

Rob Niezen's Cross Cut has AGB grand opening



By Michael Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Award-winning painter and printmaker Rob Niezen had the grand opening of his show *Cross Cut* at the Art Gallery of Bancroft on Sept. 6. While he paints mostly in oils, his printmaking includes linocuts and etchings. His show at the AGB consists of 24 linocuts reflecting on traditional songs from Ontario with a contemporary perspective. A participant in the annual Kawartha Studio Tour since 2010, his art has shown in seven solo exhibitions and over 30 juried exhibitions. Niezen comments on his AGB show to *Bancroft This Week*. Niezen's show, *Cross Cut*, at the AGB runs from Sept. 3 to 28, while the grand opening happened on Sept. 6. As stated on Niezen's website (www.robniezen.com), *Cross Cut* reflects on traditional songs from Ontario (from 1820 to 1920), collected by the CBC's Edith Fowke in the 1950s and 1960s, with a contemporary perspective. It aims to connect our recent history and today's society, inviting viewers to reflect on what's happening with them and around them, asking if life has improved or is progress only on a materialistic level? These folk songs on which the linocuts are based make global issues accessible to everyone, as they emanate from real people telling real human stories. The underlying themes deal with human existence, like love, deception, politics, war, immigration, work, leisure, murder, death and more. Niezen says that in printmaking, he experiments with linocuts, including reduction prints, blind emboss, collage (stamps) and text. Linocut printing involves cutting away from a block of linoleum and inking and printing the uncut areas. When the carved inked up block is placed face down on a sheet of paper, the printed image will appear as a mirror image and the areas cut away will remain white on the paper surface. Niezen's linocuts use both the traditional method of carving the material and more contemporary and experimental ways like laser engraving, etching and collage. Born in The Hague, Netherlands, Niezen is partly self-taught and studied at Vrije Akademies in The Hague and Delft, the Netherlands, the Art School of Peterborough and the Haliburton School of Arts. Private and corporate collections around the world hold Niezen's art. An elected member of the Ontario Society of Artists, Niezen was a board member at the Art School of Peterborough for six years and markets the school as a volunteer. Nine years ago, he was awarded a Leadership in Arts and Culture Recognition Award by Peterborough County. Niezen told *Bancroft This Week* on Sept. 6 that he didn't really have any mentors in the art world growing up, but picked up inspiration from everywhere basically. "In my 20s I took evening classes in painting so that was the most formal training I did get. But I wouldn't say I had specific mentors, no," he says. Painting with oils was his main medium for a long time, according to Niezen, but he always like print making and says that went back to when he was a kid, inspired to draw from the comics he read. "And there's a lot of printmaking in Europe and the Netherlands, where I come from. I like the contrast in it. At some point, I started experimenting with linocuts that were in the vein of paintings that I did that were nocturnes; night scenes with bright colours, so a lot of contrasts, which I try to translate to linocuts. But I also have an interest in music and at some point, I thought learning about those old folk songs. I thought it would be cool to approach those visualizing those through linocuts. I thought it would be interesting to do a series like that," he says. Niezen says he learned about Fowke, who collected those traditional

Ontario folk songs, in a workshop put on by Al Kirby who had done a PhD thesis on Fowke, at Lang Pioneer Village Museum. That's where I first learned about these songs and being local songs that kind of interested me. Some are local and some have older origins going back to the British Isles, but many originated in Ontario. So I thought that was interesting and connected with Kirby to make a selection of songs and created a songbook of these songs, illustrated with my linocuts, and performed by the traditional music group Backwoodsmen, he says. Niezen said he got a cross section of the types of songs that you could find in Ontario dealing with all aspects of life in those times. Songs about logging, settlement, immigration, politics, war, life and death, and mining. A cross section of what was happening in Ontario between 1800 to 1940. Niezen says his approach is not just to look at what was happening back then, but to look at it with today's perspective. Do we learn from history? How were things then and how do we look at them now? To stimulate the thinking about are we learning from history or not? And also to say that hopefully people read more about history and think more about it and how it affects them, how we keep repeating it or maybe are we learning? So that's what I take from it and I think what I'd like people to take from it, he says. Niezen started work on Cross Cut in 2018 but it wasn't until 2022 that it had its first exhibition. We had two recording sessions, one was in 2020 and the second was in 2022. We had to take a break due to COVID-19. So that was the main reason it stretched out. Plus, I couldn't show anywhere until COVID-19 passed. So, it's been a process; one year's preparation, three years' working on the contents, on the linocuts, researching the stories, choosing and arranging the songs and figuring out the playing of the songs and executing the linocuts, he says. Loree Lawrence owns the Wildewood Gallery in Maynooth and says she heard of Niezen's project before, when she worked at the Ontario Arts Council. It's interesting to see the accommodation of the linocuts and the music and the way they play off each other. I remember reading the grant application and I was like this sounds like such a beautiful project. So well executed. I love the way that the subject matter is driven by the songs. He's using all sorts of different techniques. I think there's lots of variation and it's really well done. I'm impressed by the work, the ideas behind it, the historic nature behind it and the diversity of the printing techniques he's using. I'm really curious to hear the music, she says. Molly Moldovan, a visual artist (www.mollymoldovan.com), who also hosted Niezen's exhibit opening, thanked the attendees for coming and thanked all the volunteers for their hard work. She also said that the AGB was always looking for new volunteers, and anyone interested should go to www.artgallerybancroft.ca, or contact the AGB at 613-332-1542. She thanked the exhibit's sponsors; Tweed and Company Theatre and Backcountry Homes, and thanked the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Ontario Arts Council for their support. Moldovan then introduced Niezen, who explained his exhibit to the crowd and performed three songs with his guitar; Charming Sally Greer, Shanty Boy's Alphabet and Barbara Allen, and then answered questions from the attendees. Moldovan told Bancroft This Week that when they mount exhibitions of work by artists who are not local to Bancroft, especially in the off months, it's not a given that people will attend the opening. So, I was very pleased with Friday night's turn out, for Rob's sake as well as for the gallery. It's encouraging for artists to see people engaging with their work and with their artistic process. Rob is a natural, engaging speaker, and people were hanging on his every word. I really wasn't sure what to expect when Rob mentioned the idea of performing some of the songs featured in the exhibition work, but it was actually the perfect way to close the circle of connection between the linocuts and the historical songs that inspired them, she says. His work is such an interesting blend of artistry, history and performance.