



## War Brides Stand Shoulder to Shoulder in Bev Tosh Exhibit



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Sixty years ago, thousands of war brides and their children began arriving at Pier 21 in Halifax to begin a brand new life in Canada. Calgary artist **Bev Tosh** is ensuring their stories won't be lost or forgotten. What began as a portrait of her own mother as a young war bride has led **Tosh** on a personal journey into the lives of war brides from North America, Britain, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. **Tosh** has interpreted this remarkable journey through various mixed media in a heart tugging, touring exhibition which tells the stories of these brave young women.

A recent audience, packing the theatre at the museum's monthly lecture presentation, heard **Tosh** explain how her artwork has evolved as she attempts to express the war brides' experiences. Her mother's painting is 8 feet high by 6 feet wide and is set against a blue watery background which speaks to the ocean journey the brides made and the heart breaking one way passage that the government paid. However, it is in the details that **Tosh** touches our hearts. The names of the bride ships that brought over 48,000 brides to Canada and their 22,000 children are written in her mother's flowing hair.

Not unlike the war veterans, **Tosh's** mother never talked about her experiences as a war bride. We generally associate the term 'war bride' with WWII although there were war brides on a smaller scale during WWI. It's easy to imagine young girls meeting and falling in love with the Allied Servicemen who were stationed, hospitalized or on leave in their countries. In fact, many of them met at dances, says **Tosh**. Her own mother fell in love with one of those handsome, rakish flyers here in Canada as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and set sail for her

husband's home country of New Zealand on a bride ship after the war. Approximately 4,000 Canadian women left Canada for other countries as war brides. **Tosh's** parents' marriage didn't work out and eventually **Tosh** ended up back in Calgary where she taught at the Alberta College of Art and the University of Calgary. Fittingly, it was back in New Zealand where **Tosh's** war bride portrait of her mother was printed on the front page of a newspaper which galvanized New Zealand war brides

to seek out **Tosh** to tell her their stories. She never intended to pursue an artistic project based on war brides but 60 full length portraits and numerous exhibitions later, **Tosh** finds herself telling their stories interpreted in her own way.

"I have a file on every war bride and the stories they have sent or told or taped for me", says **Tosh**.

In some of her exhibitions **Tosh** sets up an old fashioned radio from which a 54 minute audio loop plays fragments of shared stories and experiences with different accents and voices. Nearby, a full-size parachute, hinting at a wedding dress, is often the backdrop for projected slides of the transferred photo images of war brides.

However, it is the rough wooden planks capturing the full length portraits of almost 60 war brides in their uniforms, their two piece suits and now and then in the traditional white wedding dress that gives life to these war brides and their stories. When she exhibits, **Tosh** leans the individual (4 foot high by 1 foot wide) wooden plank wedding day

portraits in a zigzag pattern against each other. They stand shoulder to shoulder supporting one another metaphorically as well as physically.

**Tosh** spends hours at the lumber yard looking for the particular piece of wood which will tell each war bride's story. Participants in **Tosh's** lecture at the museum were fortunate to hear the stories behind the sample of portraits **Tosh** brought, whom she refers to by first names only. In the one, the knot in the wood that appears right where the war bride's eye should be was chosen on purpose as it was a daring wink that caught the attention of the Calgary Highlander who would become her husband. The cracks that split the wooden panel of a particularly fetching war bride represent the sad story of the disastrous twists and turns of her life. The damage on another board was transformed by **Tosh** into confetti in the bride's hair which you can see in the original picture.

For the first time, all 60 of the wooden wedding day portraits will be exhibited together on Canada Day 2006, at the Pier 21 Museum in Halifax where these same women passed through the custom sheds when they first set foot in Canada. How poignant that these women are returning in this memorialized state almost 60 years later. If you stare long enough at their portraits, in the deeply textured wood, these women do look like they could step out and begin talking to you.

The war brides were very candid and trusting when they spoke with me, says **Tosh**, and one common thread was that *life isn't always what you plan*. Although the Canadian government paid their ocean passage and rail

journey to their final destination some of the brides didn't even get off the train after seeing the isolated country where they'd have to live. **Tosh** heard numerous horror stories from brides who never realized there would be no running water or inside bathroom facilities or anyone to talk to for miles and miles on top of the fact they'd just left behind their family and the only world they ever knew. Many brides met their in laws for the first time on their own as they arrived before their husbands. Some war brides found their

husbands already married or having decided they wanted nothing to do with them.

We could have sailed on our tears', one war bride told **Tosh** and tears came up so often in her conversations that **Tosh** created a collection of tear bottles. Each tiny tear bottle contains



War Bride, Iris, poses beside the wood plank wedding day portrait of herself. (Bev Tosh)



Bev Tosh stands beside her Mother's portrait at the opening weekend of the Canadian War Museum where it is on loan for five years. (Bev Tosh)



A closeup of 3 war bride wood plank portraits, (left to right) Lydia, Joni, and Josie. (Bev Tosh)

the reflected facial portrait of the war bride and the sea water from the actual sea that she crossed. Every exhibition is different and is booked to travel throughout Canada for the next few years. Her mother's painted portrait, which was the beginning of **Tosh's** journey to commemorate war brides, is on a five year loan at the new Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. The war brides who have spoken to **Tosh** now speak to all through **Tosh's** artwork. Once you have seen them you will never forget them and thus their lives and stories will live on.