

# Farming in the Dust Bowl: Carol Bromley Meeres

## Exhibition Guide



TRAVELLING EXHIBITION PROGRAM

Alberta Foundation for the Arts

# TRAVELLING EXHIBITION PROGRAM

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA) has supported a provincial travelling exhibition program since 1981. The mandate of the AFA Travelling Exhibition Program is to provide every Albertan with the opportunity to enjoy visual art exhibitions in their community. Three regional galleries and one arts organization coordinate the program for the AFA:

Northwest Region:

The Art Gallery of Grande Prairie, Grande Prairie

Northeast and North Central Region:

The Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton

Southwest Region:

The Alberta Society of Artists, Calgary

Southeast Region:

The Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre, Medicine Hat

Each year, more than 600,000 Albertans enjoy many exhibitions in communities ranging from High Level in the north to Milk River in the south and virtually everywhere in between. The AFA Travelling Exhibition Program also offers educational support material to help educators integrate the visual arts into the school curriculum.

Exhibitions for the TREX program are curated from a variety of sources, including private and public collections. A major part of the program assists in making the AFA's extensive art collection available to Albertans. This growing art collection consists of over 9,000 artworks showcasing the creative talents of more than 1700 artists. The AFA art collection reflects the development of the vibrant visual arts community in the province and has become an important cultural legacy for all Albertans.



The AFA and TREX partners respectfully acknowledge that the artistic activity we support takes place on the territories of Treaty 6, 7 and 8: lands of First Nations and Métis peoples.







# Farming in the Dust Bowl: Carol Bromley Meeres

Intricately layered with delicate details, textures, and memories, the artworks in *Farming in the Dust Bowl: Carol Bromley Meeres* explore the histories of the dust bowl on the Canadian Prairies. In the 1930s, an intense period of drought swept across the Great Plains of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and parts of the United States. This helped to set the stage for the historical crisis known as the dust bowl—named for the clouds of dust that were so massive they turned the sky black for days, wiped out crops and livestock, swept through homes, and deeply changed the lives of many.

While drought had long been a problem for large portions of the prairies, the dust bowl was the result of numerous social, economic, and ecological factors. The prairies witnessed widespread and rapid farm development, in part due to the aggressive promotion of the land to potential settlers around the world. Many of these farms were in the Dry Belt—an area so prone to drought it had been off limits to homesteading until 1905. In the early 20th century, a strong boom in wheat prices—leading to the phrase “Wheat Is King”—pushed farmers increasingly towards monoculture (single crop) farms of wheat, in place of diversifying crops and grazing livestock. This left the fields particularly vulnerable to pests, in addition to degrading the already dry soil. Finally, dry-farming techniques that were not suitable to the environment on the Plains were promoted to farmers. All these factors led to an excessive amount of loose, dry topsoil across wide swaths of the plains. This came to a head when a terrible drought hit the prairies in the 1930s, enabling the wind to sweep all the finely tilled topsoil into the air to fuel dust storms that lasted days at a time; while swarms of pests like grasshoppers devoured the meager crops and plant growth that remained.

Further exacerbated by the economic conditions of the Great Depression, the dust bowl was an immensely difficult period for farmers—eventually leaving thousands no real option but to abandon their farms. Women, who were predominantly responsible for any domestic work during this period, faced the enormous task of battling dust collection indoors by endlessly placing wet rags across windows and doorways, and flipping items like teacups upside down. With few resources to work with, women also had to come up with innovative ways to feed, clothe, and take care of the household, including fashioning dresses out of flour and feed sacks, and persistently caring for home gardens in the harsh conditions in hopes of providing a source of food for the family.

Carefully researched by Carol Bromley Meeres in consultation with archives across the prairies and family histories, each piece contains a unique reference to life during the dust bowl, highlighting stories of survival, innovation, and resilience during an economic, climate and social crisis. Adding to the rich historical references, the artworks combine three unique historical mediums—encaustic painting, cyanotypes, and photography. Through each thoughtful and insightful story told in the artworks, *Farming in the Dust Bowl* asks us to reflect upon the delicate balance between economic and ecological life.



