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'Immigrant' by Rosemary Slood

painting an intensely personal, yet universal story

Rosemary Slood's new exhibition, inspired by the 1950s immigration experience of her parents, has just opened in the Burlington Art Centre.

BY TOM BIJVOET

In his introduction to *From the Prairies with Hope*, a collection of newspaper articles about the harsh life of the immigrant farmer, written by Jane Abernethy for her hometown newspaper in The Netherlands, Mark Boekelman says: 'The inescapable burden of the immigrant is forever to be pulled between two worlds.' These words are written across Rosemary Slood's *Burden of the Immigrant*, a diptych showing on the left a white Canadian landscape with as its focal point the twigs of a dry snow covered thistle, and on the right a Dutch country lane flanked by bare wintry willow trees. The separation is complete: the images stand apart within the shared frame, separating one world, the new Canadian one on the left, from the other, the old Dutch world on the right. There is nothing that seems to bring the two together.

But the two otherwise static landscapes, devoid of life – dried-up flowers, leafless branches – when

seen together do have a dynamic element. The spindly twigs leaning left, the willows arching right over a ditch, are pulling in opposite directions, ripping the two worlds farther apart than they already are and with it pulling the onlooker, like the immigrant, between the two.

The starkness of the landscapes reminds us of the emptiness and desolation that virtually every immigrant experiences at one time or another. Old friends and relatives move on, follow the well-trodden country lane around the bend to behind the willow trees, invisible to the onlooker. They have no residual interest in those who left. The immigrant's life in his native country is cut short, his erstwhile course along the road arrested and the future which the old world would have held will never be known.

In the adopted country everything is new, nothing and no-one is familiar. A field of virgin snow in which tracks still have to be made;

the future on the other side of the rift hidden behind a dense forest of towering pine trees. A new land, forbidding, unwelcoming, yet to be discovered.

The image on the right is slightly out of focus, shimmering with fading memories, the deep-rooted trees of past heritage and family ties take on a dream-like quality, intensified in their reflections in the water-filled ditch, called 'slood' in Dutch. A coincidence? Or a private play by the artist on the family name, understood in Holland, but without meaning or history in Canada?

On the left, on the other side of the divide, in stark contrast to the sturdy old willow trees, the fragile thistle's thin twigs seem ready to be broken by a careless passer-by or a strong gust of wind. But all is not hopeless. With their little snow caps the dried out thistle blooms look like tiny white flowers, a sign of hope, maybe, in a land where one day, after an imprint has been made

in the snow and the empty whiteness traversed, the immigrant may reach the not entirely impenetrable forest's edge. And if he endures until the snow melts the evergreens will take on their natural colour. Will his family eventually become as deeply rooted as the old willow trees in that other distant world, as the pines in the new one, or do the fake flowers deceive and are they a false sign of hope? It is the inescapable burden of never knowing what might have been, of the pull between the two worlds.

But is there nowhere the two connect? At first glance the handwritten motto seems to pull the two pieces together into one story: the story of the immigrant. But even the handwriting is disjointed, just like the two snow covered thistles that seem to grow out of a willow tree across the divide – they do not line up. There is a brief illusion of continuity, but the two worlds will forever pull the immigrant in opposite directions, they do not touch, it is only the immigrant himself who, like the diptych's frame, embraces both, and who knows the full story. A story that starts long before 'the burden' and ends long after 'two



worlds' as we see along the bottom of the two disconnected images, where the single sentence, fragment of a much larger story, both starts and ends outside of our view.

It is this intensely personal, yet universal story that London, Ontario artist Rosemary Sloom's new exhibition *Immigrant* tells. When I first saw Ms. Sloom's beau-

Rosemary Sloom was born in Simcoe, Ontario, two months after her parents landed in Canada. They had just immigrated from The Netherlands. She graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and with a master's from the University of Alberta, both in Painting. Rosemary Sloom has an exhibition history of 34 years. Her works are included in a number of major corporate collections in Canada and in private collections in Canada, the USA, Australia and The Netherlands among others.

