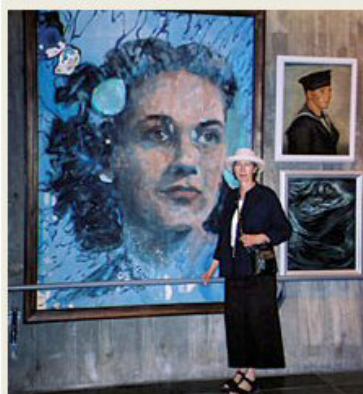


# Bev Tosh



Bev Tosh with *One-Way Passage*, a portrait of her war bride mother, oil and silver leaf on canvas, 2002.

BY *Portia Priegert*

**SASKATCHEWAN: One-Way Passage, Mar 4 - May 31, Diefenbaker Canada Centre, Saskatoon. Also showing June 29 - Sept 27, Pier 21, Canada's Immigration Museum, Halifax; and May 17 - Nov 12, 2007, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa**

Bev Tosh's latest project, *One-Way Passage*, has consumed her life in recent years. Setting aside teaching duties and much of her other painting, the Calgary-based artist has focused on telling the moving story of Canada's war brides, a history at the heart of tens of thousands of Canadian families, including her own.

Tosh's mother married a New Zealand airman — one of the so-called flyboys who trained pilots in Saskatchewan during the Second World War. The couple moved to New Zealand after the war, but Tosh's mother returned to

Canada when her marriage ended, bringing nine-year-old Bev and a younger sister with her.

Tosh knows little about her mother's wartime experiences — the topic is never broached in her family. But curiosity about her mother's story was the genesis for research about the lives of hundreds of other war brides, typically British women who married Canadian servicemen.

"I receive mail and calls every few days," says Tosh. "I find the stories and the sharing so poignant. It just connects. The hair on my arms rises every time I read a war bride's story."

When she began the project, Tosh was already an established figurative painter and a long-time sessional instructor at both the University of Calgary and Alberta College of Art & Design. She had earned an MFA from the University of Calgary in 1987 after returning to school as a mature student while raising two sons with her husband, Bill, who works in the oil industry.

Her work usually focuses on women's lives. An early series, for instance, featured images of women swimming underwater, a subject rich in metaphorical associations. Later, she completed a series of icon-like paintings of a Russian friend who died of cancer.

In 2001, Tosh marked her mother's 80th birthday by completing a large portrait of her as a young bride, a work now displayed in the lobby of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa as a symbol of women's wartime sacrifices.

The following year Tosh traveled to New Zealand to teach two painting workshops. After a newspaper ran a story about her, several war brides contacted her to share their stories. When Tosh returned home she began talking to some of Canada's war brides.



Vera S. and her war bride image

Sixty years ago, some 48,000 women traveled on so-called bride ships with passage paid by the Canadian government, then boarded trains for far-flung communities to reunite with husbands they had not seen for months or even years.

Tosh, who was elected this year to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, began painting these women in their wedding finery, using bridal photos for reference. Sensitive rendered in oil on planks of wood, the paintings convey a nostalgic sense of time's passage. Tosh has found the project so compelling that she now provides commercial work to only one venue, Masters Gallery in Calgary.

"I don't just paint the war brides," she says. "I meet them. I continue correspondence with them. We've become quite close. Some of them have passed away since I've started."

*One-Way Passage*, which features paintings of 48 women representing 48,000 war brides, will be at the Diefenbaker Canada Centre in Saskatoon from March 4 to May 31, overlapping a reunion of the Saskatchewan War Brides Association from May 5 to May 7. The exhibition includes hundreds of photo-based image transfers along with small glass vials filled with salt water that Tosh calls tear bottles — symbols of memory, transition, loneliness and loss. "For all of them, that was the common denominator, the tears," says Tosh, who has set up a website at [www.warbrides.com](http://www.warbrides.com). "They said they could have sailed on the tears. They left everything they knew, everyone they knew — some never saw their parents again."

Tosh continues to work on the project, finding in this marriage of personal narrative and social history a way to honour the sacrifices of a vanishing generation of women.

Represented by: *Masters Gallery, Calgary*

*Portia Priegert is an artist and writer in Kelowna, where she is director of the Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art.*