# ABOUT THE ARTIST

## BIOGRAPHY

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Carol Bromley Meeres is an Alberta-born Grande Prairie artist who has studied visual arts and communication at Simon Fraser University and (for many years) Grande Prairie Regional College. Printmaking workshops and mentoring from artists in B.C., Alberta, and Cambridge, England have also contributed to her range of techniques. She is a member of the Federation of Canadian Artists, Flying Colours Artists' Association, and Print Artists North. Now retired, her working life included twenty-eight years with suicide prevention, mostly involving information services, graphic design, and administration, but also including crisis calls.

She is a lifelong experimenter with techniques, materials, and media combinations, including nontoxic printmaking, encaustic painting, photography and acrylic painting. Environmental and social issues are at the base of many of her works, while others purely reflect a fascination with colour, materials, and form or texture. Growing up near the Rockies and living in the Peace Country have formed a passion for the western Canadian environment. Drawing on family history and documents, including their war service and correspondence as well as homesteading, has also been incorporated into her art.





# ABOUT THE ARTIST

## ARTIST STATEMENT

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The dust bowl of the 1930s was an era and an area of drought and dust storms that affected the Great Plains of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the United States. Winds blew finely tilled topsoil into the sky and blackened it, blew dust into eyes and lungs and homes.

Before settlement, prairie grasslands, buffalo, and the First People occupied the area.

Factors leading to the dust bowl situation included expansionist government policy and laissez-faire economics. Settlement in areas ill-suited for grain production had been heavily promoted, and homesteaders were strongly encouraged to raise wheat, and only wheat, rather than engaging in mixed farming or ranching. Colonialist reduction of the areas of reservations, the previous extermination of bison-the keystone of the ecosystem, and farm indebtedness for machinery were all part of the era known as the Dirty Thirties. As well, farming had become tied to petroleum-based fuel. And combines do not leave behind manure that gives back to the land.

Repeated years of drought and associated pests, the farming practices of the time (plowing, tilling, stubble burning, summer fallowing, drainage of wetlands and so forth), and economic factors including the Great Depression and particularly a glut of wheat on the market and falling prices, led to widespread environmental, social and economic disaster.

(Continued on the next page)

# ABOUT THE ARTIST

## ARTIST STATEMENT

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The interaction of climate and land use is a continuing concern, as measures to reduce susceptibility to drought and high winds come and go, depending on policies and pressures on farmers, and threats to the climate/the environment increase. Monoculture (resulting from increasing mechanization-equipment tended to be suitable for only one type of crop and the encouragement of wheat production), while having potential production and economic benefits, has its weaknesses, including vulnerability to market conditions, habitat destruction, attraction of pests, and reduced self-sufficiency of a family or community. Both biodiversity and diversity of crops are lost. Modern corporate and offshore ownership of agricultural land and grain distribution destroys the connections between producers, farming communities, and the land. Pressure for profits competes with environmentally friendly practices such as zero tillage, shelter belt planting, and restoration of wetlands.

Farming was always hard work and all able family members contributed to most tasks. The role of women, who were not even eligible for relief, has been underrepresented in the telling of history. Connecting with family histories, lore, photos and documents is one way of retrieving and representing the experiences of farmers in the dust bowl.

Thousands of farmers and their families left the prairies, abandoning their farms, and tried settling on the edges of forest country, competing with Indigenous people for sustenance from hunting, fishing, and traplines, and sometimes facing issues such as frost and flooding. The bitterness of lack of control over so many factors of their lives and livelihoods and the perceived humiliation of applying for relief followed them.

# IMAGE INVENTORY

Carol Bromley Meeres

BEFORE/SWEETGRASS

2019

Encasutic and Cyanotype

10 x 12"

