

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Rosalie Gascoigne had three very distinct lives, more or less of equal length. Her first life was as a child and young woman in New Zealand, the second as a wife and mother on Mount Stromlo and in Canberra, and the third as an artist. One constant in Rosalie's life was her love of nature and the outdoors, which helped carry her through difficult times. Although born and raised in the city, it was her time alone on the beach or in the paddock that she found both nourishing and liberating, nourishing because the natural world fed the 'pleasures of the eye', and liberating because in the vastness and immutability of the landscape she found the freedom to be herself. And it was this engagement with the landscape and the things she found in it that was at the heart of the explanations Rosalie offered when asked about her career as an artist and the source of her creative sensibility. 'You can't do better than nature', she would often observe.

A. The Auckland years

Childhood and family

Rosalie was born in Auckland, New Zealand, on 25 January 1917, and lived there until she left to get married and live in Australia in 1943, just short of her twenty-sixth birthday. Rosalie remembered the New Zealand of her childhood as a 'colonial outpost, small and behind the times'. Auckland was by far the largest and most important town in New Zealand, and for most of Rosalie's time there its population was about 200,000. Her family on both sides arrived in Auckland in the 1870s, her father's Irish Protestant family having migrated from County Wicklow and her mother's Anglo-Scots family, with roots in Hampshire, Gloucestershire and Glasgow, arriving after a short spell in Australia. One of the challenges for Rosalie while growing up was learning to navigate her way between these two cultures and temperaments, a task made more difficult by the rupture in her parents' marriage when she was five years old.¹

Rosalie in front of *But mostly air* 1994-95
at the Art Gallery of New South Wales,
November 1997

Photograph by Christopher Snee courtesy of the
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Rosalie was the second child of Marion and Stanley Walker. She had an older sister, Daintry (born in 1915), and a younger brother, Douglas (born in 1918). Her father, Stanley, trained as a motor engineer and had a car maintenance and importing business. Mother Marion (née Metcalfe) was one of the first female graduates of Auckland University College (later the University of Auckland), earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1905.

¹ Rosalie Gascoigne 'My country childhood' *Country Style* Dec 1997, p. 19.

Marion was a teacher at Auckland Girls Grammar School before her marriage. The family lived in the prosperous middle-class suburb of Remuera.²

It had been an unlikely marriage: Marion and Stanley were both 31, a late marriage for the times. Marion was a bright, witty, educated woman who played hockey and tennis at university, liked reading and was interested in history and the classics. Stanley's education went no further than incomplete trade qualifications, and he was not interested in sport. She was from a prosperous conservative family, where the men were all in the professions and the daughters married into them; her father was a highly regarded civil engineer whose practice extended over the whole of the North Island. Stanley was from a family past its prime and with few resources, although his father had been a well-known Auckland liquor merchant in the 1890s. Stanley could not have been more unlike Marion's father, whom she adored. The marriage took place on 10 March 1915 at St Mary's Cathedral, close to the Metcalfe family house in Parnell.³

In Rosalie's memory, the Walkers were a proud (Protestant) Irish family from County Wicklow, with strong women and weak men. Stanley was the second youngest child in a family of ten children, with a brother, six sisters and two half-brothers. His family doted on him. As a young boy Stanley was dressed in trousers edged with lace which might help explain how in his youth Stanley acquired the nickname 'Masher', which stuck long enough for the story to survive, if not the nickname ('masher' — all dressed up). As a young man he took the far-sighted decision to train as an auto-engineer and served a five-year apprenticeship. Soon after, in December 1905, he went to San Francisco, presumably to further his training or possibly to strike out on his own. He survived the great earthquake there in April 1906 (neglecting to tell his family he had done so), and stayed on until sometime after April 1910, working as a machinist with the Union Iron Works Company. It is not clear when he returned to Auckland, although he was there in time to be registered on the 1914 electoral roll, by which time both his parents had died.⁴



Rosalie aged about five years
Photograph from author's archive

² This account of Rosalie's childhood, family and forebears draws heavily on my earlier work *Rosalie Gascoigne: Her New Zealand origins* (Martin Gascoigne 2012). Rosalie's recollections of her childhood are recorded in 1997 Frost, 1997 Ross, 1998 Hughes and Vici MacDonald 1998 (especially pp. 9–13); see also 1982 North. These are the sources for the unattributed quotations on Rosalie's childhood.

³ The Metcalfe house, called 'Turarua', was at 5 Bridgewater Road, and set on over two acres (about 8100 square metres) near the waterfront (sale advertisement, *Auckland Star* 10 Jul 1919, p. 6). Marion's siblings were also married at St Mary's.

⁴ The apprenticeship data comes from the 1922 bankruptcy papers (NZ Archives ref. BAEA 21460 A709 152c 1922/220). Californian passenger lists record his arrival in San Francisco on the *Sonoma* on 4 December 1905, and the 1910 United States census conducted on 15 April lists him as a boarder living at 681 Fell Street in the 37th Assembly District. Union Iron Works was a big shipbuilder.

There is no record of how Stanley and Marion met or what brought them together; perhaps they met because Stanley had lodgings in St George's Road in Parnell, near the Metcalfe house, or through the school where Marion was roll mistress for Stanley's niece Vera Cashell. Once married, what money Stanley had was invested in his garage, and Metcalfe money financed the purchase of the couple's house. Metcalfe money (and some from a Walker brother-in-law) also saw him through when he ran into trouble getting bank finance for his business. There were other cultural differences. Unlike the uptight Metcalfe brothers who crewed a coastal steamer during the 1913 maritime strike, it is hard to think of Stanley as a strike-breaker, let alone imagine him sailing. Sailing was important in the Metcalfe family and Stanley was not a sailor, not a Metcalfe. Having been judged medically unfit, he did not go to war, unlike Marion's brothers, one of whom was killed, the other almost so.⁵

If it was Irish pride that fed Stanley's ambition to prove himself to the Metcalfes — and to Marion — by expanding his business in a risky way, then its failure must have hurt. In 1922, when Rosalie was five, Stanley's business failed, in large part because of his drinking, and Stanley was declared bankrupt on 10 October 1922. Two months later the family home was sold to pay Stanley's creditors. Marion and Stanley's mismatched partnership could not cope with the pressures and the marriage fell apart. After a blazing row one night, Marion called a taxi and took her children to live with her widowed mother and her unmarried sister, Ellen. Stanley removed himself to the Thames district at Turua, where he remained until 1932. He had a garage but continued to be troubled by his drinking, and lost his driver's licence for two years in 1929 for drink-driving offences. When he visited Auckland on business or to see his children he stayed at the Glenalvon guesthouse owned by his sister Gipsy and her husband Robert McCallum.⁶

Marion's mother lived at 8 Halls Avenue, Remuera (later 8 Robert Hall Avenue), not far from the house Marion had shared with Stanley. The Halls Avenue house had been bought for Marion's mother, Jessie Alexander Metcalfe (née Hamilton), downsizing following her husband's death in 1918.⁷ When Marion and her children moved in, Grandmother Jessie was in her seventies. She had never really got over the death of her older son, Henry Ernest, killed in France on the Western Front in April 1917. Henry's death, and the death of her husband a year later, led to the closure of the Metcalfe family engineering business, the source of the family's prosperity.

Having left Stanley who had no money, Marion needed to find a job. Her mother simply did not have the resources to maintain a household in the style to which she had become accustomed and to provide for her unmarried daughter Ellen and now Marion and her three children as well. So in 1923, at the age of 41, Marion went back to teaching. This was unusual for a married woman in those days, but Marion was probably helped by women she had known at university. She taught at Epsom Girls Grammar School, which was well regarded academically and close to the house in Remuera. Marion developed a great rapport with her students and after two years she was a senior mistress, teaching English, history and languages. She taught there until she retired in 1943.⁸

5 'Vera Cashell': Auckland Girls Grammar School archives. Vera was the niece of Stanley's half-brother Arthur Cashell. Financial details from Stanley's bankruptcy file (see footnote 4) and the report on a meeting of his creditors in the *NZ Herald* 19 Oct 1922, p. 5. The bankruptcy was discharged on 26 October 1932. Additional information on Metcalfe loans in HH Metcalfe estate papers in the HJHM archive. Stanley was on the NZ Army Reserve Roll 1917. He is thought to have been assessed as unfit for active service because of a hand injury that restricted its use.

6 Drink-driving episodes reported in *Auckland Star* 6 Feb 1924, p. 6; 10 Nov 1926, p. 8 and 27 Mar 1929, p. 11; and *NZ Truth* 18 Nov 1926, p. 7. Stanley also spent a year at the Salvation Army's inebriates home on Rotorua Island (*Auckland Star* 15 Jul 1936, p. 8).

7 Ownership of the house would be transferred to Marion in 1938.

8 Marion's teaching record: Epsom Girls Grammar School archives.

So it came to be that between the ages of five and eleven Rosalie shared the house with not only her immediate family but also her moody grandmother and spinster aunt. It was not a large house, especially compared with the twelve-room Metcalfe family house Jessie had shared with her husband in upmarket Parnell, but it was large enough, with four bedrooms, a maid's room, a sitting room, dining room and conservatory. It cannot have been easy for any of them. Rosalie recalled years later, 'by the time we moved into my grandmother's house she was unable to do much for herself, or so she liked to believe. She needed to be catered to.' Jessie set the tone of the household: she was the daughter of a prosperous Scottish merchant and had been brought up in the fashionable English spa town of Cheltenham in Gloucestershire where the Hamilton family became close to the Metcalfes, a Hampshire county family of independent means also living in Cheltenham. The atmosphere at Halls Avenue was oppressive, standards of behaviour were important, happiness didn't enter into it, and it was all adults. Rosalie remembered: 'People had high standards for you. You had good table manners and you spoke correctly, and you were seen and not heard a lot, because people did not have time for you, really.' She remembered noticing a girl smile up at a friend's mother once and thought 'What's she smiling for? Adults aren't our friends.' Another of Jessie's granddaughters, Nicolette, remembered Jessie as being 'a bit of a tyrant' and her brother Bill 'used to be scared of her'.⁹ Rosalie recalled: 'After my mother left the house in the morning to teach ... my grandmother would make us wash up the breakfast dishes and we'd miss the tram to school and be in trouble. It wasn't any good pointing this out to her.'

The breakfast dishes aside, the brunt of the household work fell on Marion's older sister Ellen (known as Nellie). Aunt Nellie was later fixed in Rosalie's mind as someone 'who did things' — forever polishing tables, painting garden barrels green and raising chicks and ducklings. During the 1914–18 war Nellie had served as a volunteer aid detachment nurse in India, where she had Hamilton cousins and a Metcalfe aunt and afterwards lived in England, but returned to Auckland in 1921 to look after Jessie.¹⁰ It was Nellie who responded to a ten-year old Rosalie's pleas for ideas for an entry in the school flower show: 'Why don't you do buttercups and broom in brass?' Rosalie, desperate to do well, was very dubious, but went ahead and won first prize, much to her delight. This is the first recorded instance of Rosalie using yellow as the predominant colour in one of her works.

9 'A bit of a tyrant': 20 May 2005 Nicolette Benyon to MG: she was only four when Jessie died and does not remember her, only her reputation. 'Scared of her': 17 Dec 1999 HJ (Bill) Hamilton Metcalfe to Mrs Benson (Metcalfe Society) (HJHM archive). He was seven when she died in July 1928. Jessie had been in poor health for the six months before her death.

10 A legacy of Nellie's Indian experience was the name given to one of the family dogs, 'Kutah', later taken up by Rosalie's family in the 1950s.



Marion Walker (Mrs MH Walker BA) in 1929, an image from a poster picturing all the teachers at Epsom Girls Grammar School at the time

Photograph courtesy of Hannah Fink



Stanley with his children, c. 1930: Daintry, Rosalie and Douglas

Photograph from author's archive

With hindsight, Rosalie came to think of Nellie as a frustrated artist. As a young woman Nellie had been a water-colourist, probably taught by her father, and was later described by an English Metcalfe aunt as ‘a keen artist’, but the demands of running the busy household in Halls Avenue meant she had neither the time nor opportunity to venture out to scenic spots with brushes in hand. Rosalie also concluded that she was closer to Nellie who did things, than to her bookish sister Daintry. Indeed, there was something of Nellie’s busy hands in Rosalie and in the way she worked in the studio. There was one other legacy: when Nellie died in 1931 she left the bulk of her estate to Rosalie and Daintry, which helped pay their expenses while at university.¹¹ There was a legacy of a different kind from Grandmother Jessie because, in addition to the training Jessie provided in social standards, Rosalie inherited Jessie’s abiding love of the colour yellow and of fine china. ‘My grandmother was very fond of yellow. She had yellow curtains. She used to buy a lot of yellow china.’ In terms of the art Rosalie was to make fifty years later, it was a noteworthy legacy.¹²

When Rosalie was between the ages of eight and thirteen, summer holidays at Waiheke Island (about 18 kilometres north-east of Auckland in the Hauraki Gulf) provided relief for all from the pressures of the Remuera house. ‘I think the reason we [Rosalie, her sister, brother and their mother] went to Waiheke each year was to give my grandmother a rest.’¹³ Their six-week holidays were fairly lonely. Waiheke was then a ninety-minute ferry ride away, with perhaps one boat a week. Rosalie’s later success as an artist gave an edge to her memories of New Zealand and she would describe the Waiheke experience ‘as one of my great influences’, one borne out by the evocations of those times in her work fifty or more years later and mirrored in the similar sense of freedom she found on her travels in the countryside around Canberra. ‘It was the freedom that made our time at Waiheke so different from now, so different from our everyday life then ... We could do what we wished. No one could say to us yea or nay. We loved the house and the deserted beach. If by chance someone did wander onto our territory — and the shoreline was public of course — we resented their presence.’ When Rosalie’s brother and sister were doing ‘meaningless’ things like making rafts and boats she would wander off on her own and look at shells. The shells and all her other finds came back to the beach house where they were ‘arranged in rows on tabletops. Endlessly, so no one could eat.’ This would be a familiar experience for Rosalie’s family and friends in the 1970s when the dining table and then all the living areas in the house in Pearce were taken over as her workspace. It was a practice that carried over into her art, notably in *Games table* 1975–76.¹⁴

There were also country holidays with Metcalfe family cousins at Te Kuiti — ‘it was always the paddocks ... And not much personal supervision ... and you made something out of nothing’. In 1997 Rosalie could still remember how suddenly a calf was born on the hill and then a donkey, and in the orchard how the plums turned yellow and gold. Memories of these times found their way into Rosalie’s constructions, none more so than in the aptly titled *Age of innocence* 1993, which captured the feel of Waiheke’s blue seas, sandy bays, green pastures and rocky promontories. Later, in Canberra, she came to enjoy — need — the solitude of the Australian countryside, and would speak about the ‘lyrical quality of acceptance, of taking things as they come, and accepting the perfect with the imperfect’ that she felt while out in the country.¹⁵

11 ‘A keen artist’: Florence Metcalfe as told to HJ Hamilton Metcalfe (HJHM archive). Ellen died on 15 July 1931. Her estate was valued at £1300 (Probate no. 570/31).

