

PARASKEVA CLARK

Myself 1933

CAT. 39

I had never trusted paintings. This didn't mean I had never been temporarily enticed or entranced by paintings' seductions. I certainly had. But, as an artist, I had never been able to wade through the seemingly limitless layers of trickery and deception embedded in paintings' mechanisms, history, and ubiquitous acceptance as a reliable device of communication. Painting and paintings, I believed, would never lead me to any real truth.

Paraskeva Clark is said to have lived a life of contradiction. Her Russian ancestry tells a story of a *double faith*; hers is a people who maintained strong pagan faiths and rituals while adopting Christianity, a people whose expansive land and history straddled both Eastern origins and the allure of the West. With one hand tied to her peasant and socialist roots and the other to her refined capacity for eloquence and expression among artists and intellectuals, Paraskeva occupied a threshold between two profound commitments. It seems she lived a long and laboured life, struggling to keep both faiths alive.

I've come to see her painting, *Myself* (cat. 39), as a sculpture. Its timber bones and stretched field of flax linen, both unseen and protected, support an outer skin that faces us. On this skin lies the self-determination of Paraskeva, living in a thin, taut moment between death and life, elegance and vulnerability, both "holding her own" and drawing us into her exotic mystery.

Painted when she emerged in Toronto, having come from the East, she is facing a new day, a new life, pregnant with my father. It is 1933 and she is thirty-five. She stands in a doorway, a portal between a darkened room and a more neutral, unembellished but light-filled space that illuminates her. She is poised, strong, alluring.

The portrait is exhibited several times in the 1930s. It hangs in her house for forty-two years while she makes the long journey across the vast plains of her life ... She applies for a Guggenheim fellowship and doesn't get it. Her son is ill. Her garden brings her joy. Her grandchildren are born. She gives us candy before dinner, wheels the TV cart into the dining room, tries to get us to drink beer. I hide under the table after every meal. In the spring the flowers begin to grow and she talks to them ... and paints them.

In 1974, at the age of seventy-six, there is a knock on her door by a young Charles Hill, the National Gallery of Canada's new curator of post-confederation Canadian art, labouring over his own life's work. He includes four of her works in the groundbreaking exhibition *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, and two of her works are purchased by the gallery for respectable sums. Paraskeva steps into our history books.

I am reminded of Paraskeva's lament on the difficulty for women to make great art because they couldn't "close the key on the door from everything." *Myself*, and the story it has come to reveal, testifies to the doorway itself having become her home, the place she occupied in her wrestle and love affair with life itself. Curiously, *Myself* has told a truth the artist, herself, never intended to reveal.

Panya Clark Espinal