

**Elizabeth Russell** is a conceptual, interdisciplinary artist whose practice involves the creation of site-specific works for alternative spaces and galleries. Russell is a sessional art instructor at North Island College in Courtenay, where she resides. The artist received her BFA in Painting from Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, BC (1995) and her Masters in Combined Media from Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, UK (1997). Russell's art has been exhibited in a variety of unusual spaces from a London police station (2000) to a barge on the river Thames, London, UK (Drift, 2008) and in group shows at galleries such as the Evergreen Cultural Centre (Coquitlam, BC), the Art Gallery of The South Okanagan (Penticton, BC), Comox Valley Art Gallery (Courtenay, BC), word.image.sound.House (London, UK) and Galerie Herold, (Bremen, Germany).

The artist wishes to thank Ann Rosenberg, David Pawson, Betty Russell, Richmond Multicultural Concerns Society and the staff at the Richmond Art Gallery.

Images:

Front Cover: Liz Russell, *Curtain Coat*, 2009, charcoal on paper, 68" x 87"

Inside Left: Liz Russell, *Blanket Coat*, 2009, charcoal on paper, 86" x 60"

Inside Right: Liz Russell, *Mop Painting*, from the installation *Snakes and Ladders*, 2002, ink, string on paper, 96" x 22"



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# Migration/Immigrant Stories

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The urge to migrate comes from a variety of impulses, from wanderlust to economic pressure, the desire to escape war or to rejoin loved ones. Decolonization of former Imperial territories and globalization have accelerated this movement, transforming nations – nations left behind and destination countries – and the lives of those who occupy them. The act of removing oneself from the home culture and re-rooting in a new place causes the formation of a new self, alienated from one's own past and oriented to the new present, with all of the adaptations required along the way. The immigrant looks back in nostalgia to what is left behind, embraces a new life, or occupies a position between that pulls in both directions.

Groups of objects and individual pieces in Elizabeth Russell's current exhibition, *Migration/Immigrant Stories*, drive home some uncomfortable and sometimes humorous truths about arriving in an adopted country. Everyday objects depicted in a variety of media point to the complexities of immigration, of carrying fragments of the past into a new life. Growing up Russell heard stories of leaving and cultural adaptation from her Irish-immigrant parents, relatives and friends, then from 1996 to 2002, she explored themes of living outside one's culture when she lived a transient's life in London, England.

Russell's site-specific installation derives in part from her experiences conducting drawing workshops with new immigrants at the Richmond Multicultural Concerns Society. *Linda's Story* and *Homeland* are images of everyday objects that recall time and place, referencing both personal and collective experiences. *Homeland* is a painting of a single mattress that functions as a symbol of comfort belied by its materiality – acrylic on a hardwood surface. *Linda's Story*, a central image in the show, is accompanied by the quotation that inspired it; a fragment from the life of a couple that came to Canada from Scotland in the 1950's.

...when we arrived we had two coats, we used  
one coat for a curtain and the other coat for a blanket.

As Russell wrote, *Linda's Story* depicts "two, over life-sized charcoal drawings of winter coats which have been partially erased as I executed them to endow them with a sense of history. These coats remind me of 1940's-style coats, the war, my grandfather and tough economic times."

*Snakes and Ladders* is a wall installation comprising elements made of drawings, photographs and paintings, that alludes to the well known board game of advancement and set-back. Variations of this game have existed in different time periods and different countries, occasionally including words of encouragement and reprimand. In all versions the participant is a dice-toss away from rising up or falling down, from triumphing or succumbing. In Russell's piece, ladders of various sizes soar above the ground, sometimes tilted dangerously, sometimes curved, or correctly aligned but out of reach. Some, like *Mop Painting*, are quasi 3-dimensional while others are flat, silhouette-style renditions in red electric tape. *Mop Painting* is an eight-foot tall image of a ladder, produced through the use of negative space created by placing horizontal and vertical strips of masking tape to protect the paper beneath from the painterly onslaught of an ink-soaked janitor's mop. The semblance of a ladder is increased by pieces of knotted string that drape ineffectually from the upright braces on either side, creating a sense of futility and struggle. Yet, despite the work's material insubstantiality, it is meant to invoke the newcomer's dream of success, the trials of resettling in a new land, and the mechanisms of race, class and education that affect the immigrant's ability to reposition him or herself socially and professionally.

The snake element is represented in the installation in an S-shaped cluster of photographs of luggage and body parts. *Arrivals*, a photograph included in this series, depicts an assemblage constructed of luggage, one open and balanced precariously atop two others, like a forlorn shelter symbolic of transition. Another small photo, *Upside-down*, represents the artist crouched beneath an opened leather valise. On one hand this work playfully suggests that, if circumstances require, the suitcase could function as an umbrella or, as with *Arrivals*, as a frail shelter; on the other hand, it alludes to the (sometimes awkward) adaptations required for living in a new country and the sense of being an outsider. Other images depict hands and feet, arranged to evoke the sense of 'diving in' to an unknown space.

Another snake-shaped assemblage is composed of small, abstract paintings on wood. The painted surfaces were built up then sanded to reveal different layers. Names appear between these layers recalling the names of forgotten immigrants, those who anglicized their names in an attempt to assimilate into their new surroundings, and of common names in the Vancouver area today.

To survive cultures must change and grow. And, while governments contend with the social, economic and judicial aspects of such changes, individuals live out the deeper truths of migration. Elizabeth Russell's exhibition *Migration/Immigrant Stories*, reminds us of these realities – the hopes, joys, sorrows and defeats, the countless dramas that form the lived history of a nation.