12 ‘Fond of yellow’: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 12.

13 One summer Jessie sent a message to stay longer: there had been an outbreak of polio in the city. Jessie’s relief was the occasional holiday with her daughter Dolly Broadfoot at Te Kuiti (1997 Frost) (also for country holidays).

14 ‘My great influences’ and Te Kuiti: 1982 North; ‘arranged in rows’: 1997 Ross.

15 Metcalfe cousins: the cousins were the two daughters of Marion’s sister Dorothy (Dolly), who married Walter Broadfoot, a solicitor at Te Kuiti. He was elected to the New Zealand parliament in 1928, served in the war cabinet, was later postmaster general and was knighted for his political services. ‘Lyrical quality of acceptance’: 1982 North (talking of *Scrub country* 1981–82).

Rosalie's references to the 'freedom' and 'acceptance' she experienced in rural settings are a recurring theme in her memories. The place where she found peace was in nature: 'I looked at nature and was accepted.' She came to recognise herself as someone who was different, who did not conform and did not fit in. Apart from anything else, she was the tallest in her family, even taller than her parents. Rosalie also understood she was like her estranged father rather than her Anglo-Scottish mother: 'I had a bit of that unacceptable Irish from my father', whereas her sister and brother did not. Of the three children, it was Rosalie who looked most like her father. She remembered him as a man who liked to be happy and laugh a bit. Daintry, like their mother, was academically inclined. 'Brains were valued in the family. I was always out of step. More like my Irish father — you did not have to take me seriously. I think I probably drove my mother mad with my lateral thinking. I always looked sideways. The others all read books — so I was always on my own a bit.'¹⁶

As a child Rosalie tried to find things to amuse herself and would follow her mother around asking her to give her something to make. 'But she was so busy she couldn't direct me towards anything creative although she did sometimes say she was sure I could paint. I can't paint and I can't draw. She'd recognised something in me which made me different from the others but she'd hit upon the wrong medium.' So far as artists were concerned, the only models Rosalie had were her aunt Ellen, her cousin Damaris and her dead Metcalfe grandfather, who could all draw and paint — the very skills that eluded her. Rosalie had seen her grandfather Metcalfe's sailing sketchbooks filled with watercolour sketches and she admired the seas he painted. Her cousin Damaris could draw well and when she grew up sought work as a book illustrator 'whereas I couldn't draw anything at all that looked like anything'. She failed dismally in her attempt at secondary school to get one of her works on the wall in the display case that showed the best student works. 'It was absolutely hopeless. I had no self-belief at all.'¹⁷

Art did not play much part in Rosalie's childhood. 'To be really into art in the New Zealand of that time was to possess a Medici print of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*.' People rarely had paintings in the house at all, although at Halls Avenue there were oils done by English aunts — 'very proper, conventional pictures ... heather on the moors' — and a few of Ellen's watercolours, though once all Rosalie remembered was 'a terrible sepia thing' in the hall, of Hope sitting on the world [by the symbolist GF Watts, *Hope* 1886], and, on another occasion, prints of Van Gogh's [*Langlois*] *Bridge of Arles* and *Cornfield* [probably *Wheatfield with Crows*]. 'If you were terribly, terribly forward looking and artistic, you had a print on your bedroom wall.' Rosalie had 'a Madonna and an oil' on hers. In 1942 these were joined by an unidentified print, which Ben Gascoigne ('Gassy') had sent her for her birthday. 'I like the picture very much espec[ially] the sky and I like the general blueness.' His gift reflected a newly discovered interest in art on his part, and suggests that maybe he had seen something in Rosalie to prompt his choice.¹⁸

16 'Looked at nature': 1997 Frost; 'unacceptable Irish': 1982 North and Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 12. Rosalie would later observe, 'Irish got to be a fairly dirty word. You know, "I'm Irish" and that excused everything. They're old outmoded ideas but this did happen. But I'm always thankful to have a bit of Irish in me. There was an awful worthiness about the other thing' (1995 Topliss, p. 7).

17 'But she was so busy': Frost 1997; 'whereas I couldn't draw': 1995 Topliss, Janet Hawley 1997, also Damaris's daughter Nicholas Rodgers with MG July 2005.

18 'English aunts': Janet Hawley 1997. Florence Metcalfe was a serious practitioner, drew and painted in watercolour and oil and subscribed to *The Studio* magazine; her sister Clara also painted. For a more detailed account of the Metcalfe family in England see Martin Gascoigne 2012, pp. 132–135. 'Hope': the oil painting on which the print was based is in the Tate Museum, London — my thanks to Daniel Thomas for the attribution. 'I like the picture': 20 Feb [1942] RG to BG. Ben bought it from Carl Plate's Notanda Gallery in Sydney.

Teenager, student and teacher

Rosalie recalled her teenage years as a period in which she completely lacked self-confidence. While lack of confidence is not unusual for a teenager, Rosalie also had to cope with the troubles within her family, and the scandal surrounding her cousin, Bill Bayly, who was hanged in 1934 for murdering his neighbours (and earlier was suspected of being responsible for the mysterious death of another Walker cousin in 1927). Although Rosalie missed the presence of her father in the house, so far as her daily life was concerned she seems to have been otherwise unaffected by this background tumult. Schoolfriends recall Rosalie quite differently from the out-of-step girl she remembered herself as. One of them, Ruth Evans, described her as ‘gregarious and good company for other children, so she would get asked away on holidays with them’. She went on: ‘Rosalie and Daintry were very different personalities, Daintry being quiet and Rosalie the more dominant personality. Rosalie was always stimulating company and it was great fun to be with her on the many walks we took together round the streets of Remuera. We’d admire the gardens and the view [of Waitemata Harbour from Mount Hobson “in all its moods”]. This would be when we were in our early teens. Rosalie and her mother put on wonderful parties with new and exciting games that they introduced. Exciting food, too.’¹⁹



Rosalie (far right) and the Epsom Girls Grammar School tennis team in 1934, next to her friend Marie Best. Joan Hewitson is second from left

Photograph from author's archive

From 1930 to 1934 Rosalie and Ruth were schoolfriends at Epsom Girls Grammar School, where Marion taught. ‘We were in the top form at EGGS. I was very aware that Rosalie was much cleverer than I was. She was extremely clever but not overly academic (and not ambitious to be the top). She was able to perform well in English, Mathematics and Science but was reluctant to do homework so didn’t perform well in subjects that required learning French vocabulary. She was not interested in acting Shakespeare and the like, so she did not try, but she would listen well as others “strutted” their parts.’ According to Ruth, Rosalie was very strong physically and, like her mother, good at games like hockey and tennis.²⁰ She was extremely confident in her attitude towards teachers and pupils. She liked them and they liked her. Rosalie had no desire to be popular but the other pupils liked and respected her. She was compassionate and would feel sorry when her friends endured bad luck. She could be patient, too, with those in sore trouble. In 1999 another schoolfriend wrote to Rosalie after seeing her work exhibited in Auckland: ‘I had absolutely no idea what your approach would be but I should have realised — remembering you as I do [from school] — that it would be no conventional scenes.’²¹

¹⁹ Bill Bayly was the son of Stanley’s sister Constance and Frank Bayly. ‘Schoolfriends recall’: Ruth Evans to MG, also the source for the next paragraph; see also 28 Oct 1999 Ruth Evans to BG (BG papers NLA).

²⁰ The yellow-orange in Rosalie’s triptych *Orangery* 1998 triggered memories of the egg-yolk yellow gym smocks or skirts worn at Epsom Girls Grammar School. See the catalogue entry on *Orangery* 1998.

²¹ ‘Remembering you as I do’: 1 May 1999 Joan Hewitson to R.G.

After Ellen died in 1931 Marion allowed Stanley to return to the family at Halls Avenue where he had a room of his own and the shed to work on cars. Rosalie, who was about fifteen at the time, was pleased to be part of a normal family again, although it was an uneasy household. Marion and Stanley were really only reconciled after Marion retired ‘but it was never an equal sort of relationship. [Mother] always had the upper hand, she was the stronger personality.’ Rosalie remembered, ‘father did not give up his ways and so we had royal battles’. After another drink-driving incident in 1936 he lost his licence for five years, which put a dent in his car maintenance business.²²

Times were tough in the Depression: a teacher’s pay did not always arrive on schedule, which could cause embarrassment with the housekeeping bills, but the family was still better off than many. At least there was money for the ‘pound and a half of gravy beef’ that Rosalie remembered having to fetch from the butcher, and to pay unemployed men who came to the house ‘two bob after they cut the lawns’. There was also the money from Ellen’s estate and, later, bursaries to pay for the girls’ education. In an atmosphere of insecurity generated by the Depression, Stanley’s rocky relationship with Marion and his inability to provide for his family, the focus of the children’s education was economic security and their ability to earn a living. When Rosalie left school her aim was to get the qualifications for a job, which in her case would be teaching. She had a strong role model — her mother, Marion, whose education and teaching experience meant she could get a job to support her family when she left Stanley. Rosalie was awarded a University National Bursary (one of three for her school that year), so she was eligible to apply to the Education Department for a bursary tenable at Auckland University College, which she attended from 1935 to 1938. She studied English, Latin, Greek, French and pure mathematics, majoring in English and Latin and graduating in 1939 as a Bachelor of Arts. She was very proud of her degree.²³

It was a good time to be studying English at Auckland. A new professor, Arthur Sewell, had been appointed in 1934. He was only thirty, a fine literary critic, known internationally and a good actor with a beautiful speaking voice. ‘His lectures to large classes were performances of a high order.’ The English course placed a lot of emphasis on the history of English language, which was taught by Philip Arden. Sewell and Arden made a great combination. Keith Sinclair, who was a student at the same time as Rosalie and became a distinguished historian, thought the students were very lucky: ‘They could not have received a better undergraduate education — and training — in English language and literature in many places of the world.’²⁴ This was the foundation for Rosalie’s love of words and her appreciation of ‘the blow to the solar plexus that the right word in the right place, or the new word in the right place, [which] gives me pleasure beyond belief’. Later, her knowledge of words was obvious to anyone foolish enough to challenge her to a game of Scrabble, in her skill with cryptic crosswords, and in the titles she chose for her assemblages. Rosalie was a natural poet and, like her mother, able to conjure up the apt and pungent phrase for person, thing or event. The poetry she studied at university stayed with her: Rosalie would acknowledge late in life that the aim of her work ‘was probably nearest to lyric poetry. Its purpose is feeling, not recognition.’²⁵

22 The best account of Rosalie’s memories of her father is in 1998 Hughes; ‘lost his licence’: *Auckland Star* 15 Jul 1936, p. 8.

23 Bursary: *Evening Post* 1 Feb 1935, p. 10. Courses of study from Rosalie’s academic record, courtesy of the registrar University of Auckland and Dianna Howard 27 May and 4 June 2004. Daintry went to Massey Agricultural College in Palmerston North to train as an agricultural scientist, and became the first female to graduate from the college. It wasn’t cheap: the fees were £100 a year (about NZ\$885 in 2017), plus the extra costs of living away from home. Douglas became an accountant.

24 Quotes from Keith Sinclair *A history of the University of Auckland, 1883–1983* Auckland University Press, 1983, pp. 173, 145–187. Auckland University College course details from the college calendars 1935–38.

25 ‘Blow to the solar plexus’: ‘Poems chosen by Rosalie Gascoigne’ *A return to poetry* 1999 Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999; ‘nearest to lyric poetry’: 1996 Davidson.



Auckland University College Field Club Christmas excursion to Great Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf, 100 km north-east of Auckland. Rosalie is standing in the centre. Marie Best is the blonde at lower right and Charles Fleming, one of Rosalie's suitors, upper right, wears a hat

Photograph from author's archive

Rosalie's memories of her university days do not put much weight on her academic endeavours. She remembered it as a time of young men and failed relationships, sports and social activities. 'I played tennis [she was one of four in the university tennis team] and was with a lot of people. We mainly enjoyed ourselves and did not make too much of the lectures — you took notes and did enough to pass the exams and you went to field clubs and things.' Field clubs were run by zoologists and botanists: 'you walked for miles and had your meals in huts and they'd say this rock was greywacke but you did not care whether it was greywacke or not, as you were having a nice time'. Rosalie and her friend Marie Best were about the only two non-scientific walkers 'asked along by one of the boys for light relief as the scientific women were pretty earnest. I didn't want to be scientific but it was a sort of way of life in the back-to-nature-and-the-old-hut and that sort of stuff I liked.'²⁶

In March 1938, while still at Auckland University College, Rosalie did some practical teaching at Whangarei, 140 kilometres north of Auckland. Letters home to 'Gassy' Gascoigne, whom she got to know at university, describe the school (which didn't impress), her classes and her strategies for dealing with her girls. In her first class, her pupils 'tried everything on to see how much I'd take. But I was determined that whatever my shortcomings as a teacher might be, at least I wld be respected as a keeper of order. So my classes are orderly if uninformed, poor things.' Rosalie encouraged self-expression in her students: 'I want them to write on simple subjects ("Rain") that they can have their own thoughts about and not dish out the ideas of other people'. Rosalie did well enough for the headmistress to offer her more relief teaching but Rosalie turned her down because she missed her Auckland life and needed to complete her degree.²⁷ After graduating, Rosalie undertook a year's teacher training under John Murdoch, then head of the graduate course at the teacher's college. There was a lot of emphasis on the theory and practice of teaching, and half of students' time was spent in observation and practice.²⁸

²⁶ 'I played tennis', 'walked for miles' and 'light relief': 1998 Hughes.

²⁷ She worked out that she was getting paid about £3 a week plus a boarding allowance of 12/6 (12 shillings and sixpence), but board cost 30/- (30 shillings) and consequently 'life isn't everything that I expected it to be' (3 Mar 1938 R.G. to B.G.). In other words, Rosalie's total weekly income was £3/12/6 of which £1/10/0 was the cost of board, leaving her with £2/2/6.

²⁸ Murdoch described his students as 'keenly critical, possessed of the highest ideals, anxious to learn, often charmingly modest and extraordinarily gifted. Many are "born teachers", adapting themselves to new conditions with amazing ease' (Louise Shaw *Making a difference: A history of the Auckland College of Education 1881–2004* Auckland University Press, 2006, pp. 100–101). The curriculum was broad and as well as the principles and practice of education, and courses in hygiene, physical education, music and art, students were required to undertake three subjects not included in their degree. When asked about her formal art training, Rosalie remembered her teacher training course 'but that was different'; she regarded her ikebana lessons in the 1960s as her first and only formal art training (1998 Hughes).

