thought of making, sped him along a path that made him quite quickly well-known.

Pratt's mind was already filled with images that he had and his memory was heavily loaded with works from the late 1950s and early 1960s and were already considered to be iconic and metaphorical in conception. He already knew the landscapes of Newfoundland from Cape Race north to St. Anthony, he knew a lot about the fishery, the outports and the small hamlets with charming names like The Tickles, Joe Batt's Arm, Seldom Come By, Bay Bulls, Paradise, Deadman's Bay, Muddy Hole, Mosquito and other delightfully imagined names of villages where one might (or might not) want to live.

Pratt's postal mailing address is Mount Carmel—a good biblical point of reference, deeply metaphorical, at least for those who take the time and effort to ponder the message that Pratt works so clearly to convey to viewers of his work.

Although Pratt returns to the same or similar subjects from time to time, he never repeats himself, nor drifts away from the Newfoundland landscapes he knows so intimately. What he did repeat were experiences that held a meaning for him. Pratt wrote of the print ***Crow and Raven***, *The birds serve as a foil for the diagonals, and define the vertical and horizontal space*.

But this image is not just a crow and a raven; it really is a double portrait of the artist and a close family friend with whom Christopher often went fishing: His name was Fred Clarke and Pratt saw in the image of the two birds a relationship that has lasted for many, many years.

When I pulled a good-sized cod out of the ocean in a small bay on the Labrador coast, Fred said to me "We'll have it for dinner tonight. You'll never have a fish as delicious as this one will be." Fred wasn't wrong, since all those at the table that night agreed that Fred's bread stuffing for the codfish was so certainly unbeatable that a silence fell on the diners who decided that silence was better than trying to describe the ecstasy the food prompted in words.

The way Pratt works, normally, which is in a state of constant and intense immersion, means that ideas, images, technical and dramatic achievements flow back and forth as he figures out something in one medium and then changes to another, or stops to search through his file drawers which are full of poems, brief notes, photographs, drawings and other odd bits of information that might, or could, act as a spur or a catalyst to change the course of a print or a painting.

Despite the great variety in his works, Pratt's work is homogenous, from drawings, to prints, to very large-scale paintings. Although he has never said as much, they are, in his mind, all one large creation and they are figurative as well as abstract. Throughout his career Pratt has used models, but his use of figures or animals in prints is a small percentage of his body of work. In a silkscreen such as ***The Raven*** (p. 67), the black profile of the bird provides a striking contrast to a brilliant blue sky, white laundry, clapboard houses, and snow.

Pratt's works encompass a wide and disparate range of subjects that corral a broad number of landscapes, man-made objects, things that are domestic and things that are universal. Somehow in the course of conceiving a drawing, a print, a painting, or writing a poem, Pratt often inserts a universal element into his work, only because he has a breadth of mind to think globally; this injects a note of universality into his work. He sees art as a way to connect viewers to things viewers may not have known or thought much about. There is a lot to learn from Pratt's works of art. All you have to do is sit down in front of them and think hard about what the images in the frame are there to tell you.

Nor has Pratt much need to travel abroad, since he has many exciting miles to travel without going far from his home on the Salmonier River, which flows past his house and studio on its south-west way to St. Mary's Bay. Images such as ***Cape St. Mary's*** (p. 27) or ***Night on the Verandah*** (p. 47) come from Pratt's own "backyard."

Pratt also finds inspiration and information in books on artists whose work he admires or who work in a manner related in a tangential way to his own set of artistic parameters, either in subject, technique, style, or colour composition. Most artists I know are exceptionally acute at reading reproductions of paintings that are four or five hundred years old and can read them accurately, whether the reproduction is in colour or in black and white. Ideally, one can sit in front of a great masterpiece by Rembrandt, Caravaggio or

Domenico Ghirlandaio, for half an hour or longer to figure out how the creator, whoever he or she was, organized the composition, deployed a battalion of colours and ended up with a painting so strong and brilliant that you would have a hard time remembering which colours were used.

Pratt's work is filtered through the full range of places, people, subjects that are a profound part of his life, his love and expertise in sailing, his intimate knowledge of most of Newfoundland and Labrador from its east-most point at Cape Race, to the southern tip of the Burin Peninsula and north to Cape Bauld and the Strait of Belle Isle.

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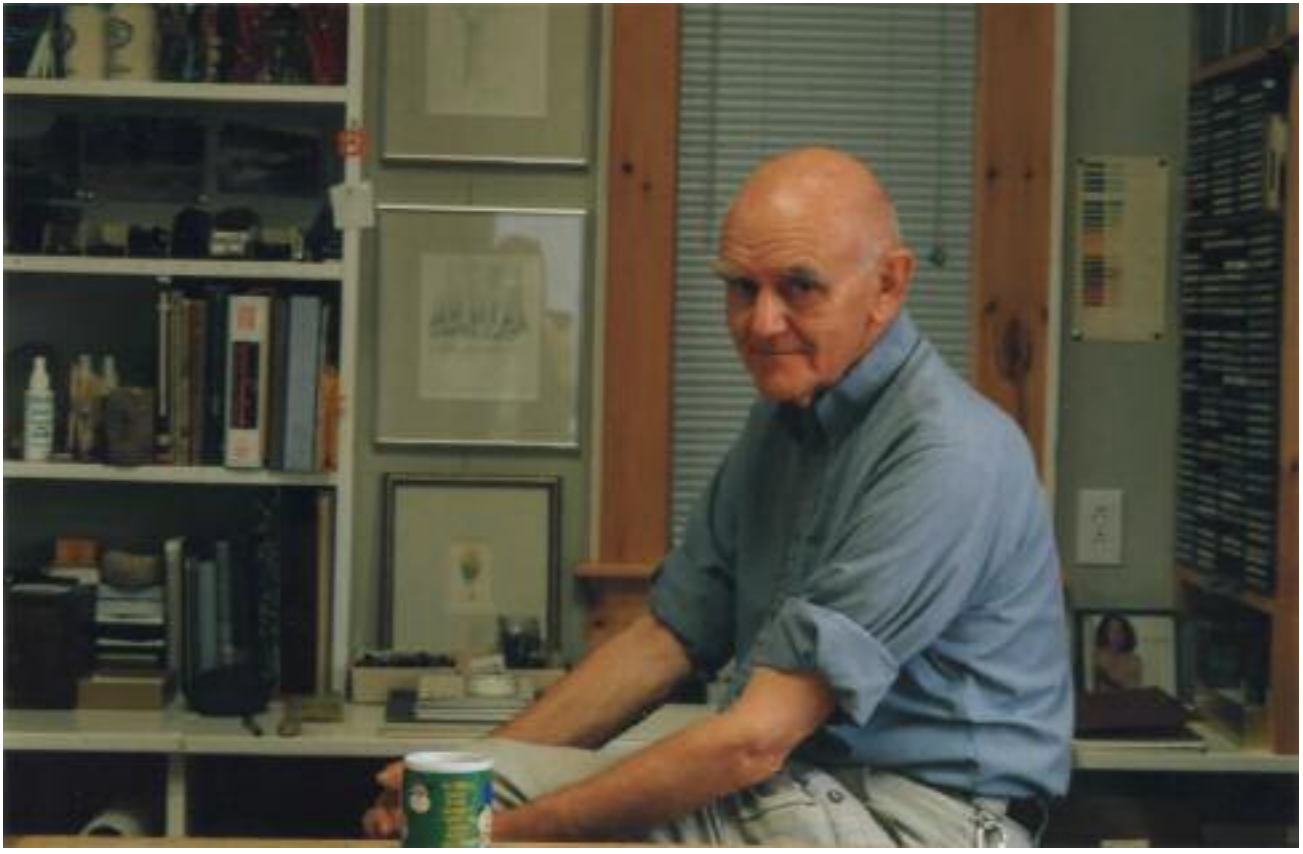
Pratt's interest in architecture is evident in both his paintings and his prints. It was his younger brother, Philip, who became an architect and both of them are exceptional in having successful careers in their respective disciplines. Philip's great achievement was to be the architect who won the competition to design The Rooms, a great building and a work of high achievement in St. Johns, that houses the Provincial Library and Archives; a large Public Art Gallery, the History Museum, and a special section of war memorial material reminding us that ninety percent of the Newfoundland regiment died on one day, July 1st, in the First World War.