Rosemary Sloom in her London, Ontario studio



About the Immigration exhibition Rosemary says in her artist's statement:

"My efforts as artist chronicler have resulted in a series of intimate works that are narrative by intent and reveal themselves readily while they recover personal history and speak to common universal themes of loss, uprootedness, family and individual identity, sacrifice, persistence, hope and faith."



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tifully detailed paintings, I was stunned by the familiarity of their narrative. And as I saw canvas after canvas a deep sense of melancholy came over me. The images and objects presented in intricate detail come from the Sloot family album and attic. And as I discovered during a long conversation with the artist, they often have intimately private backstories that the casual onlooker will never know.

Nevertheless we recognize the images instantly. The divide between old country and new, which is evoked in several of the works – just look at *Final Farewell* with the blurred family portrait behind the young Canadian maple leaves – must resonate with anyone who has made the leap between two countries. Or whose parents or grandparents have.

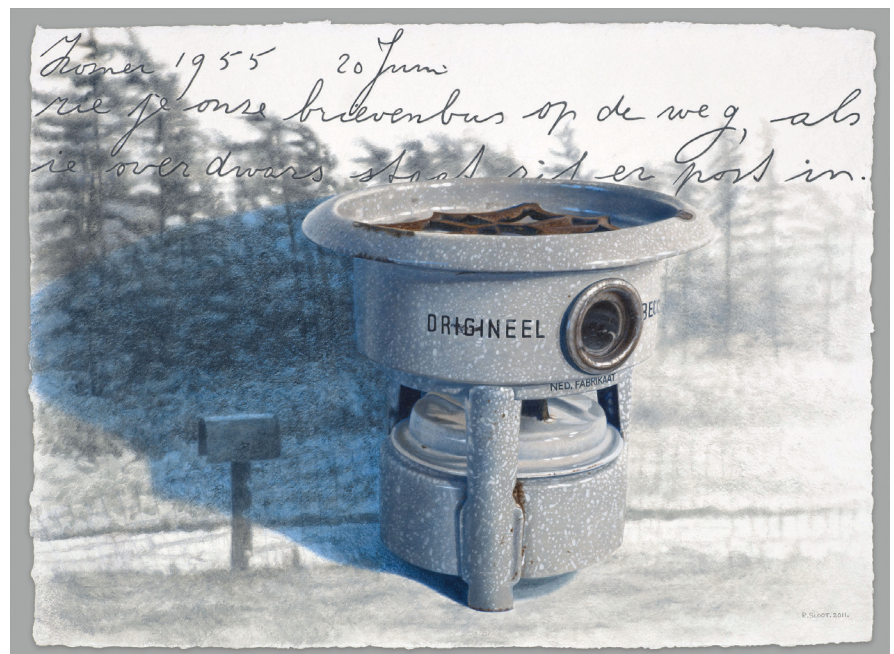
Ms. Sloot's representation of the story firmly places it in time and space. The dress style, the objects, the letters: Dutch post-war images, the years when

half a million people – a full five percent of the nation – stepped onto a boat heading to Canada, the USA, Australia, South Africa and left – forever, never to see the homeland again, as was the expectation at the time.

At some point in the post war

era every Dutch family had one of those paraffin burners that we see in *Olietel* – the inscriptions 'origineel' (original) and 'Ned. Fabrikaat' (Made in The Netherlands) on the burner speak volumes. Those burners were essential appliances before the gas was hooked up again, and represented basic dependability after the devastation of World War II. A very useful object to take along to Canada too, where many families were shocked at the poor state of the accommodation they were given; 'not so much as a nail to hang a tea towel on' as Rosemary's mother said when they walked into their first house in Canada (a memory recalled in words and images in *Tea Towels*).

Anyone with Dutch family roots, who remembers the 1950s and 1960s will want to lift the white veined gray enamel coated pot right off *Arrival*, because their family owned one – had they been standard issue or the only style available during the post-war years of scarcity and rationing? My mother did not get rid of her set until I moved out of the family home. She gave me her pots and pans and finally had an excuse to buy something more modern – the only piece that I did not get, because it had become truly obsolete, was the paraffin burner.