Rosalie began teaching in 1940 at Kowhai Intermediate School near central Auckland, and in 1941 she joined the Auckland Girls Grammar School (AGGS), where her mother had taught thirty years before. It was a traditional establishment with extremely high standards. ‘I enjoyed [teaching] when I knew the subject, and I was good with children. I could teach English and Latin but when it came to history or geography I was just hopeless. I hadn’t read the books.’ Rosalie taught at AGGS in 1941 and 1942, until resigning to get married in Australia.²⁹ Her training and her brief career as a teacher left their mark. In later life Rosalie was a skilful communicator well able to handle public lectures and journalists’ interviews. She had good stuff to say and could deliver her messages in vivid images. She made a great subject for television.

At university, boys would single Rosalie out for attention. ‘This was a revelation to me — Who? Me? At university I had a few things where I was special to a few people. And this made a lot of difference; it was a bolstering effect to me that, in spite of those girls being prettier ... somebody singled you out. I think that was what I needed, that you wanted to be special.’³⁰ One of those boys was SCB Gascoigne (‘Gassy’, whom she was later to call Ben). Rosalie met him in 1933 when he was at university but she was still at Epsom Girls Grammar School. Although their families moved in different circles, they had at least one mutual friend, Bob Foster, who invited Ben to make up a four for bridge with Rosalie. They did not see much of each other until Rosalie went to university in 1935. On one memorable occasion, when they were closing up the university theatre after a student dance, Rosalie engaged Ben in a game of ‘will o’ the wisp’, in and out of the heavy curtains. They would walk home together from the university because ‘girls of her background did not walk out alone at night’. At weekends they would take the train up north to Henderson, about half an hour away, and tramp over the hills to the coast, about eight miles. They both loved the theatre (rather than the cinema) and would save up so they could go, several times a year.³¹



Student trampers: (left to right) Edmund Hillary, Neil Robinson, Ed (Eddy) Burton and Ben; Neil and Eddy would become godfathers to Ben’s sons
Photograph from author’s archive

²⁹ On teaching, see 1982 North and Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 13. AGGS archives has the old class rolls with Rosalie’s signature on them: RNK Walker. When Rosalie’s son Toss took up teaching in England, she recalled some of her experiences in letters to him. ‘I always remember a tough class of 45 grade C girls (sixteen-year-olds) I had once in the war. They had driven the two teachers before me into other professions. That’s where I learnt you never antagonise. What they did like was being encouraged to write a class magazine with a suitable quotation for each class member. The girl who got expelled for writing a rude essay about teacher (me) (very rude essay) got “This body did a grievous wrong”. But it brought out the best in them. That, and praise at the drop of a hat’ (9 Jun, 7 Jul 1971 RG to TG).

³⁰ ‘Who? Me?’: Rosalie was not alone in this. Betty Churcher (1931–2015), one-time director of the NGA, described feeling exactly the same way (Betty Churcher *Notebooks* Melbourne University Publishing, 2011).

³¹ BG reminiscences 1999: ‘Will o’ the wisp’ in MG’s eulogy at Rosalie’s memorial service, November 1999 (RG papers NLA). Ben remembered seeing the *Comedy Harmonists* (visiting Auckland in November 1937) and *The Whitehorse Inn* with Rosalie. ‘Four for bridge’: undated letter c. 2009 Bob Foster to MG.



The portrait Rosalie commissioned in 1941 for Ben in Australia

Photograph from author's archive



Rosalie and Ben photographed outside the Allens's house on Mt Stromlo where they had their wedding reception in January 1943. Clay Allen gave the bride away

Photograph from author's archive



The families and friends left behind: Marion hosted a party in January 1943 to celebrate Ben and Rosalie's wedding in Canberra. Seated (left to right): Angela, Pamela and Rene Gascoigne (Ben's sisters and mother), Marion and Daintry Walker. Standing: possibly Dolly Broadfoot (aunt) on far left, Bob Foster fifth from left, then Marjorie Daniel (behind Rene); fourth from right is Phyllis Buddle (aunt) (behind Marion) and on the far right is Marie Best

Photograph from author's archive

Rosalie wrote to Ben from Whangarei when she was teaching there in the autumn of 1938. As well as describing her life in Whangarei, Rosalie's letters to Ben also touched on their relationship, including her desire to get back to Auckland for the Rowing Club dance: 'Blast it, this is going to sound crude, but you wouldn't mention dances to a girl unless your intentions were the best, would you Gassy?' They were good friends, certainly, but Rosalie was intent on playing the field: 'Your chief fear seems to be that I'll take you too seriously. There is neither hope nor fear of that. I'm not taking anyone seriously. I'm having a good look round and finding out what I really want and when, about four years hence, I've made up my mind I'll start in being ingratiating. Then if it's you, lookout!' She was, after all, only just 21 and he was planning to do a PhD in England, though a friend at the time remembers him as having 'a keen eye on a lovely Rosalie Walker'. Four years later, she would make up her mind and move. In the meantime Ben sailed from Auckland in August 1938 and returned two years later, on the last passenger boat to leave England for Australia as the Battle of Britain was about to start. When he arrived back in Auckland, his own family had fallen on hard times and could no longer accommodate him, so Marion invited him to board with them.³²

Rosalie continued to live at home while she was at university and teaching, and she and Marion became very close. Daintry had long left home in pursuit of her career as an agricultural scientist. Douglas went off to war. 'Mother missed me frightfully when I left home because I was her amusement and her companion. I was teaching at one of the high schools and she was teaching at another. It was a terrible wrench leaving her because I could vicariously suffer all that she was suffering.'³³

In August 1941 Ben left Auckland for Australia to take up an appointment at the Commonwealth Solar Observatory at Mount Stromlo outside Canberra where he would be engaged in war-production work, designing and constructing optical instruments for weapons systems, and would go on to have a distinguished career as an astronomer and telescope designer.³⁴ Rosalie had her photograph taken for Ben and the photographer put a copy of it in his window, prompting many queries from young American servicemen seeking her name and address, but to no avail. She had her other admirers, keen to marry her, but it was Ben she chose, and in 1942 she sent him a telegram asking if he would marry her.

³² Rosalie's undated letters are in the BG papers NLA. She did get to go to the Rowing Club dance (*New Zealand Herald* 14 Mar 1938, *Auckland Star* 4 Apr 1938). Ben and Rosalie's granddaughter, Hester (Hetty) Gascoigne, remembers Grandfather Ben being very pleased with the string of boyfriends she introduced to him. He told her it was a good thing she was not making her mind up on a man before trying out a few first. 'A keen eye': 8 Jun 2010 Sir Owen Woodhouse to MG.

³³ One time they decided to beautify their sitting room on a modest budget 'so they dyed the elderly carpet black and chose yellow silk for the curtains' — the colour scheme of Rosalie's many retroreflective road sign assemblages and also a favourite of Jessie Metcalfe's. As part of their contribution to the war effort they taught English to refugees (March 2005 Ruth Evans to MG).

³⁴ On Ben's career, for which he was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science and made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO), see his Academy of Science personal record and BG papers NLA.

The engagement was announced on 6 June 1942 and in January 1943 Rosalie found herself in a flying boat headed for Sydney, then on the train to Canberra and Mount Stromlo. They were married in St John's Church, Canberra, on 9 January 1943 and spent their honeymoon in Sydney, buying furniture for the house that would be their home until 1960. In marrying and leaving New Zealand Rosalie was following her idea of what life was about: 'I always knew I meant to get married and have children. I knew I had to have children — I just needed them. It was unthinkable for me not to have children.'³⁵

The memory of New Zealand

The New Zealand that Rosalie maintained contact with from Australia was very much the New Zealand of her childhood and university days. By far the strongest link with the past was her mother, Marion. They exchanged long, lively letters every couple of weeks, with vivid descriptions of the things they had been doing, news of the extended family and of the people they knew. The letter writing continued until Marion's death in 1969. There were visits to and fro: Marion made visits in 1944, 1950 (with Stanley), 1952 and in 1961. Rosalie went back in 1946 and 1948–49 to show off her young sons, and in 1957 with her daughter, but did not go back again until 1983. Some friends kept in touch at Christmas but, with one exception, it was rare for old friends to visit Canberra.

The notable exception was Rosalie's teacher friend Marjorie Daniel, who made twenty-four visits over thirty years, each one an occasion for reliving the Auckland of the 1930s. After the 1988 visit, Ben observed, 'Marjorie went back last Tuesday, reluctantly as usual, but not before she and yr mother had once again recreated their girlhoods in minute detail'. They were also occasions for the two old friends to observe the comparative advantages of Australia over New Zealand: after one three-week visit, Rosalie reported that Marjorie has 'gone back with 2 smart dresses, 2 pairs shoes, chinaware, glassware and a new dressing gown. EVERYTHING better than in N.Z. ... enjoyed her stay.'³⁶



Marion and Stanley photographed in Sydney on a visit to Australia, c. 1950
Image courtesy of Neil Walker

³⁵ Engagement: *New Zealand Herald* 6 Jun 1942, p. 4; 'meant to have children': 1998 Hughes. The wedding was to have been a week earlier but had to be rescheduled when Rosalie's flight was delayed. Ben kept the finance document listing the purchases from Anthony Hordern and Son: namely a kitchen table and chairs, one bedroom suite, a lounge suite, a card table, a few other small items and several 'druggets' (BG papers NLA).

³⁶ 'Marjorie went back': 17 Sep [1988] BG to TG; 'gone back with': 11 Sep 1972 RG to TG. Rosalie's experience was typical of many emigrants, whose perception of their homeland is naturally shaped by their memory of their homeland as it was when they left, but what is unusual in Rosalie's case is the constant reinforcement of those images of old Auckland through her mother's letters and visits from Marjorie Daniel (until the mid-1990s).



Rosalie in Auckland with Marjorie Daniel and the author. This visit was an important milestone because it was then that she understood: 'You can't live in two countries. Once you leave home, there's no such thing as going back' (Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 14). She learnt to 'let go' and come to terms with her life in Australia

Photograph from author's archive

Once Rosalie was fully embarked on her career as an artist, she had another perspective from which to view her old life in Auckland and within her family. She concluded that she could never have been an artist in New Zealand, constricted as her childhood was by a need to conform, and believed that 'plenty of New Zealanders would not have considered me an artist even when I sort of arrived'. She stayed away. Speculating in 1978 that Ben would like to return she commented, 'there'll be no cooperation from me'. Rosalie's memory of the local attitude towards artists was more forcefully expressed by Colin McCahon in 1958 in a letter to his sister, in which he referred to 'the ruthless destructiveness of New Zealanders towards any creative activity...'. It was only when Rosalie began to know the art world in New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990s, and could relate to New Zealand as an artist, that her attitude changed.³⁷

In reflecting on her upbringing and how she finally found herself, Rosalie took her cue from Picasso and put it like this: 'I think you are born the artist, but you've got to shake off a lot of your conditioning and you've got to shake off a lot of what the people who influenced you in your childhood thought you were, which you certainly are not.' It is an idea that informed her remarks about her big linoleum work, *Letting go* 1991. Or as she told Robert Lindsay in 1978: 'this art thing lets you free to be yourself, regardless of what anybody thinks, and I think that's probably what I needed to be because you get rather sick of being always a little bit out of step'.³⁸

Picasso's observation that 'you don't become an artist, you are born an artist' was one she would often bring up. 'I think if you're that sort of animal you find the way. If you're really desperate enough and you want to you can find a way for your art.' But it wasn't easy. 'It takes a long time to sort yourself out though ... and I think that's what an artist probably should be doing, sorting themselves out, what they really are. And it takes you decades to find out what you are.' Rosalie was in her mid-fifties when she found out. What follows is an account of Rosalie's long journey of self-discovery and fulfilment.³⁹

37 On conformity and 'would not have considered me an artist': 1997 Ross; 'no cooperation': c. 30 Nov 1978 RG to TG. Colin McCahon to Beatrice McCahon, 11 November 1958, MS-4345/003, Beatrice and Noel Parsloe papers, Hocken Collection Dunedin (with thanks to Peter Simpson).

38 'Born the artist': 1997 Ross (and others); 'this art thing': 1978 Lindsay.

39 Picasso observation: 1978 Lindsay, 1982 North, 1984 Wood Conroy, 1995 Topliss, 1997 Ross, 1997 Feneley; 'if you're that sort of animal': 1995 Topliss; 'it takes a long time': 1990 Ross.

B. Marriage and family

Early life on Mount Stromlo

The challenges Rosalie faced when she arrived in Australia were much the same as those facing any young immigrant: she had to shed her old life and come to terms with marriage, family and life in a very different community in a very different landscape. It took Rosalie seven years to do so, until around 1950. Thereafter, life became easier, and Rosalie gradually began to have more time for creative activities, particularly for her country foraging and flower arranging.

When Rosalie arrived in Australia, Canberra had only 8000 people and was barely twenty years old, an isolated country town markedly different from the bustling, lush green harbour city of about 200,000 she had left behind. Canberra was a hierarchical town of public servants who had no need for or interest in the handful of scientists on Mount Stromlo. When offered the choice of living in town or in the country, and knowing little of what it would be like to live on the mountain as a young mother in 1943, Rosalie chose the mountain, which she thought would be the safer bet. The dawning reality must have come as a huge shock after the pleasures and convenience of city life in Auckland. She found herself confined to a small, isolated community of about thirty adult residents on a pine-covered mountain top at the end of a ten-mile unsealed road to the nearest town. Wartime petrol rationing meant there were few opportunities to get away. Indeed, life was such that government employees living on Mount Stromlo were paid a hardship allowance of £39 a year in addition to salary, a considerable sum at the time. Rosalie's decision to live there would have a profound effect on her future life.⁴⁰

She was a welcome addition to the mountain community. When Rosalie first arrived, she impressed a neighbour as 'rather tall and slight, rather nice looking ... she seems to fit into our household very easily', and one of the European refugees working there remembered: 'from the day you introduced her to the Stromlo bachelors she always charmed me — and everybody else'. She liked the company of these intelligent, lonely, displaced men, whom she would ask to join her for a cup of tea, and they liked her. She also struck a chord with the urbane, Cambridge-educated director of the observatory, Richard Woolley, who regarded her as the only good conversationalist on the mountain, and turned up one night with HC 'Nugget' Coombs in tow to meet this 'Jane Austen' (as Ben recalled). For similar reasons he also invited the Gascoignes to dinner when the master of his old college at Cambridge visited Canberra. But these were to be rare events.⁴¹

Six married women provided female companionship: three were married to scientists, one to an instrument maker and two to groundsmen. They had very assorted backgrounds and interests, and not much in common with Rosalie. For Rosalie in 1943 and 1944, used to the pleasures and convenience of urban life, the stimulus of her teaching job and the easy availability of like-minded friends and family in Auckland, the solitude and isolation was testing — no place to meet, no place to shop. 'My mother came, and said, "this is a terrible place. Can't even go anywhere to borrow a book." And you couldn't.' There were trips up to the observatory to collect the mail, simply in the hope of receiving a friendly nod. 'You'd see some of those glamorous people



A postcard of Mount Stromlo in the early 1940s with the Tidbinbilla range beyond. The family houses are not visible, but were left centre, down the hill in the pine trees, which made for a gloomy environment and added to the sense of isolation that Elinor Ward noticed when she described mountain life in 1950. It was something of a revelation to the residents when the forest was destroyed in a bushfire in 1952

Photograph from author's archive

40 'Offered the choice': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 17. The number of residents is derived from the 1943 electoral roll, which lists 22, not including Rosalie or the wartime refugees recruited to work at the observatory because of their special skills. Nor does it include the workers who lived in Canberra and were transported to and from the mountain each day. 'Hardship allowance': CW Allen papers NLA (diary 2 Feb 1943).

