

Self-Portraits

An Exploration of Self-Portraiture by Christl Bergstrom



Researched and curated by David Murray, partner and husband.

Portraits respond to the basic human interest to look at faces and bodies, to find insight into the character behind the portrayal. Self-portraits have the added fascination, from the artist's perspective, that comes from looking into a mirror in order to understand or express some aspect of one's own character. Christl has painted portraits from the beginning of her artistic career. The fascination of delving into the character of her human subjects has been intermittent. It is not her sole source of inspiration or the reason to be a painter. It has just evolved as a response to her relationships – perhaps to express some dismay or mystery; perhaps to celebrate a love; sometimes, just to remember friends, the portraits keeping her company while working in her solitary studio. Along the way, self-portraits emerged which is a natural extension of her interest in portraiture and character discovery. Throughout history, artists have painted their own portraits, as a way of saying **"I am here"**. Jan Van Eyck was one of the first artists to sign a painting as illustrated in *The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434*, clearly identifying himself as the originator of the painting and establishing his presence in the history of art .



*The Arnolfini Portrait by Jan Van Eyck
1432, National Gallery London*



"Jan Van Eyck was here"

The artist's self-portrait not only reveals some aspects of character but is also a declaration that "I am here", perhaps in self-confidence, perhaps a discovery that reveals something previous unknown or understood. Perhaps it is just a way of saying "This is how I want the world to see me." No surprise and no mystery.



*Jan Van Eyck Self-Portrait, 1433
National Gallery London*

Christl was born in Neede, Netherlands on October 8, 1945. She has always held an affinity with the 17th C. Dutch masters and that period of art and self-discovery. It was a period of secular cultural documentation and a period when the painted portrait became very popular.



Christl then and now

An early portrait by Christl reveals some of the mystery and hiddenness about a friend who came into her world for a short while during the time she had a gallery/studio call *Christl's Art and Other Things*. This portrait portrays Christl's dismay and wonder about his personality.



#009 Impassive Reality 27"x 39" 1981 prismacolor on paper



Christl's Art and Other Things

10922 - 88 AVENUE
432-7501

HOURS: TUESDAY-SATURDAY 11:00-5:30

An artist's studio is an ever-changing place where fantasy stretches and curls in the corners and imagination roams from window to wall. And here at Christl's, the artist's studio is open to all. Named after its owner, Christl Bergstrom, it is a studio, a drop-in place for local artists and artisans, and a gallery. Local arts and crafts, selected

according to Christl's own taste, include the ephemeral, the playful and the outrageous. Paintings, jewellery, soft sculpture and handmade objects are offered on a completely irregular basis, with imagination and quality of execution the chief criteria. A visitor may be offered Christl's own pencil drawings, Mrs. Bergstrom's tea cozys and copper enamel; hand knit sweaters; and funky, flashy, objects like Fantasy Design's mobiles and pins, Skookum art glass, Edibaubles, Jetson Jewels, Angel International T-shirts and provocative cards. The idea for this place started with Christl's search for a studio. She decided that a larger space than she needed could afford other artists a place to exchange products and ideas . . . hence the development of one of the most unusual stores in Edmonton.

*INSIDE TRACK The First Edmonton Catalogue, Published by Ensemble Publications
1981*



#006 **Pink Lady** 39"x 27" 1980 prisma colour on paper

This early drawing and self-portrait brings together Christl's exploration of youthful body image that is reflected in an antique wood-framed mirror with a background of fabric designs, a legacy from a life-long involvement with fabrics and sewing.



#033 Lydia Lived Next Door 46"x 32" 1982 prismacolour on paper

A self-portrait need not necessarily reveal the artist's face. In this case, Christl is thinking about our elderly neighbour Lydia, no longer living. Lydia used to check in on the original owner of our house every morning when Mrs. Head raised the window blind. We can imagine that one morning the blind was not raised. It is a wistful portrait of a life passing. The interior breeze suggests some unlikely mystery. Perhaps, because the blind is raised (the pull cord is depicted near the top of the window) it suggests that Christl is continuing a commitment to a life of art, with a window on the world.