Christopher was commissioned to design the handsome Provincial Flag, which now proudly flies in front of The Rooms. Pratt was fourteen years old when Newfoundland joined Canada. He has become one of Canada's great artists and remains a proud Newfoundlander.

David P. Silcox C.M. 2019

David P. Silcox has received the Order of Canada and a Governor General's Award for his many contributions to all the disciplines of the arts in Canada. He has written several award-winning books: Painting Place: the Life and Work of David B. Milne, Tom Thomson: The Silence and The Storm (with Harold Town), The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson, and Christopher Pratt, as well as numerous articles, catalogues, and reviews on artists and the arts.



Christopher Pratt, 2004

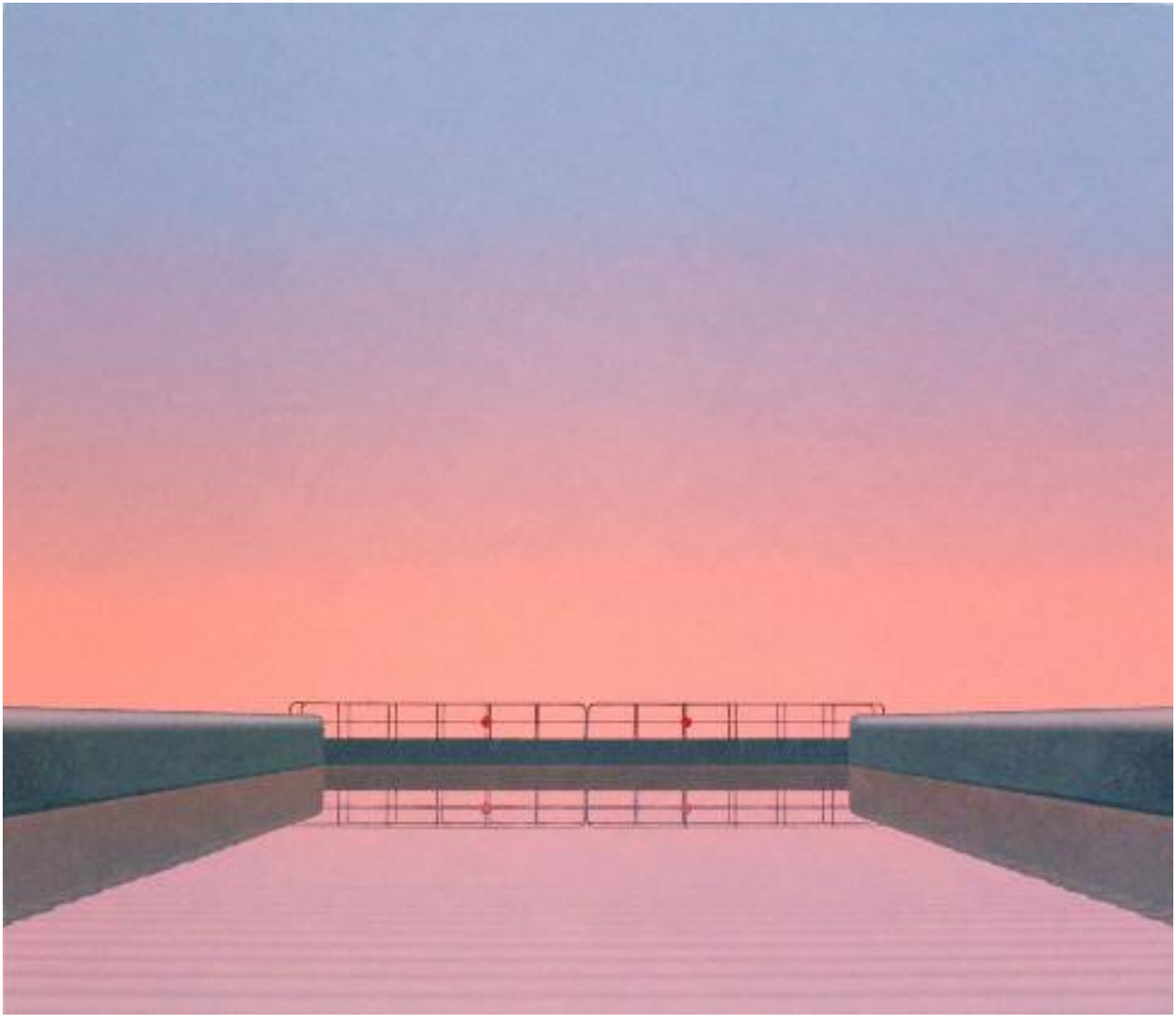
Cleaning the screen for *Stationary High,* 1986

Squeegeeing paint on silkscreen, 1986

Colour Plates

On our way down the seaway, in the Beauharnois Lock above Montreal, we could see nothing ahead of us but sky: a humid, smog-red glow of the sun rising over the city and the St. Lawrence River to the east. It was easy to believe that there was a void beyond the gates; that past them we would, as ancient seamen feared, sail off the edge of the earth.