41 'Rather tall and slight': CW Allen papers NLA (diary 6 Jan 1943). Allen gave Rosalie away at her wedding and hosted the wedding breakfast. 'Stromlo bachelors': Oct 1999 Czech optician Francis Lord to BG (BG papers NLA); see also 1998 Hughes on 'good works' with the bachelors. Woolley: recollections of TG and Mary Eagle of conversations with BG. Woolley shared a flat with Coombs in Melbourne, who became one of the greatest public servants of his generation. When FJM Stratton, Master of Gonville and Caius, Woolley's old Cambridge college, was in Canberra on a wartime mission Woolley invited them down to the Hotel Canberra to dine with Stratton.



Ben returning home from the observatory to the house on Mount Stromlo one memorable winter in the late 1940s (because snow like this was uncommon). The only heating was from wood fires and single-bar electric radiators until the mid-1950s, when an oil-burning heater was installed. Rosalie would talk about the air in the house being 'blue with the cold'

Photograph from author's archive



Ben with the first telescope he designed. Absorbed in his science and war work, he only recognised much later how much at sea Rosalie was on the lonely mountain top, the first time she had lived away from home for any length of time

Photograph from author's archive

who worked. People smiled at them in the corridors. I used to say to my husband, "you don't know what it's like in a house all day, with nobody." It was real loneliness.' Ben agreed, 'It was the first time she had left home and she was very much at sea. I wish I'd appreciated this more at the time.'⁴²

If these were tough times, they got worse in November 1943 following the birth of her first child, who immediately required surgery in Sydney. The surgery was done 'with misgivings as the complaint was not positively identified'. (It turned out to be pyloric stenosis, which caused projectile vomiting.) Rosalie stayed in Sydney for two months, with only limited access to her child and having to deal with unsympathetic nursing staff. Mother and child returned to Canberra on 2 February 1944, accompanied by Marion, who, having retired in 1943, came from New Zealand to stay for five months, primarily to help Rosalie with her baby. A second child followed in June 1945 and a third in December 1949.⁴³

There were rare opportunities to escape. One came after only two months on the mountain, when Rosalie jumped at the chance to accompany Ben on a visit to Sydney. She had planned to stay with the Allens but at the last moment changed her mind, somewhat to the relief of Clay Allen who wrote that 'she wasn't a cheerful visitor this afternoon and it is well she went off to Sydney'. There was a week in Sydney in November 1944 (with Rose Allen), and the question of a hurried visit to Auckland came up on 7 September 1945 'on a boat supposedly leaving on Monday [10 September]' but nothing came of that. Three months later, however, in December 1945, Rosalie did return to Auckland, taking her two sons (then aged two years and six months respectively) and she stayed away until April 1946. Ben remained in Australia but joined the family in Auckland for their last few weeks there. While it was natural that Rosalie would want to show off her new family to old friends, and welcome her mother's help with the children, the length of the stay also suggests Rosalie was continuing to find mountain life difficult.⁴⁴

⁴² Regarding the women on Mount Stromlo, see ABC radio talk c. 1960 RG 'Too many pine trees'. The text on loneliness is drawn from Vici MacDonald 1998, pp. 14–15.

⁴³ Baby's illness: CW Allen papers NLA (diaries 5, 15 Dec 1945; 2 Feb, 23, 28 Jun 1946). Rosalie and Ben were accompanied on the train by Unity Cunningham, a young woman with nursing training who worked on Mount Stromlo in the optical assembly unit. On Unity Cunningham see Jennifer Horsfield *Mary Cunningham: An Australian life* Ginninderra Press, Canberra, 2004, pp. 213–214 and her unpublished lecture 'Some stories from Mount Stromlo during the war' to the Queanbeyan Historical Society, April 2009 (BG papers NLA). Unity stayed in Sydney with the family for some weeks. Rosalie and Ben also visited Carl Plate: see Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 16.

⁴⁴ See CW Allen diary entries for 6 Apr 1943 (Sydney holiday); 27 Nov, 1 Dec 1944 (week in Sydney); 7 Sep, 6, 12 and 23 Dec 1945, 24, 26 Feb 1946 (Rosalie in Auckland, Ben in Canberra). During the 1946 visit the two sons were christened on 27 March 1946 at St Andrew's Church, Epsom (author's archive).

In August 1950 *Woman's Day* published a feature article about life on Mount Stromlo. It was written by Elinor Ward and presented a mostly cheery picture (at her editor's insistence).⁴⁵ Her account squares with the picture of mountain life painted in the diaries of resident scientist CW (Clay) Allen, a colleague and neighbour of the Gascoignes, although the diaries lack a woman's perspective. Clay's account predates Ben's arrival in 1941 and ends with the Allen family's departure in October 1951. From his diaries we learn that wood-fired stoves were the main source of heating and cooking, that the first electric stoves were only installed in 1944, that the supply of fresh milk was unreliable and that the only refrigeration was a community refrigerator installed in 1948 after much debate. As it turned out, the Gascoignes did not get their electric stove until April 1946 (and the old fuel stove was replaced with another in 1951).⁴⁶

Even in 1950 Ward could write that there was a 'sense of being cut off from the rest of the world' on Mount Stromlo, which 'serves to emphasise the remoteness and the feeling of being a separate community that the little community holds'. She noted that, for women, 'life on Stromlo has its peculiar domestic problem. Shopping has to be carefully planned ... Once a week, if she can get someone to look after the children, a housewife may take a shopping jaunt into Canberra. This is her personal link with outside life and stimulation.' Ward highlighted the sense of community, including 'the community refrigerators which the Department of the Interior had installed to serve family groups. Each family has its own shelf and users are rostered, week about, to clean the machine.' Other community efforts included 'an orchard, in which the men work together in their spare time and share the crop'. Large wood-burning stoves were used to heat the houses and 'the menfolk frequently make up logging parties to drag in timber and chop it in company'.⁴⁷

Rosalie's (and my) memories square with Ward's account. In 1960, when Rosalie was about to leave the mountain and looked back on her time there, she recalled the challenge of learning to live in a small community. 'I learnt about it the hard way, with many trials and many errors.' But she



Rosalie with Toss and Hester in 1951

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

45 Elinor Ward 'Living with the stars' *Woman's Day* 14 Aug 1950, pp. 40–41. She visited Mount Stromlo on 27 May 1950 (CW Allen papers NLA). Elinor (sometimes Ellinor) was the wife of Frederick Ward, a Melbourne-based industrial designer, who in 1954 was invited to form the ANU Design Unit. Ward, a working woman herself, was an enlightened observer of the plight of women who were expected to make do with home making and child rearing. After the observatory became part of the ANU, Rosalie and Elinor ('Puss' as she was known) would become friends. She died in 1989. Her son Martin told me his mother was unhappy with editorial changes to her article, because they put a more cheerful spin on her story (13 Jun 2016 Martin Ward with MG).

46 CW Allen's diaries include many entries on social life on the mountain, including the women's sewing circle, wood cutting (including a reference to Ben's cross-cut saw), the installation of the first electric stoves in November 1944 and debate about the community refrigerator in 1947. The diaries have references to the Gascoignes visiting to listen to plays and radio talks in their first years; I think they did not get their own radio until Ben made one. Clay's wife Rose ('Vich') was Rosalie's closest friend on the mountain. Gascoigne stove: from maintenance records of the house in the Government property and tenancy registers 1925 to 1968 at archives.act.gov.au.

47 Elinor Ward op. cit. It was only when oil-burning heaters became available in the mid-1950s that there was some relief from the winter cold inside.



Rosalie's patchwork quilt (detail). The completed patchwork covered a single bed. Rosalie had put it aside in the late 1940s and did not complete it until the early 1950s. Rosalie's approach to the construction of the patchwork foreshadowed the work practices she would apply in her art twenty-five years later

Image courtesy of the photographer, Hester L Gascoigne

concluded, 'I think I can say I have got to like living in a small community. I think I learnt how to.' In the early years 'with the men scientifically occupied both day and night, the women had to make a life for themselves as best they could. In the country but not of it, there we were. Assorted ladies, different backgrounds, different age groups, different interests, but dependent solely on each other for companionship ... We must all have been fighting loneliness for our own kind, and I think now that most of our problems sprang from that.'⁴⁸

Rosalie's ways of coping were various, as much as a young family would allow. She gardened a little, writing to Ben in Melbourne in the late summer of 1944 about watering the stocks and an orange canna in flower. Her aunt Ellen had been a gardener and when her mother Marion retired she also would be a keen gardener (as would sister Daintry). Initially the garden was close to the house but in the years ahead it spread and included a large rockery in a previously neglected area by the driveway: 'One day I saw a marigold growing there and realised the soil where they'd thrown it was good.'⁴⁹

Rosalie, true to her childhood inclinations, found things to make. She made children's clothes, knitted and in the early 1950s took up embroidery for a brief period, making samplers (including a tea-cosy) based on stitches in the *Woman's Journal book of stitches*. One winter shortly after the war, when materials were still scarce, she began a patchwork quilt, piecing together flowery hexagons, their colour and cheerfulness relieving the bleak chill of a 'large, cold house and a bad-tempered fuel stove'. She may have brought the idea of a patchwork with her from Auckland Girls Grammar School, which made patchwork quilts for the war effort. The pleasures of the hunt for suitable materials, the meticulous work involved in converting them to the hexagons from which she constructed the quilt, the aesthetic judgements involved in arranging the hexagons, and the process of working with small units all foreshadow the work practices Rosalie adopted in her art twenty-five years later.⁵⁰

Books were another escape, especially in the 1950s when she could visit the Canberra library (then in Kings Avenue, later demolished) on her trips to town and when the mobile library began making regular visits to Mount Stromlo from 1956. Rosalie sought out books based on people, hoping to combat the solitude and limited human contact mountain life had to offer. 'I met the pleasant, the calculating, the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the stupid, the fascinating, the artistic — hundreds of them, and they all helped, even the ones I didn't believe in.'⁵¹

48 'I learnt about it': c. 1960 RG 'Too many pine trees'.

49 Gardening: [possibly 24 May] 1944 RG to BG, BG papers NLA; 'marigold': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 16. It was in the rockery that Rosalie grew the polyanthus that she used in one of her first competitive flower show entries.

50 Patchwork: c. 1960 RG 'Too many pine trees'; illustrated in Vici Macdonald 1998, p. 15.

51 c. 1960 RG 'Too many pine trees'.

Rosalie's survival skills included all those childhood attributes her friend Ruth Evans remembered: the gregarious girl who was good company and hosted wonderful parties with new games and exciting food. She drew on these skills to entertain both the adults and, later, the children on the mountain. There were parties and games, beginning with the 'soup kitchen' that Ben and Rosalie hosted shortly after they settled into their house. A few months later there was a party for 'nearly all the Mt Stromlo people' where they 'had various competitions and finished up with many short charades'. Another evening of games and competitions at the Gascoignes 'kept us amused until late'. Reflecting Rosalie's love of words and punning, one of those games involved completing a short story by filling in missing words, all of which were cued to the names of the residents: 'until the *Buscombes* [bus comes]', 'a tame *Cookaburra*', 'a *Clare* [clear] case of love at first sight', 'took the last *Bend* at seventy', 'licked his lips with *Gusto*', 'turned *Ashley* pale'. One children's party featured a pond made with a large silver tray covered with green jelly and home to a chocolate frog for each guest. Another was based on the theme of a gypsy camp complete with fortune teller. At Christmas she decorated the tree with yellow-painted kurrajong pods, hung it with little cut-out birds fitted with shiny cellophane wings, and topped it with a fairy holding a wand with a gold star attached. In the 1950s Rosalie devised decorations for observatory social evenings, including gold and black posters of the signs of the zodiac for a staff dance.⁵²

Coming to terms with the landscape

Rosalie's first experience of the Australian landscape was of a small scientific community in a pine forest in the heat of summer. 'I remember the first impression I got of Mount Stromlo was the colour actually. It was a different colour scheme from New Zealand and it was all orange roofs and really deep green pine trees and blue sky ... It was very different from New Zealand ... the birds were all big and they toppled the branches like the biblical birds. I was amazed at how big the birds were and as for the parrots, it was like living in a zoo for a while.' She had experienced nothing like it before. 'You had to learn that feeling of rock under your feet. We have squelch in New Zealand because it's green; there are no snakes and you can walk on it, and it smells sweet.' She struggled with this new environment for many years 'wondering where to put my emotions'.⁵³

She was also struck by the scale of things. 'You'd stand up there on the top of the hill and look way down to the 'Bidgee [Murrumbidgee River] and the Brindabellas [mountains] out there. It was gigantic.' She recalled coming back from a visit to New Zealand and standing out on the back of the hill. 'The air hung from the top of the sky down to the ground, empty, and I remember saying to myself: "nothing's going to happen, so you might as well get used to it" and it's very true, nothing did happen.' Forty years on she stood on the ridge above Lake George and revelled in the freedom and air and all that space, and recalled somebody 'who wrote about a place where the horizon came down to his boots; I think that's a lovely expression ... and Eve Langley [who] wrote ... about the gigantic Australian afternoon ... I think Europeans don't live with gigantic'.⁵⁴

52 Parties, games nights: CW Allen papers NLA (diary entries 21 Feb, 22 Jul 1943, 25 Dec 1944, 26 Feb 1947). The diaries also include references to communal chess tournaments (for men only), evenings of recorded music at the bachelor quarters, play readings and flag bridge. I remember Rosalie and Ben making nautical flags and stands to hold them for flag bridge tournaments. Two stories from the punning games, dating from the early 1950s, are in the BG papers NLA. Children's parties, decorations: MG personal memories.

53 'The first impression': 1997 Feneley, also 1982 North; 'that feeling of rock': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 37; 'wondering where to put': 1996 Davidson.

54 'You'd stand up there' and 'horizon came down to his boots': 1995 Topliss; 'the air hung': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 14; similar remarks in 1997 Feneley and 1999 Auckland AG.