#169-172 **Art of Ecstasy** 42"x 32" 1999 oil on canvas

This ensemble collection of paintings was created prior a trip to Italy where Christl was able to view, in person, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* in the Cornaro Chapel of the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. The erotic mood of the sculpture was in line with Christl's career-long interest to paint erotic subject matter as depicted, in this painting, by the fornicating lady bugs, the supple image of crab apples from our backyard tree and Bernini's amazingly erotic depiction of St Teresa. Christl has included a stern self-image.



<https://www.chiesasantamariavittoriaroma.it>



#270 *She in the Sheets* 38"x 33" 2003 oil on canvas

From Christl's diary of a trip to New York in 1982 "...Next we are on the subway to 77th where we were to go to C M Arts. We had phoned the Acquavella Gallery to see if they had any **Lucien Freud** on their walls. They suggested the Metropolitan and the C M Arts. So there we are ringing a buzzer to get entry. There is a guard at the door. At the entrance is a Jeff Koons, an artist who has made stupid an art form. There is a large collection of works and we see the Lucien Freud, a very large work of a nude woman. The painting was a surprise for its size, I had thought the work was small. Looking at the book I have, I realize that his work was small at first. I go to ask the director if they can give me an idea of the value of the painting. There was a bit of a wait but in the end the lady told us that for a first collector the work is \$2,000,000.00 but that on resale it was \$4,000,000.00. There was however a waiting list of collectors. Don't you just love the world of art?"



Lucien Freud, *Standing by the Rags* 1988-89



#224 *In the Red Studio* 36"x 30" 2002 oil in canvas

Christl's Statement:

"This work owes its influence, in part, to the painting "Back View of Venus" by Jules Pascin (1925). I like the fleshy, rough, female backside, clearly erotic, but not romanticized. This red chair is one of my favourites and as equally sensuous as the nude. I have long admired Matisse's "The Red Studio" (1911) that I saw in the early 1990's. It shows the inside of his thoughts - a flat surface that feels like a room. Matisse owned and was probably influenced by an earlier painting by Degas, "Combing the Hair" (1896), where shades of red dominate the composition of two women in an ambiguous room. I decided to place my nude and chair in a red room without walls."



