



Bringing History Forward

The Halifax Explosion Centenary Quilt

by Laurie Swim

After completing *Lost at Sea, 1961*, a memorial quilt, in my hometown of Lockeport, Nova Scotia, in 2000, on the two-day train trip back to Toronto, where I was living at the time, I picked up a copy of Janet Kitz's *Shattered City, the Halifax Explosion*, to read.

In the years since, I thought about and researched the Halifax Explosion as a community quilt project. In the time between there were two more projects, *The Canadian Young Workers' Memorial* (9' x 18'), 2001-2003, in Toronto and the *Lunenburg Heritage Story* (8' x 9'), in the summer of 2003. The latter brought me home to Nova Scotia and Lunenburg where I now live and work.

On December 6, 1917, a Belgian relief ship, the *Imo*, collided with the French munitions ship, the *Mont Blanc* in Halifax Harbour and caused the largest man-made explosion before Hiroshima. 1,963 people were recorded killed—many disappeared without a trace—9,000 injured and 199 blinded. The population of Halifax at that time was 50,000. 25,000 souls were left destitute in the middle of winter.

The interesting thing about these projects (this is my seventh) is that I begin to understand the deeper, lasting consequences of an incident and how the ripple effect changes the lives of people close to the victims and

also how it changes the community. As each project evolves, everyone's involvement, sharing information and connecting the dots, reveals more revelations. In the case of this project, the very mention of it would spur someone to tell you a story or connection to this horrendous event that took place a hundred years ago. The knowledge shared in the process of building the work informs the community and the art being made.

Conveying the occurrence of the explosion through art is challenging, but when it came to designing my project, *Hope and Survival, the Halifax Explosion 1917*, I knew from the beginning I would use Braille as a component

of the work. This element of the project eventually began a collaborative effort with volunteers from around the province. Whole families were wiped out—many were children in this disaster. To honour the victims and accompany the centerpiece, *The Halifax Explosion Remembrance Book*, holds the list of those who died and was translated into Braille dots. The Braille, along with the names and ages in script, were then printed on transfers. These were heat-transferred to 172 sheets of fabric, 11" x 8.5", which had been stained to reference the shrouds covering victims. In 2014, these sheets were



ABOVE Beaded sheet for *Scroll of Remembrance*

AT RIGHT Laurie and volunteer Susan Lilley at work



In the Field, 2015

distributed to volunteers to bead the Braille dots. About 400 people participated in the process, some with just a few beads at a time in local museums, but most sheets were adopted by quilters and other sewers. Often

those who undertook the task told me it was a meditative process, which in turn, allowed them to honour and remember the victims.

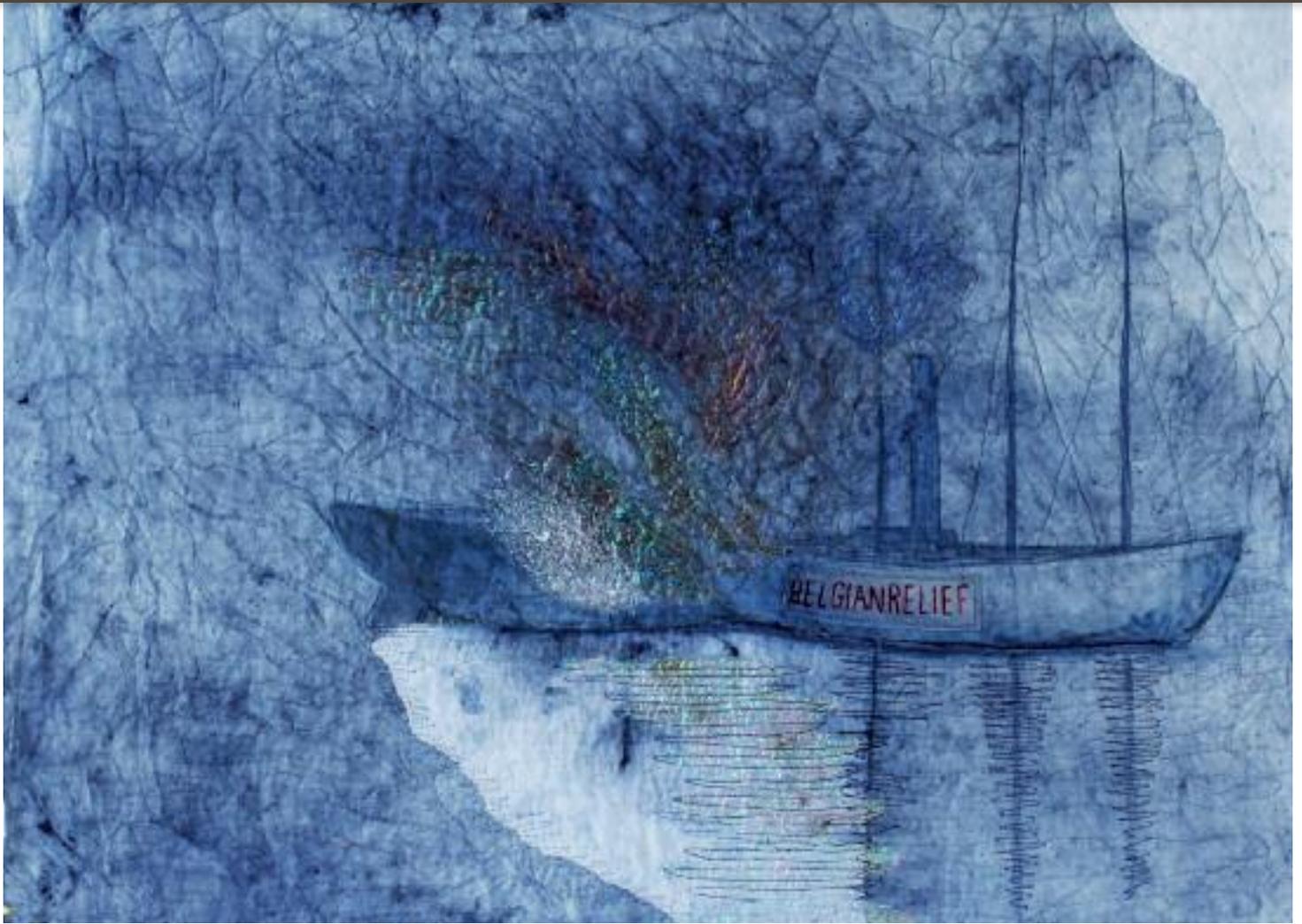
At this writing, I am creating the centerpiece of the project, *Hope and Survival*, the