Rosalie with pram, c. 1944

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Rosalie by the Murrumbidgee River, c. 1950,
stone in one hand, driftwood in the other

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

Rosalie's childhood provided her with strategies for dealing with her new world. Place had a special value for Rosalie. She remembered the childhood holidays at the beach: 'It never became a sort of home or place where I was willing to stay until ... I had walked every path and knew things about it.' She did the same on Mount Stromlo. Walking the unkempt gravel road along the top of Mount Stromlo looking for something — anything — to take the eye, at first it was a case of 'goodness, where's a tree I know? Nowhere'.⁵⁵ 'Also, I used to walk out of the house and down the hill and round the place and I came to the conclusion that, well, nature was a friend anyway and something I knew about. As Picasso said once, you've got to start with what belongs to you, and that belonged to me because I knew about that. Nobody was going to tell me.'

'I'd push the children's prams around that lonely mountain until I knew the shape of every stone and tree, the texture of every patch of dirt and grass, the colour of every leaf and weed.' She began to forage the shaped branch, unusual leaves, native grasses in their different seasonal colours, whitened bones of long-dead livestock, pieces of driftwood or stones smoothed by the river. 'I had to have things that I found interesting. There wasn't any stimulation of the eye. You fed your eye as much as you could. And that's where I think I started. You were just hungry for something extra, and not the ordinary turnover of the everyday.'⁵⁶

As the children grew and went off to school, Rosalie could forage further afield. On family picnics Rosalie would encourage them to look for materials: one day it was black river stones, another day it was interesting driftwood. Selections came home and ended up on the mantelpiece, to the scornful looks (Rosalie thought) of the other mountain-top women. She had done the same as a child at Waiheke and, as an ikebana practitioner and assemblage artist, would continue bringing things in to live with, watch and assess 'until I get a feel of them'.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ 'It never became': 1998 Hughes; 'goodness, where's a tree': 1982 North; 'I used to walk': 1997 Feneley, also Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 16.

⁵⁶ 'I'd push the children's prams': Janet Hawley 1997; 'I had to have': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 16.

⁵⁷ 'On family picnics': MG personal memories; 'scornful looks': Janet Hawley 1997, Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 16; 'until I get the feel': Australian Information Service c. 1969.

Mount Stromlo in the 1950s

Life on the mountain — and in Canberra and elsewhere — improved as wartime restrictions and shortages eased. The local community began to grow in 1951 following the government's decision to invite international observatories to build facilities on Mount Stromlo. New houses were constructed to support the observatory's expansion and this brought new families and more women. Rosalie recalled, 'As time went on we got better at coping. People ceased, some sooner, some later, to look for the kind of lives they had left behind them in the cities of Australia or, in many cases, overseas.'⁵⁸

Rosalie's remark that people ceased to look for the kind of lives they had left behind them applied in her case as much as to others. Rosalie was fortunate in having had the opportunity to revisit her old life — unlike others on the mountain — not least because the visits sharpened her awareness that the mountain was now her home and Australia her landscape. Rosalie and Ben would go back to Auckland with the boys again, in the summer of 1948–49.⁵⁹ This visit was an important milestone because it was then that she understood: 'You can't live in two countries. Once you leave home, there's no such thing as going back. You're different, the children are different. Your friends have made other friends.'⁶⁰

Soon after they returned to Australia the family bought a small car, in June 1949, and Rosalie learnt to drive. The car gave her more control over her life and she could venture into town (including the library) at times of her choosing. She was no longer dependent on the goodwill of others and the limited public transport available to those living on the mountain when she needed to go shopping or do canteen duty at the boys' school (which had the side effect of expanding her range of contacts).⁶¹

More women arrived on the mountain, giving everyone a chance to find someone who shared at least one interest with them. For Rosalie, flowers and gardening was one of those shared interests. In 1955 one neighbour, Royal Buscombe, persuaded Rosalie to enter flower arrangements in the Horticultural Society of Canberra's Spring Flower Show and she won a second prize with a bowl of polyanthus. For the next ten years Rosalie would continue to enter the society's competitions on a fairly regular basis, with a growing measure of success, and sometimes she participated in similar shows run by others. In terms of her later career as an artist, Rosalie did not put much store by her flower arrangements, but the shows were important because they were an opportunity for Rosalie to do something for herself, an activity of her own independent of family needs and providing an outlet for her creative instincts. Three times a year, in March, September and November, the Horticultural Society show schedule arrived in the mail, and she would read it eagerly to see what classes she might enter. Her preferences were twofold: initially she concentrated on modest domestic arrangements, for 'a breakfast table' or 'a bedside table' and such, but her strength lay in classes calling for much more imagination: 'Autumn', 'modern arrangement with driftwood', 'a touch of Midas', 'industry', 'forest fire' and so on.⁶²

⁵⁸ New telescopes: *Canberra Times* 13 May 1949; new housing: *Canberra Times* 4 Apr 1950, p. 4; 'better at coping': c. 1960 RG 'Too many pine trees'.

⁵⁹ I remember the second trip, including the flying boat with its staircase we travelled in from Rose Bay to Auckland and back; the house at Robert Hall Avenue, with the train line on the other side of the road; and visiting Daintry in Hamilton.

⁶⁰ 'You can't live in two countries': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 14.

⁶¹ The car was a second-hand Austin 7 previously owned by the Allens: CW Allen papers NLA (diary 5 Jun 1949).

⁶² MG personal memories. See also Vici MacDonald (1998, p. 17) and the Horticultural Society of Canberra papers, ACT Heritage Library. Show results were reported regularly in the *Canberra Times*. The last competitive show Rosalie entered was in September 1965, by which time she was well into ikebana.



Rosalie's 'modern arrangement of flowers and driftwood' selected as the outstanding decorative arrangement at the Spring Flower Show in 1960. See pp. 128–132 for more illustrations of Rosalie's flower, dried and ikebana arrangements

Photograph from author's archive

Rosalie's decisions on what to enter also took account of practical considerations, especially the restricted palette of flowers she had available from her garden. She experimented with other materials, including the wood, stones, grasses and weeds she encountered on her explorations of the local countryside. An early example from about 1958 was a work called 'Cotter Road', named after the still-unsealed road at the foot of Mount Stromlo linking Canberra to the junction of the Cotter and Murrumbidgee rivers and beyond. The work consisted of a sheep's skull, rocks and dried grass on a copper sheet with a blue denim background, and was a remarkable evocation of the road to the river. A work in the 1960 Spring Flower Show attracted the attention of the *Canberra Times*: 'Mrs. S. C. B. Gascoigne's modern arrangement of flowers with driftwood was the outstanding exhibit in the decorative section. It was an excellent arrangement, simple in form but with a definite line. The driftwood was well chosen and pebbles were selected carefully for colour, and arranged to form the base for the whole design.'⁶³ She taught herself how to dry and preserve many sorts of plant materials, native and exotic, and she made a name for herself by using these materials to create long-lasting arrangements.

Encounters with art (1)

One of the new experiences that awaited Rosalie in Australia was exposure to a community of artists. It began very slowly, through her marriage to Ben, which immediately brought her into contact with the Sydney painter Carl Plate (1909–1977), and expanded as an art-minded community developed in Canberra from the late 1950s. Ben and Carl had shared a cabin on the *Orcades* in 1940 on their voyage back from England. Never having put his head inside a gallery, Ben found himself travelling with a group of artists, theatricals, writers and musicians, all returning to Australia after varying degrees of exposure to the European experience. 'We talked all day and night, as one did on shipboard, and as well as undergoing a course in modern art, I was introduced to a very different way of living.' The meeting with Carl Plate was fateful — he would be the first artist Rosalie got to know. Carl introduced Ben and Rosalie to the contemporary art world and an artist's milieu. Ben later observed that what she got from Carl and his people was a feeling that there was an art community that lived very different lives from the community she knew in Auckland.⁶⁴

⁶³ *Canberra Times* 20 Sep 1960.

⁶⁴ 'We talked all day': BG papers NLA (Box 1 personal record, p. 7); 'Ben later observed': mid-2000 BG with Mary Eagle, pers. comm.

Carl was an active member of the Contemporary Art Society and he took Ben to meetings. He ran the Notanda Gallery at 41 Rowe Street behind the GPO in Sydney where he sold prints he had brought back from Europe as well as books and reproductions. Carl gave the newly married couple a watercolour of an Australian bush landscape. Rosalie first met Carl in Sydney in December 1943. They did not hit it off: he was still a bachelor and she was nursing a sick baby, felt very isolated, and had no experience of the bohemian art world. 'I was really, really on the wrong side of the tracks with him ... and he was really, really chauvinistic.' For a long time Rosalie found dealing with Carl a daunting prospect. He thought of her as a suburban housewife and wrote her off as someone with no real creativity or appreciation of art, but as time went on he came to see otherwise and he was very encouraging about Rosalie's early sculptural works.⁶⁵

Carl Plate visited Ben and Rosalie on Mount Stromlo in 1945 and 1949. He did a number of watercolours on those visits, including one titled 'Up on Stromlo' which was exhibited at the Contemporary Art Society in 1945, and another dated 1949 is a pair of one Carl gave Ben and Rosalie). On the second visit he bought his new wife Jocelyn (daughter of...) and their neighbour (William Edward) James Cook (1904–1960), a teacher at the East Sydney Technical College and art critic for the *Daily Telegraph*. Plate and Cook had their easels and painted views from Mount Stromlo. Ben later remembered Rosalie chafing at having to do all the cooking but noted that, at the same time, she got plenty out of the visits and even in those early days could talk about art. The Gascoignes made a reciprocal visit to holiday at the Plate's house in Woronora, a bushland estuary on the southern outskirts of Sydney. I don't recall ever visiting the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) on our infrequent trips to Sydney as a child, but we certainly always went to the David Jones department store (although usually not to its gallery) and to the Notanda Gallery, where we were allowed to choose postcards and Carl advised Ben and Rosalie on the selection of reproductions. On one occasion a Braque lithograph, *The bird* 1949, turned up instead of the Utrillo print they had asked for. Through Carl they met his sister, artist Margo Lewers (1908–1978), and her husband, sculptor Gerald Lewers (1905–1962), both of whom would have large works on display in public places in Canberra.⁶⁶



Carl Plate in his Notanda Gallery in 1953 'which sells prints by old and new painters. He shows customer Gauguin, Picasso' (PIX caption). The family would usually drop in when in Sydney and the children were encouraged to choose postcard-size prints

Image from PIX, 2 May 1953, courtesy of Cassi Plate

⁶⁵ For Rosalie on Carl Plate see 1998 Hughes and Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 16. As for bohemian life, even in the 1950s Rosalie could still be shocked at seeing Jocelyn Plate spitting in a frying pan to test the temperature (MG personal memory).

⁶⁶ Ben's recollections: BG papers NLA (Box 1 personal record, p. 7) and mid-2000 with Mary Eagle, pers. comm. Holidays and Sydney visits: MG personal recollections (my brother and I learnt to swim in the nearby Woronora River when we stayed at the Plates). The watercolour dated 1943, plus another from the late 1940s of a view from Mount Stromlo through pine trees, and the Braque lithograph, are all in the ANU Art Collection. (William Edward) James Cook gave the Gascoignes oil paintings of views from Mount Stromlo in different lights, studies for a larger painting intended for the Wynne Prize (family collection). In 1960 Margo Lewers had a large mosaic at the entrance to the Canberra Rex Hotel, at the time Canberra's grandest; Gerald Lewers's carved stone piece *Relaxation* 1953 and his bronze fountain *Swans in flight* 1960 were installed outside University House and his large copper relief (completed by Margo) was installed in the main hall of the Reserve Bank, Canberra, in 1965.

In 1941 Ben bought a copy of Herbert Read's book *The meaning of art* from the Notanda Gallery. Over the next fifteen years Ben and Rosalie would acquire other art books, primarily Penguin *Modern painters* paperbacks on contemporary, mostly figurative and mostly English, artists such as Paul Nash, Ben Shahn (American), Stanley Spencer, Frances Hodgkins, Edward Hopper (American), Ben Nicholson, John Piper and Ivor Hitchens. Visiting astronomers from New York gave the couple a book on Matisse in 1953 and a few years later they bought John Rothenstein's *The Moderns and their world*.⁶⁷

As Rosalie's children grew up and there was space for other things in her life, art gradually began to play a bigger part in the Gascoigne family. Rosalie made friends with a few potters and in about 1954 took a brief evening course in pottery at the Canberra Technical College (a lot of women were interested in pottery then). More reproductions were acquired, including a Signac-like harbour scene in yellows, and a very large image of a doll's house-like interior. Ben spent six months in the United States and Europe from August 1956 to February 1957 and came back with reproductions from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I recall Picasso's *The lovers* 1923, a cubist work by Stuart Davis, a John Marin seascape, an Alexei Jawlensky portrait and two Indian paintings.

Canberra grew slowly in the 1950s and with it a small community of people engaged in the arts, including two art clubs, one very traditional and the other with a contemporary twist. It was the latter that attracted Rosalie and Ben and in the mid-1950s they bought a semi-abstract oil painted on rough hessian and called *After midnight* (artist unknown). Rosalie's social world expanded further when Mount Stromlo became part of The Australian National University (ANU) in 1957. She made friends with the arts-inclined wives of other academics and, stimulated by the arrival of a Swedish couple on Mount Stromlo, she became interested in Scandinavian design. Ben brought several examples back with him after visiting Copenhagen in 1957.⁶⁸

The 1960s: Expanding horizons

In 1960 the Gascoignes moved to the new suburb of Deakin at the foot of Red Hill, a move made to accommodate the needs of three teenage children. It was a poorly designed house on sloping land facing north, entered by way of a long concrete ramp that opened onto wasteful passageways and a dining room that would just allow for a table seating six people. Opposite was a sitting room with a fireplace that, when first lit, filled the room with smoke and ash while Rosalie was entertaining. Outside a windy terrace faced west. So far as Rosalie's work was concerned, all it offered was space underneath where she could hang the materials for her dried arrangements. But as her children became more independent at least she had more time to pursue her interests.

The departure from Mount Stromlo coincided with an invitation from the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) to give a radio talk about life on the mountain. The ABC had in mind a talk aimed especially at women living in small communities, including Service wives living on military bases in South-East Asia. Rosalie called her talk 'Too many pine trees' and in it described her life on Mount Stromlo, still very fresh in her mind. It has been an important source for this biographical note.⁶⁹

67 The *Modern painters* series was edited by Kenneth Clark; artists listed by publication date. Most were acquired in Canberra from Verity Hewitt's bookshop. The Matisse was Jean Cassou *The Faber Gallery: Matisse* London, 1953. John Rothenstein *The Moderns and their world* Phoenix House, London, 1957.