Back View of Venus, Jules Pascin 1925 Musée d'art modern de Paris



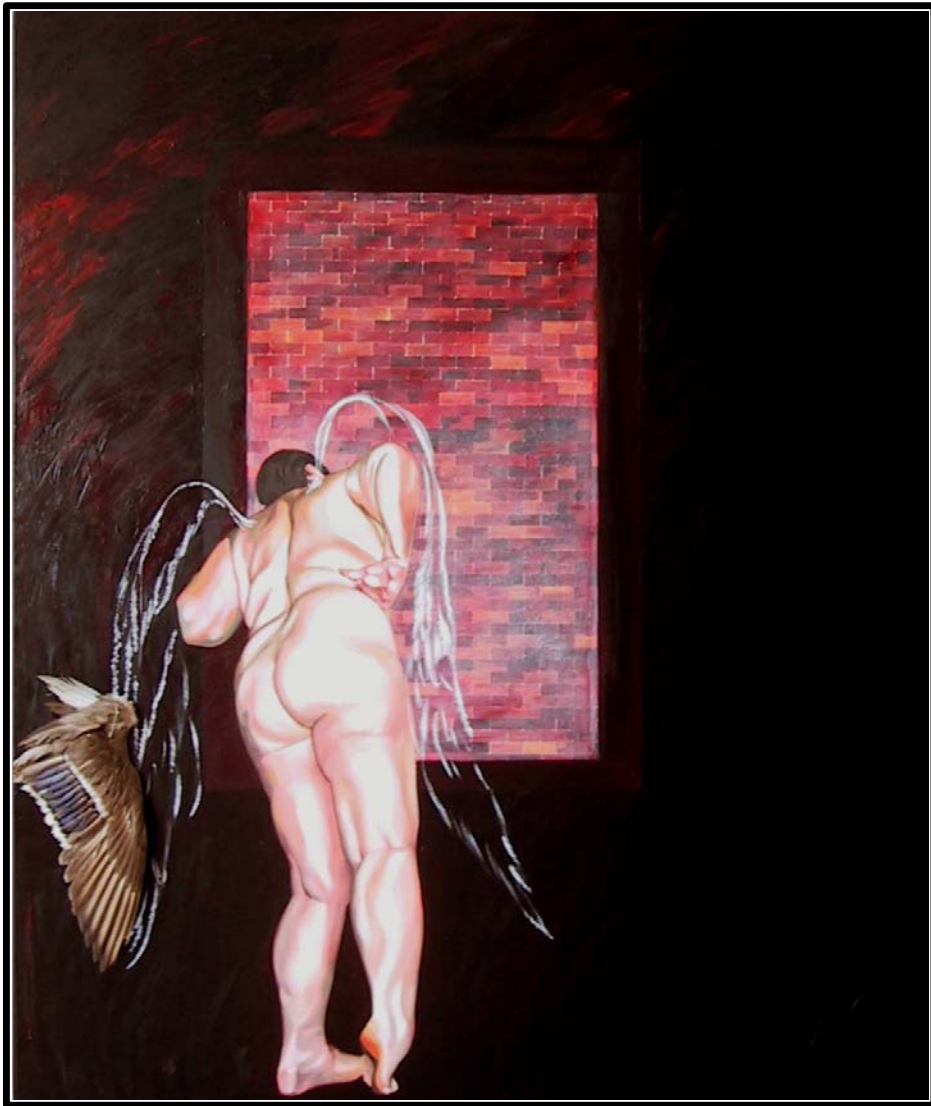
#226 **David's Landscape** 24"x 48" 2002 oil on canvas



#066 **Hugs #1** 38"x 33"
1992 oil on canvas



#153 **Portrait** 12"x 12" 1997 oil on canvas



#225 **Victory Frustrated** 59"x 49" 2002 oil on canvas

Christl's Statement:

"This is the repeat of a drawing I did 20 years ago called "Jean Donovan – One of Ten Thousand" and deals with people who are killed in a war zone while artists watch on television and are not capable of changing the world.

Classical sculpture depicted victory as a winged female, like the Greek sculpture "The Winged Victory of Samothrace". There is a frustrating barrier that prevents artists from changing the world, but we never stop trying. The wing is from a duck"

Christl sometimes thought of herself as "lame duck".