Above Montreal
1979
original signed screenprint
20 x 23 inches
Edition: 40

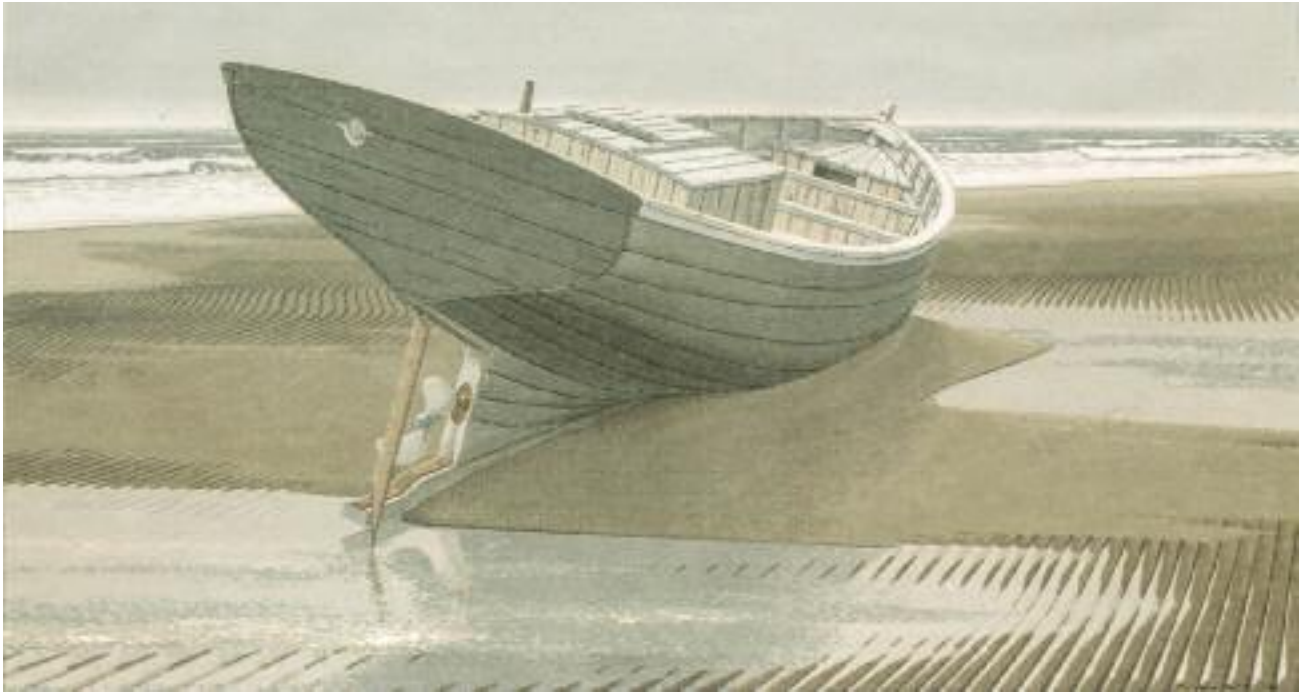


When I was growing up, boats were far more important than cars and trucks in rural Newfoundland. Small boats had always been the backbone of the Newfoundland economy, and the ability to handle them the measure of a man. They symbolized our way of life.

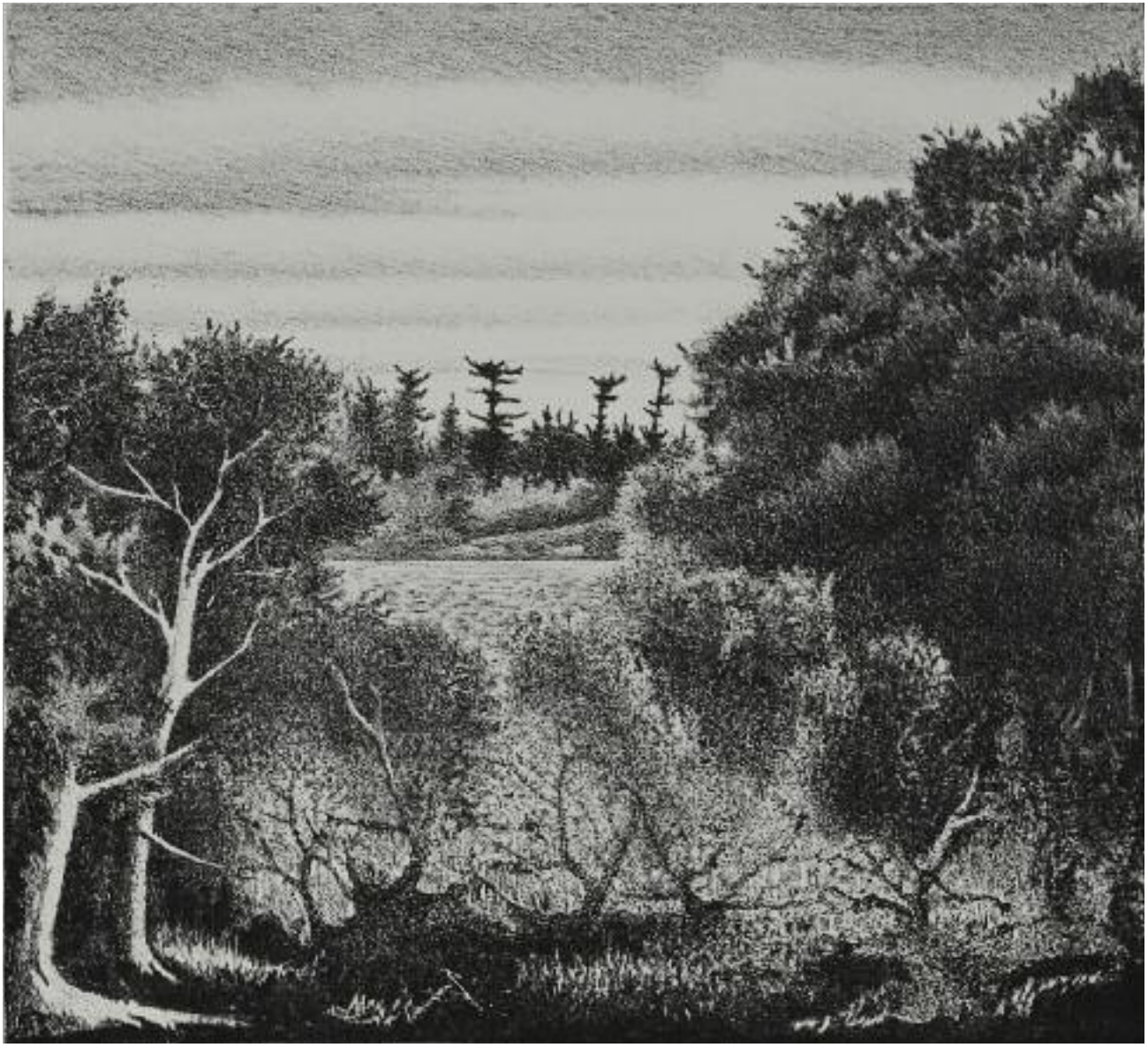
I did this print in 1961, at a time when things were changing very rapidly in Newfoundland. It seemed to me that traditional and viable social structures were being systemically discredited.

I was living in Sackville at the time, working in a small, unventilated room, searching for techniques to make the image work. It took me four frustrating months! But it was very satisfying to see the boat emerging from the paper, very pale at first, but strong with each printing. It seemed to appear out of the fog. I had made a window in the walls, and through it I could see St. Mary's Bay.