Collection of the Artist



Carol Bromley Meeres

PROMOTION OF SETTLEMENT

2019

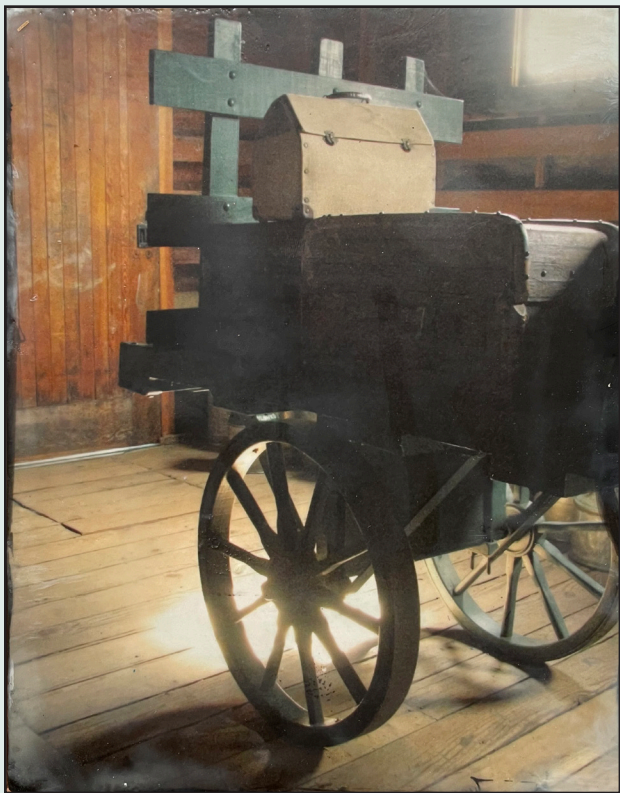
Encaustic and Mixed Media 12 x

10"

Collection of the Artist



# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

ARRIVING (EUROPEAN SETTLERS)

2021

Encaustic and Inkjet Photo

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist

Carol Bromley Meeres

WHEAT IS KING

2019

Encaustic

10 x 12"

Collection of the Artist



# IMAGE INVENTORY

Carol Bromley Meeres

PLOUGHING

2019

Encaustic

8.5 x 11"

Collection of the Artist



Carol Bromley Meeres

ASPARAGUS/SUSTENANCE FROM THE  
GARDEN

2019

Encaustic and Cyanotype

11 x 11"

Collection of the Artist



# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

DUST STORM 1

2019

Encaustic and Mixed Media

6.5 x 9"

Collection of the Artist

Carol Bromley Meeres  
EMILY AND HORACE, HOMESTEADERS

2019

Encaustic

6 x 8"

Collection of the Artist





# IMAGE INVENTORY

## *STORIES FROM THE DUST BOWL:*

Emily and Horace Meeres homesteaded twice in southern Alberta, first with a Dominion Land Grant, later with a Soldiers Settlement grant, Horace having served in World War 1. ("Emily and Horace, Homesteaders," and "Never Done.")

Horace Meeres was born in 1870 in Wiltshire, England. He was apprenticed at the age of fourteen to be a sailor, by his father, a doctor, and came to Canada in 1887.

Emily Hornett, from Oxfordshire, England, came to Canada in 1890 or 1891. They married in 1894 in Calgary, and lived and had their first child there. In 1895 they homesteaded at Hill End, south of Red Deer. Emily's parents farmed in the area.

They built a sod-roofed home partly in a work bee. Emily invested \$6 she had earned in a heifer calf, the foundation of a small dairy herd.

Five more children were born there. Her mother "nursed her through them" (Emily eventually had 7 girls and 4 boys) and helped with Horace's sciatica and rheumatism.

One winter, Horace travelled to Calgary with two ponies and a home-made sleigh and harness, wearing a cow-hide coat he had sewn. Emily had enough wood for a week but it ran out in bitterly cold windy weather, so she sawed some willow and poplar from a nearby bush. Horace left Calgary in 45 below weather. At one stopping house, he was so cold he had to be lifted from the sleigh.

In the summer of 1897, Emily and Horace took their children and worked off the farm in a timber camp cooking and running a steam engine. Her father looked after their animals. They earned enough to buy a used wagon and harness.

During their eight years at this farm, Horace studied and earned engineering papers. Though a pig pen and a barn were lost in separate fires, the family sewed most of their own clothing, expanded the sod-roofed house, built a new house, built fences, helped make roads, raised an 8-cow dairy herd, had teams of horses, and acquired pigs and poultry.

At this point, they had six children and no school in the area, so they regretfully sold the farm and built a house in Red Deer. Horace worked as a steam engineer and became Red Deer's first Fire Chief. Emily became well known for her gardening.

Following Horace's service in World War I, they claimed their second homestead in 1919 in Condor, Alberta.

The asparagus in "Sustenance from the Garden" comes from my garden and is descended from plants that were my great grandmother's (Emily Meeres).

