



BEV TOSH'S
war brides are
showing at the
Kelowna Art Gallery
until mid-September.

DANNA KIRBY / SHOWCASE

Romanced away Romanced away

Glenna Turnbull
showcase critic

"Every time I talk to a war bride they ask me, 'Dear, why are you doing this? I'm just ordinary.'

But I don't think so, I think they're extraordinary and I want to celebrate them the only way I know how," says Bev Tosh, the artist behind the Kelowna Art Gallery's latest exhibit, *One Way Passage*.

They stand shoulder to shoulder around the gallery—48 paintings of war brides representing the 48,000 women who married and left their native countries behind during the Second World War. They're all dressed in their wedding outfits and their naive smiles clearly state they really don't know what they've just gotten themselves into.

"My mother was a war bride, but she went the other way," says Bev. "She was from Saskatoon and met a pilot from New Zealand. Our wonderful wide open skies were great for training air crew so there were stations throughout, especially in the prairies. My mother was one

of thousands of Canadian women who married these pilots."

Each of the war brides are painted onto a rough piece of board. The grain of the wood, splits and knots add a depth and timeless age to each of the almost translucent oil portraits.

"I originally started by painting very, very large paintings. I loved the huge scale but found canvas seemed wrong for the subject. I had a piece of rough board in the studio and just decided to experiment. I found, the rougher the board, the more it seemed to play into aspects of memory.

"Also, with stretched canvas, they're all the same, but with the wood, every panel is as unique as every person. And this crack," she says, pointing to a deep gouge in one that runs from the base of the wood up into the portrait, "this crack is a metaphor for this particular war bride's life."

Bev fully immersed herself into the project, not just requesting photos, but taking time to get to know each woman and her story. "Every war bride I spoke to, spoke of tears—tears of homesickness, tears

of loss, because in the '40s, when you left, you didn't go back.

There were no long distance phone calls, no transcontinental flights, and when you wrote a letter, it had to travel surface mail so it would take well over a month to arrive.

There was culture shock and relationships that didn't work out. The wonder of it all was, in spite of the odds, many were wonderful, loving relationships."

Sadly, Bev's parents were not one of the happier unions. She recalls, "I was born in New Zealand and lived nine years there until we left and went back to my mothers' home in Saskatoon, but it wasn't my home.

"We went by ship, it took 21 days, so I feel for the war brides because I've stood on the deck and watched my own shores disappear, only it was tougher for them because they were older and leaving even more behind and not traveling with their family."

Bev, who has a bachelor of arts in psychology and fine arts from the University of Saskatchewan, along with a master of fine arts in painting

from the University of Calgary, has been working on this project for almost five years now.

As we tour the paintings, she notes, "For each one of these, there was a meeting, a relationship—a trust that developed. I got each woman to sit down and write out her story for me. And the story of meeting them has changed my life."

Is her mother in one of the paintings, I ask?

"Yes, she's right here," she replies, leading me around to the wall that faces the display window. I notice a crack running through the board. "I loved that the crack ran up to right where her heart is," she says.

In addition to the paintings, Bev has covered one wall and parts of others with photographs she's copied of war brides from all over the world, printing the shots onto pieces of cotton, paper and even silk from a WWII parachute.

"I've met almost all these women," she comments, as we look up at the collection of more than 500 photographs.

The photographs are all made from Polaroids and she has started running workshops with war brides

wherever the exhibit tours, and they help her to create more. "I take slides of their photos, then from the slides, I've made Polaroids that I've split apart while they're still developing, then printed.

"I only did them to help with a talk I was doing at the Glen Bow Museum in Calgary a few years ago and I wanted to project slides of these rather than the photographs because it allowed me a sense of intervention. I put them on hinge clips and spread them out trying to decide which to use and I just loved it."

Hanging in the middle of the gallery is an actual silk parachute from WWII. "It's a metaphor for displacement," she says, "because they may as well have just parachuted in for all they knew about what they were coming into. It also stands in for a wedding gown because a lot of women made their wedding dresses and undergarments from these parachutes."

One Way Passage will be on display until Sept. 18 in the Reynolds Gallery at the Kelowna Art Gallery. For more information, call the gallery at 762-2226.