Boat in Sand
1961
original signed screenprint
14 x 26 inches
Edition: 25



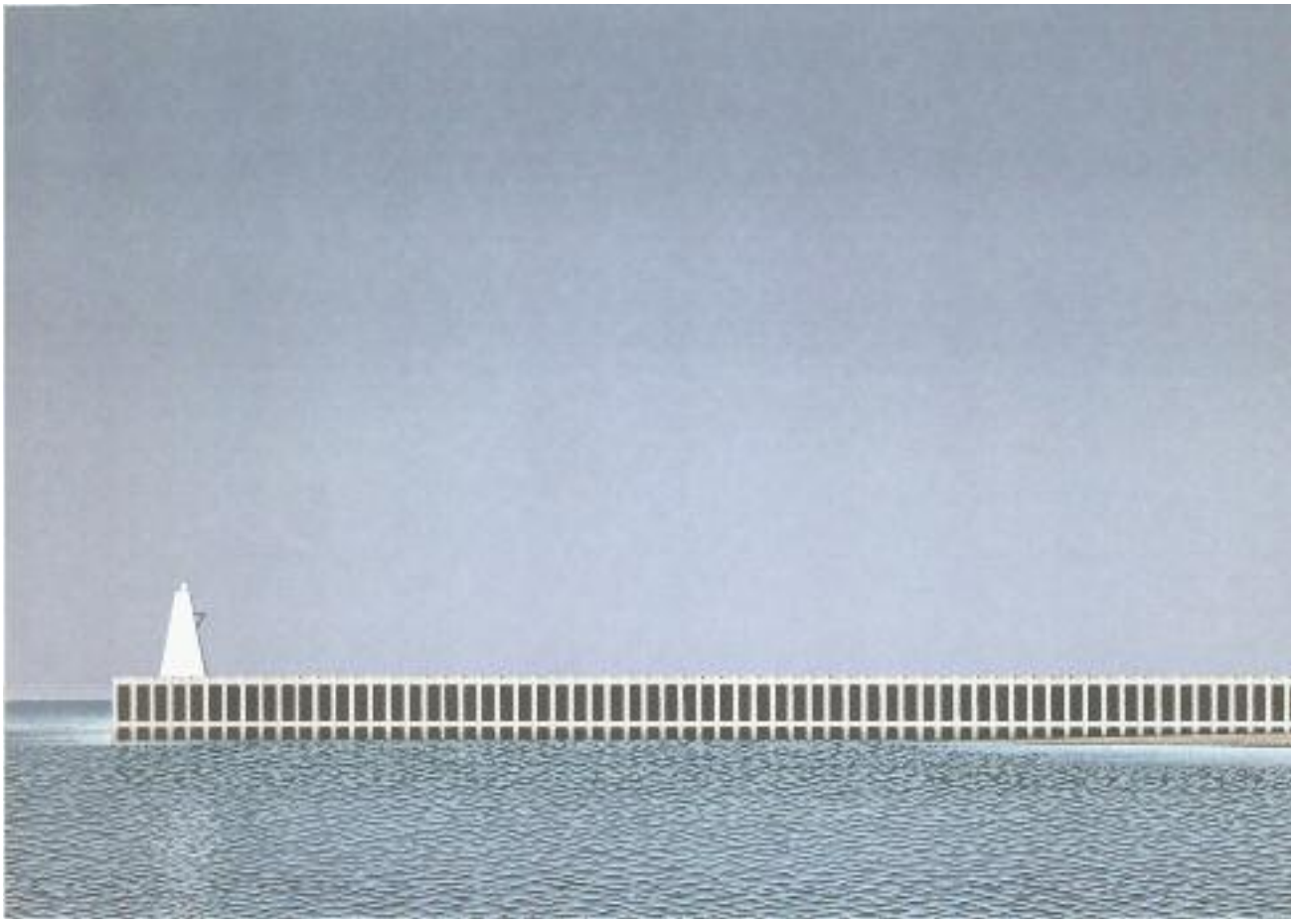
Bog Birch, Burgeo Road
2000
original signed lithograph
9 3/4 x 10 3/4 inches
Edition: 20



The breakwater to the north of Long Pond Gut is very regular, the work of engineers; it is a Government design, ubiquitous from Bronte Harbour to the Labrador. They are abstractions of the old rock ballasted, pile-and-cribbing wharves that were built locally; they look like they come in a box.

Perhaps because the subject came pre-generalized, this image is very close to being a description of a specific place. We kept our boat at Long Pond, and we passed this breakwater to starboard every time we put to sea. As a child, my son Ned did a drawing of the structure and its tower, a memory of many days spent sailing on Conception Bay. I have it in my studio. It became an important part of my associations with the place.

Breakwater
1976
original signed screenprint
20 x 28 inches
Edition: 55



The new concrete tower that replaced the Cape St. Mary's lighthouse, cold and efficient and not needing live-in keepers anymore, out of context, drenched in daylight, white, frigid sea-light; rising pale and phallic against the sea, it looked like a teutonic memorial to drowned sailors or bird hunters fallen from the cliffs.

I was always afraid of the cliffs. They are 400 feet high, and rounded at the edge; you can't tell where the real edge is. There is no line of demarcation at the point of no return.

I go to Cape St. Mary's once or twice a year, always when the gannets are nesting in their raucous thousands on the "Bird Rock", just east of the Cape itself. We drive out now, and back in the same afternoon; first when I made the pilgrimage, we had to hike along an old overgrown trail through bogs and brush. After walking for hours, it was always a surprise to come upon the lighthouse standing on the tundra, guarding the edge. We used to camp there overnight.

Cape St. Mary's
1975
original signed screenprint
18 inches diameter
Edition: 45

Flowers Island Light
2003
original signed lithograph and screenprint
10 x 15 5/8 inches
Edition: 15

Fox Marsh Siding
1991
original signed screenprint with chalk and charcoal
16 x 36 inches
Edition: 60


1001

There is a small community in St. Mary's Bay called Path End and many houses similar to this; but the title, with its end-of-something overtone, relates more to the mood of the print and my own mood at that time than it does to any actual place. Circumstances in my life, affecting family and friends, forced me to admit to death; they broke through my denials, my contrivances, and focused a sharp cold light on its reality.

I find my real emotions very hard to talk about or deal with in my work. People ask me why my work is so "unemotional": death happens in an ordinary place and on an ordinary and uncaring day. Inevitably, if you are a painter or a poet, you undress and walk into the village square; but art isn't only self-revelation, and most self-revelation isn't art.

House at Path End
1977
original signed screenprint
16 x 33 1/2 inches
Edition: 55

Looking through old notes and diaries, I found some drawings I had made in 1965 of Lance Pt. Rock. I was wary of reaching so far back, but the time of year was right and I remembered all the things that interested me then: the sea outside the barrier, the lines of snow responding to the structure of the rock, and how this granite knuckle looked like a flensed animal. So I decided to do a print using techniques and chroma that I started with; bringing it full circle, as it were.