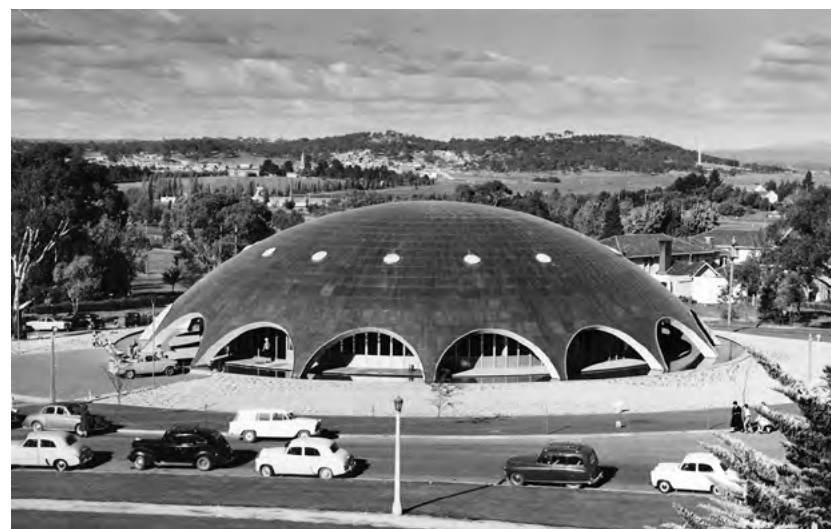
68 For an account of the pottery/ceramics course at the Canberra Technical College, see Michael Agostino *The Australian National University School of Art: A history of the first 65 years* ANU eView, Canberra, 2010, chapter 11. Ben's six-month trip overseas had another consequence: previously the traditional housewife, Rosalie for the first time was fully in charge of the family, had to learn how to manage the family finances and had to buy a new car to replace their ageing, unsafe one. Scandinavian design: the Swedish couple was Bengt and Vivi Westerlund. Rosalie and Vivi became close friends — Vivi introduced Rosalie to Swedish rug making and Rosalie introduced Vivi to ikebana.

69 c. 1960 R.G. 'Too many pine trees'. There is no record of the date of broadcast, but it was probably in 1960 or 1961.

In terms of Rosalie's future life the talk is particularly interesting for what she says about her country foraging trips and her awareness of the beauty of the grass, stones and bare branches she came across. So much so that by 1960 she had 'a very satisfying hobby in still life arrangements ... [which] takes me out over the paddocks on fine mornings and fills my house with mountain stones and river stones and flat frost-split rocks, dry grasses, cones, thistle heads, seed heads, lichens and driftwood. The possibilities are endless, the excitement of the chase exhilarating ... I have never had such a rewarding hobby.'⁷⁰

Rosalie became a popular and sought-after lecturer on flower arranging and dried arrangements, and the prime minister's wife, Dame Pattie Menzies, invited her to the Lodge for private lessons.⁷¹ Good teacher that she was, Rosalie usually spoke without notes, her only aids being the materials she was using in her demonstrations. But notes do exist for a radio talk on dried arrangements in 1960 or 1961. The interesting thing about this talk is that it describes practices and interests that would continue throughout Rosalie's later career as a fully fledged artist. Right up front, in the first paragraph, is a lasting signature: 'when I am making an arrangement ... I like to have a lot of stuff', as photographs of the clutter and accumulations in her studio and surrounds in the 1990s demonstrate. Then there were the materials she spoke about: 'ordinary roadside grasses ... I pick when it has burnt brown and blond and orange in the sun'. She 'wouldn't be without' the heads 'of a very tall thistle that springs from a plant with mottled leaves' (the variegated thistle, *Silybum marianum*), and she gathered in 'even the prickly Blue Devil' (*Eryngium ovinum*). She spoke, too, about using crumpled chicken wire secured to a Masonite base as the foundation for her arrangements, a combination of materials that Rosalie would revert to in her airy assemblages in the 1990s, though with the wire and Masonite as an important and visible part of the composition, rather than the hidden support.⁷²

Rosalie's work attracted the attention of Jack Deeble, executive secretary of the Academy of Science and a former neighbour on Mount Stromlo. In 1959 he invited her to dress the newly opened Roy Grounds-designed academy building for an important international conference it was hosting. 'I couldn't believe I'd been singled out ... So I did huge dried [arrangements in] ... the Academy colours, all those greys and Roy Grounds colours ...' Grounds was impressed and at his instigation the academy offered her a contract to continue her installations. This gave her an opportunity to work on a much larger scale in a sympathetic environment, with its natural light, muted natural colours and clean,



The Academy of Science building, 1960. Designed by Roy Grounds, who admired Rosalie's installations there, the building would influence the design of Ben and Rosalie's house when they came to build in 1968–69

Image courtesy of the Australian Academy of Science, photographer unknown

⁷⁰ 'Satisfying hobby': c. 1960 RG 'Too many pine trees'.

⁷¹ 'Dame Pattie': MG personal memory. The social pages of the *Canberra Times* and *Canberra Courier* contain many references to talks given by Rosalie.

⁷² c. 1960 RG 'Dried arrangements'.

uncluttered spaces. The challenge was stimulating. ‘This was pretty good for me, really, because you got those good sculptural spaces. You had to think big.’ The experience was to influence the design brief when Rosalie and Ben came to commission their own house in 1968.⁷³

Unbeknown to Rosalie, Roy Grounds’s sympathetic response to her work in the academy — especially her use of the natural pieces she had found in the fields and by the river — would find its parallel in Hal Missingham, then director of the AGNSW. In November 1962 the gallery mounted an exhibition called *Found Objects*, which James Gleeson reviewed: ‘Pieces of wood, stone, metal, bone or shell can be enjoyed simply because their form is beautiful, their colour is attractive or their texture unusual.’ Even then, this was a song Rosalie certainly knew well, although I doubt that she saw the show or even knew of it.⁷⁴

Ikebana

In 1962 Rosalie was persuaded to accept an invitation to join classes in ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of flower arrangement, which were being offered by Norman Sparnon. Sparnon was a Sydney-based and Tokyo-trained master who came to Canberra once a month and taught the modern, twentieth-century style known as the Sogetsu school, founded by Sofu Teshigahara. At the time ikebana had a growing following in Australia, including in the art world, such that Sydney’s *Contemporary Art Society broadsheet* in April 1959 noted in its list of forthcoming exhibitions that there was to be an exhibition of Classical and Modern Flower Arrangements by Norman Sparnon 13–18 April at David Jones Gallery. Rosalie had already read Sparnon’s book *Japanese flower arrangement* when she was asked to join his class. She had bought it in Sydney and afterwards sat on the steps of Mark Foy’s department store with her coffee and leafed through it. A great wave of recognition passed over her: ‘I read on, feeling that I knew for myself everything it was saying’.⁷⁵

In the light of Rosalie’s later career, it is fascinating to read what Sparnon had to say about modern ikebana. It ‘utilises all forms of plant life, living or dead in every conceivable form — whole tree trunks, stumps, roots, grasses, flowers, vines [and] all varieties of dried materials ... The container may be of the conventional type or may be one of the arranger’s invention such as automotive parts or drain-piping ... and used along with other non-floral materials such as wrought iron, scrap metal, wire, stone ... [and others].’ He also made a point about the creativity of the practitioner and the importance of materials in determining the outcome: ‘the student should strive to be creative and original ... the idea for an arrangement should come from the material to be used’. And the punch line: ‘Above all, the arrangement should be endowed with feeling. The material should be carefully studied and utilized to its best advantage to express the feelings of the arranger.’⁷⁶

73 ‘I couldn’t believe’ and ‘this was pretty good’: 1982 North. See also Martin Gascoigne and Alan Roberts ‘An artist at the academy’ in Alan Roberts *A big, bold, simple concept: A history of the Australian Academy of Science* (Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 2010). Re design of house, see Milton Cameron 2012, chapter 5 and Theo Bischoff papers, ACT Heritage Library. Ben was elected a fellow of the academy in 1966, which helped consolidate her link. Although Rosalie terminated her original contract with the academy in 1962, she continued to provide installations and massive ikebana pieces on an occasional basis until 1974.

74 *Found objects* (exh. cat.) AGNSW 7–26 Nov 1962 with introduction by Hal Missingham, AGNSW Research Library courtesy of Hannah Fink; James Gleeson ‘The beauty created by time’ *Sun Herald* 11 Nov 1962, p. 87; see also WT [Wallace Thornton] ‘New exhibitions’ *SMH* 7 Nov 1962, p. 14. I thank Mary Eagle for drawing the exhibition and reviews to my attention.

75 Ikebana in Sydney: *Contemporary Art Society broadsheet* in AGNSW Research Library courtesy of Mary Eagle. At this time the Blaxland Gallery hosted regular ikebana exhibitions organised by Norman Sparnon: ‘The flower of ikebana expertise’ (obituary) *The Australian* 12 Jul 1995, p. 12; Norman Sparnon *Japanese flower arrangement* Charles Tuttle, Tokyo, 1960; Mark Foy’s and ‘I read on’: Mary Eagle 1985.

76 Norman Sparnon op. cit., pp. 137–140.

This was all grist to the mill for Rosalie. 'I was already bringing back the hill-tops and the rivers in the form of dried native flowers, river stones and grasses. I was all wild surmise. I saw Norman Sparnon using materials such as tree roots which I'd already lugged into my house and not known how to use. Ikebana gave an absolute. It gave form. To do things exactly steadied you down. From ikebana I got the vision of how to use the things I liked.'⁷⁷

Rosalie was a quick study and in November 1965 she was awarded her teacher's diploma. She continued to take lessons with Sparnon but as time went on she found that her fellow students watched her as much as Sparnon, and that she was learning less and less from him. She offered her own classes (1966–70), gave demonstrations for charity events, organised ikebana exhibitions, and in 1968 was commissioned to provide arrangements for the opening ceremony of the new National Library. In 1969 the Australian Information Service chose her as the subject of an article on ikebana in Australia subsequently published in the Japanese press.⁷⁸

Rosalie was a very good practitioner. When Sofu Teshigahara came to Australia in September 1967 Rosalie spent five weeks filling the basement of the Academy of Science building with materials she had collected for his exhibition there. He was very taken with what she offered, and after inspecting the materials turned to her and said, 'you've got a great eye'. He remembered this back in Tokyo, when he reportedly told people that the material in Canberra was amazing, the best in Australia.⁷⁹

As time went on Rosalie's thinking about ikebana evolved. She began to tire of the emphasis on things Japanese, especially Sparnon's use of imported Japanese materials when there was so much wonderful Australian material available. After seven years 'I had decided that I didn't want anybody else's ... Japanese things ... I wasn't so great on the iris and this sort of stuff ... So I planted [my ikebana] firmly in the Australian context ... I got the farm iron and what was growing around here.' Rosalie 'was trying to make the countryside visible — the Australian countryside, not the Japanese'.⁸⁰

She also wanted something more permanent, something that would last more than a couple of days. She noted that Sofu Teshigahara had a streak of this in him because he also made sculptures and he left a couple behind in Australia (at the AGNSW, and National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in Canberra). 'I started making things that would



The photograph of Rosalie at Anstey Street taken to illustrate an article on ikebana in Australia published in the Japanese press in 1969. See pp. 128–132 for more illustrations of Rosalie's flower, dried and ikebana arrangements. On the wall is a Modigliani print bought in London in 1963

Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia (A1501, A9510)

77 'I was already bringing': Mary Eagle 1985, fourth page of the essay. Eagle spoke at length with Rosalie about her work while she was preparing her essay for Rosalie's 1985 exhibition in Hobart.

78 The women's pages of the *Canberra Times* have many references to Rosalie's demonstrations in the 1960s. In 1968 Rosalie was invited to mount a special, non-competitive, display of ikebana at the Horticultural Society's spring bulb show. The *Canberra Times* includes interviews with Rosalie (13 Nov 1968, p. 13; 18 Jul 1969), reports of her talks and advertisements for her classes. Re opening of NLA, see David Reid images in NLA: call no. PIC NL1723–4 LOG NL1723; 'published in the Japanese press': Australian Information Service c. 1969.

79 On Sofu's reactions in Canberra see 1982 North.

80 'I had decided that': 1982 North; 'make the countryside visible': 1996 Davidson, see also 1998 Hughes.

last. I got a bit sick of the fact that ikebana things if they lasted for four days this was absolutely marvellous ... It wasn't good enough for me. Nor was it good enough for the Sogetsu headmaster [Sofu Teshigahara] who made great sculptural things bought by the French, particularly. And he was playing for permanence too.' She experimented with a twisted she-oak tree trunk, burning holes in it with a blowlamp. The piece was modelled on images of Sofu's sculptures and she installed it in the Academy of Science.⁸¹

Reflecting on her ikebana years, Rosalie acknowledged several debts. First, ikebana taught her that she was good at something, and that success opened doors for her. But more than anything else, ikebana taught her to think like an artist, and made her for the first time feel that she could do 'legitimate' art. The change can be seen by comparing what she said about her work in 1960 with what she said in 1969. In 1960 Rosalie had spoken about her 'still lifes' as 'a very satisfying hobby'. Ten years on, she spoke about her ikebana in a very different way: 'It's more a way of living than a hobby. It colours the very way I look at everything now. It has sharpened my perception.'⁸²

Ikebana, she said, 'gave me a whole free open world. I could do what I liked. And that was great.' A recurring theme in her interviews in 1968 and 1969 is the personal nature of ikebana, and the opportunities it offered for self-expression. It was 'as personal as oil painting', she told one interviewer. 'I found that when you learn ikebana, after a while you learn the rules, and then you learn what rules you want to keep. You're on your own after that.' She went on: 'And so you can put everything you are into ikebana', a remark that echoes what would become a favourite saying of hers by Jasper Johns: 'A picture is what a painter puts whatever he has into'. She was beginning to think like an artist and to see herself as one.⁸³

Ikebana, she recognised in 1969, 'sharpened my perception. I enjoy sculpture as I never used to'. There were practical consequences for her foraging trips: 'I got a more sculptural eye and I remember when I used to walk in the paddocks, I used to see a lot more and I used to see the potential of things and I remember once walking over a piece of rusty, ordinary fencing wire and [thinking] oh, that's only old wire ... And so I came back and I picked it up, humbly — a bit of humility doesn't hurt anybody — because it was a good shape. I should have picked it up in the first place.' Or as she told Ian North: 'Anything that had good shape, or I found ... exciting, I didn't query what it was. If that was an exciting ... shape I took it. And so I got into the rusty wire and that sort of stuff.'⁸⁴

Rosalie's collection grew so much that by 1968 the whole back lawn of the Dugan Street, Deakin, house was covered with the material, arranged in neat rows to make mowing easier. When the sculptor and art critic Donald Brook came to a party at Dugan Street and saw it all spread out, he asked Rosalie, 'When are you going to have an exhibition? I love your iron.' She began to visit country dumps and that same trained eye eventually led her to all sorts of other materials, including the battered sheets of old, corrugated iron and the discarded kitchen enamelware that she used in her assemblages from 1974 until 1993. Ikebana had helped her see them and given her permission — and the confidence — to use her finds.⁸⁵

81 'I started making': 1998 Hughes. Sofu sculpture: Rosalie had a copy of the catalogue for the 1968 survey exhibition of Sofu's sculpture (Atsua Imaizumi 1968). See also Helen Frizell 'The grand master puts on a show' *SMH* 22 Sep 1967, p. 6 for description of sculpture. Sofu Teshigahara, *Castle*, camphor wood covered with brass, AGNSW SO1.1967, gift of the artist 1967. Sofu also gave a sculpture to the NCDC, illustrated in the *Canberra Times* 27 Sep 1967, p. 13. Titled *Hinoki*, it is a freestanding abstract wooden sculpture, just under two metres tall and partly sheathed in copper, and in the 1970s was displayed in the entrance to the Woden Library in Canberra (NCDC *Works of art in Canberra* NCDC, Canberra, December 1980, p. 53 (illus.)). The 1968 Sofu exhibition catalogue also lists other works in Australia. 'Blowlamp': I gave Rosalie a small gas-fired blowlamp as a Christmas present in 1968.

