

SOMEWHERE WAITING

The Life and Art of Christiane Pflug

Ann DAVIS

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1994, accompanied with a 16-page
pamphlet insert of writings selected
and published by Michael Pflug)

Christiane Pflug has been a touchstone for many Canadian artists. Her role and position in our imagination could perhaps be paralleled with that of Frida Kahlo to the south, although Pflug's work is imbued with a Northern melancholy and longing, rather than Latin intensity and a flaming palette. Archetypally female, Pflug's meticulous, detailed and haunting paintings and drawings have held a long-time intrigue and fascination for those of us familiar with her work. This publication, intended, I think, as a critical biography, was thus greeted with some excitement and anticipation. This reaction intensified when the book was *not* published in 1991, but delayed until 1994 due to wranglings with the artist's widower, Michael Pflug. It is highly disappointing, therefore, that while the book contains reams of factual material about the life of Christiane Pflug, it has a paucity of interpretation and evaluation - the critical component so necessary in such a project.



Ann Davis must be commended for the bravery and resolve to take on this project which involved extensive travel, dealing with surviving family members after the artist's suicide, and a daunting amount of translation of letters and other writings from German to English. But she disappoints her readers with a plodding style and structure, in which fact after fact is noted dispassionately (at times even woodenly) and democratically. Such treatment does not a critical biography make.

The results of her exhaustive research have been marshaled impressively, but perhaps a ghost writer should have been brought in after the research phase of this endeavour. Part

way into the book, one begins to yearn excruciatingly for the author to emphasize facts which are important, as having crucial bearing on Pflug's art, and indicate which are only contextual detail. One of the most glaring examples is the treatment of the various artists with whom Pflug was acquainted over the years, or whose work she saw exhibited. Many times surnames only are given, tossed into the text like exotic ingredients into a salad with no identifying information, nor a sense of their relative importance, either to art in general or to Pflug's thinking and production.

Davis' distance from her material is most frustrating in her descriptions of Pflug's paintings, which are discussed singly and formally in a rather forced, stilted manner. Pflug's strange perspective, deep emotion and the weird other-wordly atmosphere in her work are not touched upon. But we do read, for example, in amazing detail, the names of the manufactured pigments she used.

As a contrast to Davis' non-analytical treatment, I would like to briefly quote from a recent scholarly work that also investigates Christiane Pflug, but it is an MA thesis and thus not readily available to the public. Christine Louise Conley wrote *Daughters in Exile: Negotiating the Spaces of the Avant-Garde: Christiane Pflug and Joyce Wieland* at Carleton University in 1990. She bases her analysis of Pflug's

spatial treatment on ideas about space from Griselda Pollock's writing on Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat in "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge 1988). Pollock notes:

Instead of pictorial space functioning as a notional box into which objects are placed in a rational and abstract relationship, space is represented according to the way it is experienced by a combination of touch, texture, as well as sight. Thus objects are patterned according to subjective hierarchies of value for the producer. Phenomenological space is not orchestrated for sight alone but by means of visual cues refers to other sensations and relations of bodies and objects in a lived world. (p.65)

Conley argues convincingly for such an analysis of Pflug's painting space, and remarks on other aspects of her work as well. She notes, for example, that all subjects in those paintings completed after the artist's marriage (in 1956, at the age of nineteen) depict an interior space, or views from an interior. Conley states that:

the tensions between external and internal spaces that we find in her work speak of her contradictory relationship to the domestic sphere - home as both shelter and prison - a contradiction arising not only from her conflicting responsibilities as wife/mother/ artist, but also from a

personal sense of homelessness engendered by her wartime experiences. I argue further that the unresolved nature of this contradiction is articulated through her departure from the aesthetic prescriptions of a modernist tradition based upon technical and intellectual mastery. For what is preeminent in her work is not the assured, detached observing gaze typically associated with modernity, but a splitting and distancing, which denotes vulnerability, irretrievable loss and emotional pain. (p.65)

After reading the thesis I agree with Conley's ideas about Pflug's work, and it is this kind of critical insight that is so lacking in Davis' biography.

A few general notes as background to my criticisms in this review: Born in Germany in 1936, Pflug was separated from her mother (a single parent) for several of her childhood years due to the Second World War. She met Michael Pflug in Paris in 1954; their shared interest in painting created an immediate bond. Both Pflug's daughters were conceived by accident, not design. After their 1956 wedding, the Pflugs lived in Tunis, before coming to Canada in 1959 to join Christiane's mother in Toronto. Christiane Pflug felt isolated in Toronto; she was confined at home, raising her two young children and did not feel part of any artistic milieu. Although she achieved remarkable

career success in the thirteen years she lived here, Pflug was not satisfied with her exhibitions, critical attention, and placement in public collections. She was given exhibitions at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (1966), Hart House, at the University of Toronto (1969) and the public gallery in Sarnia (1971). She showed her work at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto and received two Canada Council grants, in 1967 and 1968. She had a part-time teaching position at the Ontario College of Art. Pflug began to suffer from depression, and committed suicide in 1972 at the age of thirty-five.

Christiane Pflug's story is a tragic one, and deserves to be better told. As Alexander Smith Dreamthorpe, a Glaswegian poet, wrote in 1863: "There are few less exhilarating books than the biographies of men of letters, and of artists generally, and this arises from the pictures of comparative defeat which, in almost every instance, such books contain." It is true that many great artists feel they have never realized their pictorial or aesthetic ambitions. This was the case with Pflug, and probably Dreamthorpe would not have been disappointed with Davis' book in that respect.

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