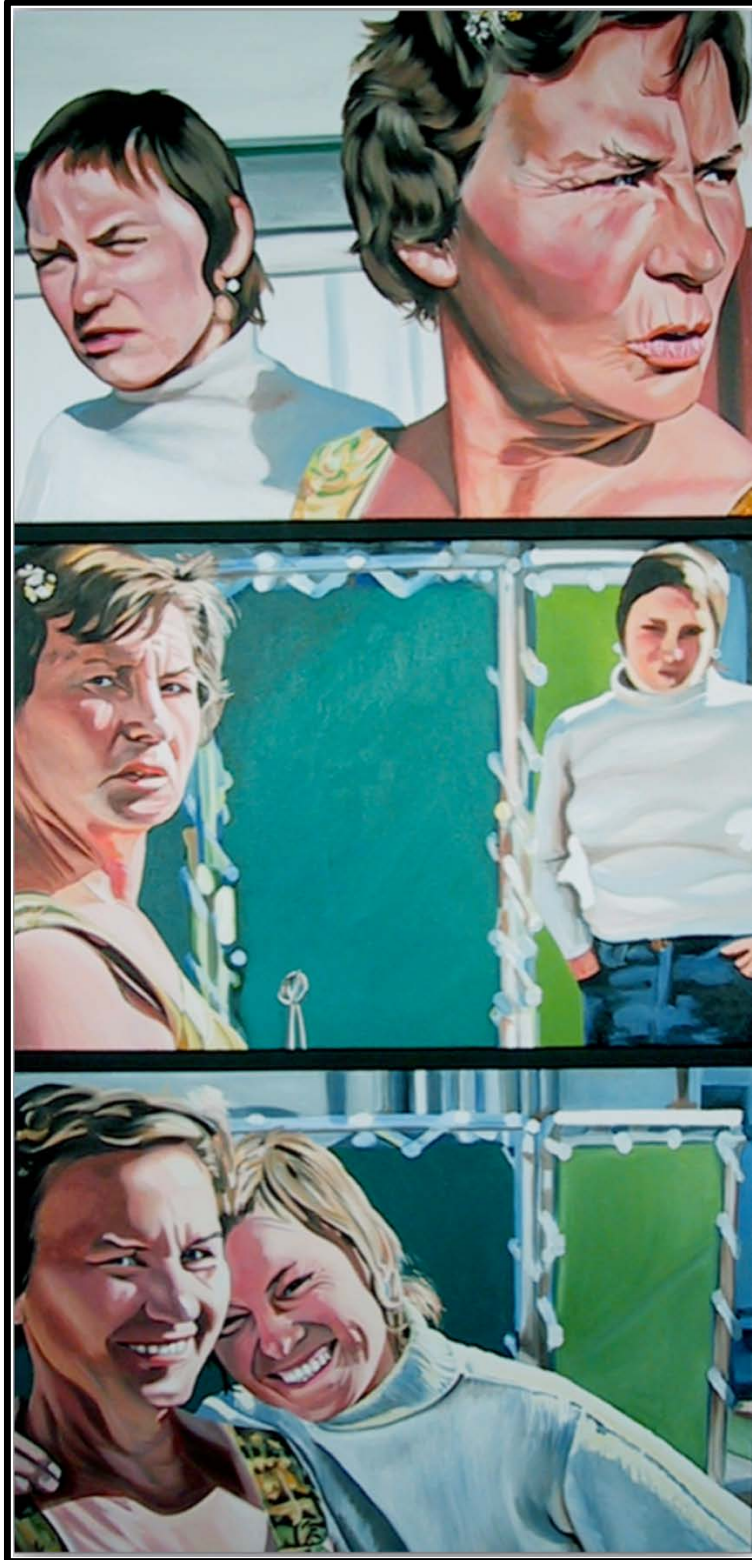


#400 1984 **Hostile World** 28"x 34" 2015 oil on canvas

There are times in one's life when it can be difficult to deal with one's family. Christl has depicted herself in this portrait as being wary, with an apprehension about attending a family gathering. My out-of-focus image is in front of Christl's as a buffer and protector. Many years later Christl painted this portrait of her mother, Janna, as an ambiguous figure, perhaps stern and perhaps vulnerable, as a mother can seem to be at times.



#358 **Mom's Eyes** 30"x36" 2010 oil on canvas



#244 Mother's Day 48"x24" 2002 oil on canvas



#396 **I'm Not Drowning** 24"x 48" oil on canvas

This is a depiction of Christl in a state of pure enjoyment, swimming in the Pembina River. I interpreted this painting from a mystical sufi perspective:

"...there is the swimmer. The one who takes and gives back and makes a game of life, is the swimmer; she does not mind if she receives one knock, for she derives satisfaction from being able to give two knocks in return. This individual has learned to navigate the waves, to cope with life's challenges, to move with its rhythms. She has got the rhythm of moving her arms and legs in the water. Then she is swimming with the rising and falling of the waves, she is not struggling..." Inayat Khan

Hence, Christl gave this painting the title, **I'm Not Drowning**. Sometimes another's perspective gives additional meaning to one's self-reflection.



