



A WIFE LESS ORDINARY

Bev Tosh asked war brides if all was fair in love and war. Then she started painting. **BY JACQUIE MOORE**

There was a moment when the gravity of what they were about to do—leave family, friends and the only home they'd ever known to live on an isolated Alberta ranch or in a northern Ontario logging camp—hit them with full force. “One war bride told me that when the ship started to move, she felt a ripple go through the crowd as these women realized they may never come home again,” says Bev Tosh, a Calgary-based artist. Tosh has spent the last eight years interviewing and painting sometimes jubilant, sometimes haunting portraits of British and European brides who came to Canada to live with their servicemen-husbands following the Second World War.

Aside from her obvious talent as a painter, Tosh is particularly qualified to interpret the romance, anguish and loneliness experienced by the 48,000 young women (plus their 23,000 children) who immigrated to Canada between 1944 and 1947. That’s because the artist was born in New Zealand to a Canadian mother and a Kiwi father who met in Saskatoon where her father served as a flight-training officer. Her interest in the project began when she painted a portrait of her mother that now hangs in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

Tosh interviewed more than 100 war brides, many of whom told stories, she says, “that made the hair stand up on my arms—they were so powerful.” Tosh heard tales of harrowing ocean voyages (women generally travelled alone, after their men had been demobilized and sent back to Canada), depression and occasionally joy.

“Surprisingly, the vast majority of these couples stayed married in spite of coming together under wartime circumstances,” says Tosh, whose four-foot-high oil-on-wood portraits are all based on wedding snapshots of the brides. “There’s so much conveyed in those photos by what’s withheld in certain gestures and postures. I’m looking for a sense of the person and a sense of a soul.”

The exhibition has been viewed by more than 250,000 people as it travels across the country, and includes an audio component and “tear bottles” containing seawater collected specifically for the women represented.

Sixty-five years have passed since the first war brides arrived, but Tosh says her subjects frequently thank her for making them part of Canadian history. “I tell them they have it backwards, but they don’t see it that way,” she says. “They say they had ordinary lives.”

NOV. 6 TO FEB. 14, 2010
WAR BRIDES: ONE-WAY PASSAGE
 At the Glenbow Museum, 130 9th Ave.
 S.E., 403-268-4100, glenbow.org.

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