82 'Opened doors for her': 1988 Ewen McDonald (similar references in Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 19 and 1998 Hughes); 'satisfying hobby': c. 1960 RG 'Too many pine trees'; 'way of living': Australian Information Service c. 1969.

83 'Whole free open world': 1998 Hughes; 'as personal as oil painting' and 'learn the rules': Doreen Hungerford *Canberra Times* 13 Nov 1968, p. 20, also 1982 North, Carole Lax *Canberra Times* 18 Jul 1969 and Australian Information Service c. 1969. Jasper Johns quote from Rosalie's Marimekko notebook, unsourced, and cited by Rosalie in Janine Burke 1979, in a letter to Josephine Humphries dated 26 Jul 1993 (notebook and letter, RG papers NLA) and 1997 Ross. Vici MacDonald refers to Sofu Teshigahara's description of ikebana as sculpture using flowers 'in which the subjectivity of the arranger is prominently expressed', and writes about how, as Rosalie grew in confidence, she personalised each aspect of the discipline — materials, container, construction and context (Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 18).

84 'Sharpened my perception': Australian Information Service c. 1969; 'more sculptural eye': 1997 Feneley; 'anything that had good shape': 1982 North.

85 'Donald Brook': 1982 North. The party must have been before 1968 when Brook moved to Sydney.

The rusted metal became one of the ways in which Rosalie personalised her ikebana, using it as containers for, but more often as part of, her compositions. The major element in a 1965 work was a 'piece of that squared-off reinforcing iron that had been twisted ... it had lovely spaces and lovely close bits and lovely wild pieces and it strained'. Sparnon was so taken with one of her constructions that he used it in an arrangement to illustrate one of his books, though he failed to credit Rosalie's work. In 1969 visitors to the new house in Pearce were confronted with an arrangement of 'two pieces of dried fern and a berry branch in an old motorcycle petrol tank' and nearby 'some perfectly circled dried grass in an upturned piece of blue metal piping'.⁸⁶

Beginning in the mid-1960s Rosalie also started using rusted farm metal to make figurative sculptures, with sideways looks to artists such as Picasso and Robert Klippel. The sculptures were in stark contrast to her ikebana pieces, usually small and with explicit human or animal references, although there was also a larger Heath Robinson-like fountain made with plough discs and plumbed with a garden hose. Her interest was such that in 1967 Ben brought back from London a copy of the catalogue of an exhibition at the Tate Gallery of Picasso's sculptures and ceramics. Rosalie was much taken with his *Bull's head*, which he made from a bicycle seat and handlebars. She enjoyed Picasso's 'sportiveness, his enjoyment' and in later years would take heed of this in her own practice (see, for example, *Side show parrots* 1981). Herein lay the seeds of Rosalie's assemblage work in the early 1970s.⁸⁷

Various curators have assessed the influence that ikebana had on Rosalie's later art, and one Japanese author has argued that her later assemblages stand as an extreme example of modern ikebana. Rosalie herself once spoke of her boxed assemblages as 'little ikebanas'. Ikebana not only allowed Rosalie freedom of expression, it also gave her discipline with which to exercise it. 'It stopped me looking predominantly at colour and it started me looking at line and form, and I suppose fairly naturally getting into a more sculptural, three-dimensional way of thought. The other thing I think ikebana teaches one is the balance of one thing against another, the spacing between things — the sort of principles you can study and adopt in any sort of work you do. I think it was invaluable to me.'⁸⁸



The backyard at Dugan Street, c. 1968, with some of Rosalie's collection of rusted iron
Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

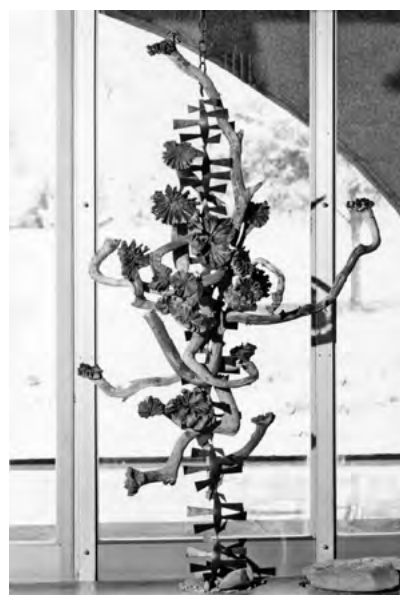
⁸⁶ 'Squared-off reinforcing': 1982 North; 'failed to credit': see Norman Sparnon and EG Waterhouse *The magic of camellias* Ure Smith, Sydney, 1968, p. 40; 'visitors confronted with': Australian Information Service c. 1969 and Carole Lax *Canberra Times* 18 Jul 1969.

⁸⁷ Picasso exhibition catalogue: *Picasso: Sculpture, ceramics, graphic work*, 9 June –13 August 1967, Tate Gallery, London. The *Bull's head* illustrated was the version cast in bronze in 1943, not the 1942 original. See also Vici MacDonald 1998, pp. 20, 21.

⁸⁸ Curatorial assessments: see Mary Eagle, Deborah Edwards and Kelly Gellatly listings in bibliography; 'extreme ikebana': Shoso Shimbo 2013; 'little ikebanas' 1998 Hughes and also p. 60n142; 'it stopped me': 1978 Lindsay (also 1982 North, 1997 Ross and 1998 Hughes).

Encounters with art (2)

Most of the books Rosalie bought in the 1960s were about ikebana, but she began buying the quarterly *Art and Australia* sometime after it began in 1963 and she had a copy of Bernard Smith's *Australian painting 1788–1960*, published in 1962. When she bought art books and journals, and she only really began to do so in the 1970s, it was primarily for their illustrations, not their words. I doubt she spent any time with Ben's copy of Herbert Read or read much of Bernard Smith.



Rosalie's ikebana assemblage of rusted iron and weathered mistletoe in the Academy of Science in c. 1968 would not have been out of place in Lenton Parr's book on Australian sculpture
 Photograph by Ted Richards from author's archive

In 1961 there were two noteworthy additions to the family's art books, noteworthy in the light of Rosalie's later career. One was Lenton Parr's *Sculpture* in Longmans's *The arts in Australia* series and the other was David Douglas Duncan's expensive, glossy *Picasso's Picassos*. The latter was a gift from me and an indication of just how much art was becoming a family value.

Parr's book may have attracted attention because it included images of a sculpture by Gerald Lewers (*Fountain* at ICI House, Melbourne) and a portrait bust of Edmund Hillary, with whom Ben had gone hiking while at university in Auckland. Pictures of two abstract metal pieces by Margel Hinder call to mind the sculptural qualities of the natural materials Rosalie was using in her work at the time. In its scale and pattern, Hinder's four-metre-high, floor-to-ceiling *Abstract sculpture in steel and bronze* (later *Growth forms*) — then in the lobby of the Western Assurance Company in Sydney, now in the University of Technology Sydney collection — is not unlike a smaller installation of rusty metal and mistletoe heads Rosalie would do in the Academy of Science lobby in the late 1960s. And Hinder's small metal *Construction* 1957 calls to mind Rosalie's interest in blue devil, a plant she would use in her arrangements and, much later, in one of her works (*[Still life]* 1983). There is also an echo of the sprawling form of Parr's welded steel work, *Orion*, in Rosalie's *Joie de mourir* 1973.⁸⁹

If Parr's book was Rosalie's first introduction to contemporary sculpture, her horizons widened further in 1963 when she made a six-month visit to England with Ben, who was taking sabbatical leave at the Royal Observatory Herstmonceux in Sussex. This was her first trip to Europe and it gave her opportunities to see some of the art in London. Two memorable events were an exhibition of outdoor sculpture at Battersea Park and an exhibition of paintings by Francis Bacon at Marlborough Galleries. The Battersea Park exhibition included Henry Moore's *Standing figure (knife-edge)* and a large group of American

89 Lenton Parr *The arts in Australia: Sculpture* Longmans, Melbourne, 1961 and David Douglas Duncan *Picasso's Picassos* Macmillan, London, 1961. Margel Hinder *Growth forms* 1958/59 brazed copper sheet over steel armature, 410 × 150 cm.

sculpture put together by the Museum of Modern Art, New York.⁹⁰ Later she much admired Moore's works modelled on animal bones (and used bones in her own work), and owned several books on Bacon, with whom she was fascinated and recognised something of herself in his messy studio.⁹¹

Canberra's hitherto fairly barren cultural landscape began to change as the city grew in the 1960s. There was more art to see and a wider variety, both national and international. There were artists to meet and get to know, including the Sydney artists who taught at the technical college, such as Tom Gleghorn (b. 1925) and John Coburn (1925–2006), and the architects and designers helping to build the new city (including furniture designer Fred Ward (1900–1990) and the design team at the ANU). The community of people for whom art was important and had seen art elsewhere grew. At the ANU there was the new philosophy professor, Peter Herbst (who had known the Boyds at Murrumbidgee in Melbourne), his protégé and sculptor Donald Brook, and the artists associated with the ANU Creative Arts Fellows program, including Sidney Nolan and John Perceval. Commercial galleries began to appear in Canberra, encouraged by Canberra's rapid growth and the scent of sales, notably Macquarie Galleries and Gallery A (which lasted only two years), both in 1965, and the Australian Sculpture Gallery/Centre, which opened in June 1966. This last was run by an old Auckland acquaintance of Rosalie's, Lesta O'Brien, and in its early years had some notable sculpture shows, including Oliffe Richmond and Clement Meadmore. A branch of the Arts Council of Australia was established in 1962 and sponsored visiting exhibitions. Canberra, being the national capital in an era of international cultural diplomacy, attracted travelling shows of painting and sculpture from around the world.⁹²

Rosalie and Ben found ready acceptance in this new world. It included a group of women artists, mostly the wives of ANU academics, who lived nearby and exhibited locally; one of them had worked with Henry Moore. Family members were regular attendees at opening events, even though Rosalie and Ben were not buying because they were saving to build their own home, the exceptions being a painting of Glebe House by Gray Smith (Canberra-based and one-time partner of Joy Hester) bought in 1966, a small Ray Crooke landscape and a small semi-abstract figurative oil by Pamela Macfarlane (the artist wife of an ANU academic) both bought in 1967, and pottery by Ivan Englund and Ivan McMeekin (both of whom had taught at the Canberra Technical College in the early 1950s). The family interest rubbed off on me, and I was actively engaged in the Arts Council exhibitions program. Having both the opportunity and a salary I started to buy the work of my contemporaries, and within two years had two paintings by Dick Watkins, one each by Robert Hunter and Guy Stuart, and a Roy Lichtenstein screen print (*Shipboard girl* 1965). In 1989, at the Australian Sculpture Centre, I met the future director of the Australian National Gallery (ANG), James Mollison, who introduced me to the contemporary art scene in Sydney. And I introduced Mollison to Rosalie.⁹³

90 Battersea Park: 2010 BG with MG, pers. comm. The exhibition was the fourth *Sculpture in the Open Air* exhibition staged in the park. British artists included Moore, Chadwick, Caro, Fink and Hepworth; Americans included David Smith, Alexander Calder, John Chamberlain and Jason Seley (both using automobile parts), Stankiewicz, Ferber and Lipton. Ben and Rosalie probably also visited the exhibition *British Paintings in the Sixties* organised by the Contemporary Art Society at the Tate Gallery and Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1–30 June 1963 (catalogue in R.G. papers NLA). One purchase in London was a reproduction of a Modigliani portrait. Another memorable experience was the discovery that poet Rupert Brooke's reference to 'a tunnel of green gloom' in 'The old vicarage, Grantchester' was such a literal rendering of English country lanes. Rosalie felt let down by the discovery.

91 Fascinated by Bacon: Marie Hagerty in Mary Eagle 2000, p. 26. Re Bacon's studio: 1995 Topliss and 1998 Hughes.

92 Canberra art: the many reviews in the *Canberra Times* by Donald Brook and, later, Robin Wallace-Crabbe, give a good idea of what was shown, including a travelling exhibition *Recent Australian Sculpture* in March 1965 at the ANU. Gallery A opened a branch in April 1965, Macquarie Galleries in July 1965 and the Australian Sculpture Centre in June 1966 (for which see *Canberra Times* 6 Jun 1966, p. 8 and 24 Jul 1968, p. 23 and James Gleeson 'A gallery for sculpture' *SMH* 12 Jun 1966, p. 79). Lesta O'Brien's ex-husband had been on the Auckland University College rowing team with Ben.

93 Rosalie's friends included Vicki Mimms, Mim Smyth, Jan Brown (who had assisted Henry Moore), Monica Freeman (who photographed Rosalie in the country), Dorothy Cameron and Jean Conron (who was with Rosalie when she first discovered abandoned apiary boxes near Gundaroo). The Gray Smith and Ray Crooke are in family collections; the Pamela Macfarlane *Red Queen* c. 1967 is in the ANU Art Collection. Rosalie gave the Ivan Englund pot to the NGA in the early 1980s. I made my first purchase in May 1965, Erica McGilchrist's abstract *Enigma* about 5 × 4 feet, bought from Ric Legrand's gallery Studio Nundah in O'Connor, and in 1967 Ben, on a visit to London, bought me a serigraph by Ceri Richards.