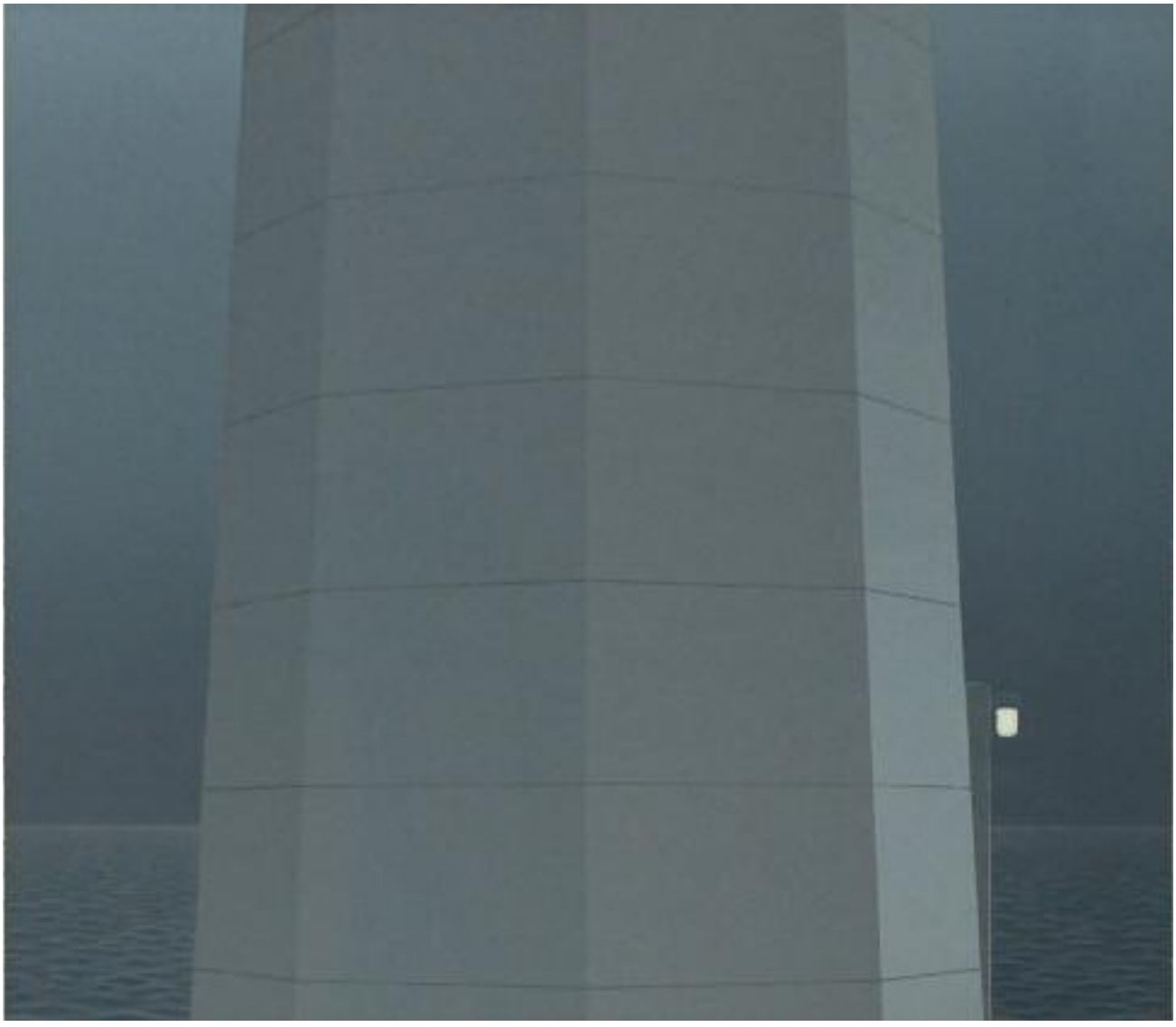
Lance Point Rock, 1990

Lance Point Rock
1990
original signed screenprint
13 1/2 x 30 1/4 inches
Edition: 70

The fog thickened before dawn and we sailed into a dark, dreamlike world where all signs were sounds: water roaring against rock; sea birds startled by our presence, croaking, alien and harsh; the fog horn, far too close we thought, strident and precise. As we rounded to the east and north, we broke out of the fog and suddenly there, fine on the port bow, was the blinding cold green fire of the Cape Race light. Then it became that time of day at sea when it is neither day nor night.

Later that summer, we visited the Cape by land. There were many lights: high overhead the giant lenses flashing light that can be seen for over twenty miles at sea; off on the horizon the faint green starboard light of a tanker passing west; at eyelevel, the ordinary bulb above the lighthouse door.

Light Northeast
1979
original signed screenprint
15 x 17 1/8 inches
Edition: 45



I crossed the Cabot Strait to Newfoundland late in March one year. There were few passengers on board and no one that I knew, and I was glad to have a private, lonely trip. It was calm but very cold on deck and very damp; there were no tourists leaning on the rail to watch the sea slip by, no lovers on the bench, no families quarreling.

I spent a lot of time on deck, feeling the hypnotic pulse of the diesel engines deep inside the ship – her steady, soothing, almost imperceptible roll – and watching the straight wake disappearing to the west. On the horizon to the north, toward the Gulf, the ice pack made two flat white lines against the sky. It was all in harmony with how I felt about coming home.

March Crossing
1977
original signed screenprint
19 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches
Edition: 48

From that Spring day in 1972 when I first sniffed the resin inside Eric Bruckmann's custom shop at C&C, I dreamed of owning a Custom '61. It was a day-dream, and a persistent night-time dream as well; in that dream, we were always getting ready to put to sea; to slip our lines and be off into the pre-dawn hours of a grey Atlantic day.

I have never owned a '61, so it remains a dream of glory. I have sailed in everything from Lasers to a '43 and found the thrill of sailing to be exponentially related to the size and power of the boat.

The compass and cabin and running lights and their reflections are coloured partly by hand, using polychromos pencils.

My Sixty-One
1988
original signed screenprint
16 1/4 x 36 inches
Edition: 65

This print has less to do with sailing than with the boat itself: a sculpture, sleek and efficient, shark-like, hanging in straps being lowered into the water; suspended between the abstracts of conception, the mathematics of construction and reality at sea.

It has to do with some newness, that instant of possession when something you really want becomes a part of you and the process of its inevitable weaning begins.

New Boat
1975
original signed screenprint
14 1/2 x 30 inches
Edition: 55

My Father Used to Listen to the Wilderness

My father
used to listen to the wilderness;
night after night
he never tired of it.

It seemed to satisfy his need
for loneliness;
the melodrama of a loon
occasionally
snipe winnowing in May and June;
but always
it was voices that he listened for;
trying to translate
the language of the wind;
sound from the forest
heard
like conversation in a nearby room,
muffled by thick walls.

I have not admitted this before,
but when he died,
before they took his casket to the church
I met with it alone
and said what I would call a prayer;
and then I rapped
three times on the coffin lid;
father, son and holy ghost.

Since then,
I have listened to the land
night after night, I never tire of it,
and listened in my room;
willing to accept the smallest sign –
three snipe winnowing at once,
three clouds across the moon
even three contradictions in the heater pipes –
but never hearing anything.

Sometimes I talk to him,
trying to explain what's going on,
knowing that I'm talking to myself.

Or him in me.

There is residue:
we listen for its voices
in the wilderness.

