



Bev Tosh

NO VOYAGE HOME

By telling the poignant tales of war brides sailing into the unknown, celebrated painter Bev Tosh has gained insight into her own family's story.

In 1946, with the rumbles and roars of World War II finally quieted, Dorothy Autridge stood on the deck of a “bride ship,” a converted troopship, to embark on a great adventure, to join the New Zealand pilot she had met at a dance and married shortly after in Saskatoon. Eleven years later, Dorothy was on a the deck of a ship again, this time with seven- and nine-year-old daughters, this time returning to her home in Saskatoon.

“Although the trip was supposed to be a holiday, and we were supposed to return to New Zealand, I knew my life would never be the same again,” recalls elder daughter and artist Bev Tosh.

Like her mother, the war bride, Tosh knew she was on a one-way passage to the unknown. The two voyages bracket a mystery of memory, identity and dislocation that has fired her imagination and since guided her professional choices in an effort to understand.

To grasp the reasons for the voyages through light and dark, she went to the University of Saskatchewan to study psychology. But she wound up getting a dual degree in psychology and fine art, finding that she penetrated the mystery more effectively with visual language. She honed this language further and developed her figurative style, with a four-years honours diploma in painting at the Alberta College of Art + Design, and then with an MFA in painting from the University of Calgary.

Tosh set up a successful art practice, and kept herself energized by teaching and mentoring emerging artists and lecturing at several Canadian colleges and universities, including 14 years at ACAD. Still, questions about her mother's war bride experience, and painful memories of their broken family's forced departure, lingered.

To help her “negotiate mentally and physically through [her mother's] passage through life,” Tosh painted an eight-by-six-foot portrait of Dorothy as a war bride, in 2001. The stunning painting that has since hung in the National War Museum in Ottawa, set Tosh on a voyage to understand the war bride experience in its larger context, to learn and tell stories that hitherto had gone unheard, before the aged subjects themselves were silenced by the march of time.

While Tosh was giving a workshop in New Zealand, a local newspaper ran a copy of her mother's portrait on its front page. This inspired a number of local war brides to contact her with their stories. In fact news of her art unleashed an international outpouring of women who wanted to have their stories told, from across Canada, the United States, Britain, Holland and Australia.

Feeling compelled to tell the war bride stories – and through them, her mother's and her own – Tosh has expanded her technical repertoire, so that her growing *One-Way Passage* war bride series includes portraits on wooden, Tear Bottles (small bottles containing tiny portraits and seawater), a bridal veil of vintage handkerchiefs, each embroidered with

the name of a bride ship, and even sculpture. *Tug of War (Tender Steel)* (2011), for example is a 10-foot-long sculpture that uses one continuous length of wire to weave together 15 war brides and a couple of infants on a ship bound to Australia in 1946.

Tosh has also published a book, *War Brides: One-Way Passage* (2008). She has also won a number of awards, including the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal, Alberta Centennial Medal, the Enbridge Alumni Professional Development Award and ACAD's Distinguished Alumni Legacy Award.

Quite clearly Tosh's own work demonstrates that art isn't important because it is valuable but because it is invaluable. She has captured compelling stories from a dramatic period of history, and told them with a visual vocabulary that celebrates them in a way they'll never be forgotten – a cultural legacy.

While the nine-year-old standing on the deck of the ship in the New Zealand harbour may never know why she is leaving home, Tosh's rich voyage of self-discovery has given her safe passage.