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whom arrived in Canada to form, for nearly two decades, the fifth largest ethnic group in the growing nation. They were outnumbered only by members of the founding nations, aboriginals and Germans. Today one million Canadians trace their roots back to this very recent mass migration.

There is a deeply ingrained belief in those who stayed behind that the Dutch emigrants all fared well in their new country, immediately absorbed the new culture, and never looked back – and to be fair, this holds true for many of them. I was much surprised, rather naively in retrospect, when a friend of mine said to me about one of his uncles: “you should not believe that they were all happy and successful in Canada.” I did not know it at the time, but his mother had lost half of her large family to emigration. In fact, the big emigration wave of the 40s and 50s is rarely mentioned in Holland. And with that the story which sometimes seems to have taken on a mythical aspect is brought right back to the real world again. A real world in which the Dutch are no different from the many other immigrant groups that came to Canada and the USA over the centuries. And therefore, this exhibition should appeal to anyone who wants to understand the eternal pull the immigrant experiences between old and new, between there and here, regardless of ethnicity. However meager

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We should be thankful to Ms. Sloom for rescuing a forgotten era, a forgotten tragedy in many cases, from obscurity. She writes in her artist’s statement accompanying the exhibition: ‘Just prior to her death [my strong, pragmatic mother] quietly told us that she had only one regret and that was immigrating to Canada.’ A huge shock to Ms. Sloom, who herself was born in Canada and strongly identifies as Canadian, and a revelation that changed the course of her work. It led her to read the stories of other postwar immigrants to Canada and it eventually culminated in the collection of 21 works that comprise *Immigrant*.

I recognize the story. I have heard it in some form or other dozens of times since four years ago I took over the publication of *De Krant*, a Dutch language monthly newspaper which is read by many of the remaining post-war immigrants. Having only made the jump thir-

teen years ago and burdened myself forever to be pulled between two worlds – yes, many things may have changed, but that has not – I keep being amazed by the memories not shared with the wider public. Neither Canada, nor Holland seem particularly interested in the almost forgotten story of the time when one in twenty Netherlanders left their native land, almost half of

Calendar

April 21 - June 10, 2012
Burlington Art Centre, Burlington, Ontario

September 9 - October 30, 2012
Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, Ontario

November 2012 through February 2013
The King’s University College, Edmonton, Alberta

2013, dates to be confirmed
The Norfolk Arts Centre, Simcoe, Ontario

The tour will close at the Strand Gallery in London, Ontario in 2013.

the belongings brought across they are the last tangible treasured remnants of a lost world, a lost life. A photograph, a tea tin, something as mundane as a ladle can become a treasured symbol of a world distant, dear, but forever lost.

In her highly accomplished at times almost photographically realistic style Ms. Sloot's paintings bring

Paintings shown with this article

1. *Burden Of The Immigrant*, oil on canvas, diptych, 36" x 96", 2010-11
2. *Final Farewell, May, 1952*, oil on canvas, 48" x 48", 2007
3. *Arrival, Brantford, Ontario*, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 2010
4. *Oliestel, (cooking stove)*, oil on paper, 18 1/2" x 25 1/2", 2011
5. *Tea Towels*, oil on paper, 20" x 18", 2009
6. *Boston, Ontario, 1955*, chalk pastel on paper, 14" x 21", 2007

Photographs accompanying this article by William Kuryluk.



the emotions of the immigrant and his burden across in their most raw and tactile form.

Those who attend the show would be advised to stop by each painting and look at it with an eye for its layered detail and its symbolism. Each one, like *Burden of the Immigrant*, carries a huge amount of meaning, of story, for each one of us, although our stories may differ in the details. For this exhibition Ms. Sloot has created a collection of works that should be recognized as a significant addition to the representation of a quintessential Canadian experience – are we not all immigrants? – in Canadian art. 🍷

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