Christopher Pratt 1984

From: *A Painter's Poems*

Night on the River
1987
original signed screenprint
14 x 22 1/2 inches
Edition: 55

Darkness beyond light; the unknown beyond the known; the distant beyond the immediate; past and future as one beyond the present. Serious stuff. I did a verandah painting in 1980 titled *Me and Bride*. Bride went home; I got cold and came inside.

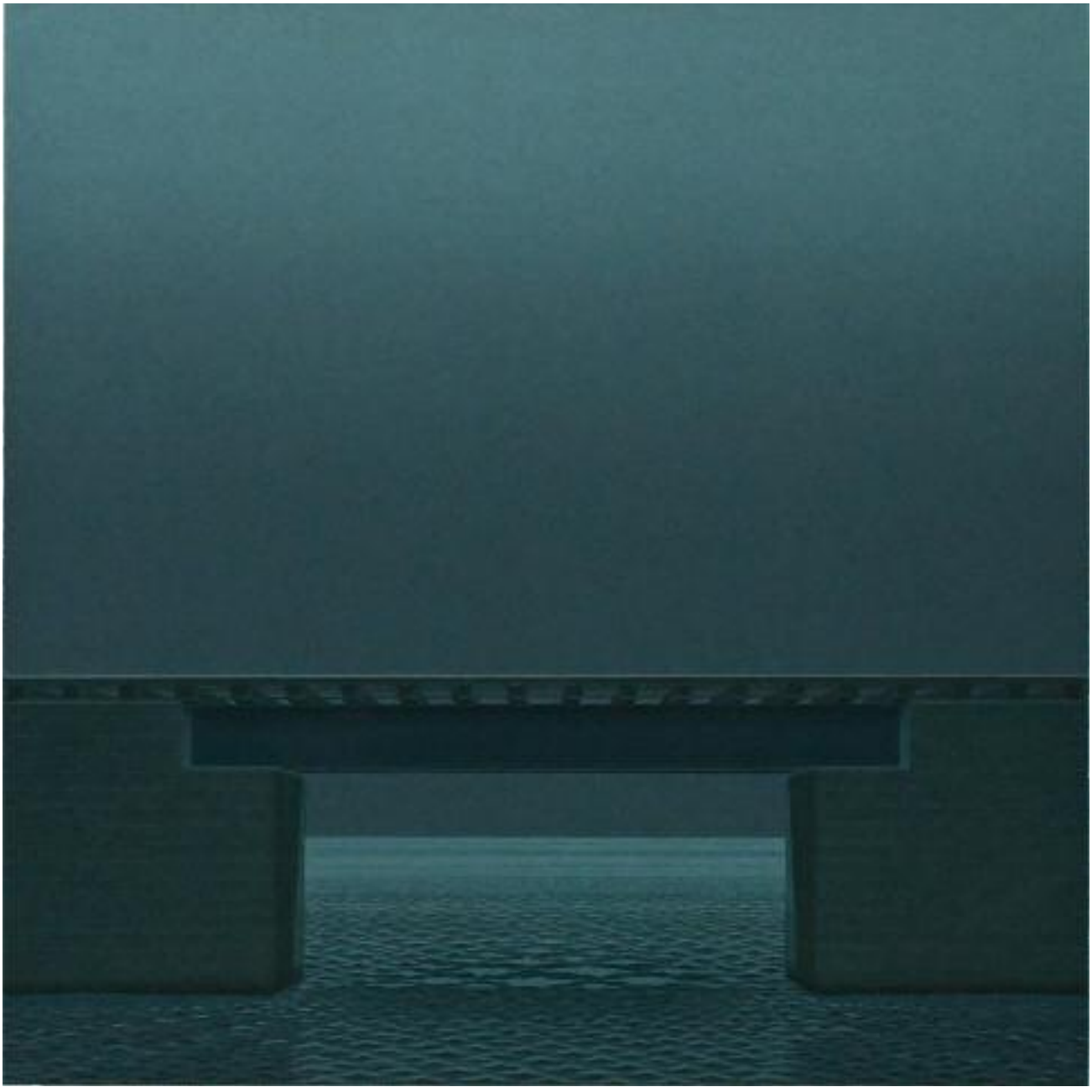
Night on the Verandah
1986
original signed screenprint
15 1/2 x 34 1/2 inches
Edition: 55

On Waterford Bridge Road we lived just across the river from the railway tracks. In the late ’40s and early ’50s steam locomotives still hauled the trains in Newfoundland, and we saw or heard every train that left or arrived in St. John’s. When I got to Sackville, trains were omnipresent; and my first recollection of being there is of hearing locomotives in the night, wailing on the Tantramar.

We used to swim at a trestle near Bay Roberts, and once when I dived off into the frigid water, my head got down beneath the ooze, or kelp; for a terrifying instant everything was black.

Everybody knows the symbolism of trains in art and literature. I am not done with images of trains, nor they with me.

Night Trestle
1983
original signed screenprint
19 3/4 x 20 inches
Edition: 48



On Thunder Brook
2001
original signed lithograph
10 x 11 inches
Edition: 20

I know rivers very well; I have walked and fished the length of them, every steady and rattle and bend, from the head waters to the estuary. Others, I know only from the pools I've fished, or at a crossing place. That is the difference between being a traveller and a transient. It reminds me of the feeling I used to get when, as a youth, I was a guest at a cousin's summer cabin for a week: the sense that I could not really be "part of it", that the tensions and relationships had a history I didn't share and a future that I wouldn't know; that I was just an incident in what they would later call "our summer". My own past and future seemed be behind me and in front of me; theirs to the left and right. There were both front and lateral infinities.

In Newfoundland, the railway often ran close by the sea; in many places the tracks were literally laid along the beach. You crossed them to go walking on the shore. I always like those parallels: crisp, iron brown rails against sea greys and blues and greens; regular but ragged lines of waves, back to the sky. It seemed to be a perfect metaphor.

Railway
1978
original signed screenprint
26 x 30 inches
Edition: 39

No particular attic, many attics where light comes from two sources: through the hatch, up from inside; through the windows, in from outside. Because they are at the top of the house, because they contain secrets and yield unexpected and forgotten things, because they are dark and contained and not easy of access, attics are perfect symbols of the mind.

The little landscape of distant trees outside the window seemed right for the image. I could not see the sea. It reminded me of Sackville.

Sackville Attic
1982
original signed screenprint
17 1/4 x 20 inches
Edition: 55

A wall becomes a screen on which light – sunlight or streetlight – projects a play. The west-facing wall of the house we lived in for thirty years is such a wall, and the play changes with the season and the time of day. *March Night* (a painting) and *Spring at My Place* are both projections on this wall.

Spring at My Place
1985
original signed screenprint
14 1/2 x 33 inches
Edition: 47

I wanted to do a print of land across water, something very clean, about how it is in winter when everything – the land, the sea, the sky and the air itself – is immaculate; a moment of cease-fire in our war of plunder against the environment.

Studio, 1986

Stationary High
1986
original signed screenprint
25 1/2 x 27 inches
Edition: 55

Printing *Stationary High*

Mixing paint for silkscreen *Stationary High*

Stationary High, 1986

We built a cabin on the Southeast River, in a clearing edged by spruce and alders. But we were too late: the fishing was declining rapidly, the river overfished and poached, especially in dry summers when the water levels shrank and the salmon got trapped and sunburned in the pools.