Credit Hazel May Gray Erga (First Cousin once removed of Carol Bromley Meeres), "Norman, Meeres and After," 1996.

# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

KEEPING THE DUST OUT

2021

Encaustic and Mixed Media

5.5 x 6"

Collection of the Artist

Carol Bromley Meeres

DIRTY 30s

2021

Inkjet Photo and Encaustic

5 1/4 x 18"

Collection of the Artist





# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

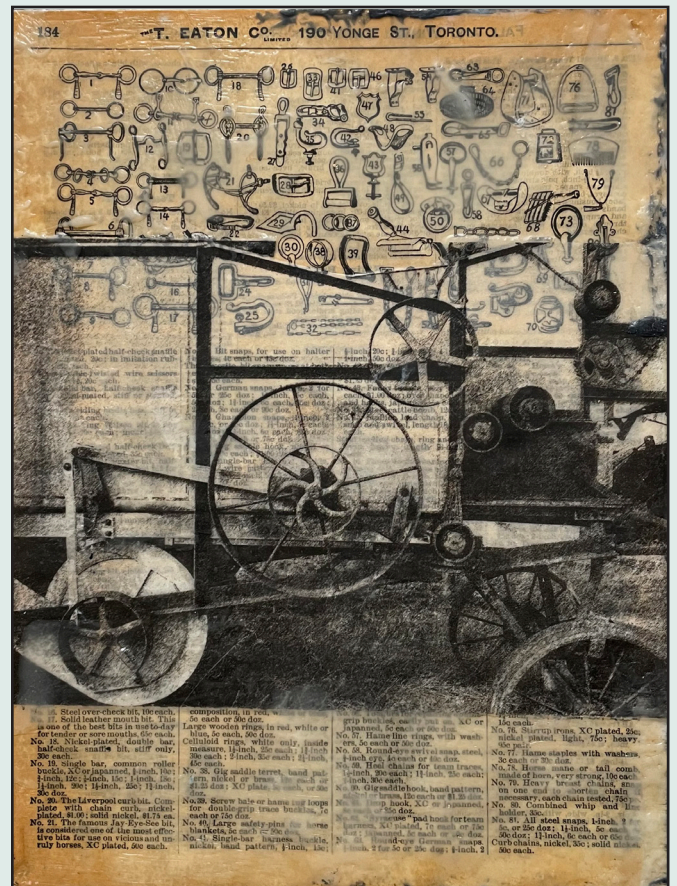
GRAIN ELEVATOR

2021

Toned Cyanotype

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist



Carol Bromley Meeres

THE SHIFT

2021

Encaustic Collage

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist



# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

25 HORSE ENGINE

2021

Encaustic and Toned Cyanotype

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist



Carol Bromley Meeres

HARD WORK 1

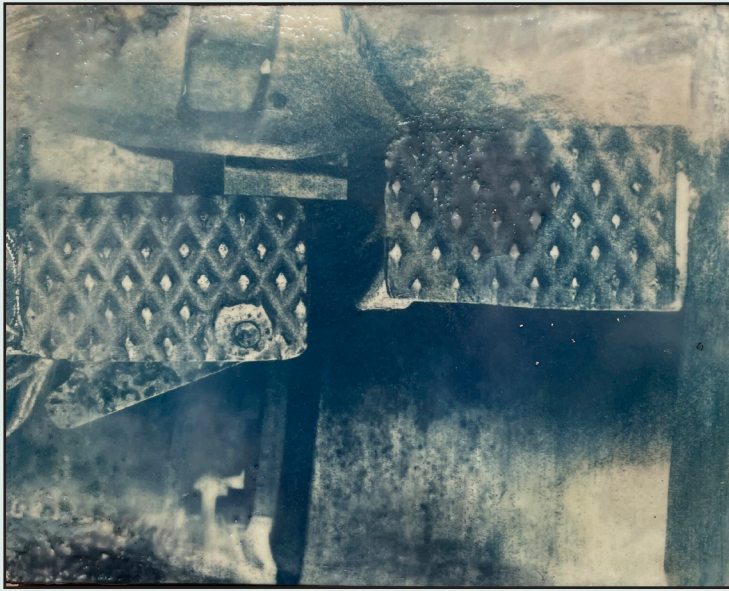
2021

Inkjet Photo, Encaustic, and Mixed Media

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist

# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

HARD WORK 2

2021

Toned Cyanotype and Encaustic

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist

Carol Bromley Meeres

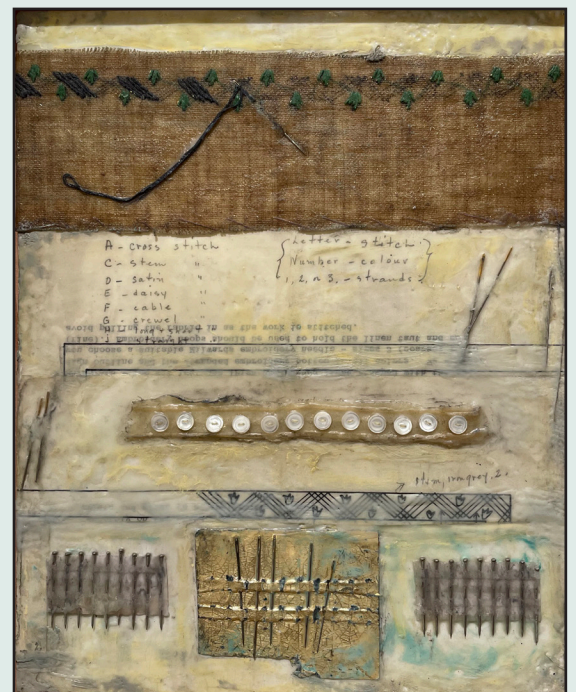
NEEDLEWORK/SEWING

2021

Encaustic and Found Objects

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist





# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

FORSAKEN

2021

Inkjet Photos Layered and Encaustic

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist

Carol Bromley Meeres

NEVER DONE

2021

Inkjet, and Encaustic on Strathmore  
Fibre Paper

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist





# IMAGE INVENTORY



Carol Bromley Meeres

HOMESTEADING

2021

Inkjet and Encaustic

8 x 10"

Collection of the Artist