Family enjoying the Pembina River



#401 Remembering My Father 24"x 24" 2016 oil on canvas

Christl's statement:

"With this painting I wanted to honour my father after his death. He made the wooden otter pin on my sweater... I am always looking for the human condition and this moment in my painting below, a picnic in the park, depicts a couple (my parents) who had been together for over 60 years. I wanted this painting to capture a contemporary, special moment. Édouard Manet's "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbes", a naked woman stares out of the canvas, like my parents below, to the viewer. The story of a life is depicted with many everyday symbols."



Édouard Manet, Musée d'Orsay



#221 Déjeuner sur l'herbe 24"x 30" 2002 oil on canvas



#392 **Dreaming Art** 54"x 64" 2013 oil on canvas

Christl, the mother, is dreaming art, in this case represented by an appealing Jack Bush painting owned by the Art Gallery of Alberta that we saw in an exhibition in 2007.

Christl's statement:

Louise Nevelson, a very dynamic sculptress, wrote "My theory is that when we come on earth, many of us are ready-made. Some of us - most of us - have genes that are ready for certain performances. Nature gives you these gifts. There's no denying that Caruso came with a voice, there's no denying that Beethoven came with music in his soul. Picasso was drawing like an angel in the crib. You're born with it. I claim for myself that I was born this way. From earliest childhood I knew I was going to be an artist. I felt like an artist. You feel it - just like you feel you're a singer if you have a voice. So I have that blessing, and there was never a time that I questioned it or doubted it...I don't say life was easy. For forty years I wanted to jump out of windows. But I did feel that I had the strength and the creative ability..."

So that was Louis Nevelson's strong statement of herself as an artist. There is one quality, which caused my development towards being an artist, that is the incredible satisfaction of creating with my own talents. I am constantly dissatisfied with myself and testing myself. However the satisfaction in producing "art" is the totality of my satisfaction with myself.

Symbolism and the Self-Portrait

These are a few examples of paintings where Christl reveals some insights into her character using symbols. These were not necessarily intended as non-representational self-portraits and might have been unconsciously produced. Subsequent review suggests that these paintings reveal as much of Christl's character as her representational self-portraits. They disclose what she values.



#166 Studies 12"x 12" 1999 oil on canvas

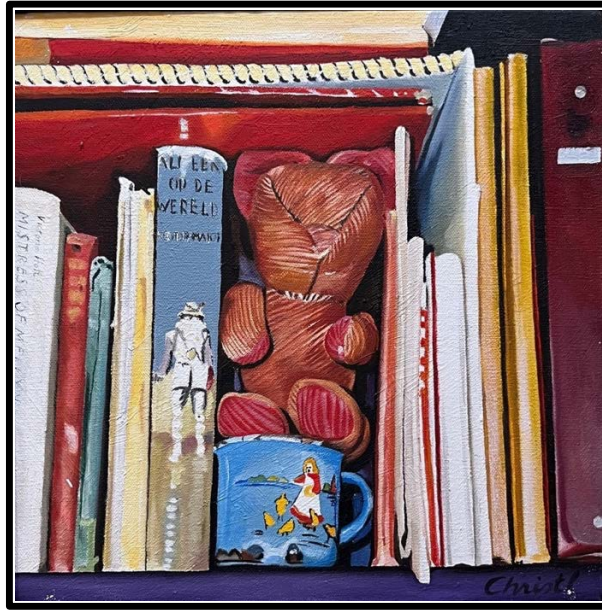
This antique oak chair was purchased, coloured and upholstered by Christl. Christl's favourite Japanese "Fireman's Coat", purchased in Hawaii in 1979, is draped over the back. Christl's sun hat is placed on the chair. This painting represents Christl profoundly.