I lived there when I was working on the Base. The summers were very dry; it drizzles, but it never rained. You couldn't hear the river through the trees.

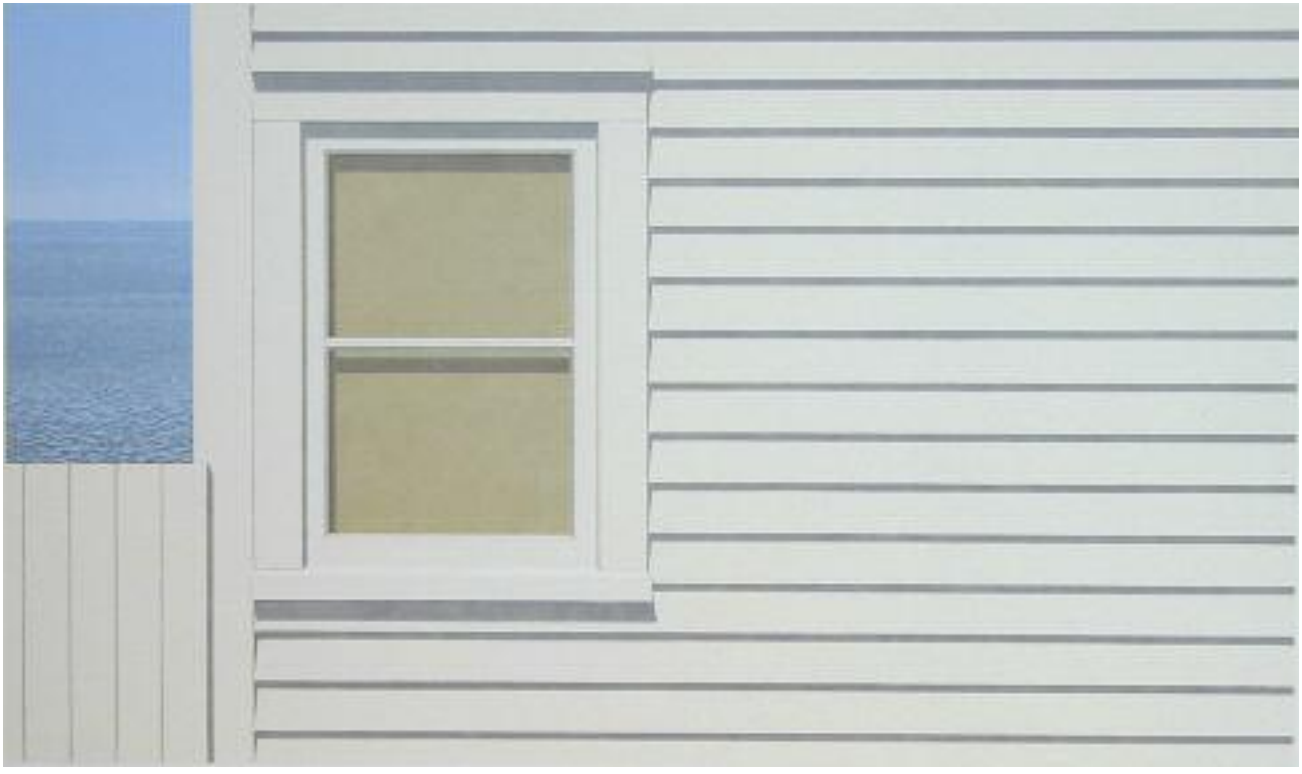
Summer on the Southeast
1987
original signed screenprint
15 1/4 x 34 inches
Edition: 70

Space can serve as an equivalent for time in visual art; "near" being "now" and far either past or future. I like juxtapositions of near and far, of deep and shallow space: the boards almost at the picture plane, the shallow recess of the blind behind the window frame and suddenly the sea, back to infinity. There isn't any middle ground, no transition, only here and there, now and then.

I liked getting depth without recourse to diagonals, without disappearing railways tracks and avenues of wirepoles. I preferred the space described by overlapping planes, defined by vertical and horizontal lines.

Those preoccupations led me to an image where things seemed to be waiting or on hold, so I called it *Sunday Afternoon*.

Sunday Afternoon
1972
original signed screenprint
16 1/2 x 28 inches
Edition: 30



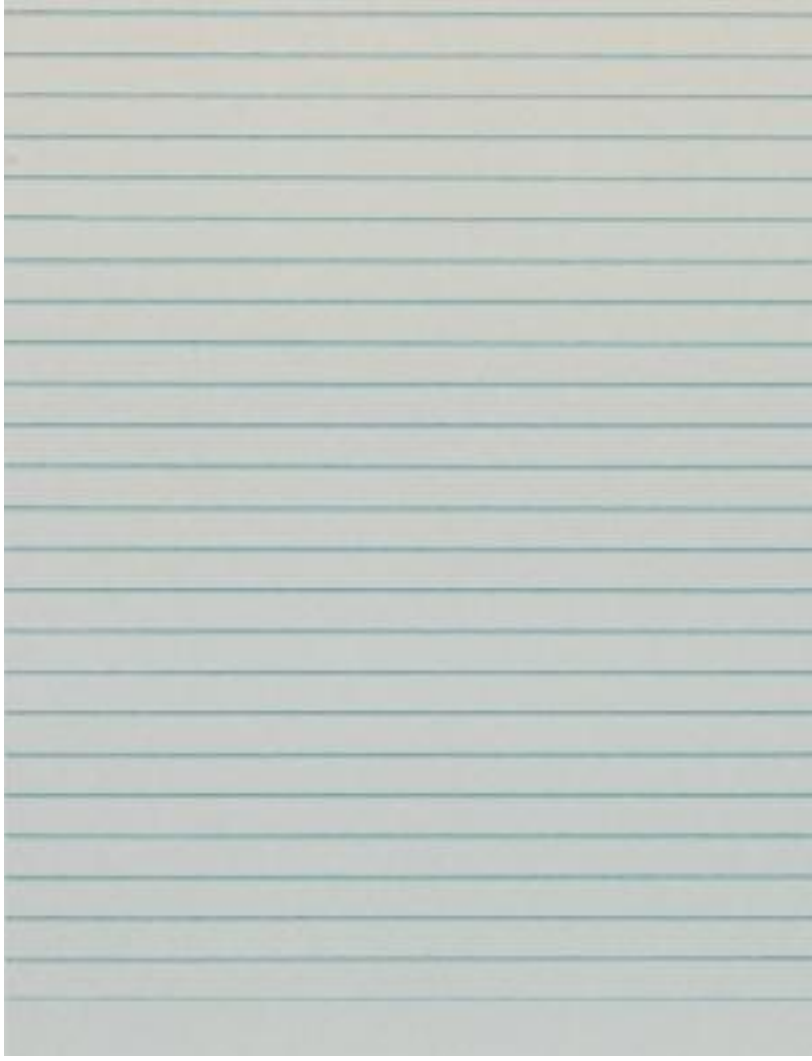
Stencil for *The Raven, 1996*

The Raven
1996-97
original signed screenprint
16 3/4 x 37 3/4 inches
Edition: 57

I had a lot of images of sheep, some from the Scottish Highlands and the Isle of Skye, others from the Cape Shore and St. Mary's Bay. I don't take to animals as subjects easily; any trace of anthropomorphism bothers me, and sheep come burdened with a load of symbolism that I wanted to avoid. But that isn't possible: I saw them as embodiment of the landscape they inhabited, the burnished, windswept landscape that I love. The more I thought about it, the more I realized my images of animals were autobiographical.

