

Carel Moiseiwitsch

# OH CANADA OUR HOME AND NATIVE LAND

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BY ROBIN LAURENCE



## CAREL MOISEIWITSCH: O CANADA OUR HOME AND NATIVE LAND

By Robin Laurence, 2004

Carel Moiseiwitsch has made a career out of opposition, both in her choice of subject matter and in her manner of working. Her status as an art-world outsider, working in alternative forms beyond the margins of the academy and the marketplace,

Carel Moiseiwitsch  
*Oh Canada Our Home And Native Land*, 1985

ink drawing on illustration board  
(50.7 x 38 cm)  
SAG 1986.06.01a

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Carel Moiseiwitsch *Oh Canada Our Home And Native Land* (panel a), 1985 ink drawing on illustration board (50.7 x 38 cm) SAG 1986.06.01a  
 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

accords with the themes of social justice and political protest to which she has been dedicated. Born in London, England during the Blitz, Moiseiwitsch was abandoned by her parents at the age of four and did most of her growing up in a girls' boarding school, as a ward of its headmistress. In retrospect, it appears that this experience sensitized her to conditions of loss, disenfranchisement and institutionalization, conditions she has since examined in her art.

The cartoons and books of the satirical British artist Ronald Searle were an important early influence on Moiseiwitsch. (His subjects ranged from the goings-on at a fictitious girls' school to his real-life experiences as a POW during the Second World War.) At the age of thirteen, she created her first comic, an attempt to come to terms with an unsettling personal experience. She was always compelled by the human face and form and in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when she was a painting student at St. Martin's School of Art in London, felt herself distinctly out of step with the then-dominant abstract expressionist movement. She related closely to figurative artists such as Francis Bacon and Frank Auerbach, and was also moved and inspired by the works of Goya, El Greco and Bruegel which she encountered in London's art museums.

Moiseiwitsch immigrated to Canada in 1968, settling in Vancouver in 1972. As the single mother of three young children, she became increasingly active in the women's movement; she also began to explore the condition of women in her paintings. It was not until 1981, however, during a turbulent period of relocation to London, that she began to focus on the medium of drawing and evolved her distinctively tough and aggressive graphic style, applied to considerable political effect in both her high art practice and wide-ranging editorial illustrations. After her return

to Vancouver in 1984, Moiseiwitsch continued to contribute drawings to a number of publications, from *The Village Voice* and the *L.A. Weekly* to *The Economist* and *Middle East Report*. She also began creating alternative comix for magazines such as *Raw*, *Weirdo*, and *Casual Casual*. An outgrowth of the underground comix of the 1960s and 70s, and a response to the punk movement, alternative comix of the 1980s typically employed a highly personal voice, often in the service of social or political critique. (Also associated with the punk and garage-band movements, especially in Britain, was the crossover of fine artists into the realm of popular culture, designing, say, tee-shirts or album covers. Moiseiwitsch was part of this crossover phenomenon.) As with a multitude of the cheaply published 'zines of the time, alternative comix positioned themselves outside the mainstream economy and culture.

Very quickly, Moiseiwitsch became a force in the graphic-art world, her illustrations winning praise and prizes, and her comix being collected in histories and anthologies. At the same time, she continued to use her high art practice to explore female archetypes, feminine stereotypes and other symbolically loaded themes, and produced a number of large-scale drawing installations for public galleries and artist-run centres across Canada. Interwoven with her strong political messages was her interest in liminal or transformative states, and in sacred forms and spaces.

From the beginning, Moiseiwitsch's crossover drawing practice has been dedicated to social, political and environmental causes, and has taken on issues ranging from racism, sexism, AIDS, and homelessness to nuclear proliferation, police brutality, war, and abuses of corporate power. Acknowledging the influence, both formal and political, of the





Carel Moiseiwitsch *Oh Canada Our Home And Native Land* (panel b), 1985 ink drawing on illustration board (50.7 x 38 cm) SAG 1986.06.01a  
 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

broadsheets of Mexican activist artist Jose Guadalupe Posada, she has often chosen to work in cheap multiples, including posters, postcards, and Xeroxed chapbooks. Her work also takes its place in a long tradition of art that registers social protest, from Francisco Goya, Théodore Géricault, Georg Grosz, and Kathe Kollwitz through Leon Golub, Nancy Spero and Sue Coe.

In recent years, Moiseiwitsch has focused her attention on uprooted, disenfranchised and interned peoples in the Middle East and North Africa. She has visited refugee camps and placed herself in physically dangerous situations, using her drawings as a direct form of reportage and of witness. However, her earliest important address of a displaced people, *O Canada Our Home and Native Land*, 1985, is based on historic rather than contemporary conditions. Working in pen and ink, in alternative-comix format, the artist here recounts the history of some 21,000 Japanese-Canadians who were dispossessed, interned and forcibly relocated from the West Coast of Canada during and following the Second World War. With considerable dramatic impact, Moiseiwitsch tells their collective story through that of one historic individual, Masumi Mitsui, a decorated war veteran who fought for Canada during the First World War, but who was stripped of his freedom, his livelihood and his assets in December 1941.

Moiseiwitsch's interest and outrage were sparked by a Vancouver newspaper story about Mitsui, which she encountered in early August 1985 (and which she summarizes in *O Canada*). As an immigrant from Britain, she had no prior knowledge of Canada's wartime treatment of its Japanese-Canadian population, and initially was stunned that such a violation of human rights could have occurred in an allegedly democratic country. (Living in London during the early 1980s, she

had also missed coverage, in the Vancouver press, of the Japanese-Canadian redress movement.) She began asking questions, reading what she could find (her sources are acknowledged at the end of her story), and poring over archival photographs at the Vancouver Public Library. Many of her images are loosely based on the latter, with others drawn from her imagination. Both figures and text are executed in a pared-down, expressionistic style (her line is somehow both nervous and adamant), amplifying the emotional impact of the narrative and carrying it swiftly and appallingly along. The wedding of image to text in an accessible, popular-culture format creates a powerful vehicle of communication.

Moiseiwitsch created *O Canada* a full three years before the Canadian government signed a settlement agreement with the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC), acknowledging responsibility for what had occurred and setting out the terms of compensation. Until then, public awareness of and sympathy for the redress movement had grown slowly, not only through the lobbying of the NAJC but also through the support of other minority groups and gradually increasing media exposure. Still, when Moiseiwitsch undertook this project, the political tide had not yet turned, and her narrative ends with the stark declaration that "the Canadian government has never fully acknowledged, or compensated these Canadians for their suffering and loss". *O Canada Our Home and Native Land* is exemplary of Moiseiwitsch's crossover graphic style, and of her melding formal and narrative devices with an impassioned sense of social justice.





Carel Moiseiwitsch *Oh Canada Our Home And Native Land* (panel c), 1985 ink drawing on illustration board (50.7 x 38 cm) SAG 1986.06.01a  
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13750-88 Avenue  
Surrey, BC V3W 3L1  
Phone: 604-501-5566  
artgallery@surrey.ca  
www.arts.surrey.ca  
www.surreytechlab.ca



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