## *STORIES FROM THE DUST BOWL:*

### Godwin's Homestead:

The documents in "Homesteading" are from my brother-in-law's family's farm, which is still in his family. It's in southern Saskatchewan, in what I believe was dust bowl country. Eleazer Frederick Godwin apprenticed in 1898 in England as an upholsterer. He came to Canada and homesteaded on a quarter section (\$10 fee paid in 1910) near Pennant, Saskatchewan.

Possibly part of the reason for the farm's survival is that two family members farmed side by side and shared equipment (purchased in 1930). They also had grazing stock (grazing stock permit 1937).

Credit: Bob Godwin and Kathy Meeres (family documents, conversations, and emails), Saskatoon.

# CRATE LISTINGS

## CRATE # 1

1. EMILY AND HORACE, encaustic
2. DUST STORM 1, encaustic
3. WHEAT IS KING, encaustic
4. ARRIVING (European Settlers), encaustic and inkjet photo
5. HARD WORK 2, toned cyanotype and encaustic
6. NEEDLEWORK/SEWING, Encaustic and found objects
7. PROMOTION OF SETTLEMENT, encaustic and mixed media
8. FORSAKEN, inkjet photos layered and encaustic
9. HOMESTEADING, inkjet and encaustic
10. HARD WORK 1, Inkjet photo, encaustic and mixed media
11. GRAIN ELEVATOR, toned cyanotype
12. BEFORE/SWEETGRASS, encaustic and cyanotype
13. NEVER DONE, inkjet and encaustic
14. THE SHIFT, encaustic collage
15. HORSE ENGINE, encaustic and toned cyanotype
16. DIRTY 30s, inkjet photo and encaustic
17. DIDACTIC 1
18. DIDACTIC 2
19. PLOUGHING, encaustic
20. ASPARAGUS/SUSTENANCE FROM THE GARDEN

NOTE: FRAGILE WORKS- Carefully review how the works are packed.

NOTE: Only remove foam packing that is marked remove/replace.  
Keep all packing with the crate.  
Repacking – Line up the numbers.

Concerns Contact: Art Gallery of Grande Prairie  
Robin Lynch, TREX Curator/Manager, 780.357.7483  
Region 1, AFA Travelling Exhibitions