Technically, this was the most frustrating print I ever made. I abandoned it three times, each time tearing up the whole works and start fresh: a total of six months, sixteen stencils and what seemed like a million dots! I was totally exhausted when it was done.

The Sheep
1971
original signed screenprint
13 1/2 x 31 inches
Edition: 25



My images are restorations of a kind. Like art, restorations cannot be reality; they are abstractions, voids: forts not under siege, their dungeons without prisoners; old rooms with no leaks, no draughts, no memory of pain; icons without belief.

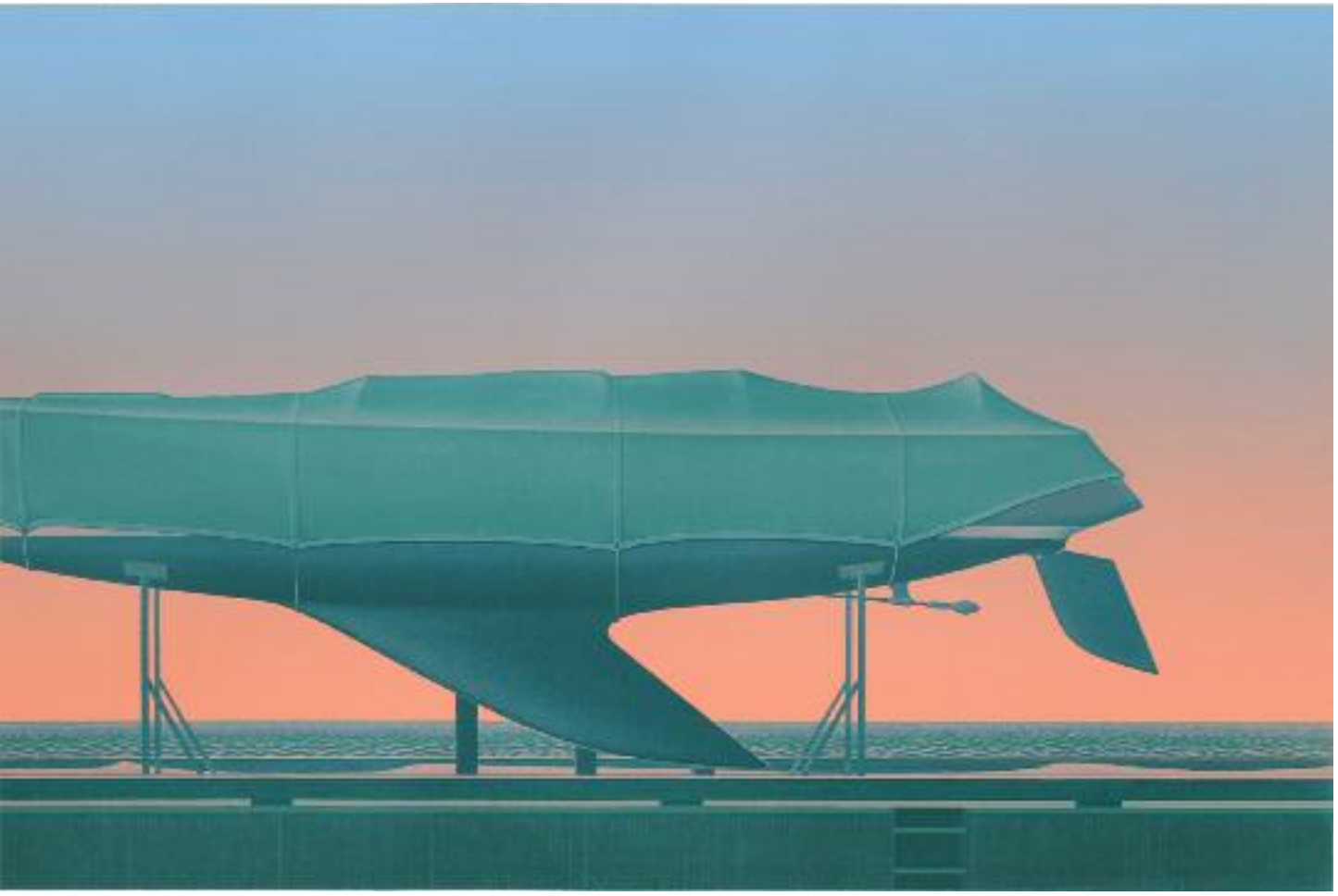
I often pass this building in the afternoon. It has a large two-storey wall that faces west, no doors, no windows, clapboard restored improbably straight and painted white. It isn't challenging – it is already art. The shadows narrow as the sun goes down, and the crisp white boards are glazed in gold and rose and blue.

Wall Facing West
1980
original signed screenprint
15 x 32 inches
Edition: 50

We had picnicked by this house in August on a hot, still afternoon and visited the people who were living there, just for their holidays. Late one night in January, unable to sleep, I went driving, just to see the "summer" places at their perigee. I got out and walked around the building in the dark: it was blowing hard; the moon was radiating frost; it was unimaginably cold. In retrospect, *Winter Moon*, *Spring at My Place* and *Summer on the Southeast* became variations on an autobiographical theme, to which I will add a fourth, "Fall" image.

Winter Moon
1987
original signed screenprint
14 3/4 x 34 1/2 inches
Edition: 60

A boat out of season, out of its element, under wraps, abstracted, a sculpture. It is based on a C&C Customer ’43, “Dry Fly”, which I owned from 1977 to 1985. I didn’t notice as I was worked at shaping the profile of tarpaulin to suggest the deck structures underneath, that what I was describing was a funeral ship, a pyre, and the sunset representing fire. When I saw where it had led me, I realized it was appropriate. I sold the boat in 1985.



Yacht Wintering
1984
original signed screenprint
16 x 32 inches
Edition: 50

List of works

Above Montreal 1979
original signed screenprint 20 x 23 inches
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Boat in Sand 1961
original signed screenprint 14 x 26 inches
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Bog Birch, Burgeo Road 2000
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Cape St. Mary's 1975
original signed screenprint 18 inches diameter
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Flowers Island Light 2003
original signed lithograph and screenprint 10 x 15 5/8 inches
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Fox Marsh Siding 1991
original signed screenprint with chalk and charcoal 16 x 36 inches
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House at Path End 1977
original signed screenprint 16 x 32 1/2 inches
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Lance Point Rock 1990
original signed screenprint 13 1/2 x 30 1/4 inches
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Light Northeast 1979
original signed screenprint 14 3/4 x 17 1/8 inches
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