Summer, 1980



David Hockney Print 1972



#219 Teddy 12"x 12" 2002 oil on canvas

This painting is a reflection of Christl's childhood with remembered childhood objects on a library shelf, as part of a much longer story. "Alone in the World" (Alleen in de Wereld – Dutch), 1878 French novel by Hector Malot, was read to Christl and her sisters as children. It is a story about a foundling in Paris named Rémi who eventually finds his biological family and is heir to a fortune. Christl's father was an orphan at the age of 12 and sent to live in foster homes. Christl reports that her father identified with Rémi and tearfully read the book to the sisters. The teddy bear and cup were favourites of Christl. Those first 9 years in Holland after WW2 loom large in Christl's memory.

"It's 1954. I am nine years old and my family is celebrating my birthday. Oma and Opa came by bus from Eibergen, all of five kilometers away from my birthplace, Neede. Tante Hanna and Oom William followed not so far behind. They live close to Oma and Opa and I love to visit them. Tante Hanna has a shy, sweet face and she seems rather stern. But they always have a happy greeting for me when I'm staying in Eibergen and I steal over to visit them. I am only nine years old but I know that these old people truly care for me. Tante Hanna has no children so it is no surprise when she tells me I am her favorite."



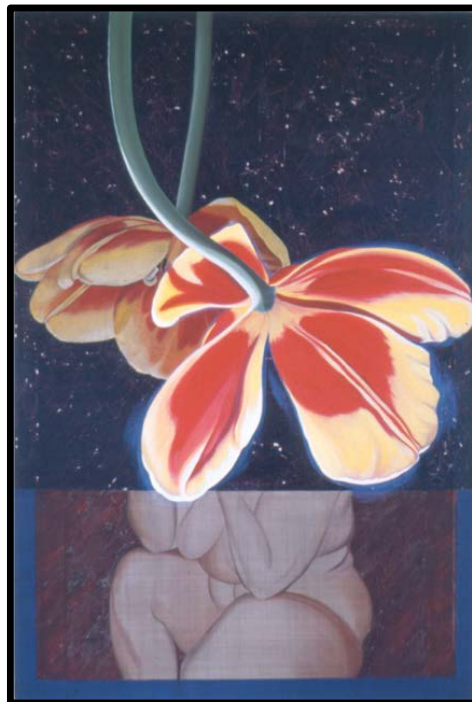
1953 in Holland



#048 **Tulip/Green Fence** 29"x 43" 1987 prismacolour on paper

Is a flower drawing just a drawing of a flower? Why has Christl chosen so often to paint tulips?

"The Dutch became so enamoured with tulips in the 17th century that their passion for the flower sparked a phenomenon known as 'Tulip Mania.' During this time, tulip bulbs became incredibly valuable and were traded like stocks on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange. At the height of 'Tulip Mania', some rare tulip bulbs were worth more than a house! Tulips became a popular subject in art, especially during the 17th century when artists painted still-life portraits of the flowers...." *Digital Europe Culture Program*



#067 **Nude with Tulip** 48"x 32" 1992
acrylic on canvas

Personal Reflections

Unlike the work of many artists, Christl's paintings reveal a lot of personal insights. They are reflections of her world, her family, her friends. She has been asked why paint flowers? She describes these as "exercises". The love of putting paint on canvas. Sometimes the flowers are symbolic and sometimes they are just flowers. Her paintings are of things she sees around her in her everyday world. Some are more thoughtful and reflective than others. Some tell a story that can be unravelled with a few hints and the observer's imagination. They were never intended to be appealing, as much as they might be. They are just the imaginations of an artist who has been observing, documenting and interpreting her world since childhood.

"You're born with it. I claim for myself that I was born this way. From earliest childhood I knew I was going to be an artist. I felt like an artist." Louise Nevelson



#152 Portrait 12"x12" 1997 oil on canvas