Halifax Explosion Memorial, in my studio in Lunenburg. It is approximately 12' x 14'. This piece is primarily indigo blue with sepia tones and accents of red. The indigo refers to the scars people were left with when a carbon-saturated, black, oily rain coated them after the blast. I used snow-dyed fabric to symbolize the horrendous snow storm that followed the day after, deterring rescue efforts.

The *Scroll of Remembrance*, now in columns of four sheets each, will be approximately thirty feet long when hung. The entire work will be unveiled in June, at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in downtown Halifax on the waterfront overlooking the harbour where it all happened. It will remain there until the end of December.

Although my intention, through these projects, was originally to create a connection to a community through the collaboration of creating public art, my interest has grown over time with researching subjects that reveal the ephemeral nature of our existence. The historical records and oral accounts begin the process of understanding a situation outside my own experience that I then put into the

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ABOVE *The Impact*, 2015; BELOW Work in progress



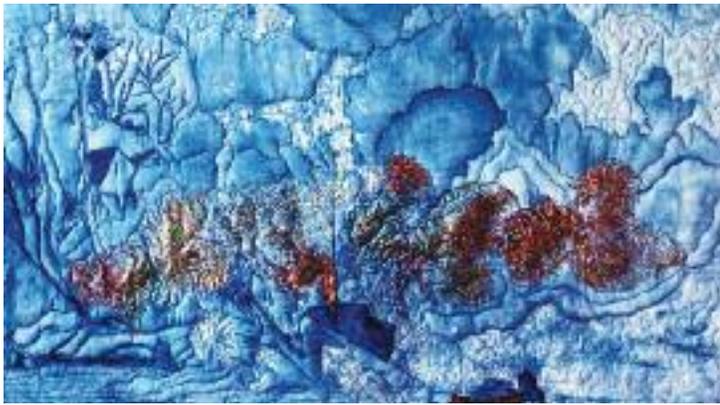
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creation of the work. People joining me on this journey contribute their ideas, which in turn enhance the work as it evolves and enriches the final outcome. Sharing visual art of this nature with volunteers, and eventually the viewing public, is powerful in conveying a story and even generating awareness for social change.

I would like to see *Hope and Survival* tour across Canada and the New England States. Boston was the first responder to the disaster, sending a train full of medical supplies and doctors and nurses within a day. Nova Scotia sends a huge Christmas tree to Boston every year in thanks and it would be great to share this memorial work as a reminder of the human kindness shown to Nova Scotia a hundred years ago.

I have also written a book. *Hope and Survival* is a children's story based on accounts of the explosion. Images created for the centerpiece are also illustrations in the book. In addition, during the process of creating this work over the last four years, the progress has been documented by film makers, Teresa McInnes and Kent Nason.

On my website, www.laurieswim.com you can view the teaser for the film and order a signed copy of the book. ♦



Ship Afire, detail



Eye Snatcher, 2014



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