A new house in Pearce

In June 1969 Rosalie and Ben moved to 3 Anstey Street in the new suburb of Pearce, up on Mount Taylor at the southern end of Woden Valley. The house had been two years in the making, from the purchase of the land lease in June 1967 until the move in June 1969. Ben and Rosalie contributed to the design brief in their different ways: Ben, scientific, rational, specific, remembering the limitations (especially) of the Mount Stromlo and Deakin houses, Rosalie more instinctive and intuitive: ‘don’t shut us in ... I need space ... lots of air: high ceilings and wide windows to allow the elements in and frame the views of the distant hills’. The architect was Melbourne-trained Theo Bischoff, who had worked closely with Roy Grounds on some of his Canberra projects. The palette of materials was much like that used by Grounds in the Academy of Science: pale, natural wood, liver-coloured bricks and tiles, plain muted carpet. The house was a strong, plain statement, neutral and light and informal, and close to the ground. It faced north to the sun, with framed views over the valley and warm, sunny spaces inside and out (a lesson from the icebox on Mount Stromlo), high ceilings, and a lot of open space and places to show art.⁹⁴



View of the house at Pearce, c. 1971, which looked north over the back garden
Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

The core of the house was a wide, tiled entrance hall and gallery that wrapped around a sheltered courtyard and opened out into a broad informal dining room. Both the dining and sitting rooms had easy access to the terrace on the north side and to the courtyard on the south, which opened on to another sheltered space with a workbench and storage space. There was a second workbench in the garage. An important feature of the sitting room was a long, strong timber bench on which Rosalie could display and assess her works, watching them and living with them ‘until I get a feel of them’. The dining table served as her primary workspace, and from the dining room, Rosalie could easily look one way into the courtyard and see all the materials stored there (so unlike the Deakin house), and just as easily look the other way and view the terrace, garden and hills beyond. The valley was full of air.⁹⁵

Despite a vigorous cull Rosalie brought with her to Pearce a lot of the rusted iron and old wood that had covered the backyard in Deakin. She placed a large grey weathered tree stump at the entrance to the house. At first the house was bare inside, but it soon filled up: Rosalie and Ben bought a tapestry by the French artist Mathieu Matégot to go on the high brick wall in the entrance hall, and by the time a journalist from *Vogue Living* visited eighteen months after the move she found

94 ‘Don’t shut us in’: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 22; ‘strong, plain statement’: Bischoff’s design notes c. July 1967, Theo Bischoff papers, ACT Heritage Library. For an extended account of the house and its creation see Milton Cameron 2012.

95 ‘Until I get a feel of them’: Australian Information Service c. 1969. It was a habit that extended to the things she found on her country explorations. Peter Vandermark observed the same behaviour when he was her studio assistant in the 1990s (discussed later in this essay).

a 'gallery and studio: extremities piled with rusting iron shapes, logs, twigs, bundles of seed heads, cartons of broken glass; the shelves of the mantels inside showplaces for the sculpture and other art work these things ultimately become'.⁹⁶

Outside, Rosalie and Ben were kept busy taming their block. They planted native trees and bushes at the front and around the perimeter, and Ben had a few fruit trees and a lawn at the back, which became a stage for some of Rosalie's sprawling bone pieces but ultimately gave way to more plantings. Near the house were cottagey flower gardens and a few herbs. Rosalie liked to have both handy for use in the house. For many years a wisteria vine sheltered the north terrace. There were bird tables, including one outside the kitchen window visited by crimson rosellas, cockatoos, galahs and magpies. Birds would be an important theme in Rosalie's art.

C. The artist: Early years: 1970–82

Transitions 1970–72

In 1970 Rosalie was on the cusp of a new world. She was thinking more like an artist, exposed to a broader, richer world of art and artists, and restless with her chosen form of artistic expression. She had an opportunity to explore what all this meant for her because the family had dispersed and her husband was caught up in his astronomical work and absent for long periods. And she had the space in which to create: instead of the confined rooms and corridors in Deakin, at last she had a house designed around her creative needs. She also had a husband able and willing to support her; this financial security meant she had the time and resources to pursue her interests full time.⁹⁷

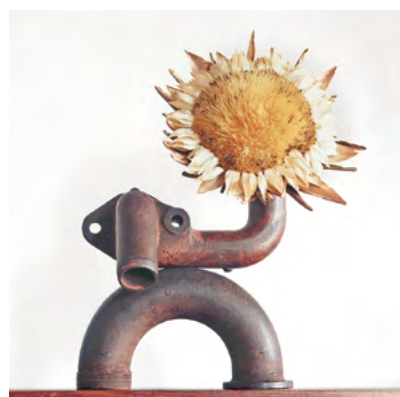
Rosalie's ikebana practice continued to flourish. She visited the Sogetsu school in Tokyo while en route to Europe with Ben in 1970, buying more vases. Back home her demonstrations were a drawcard for charity functions, and she continued to make outstanding pieces for ikebana exhibitions, including 'a large arrangement on the floor with a huge gum branch that mistletoe had grown on'. There were commissions, notably for the Industrial Design Council of Australia awards (1971) and the Japanese Embassy, for whom she became the go-to person when they needed ikebana for important events, such as the opening of the embassy's new chancellery (1970) ('an elaborate sculpture ... of pieces of wood collected in rural parts of the ACT and dried local flowers'), and the Japanese Ambassador's dinner for the Crown Prince of Japan in 1973. Rosalie came out of retirement for that, to make 'a great structure of wisteria vine filled with chrysanthemums and long branches of pulverulenta', which took 'about four days' work'.⁹⁸

After the move to Pearce Rosalie continued to work on her metal constructions, especially once she got her garden sorted out. A new strain of work emerged, particularly apparent in the pieces Rosalie began making to draw out the aesthetic qualities of the materials she chose to work with, an early example being [*Glass insulators*] c. 1971. Something similar was going on in her ikebana at the time: alongside more traditional pieces, there were now works that used only one or two materials, such as the uprooted stems of dried thistles, or the sawn-up branches of a white-barked tree. They had a strong sculptural presence and were more

⁹⁶ Mathieu Matégot (Hungarian/French, 1910–2001) *Cinnebar* tapestry, illus. Shapiro Sydney catalogue for auction 30 Jul 2014, lot 67. 'Weathered tree stump': Carole Lax *Canberra Times* 18 Jul 1969; 'Art is where you find it' *Vogue Living* 12 May – 10 Aug 1972, p. 10 (based on a visit in February 1971; see 4 Feb 1971 RG to TG).

⁹⁷ Ben liked to quote Rosalie's response when she was asked by a student, 'What is the most important thing you need when you are setting out to be an artist?' She reportedly replied, 'A partner with enough money to keep you for the rest of your life' (Ben Gascoigne 2000, p. 15).

⁹⁸ 'Large arrangement on the floor': 19 Oct 1970 RG to TG; 'an elaborate sculpture': *Canberra News* 24 Aug 1970 (with image); 'great structure of wisteria': 19 May 1973 RG to TG.



Which is ikebana and which is sculpture? Six pieces from 1972–74. The first three are untitled ikebana pieces, the others are *Elephant pot* 1972, *Twig tidy* c. 1972–73 and *Standing piece* 1973/74

Top four: Photographer unknown, from the author's archive. Bottom left: Image courtesy of Bonhams. Bottom right: Image courtesy of Newcastle Art Gallery, NSW

about showing off the qualities of the materials than the re-creation of nature. In other works, plant materials were incorporated with rusted metal containers, pieces which beg the question: where did the ikebana end and the sculpture begin? One senses that Rosalie is feeling her way, reflected in a reference she made to 'my living sculptures' in a letter in July 1971.⁹⁹

The way ahead was by no means obvious, at least to Rosalie. Her view of what it took to be an artist was shaped by her Auckland upbringing: artists could draw and paint and carve and model, and she could do none of these. Artists she knew in Canberra had formal art education, and the art programs at the Canberra Technical College where she knew some of the teachers were a further reminder that she was an outsider. Rosalie had training as a teacher and in ikebana but had none of the traditional training of an artist. So there she was in the summer of 1971–72, a woman in her fifties with little idea where she might belong in the art world or how her works might fit into the canon of art. 'Is it valid?' was a question she asked about her work at the time, 'and how should I describe it?' and she would seek confirmation from others whose authority and knowledge she respected. But she knew she was on to something, because in the July 1971 letter she also mentioned the need 'to hire a good photographer soon'.¹⁰⁰

These issues came to a head in November 1971. She was already ambivalent about Norman Sparnon, feelings reinforced in October 1971 when she spent five weeks organising an ikebana exhibition, after which he high-tailed it back to Sydney leaving the cleaning up to everyone else. 'What a lot of work', she wrote, 'I have a long list of Never Agains'. Over the summer she decided to withdraw from Sparnon's classes 'to do her own thing', as she put it in a letter in February 1972, telling him she had been offered a show in Melbourne. She wanted to move to something more Australian, closer to home. What tipped the balance, however, was the encouragement she got from two visitors who had responded warmly to her iron assemblages.¹⁰¹

99 'Living sculptures': 7 Jul 1971 RG to TG. Sofu Teshigahara believed that floral arrangements were sculptures with living flowers (see Atsua Imaizumi 1968).

100 'Hire a good photographer': Rosalie did commission someone to photograph a selection of sculptural ikebana pieces, possibly Wes Stacey, who visited in c. December 1971 to take photographs to illustrate Fay Bottrell's *The artist craftsman in Australia*.

101 'What a lot of work' and the October 1971 ikebana show: 19 Oct 1971 RG to TG, also 2 Oct 1971 BG to TG; 'do her own thing': 8 Feb 1972 RG to TG. Thereafter she accepted no more ikebana engagements, other than the Crown Prince's dinner in May 1973.

Carl Plate was the first. There was quite a lot of contact between the Gascoignes and Plates in the early 1970s. Ben and Rosalie had two of his large canvases in their new house, one a gift and the other a purchase, and they had made a side trip from England to see the Plates in Paris in August 1970 (where Plate organised a studio party with other Australian artists there: the Charles Blackmans, John Coburns and Matcham Skipper). They went to Sydney for his show in November 1971 and he visited them later that month (and twice in mid-1972). Out of all this came two things: Rosalie quickly latched on to Carl's word 'presence' as a descriptor for a work of art, and used it as her own thereafter. The second thing was an endorsement of Rosalie's work. 'He thinks I'm really on to something. A comment he doesn't make lightly. Says he wouldn't have said so five years ago', and he offered to help get her a show at the Bonython Gallery in Sydney. He also tried hard to prise Rosalie's 'Germaine Greer' figure out of her (and eventually succeeded).¹⁰²

The second endorsement came out of the blue. Fay Bottrell, a Sydney textile artist and teacher, was preparing a book on artist craftsmen in Australia. The book would cover forty of the top craftsmen in Australia, include statements by each artist on why they did what they did, and be profusely illustrated with photographs by Wesley Stacey. In Canberra she had been told to visit the 'ikebana woman' and one morning turned up on Rosalie's doorstep with the briefest of notice, accompanied by Anthony Pardoe, a Sydney artist who was helping the noted collector Margaret Carnegie dispose of her collection. Pardoe moved along the sitting room bench saying: 'what excellence ... Margaret Carnegie would go mad about this'. Rosalie felt she was in a dream. Then the visitors spoke of a gallery in Sydney where they were keeping samples of people's work to be seen by architects wanting stuff for their buildings. 'They took iron and sunflowers [*Sunflowers and radiator*] c. 1970–71 from Bungendore tip. A price? No comment from me. \$95 said Fay with conviction. Me speechless.' Margaret Carnegie wanted to buy it but the sale fell through when the work was damaged in the gallery.¹⁰³



Carl Plate in November 1971
Photograph courtesy of *The Australian*

¹⁰² The two Plate canvases were *Graph segments No. 6* c. 1964 (ANU collection) and *Blue monument No. 5* 1967 (AGWA collection). Paris: RG postcard dated 11 Aug 1970; 'presence': early Dec 1971 BG to MG; 'really on to something': 16 Nov 1971, 2 Jun 1972 RG to TG and RG to MG, 10 Jun 1972 BG to TG. The first record of Rosalie using the term 'presence' is in Bottrell 1972: 'to combine things so that one gives more life to the other and so that, together, they become a separate presence'. 'Germaine Greer': see 015 *Germaine Greer* 1972, p. 150.

¹⁰³ Bottrell visit and 'they took iron and sunflowers': 16 Nov 1971 RG to MG, pp. 33–34 and 2 Dec 1971 BG to MG, p. 34. Rosalie was well aware of Margaret Carnegie's collection and standing, son Toss having been instrumental in the 1960s in borrowing works from it for exhibition at the ANU. On Pardoe and Carnegie see *SMH* 26 Feb 1971, p. 6; also *SMH* 24 Dec 1966, p. 6 and 4 Jun 1970.



Fay Bottrell in 1972
Reproduced courtesy of the photographer,
Wesley Stacey

Bottrell's book — published in November 1972 — was the first serious recognition of Rosalie as an artist. It gave her a new context in which to see and think about her work. The illustration chosen to exemplify her work makes this point precisely: it showed the sawn-off stalks of dried variegated thistles (*Silybum marianum*), presented along with all the other craftworks in the book. In fact, it is a detail of a work she had exhibited as ikebana only a few months previously.

While Rosalie had reservations about the finished publication, it was impressive enough for her to feel a certain satisfaction at being included. Exciting as the recognition was, Bottrell's request for a statement gave rise to a more perplexing issue: how should Rosalie describe her art? One of the problems was the context in which her work was placed — craftspeople — potters, jewellers, weavers and fibre artists. She tried out the term 'bush sculpture ... "bush" partly because of their content and partly in the context of "bush lawyer", "bush carpenter"', but when Bottrell suggested 'field-found constructions', Rosalie was happy to go along with that. In the end neither term was used and she ended up simply talking about her art as 'a non-binding sort of art' set in the context of her foraging trips and love of the Australian countryside. It was another two years before she discovered the term 'assemblage artist' and adopted it for herself (of which more shortly). But one thing she was sure of was her 'commitment now ... to show how beautiful and visually exciting ordinary things can be', something that she held to throughout her career.¹⁰⁴

There was more fallout from the Bottrell visit. Fay was so taken with Rosalie's work that she was determined to help her get it shown in a commercial gallery. She thought of Realities in Melbourne (hence the reference to a Melbourne show in Rosalie's letter to Sparnon in February 1972) and in March 1972 she took Rosalie around several Sydney galleries that might suit her work. Nothing came of those activities, but she did invite Rosalie to place works in an exhibition at Myer department store gallery in Adelaide to promote the book and its artists. The exhibition was in October 1973 and Rosalie had two pieces: *Surveyor's pegs* 1973 (a collection of survey pegs in a metal container) and her bone work *Spine* 1972. This was the first public exhibition to include Rosalie's work.¹⁰⁵

Rosalie took heed of Plate's and Bottrell's encouragement to exhibit and continued to think about possibilities throughout 1972. She was also motivated by the success that Hilary Wrigley had had with her show at Bonython in Sydney: Wrigley was a Canberra friend although Rosalie was not very keen on her art. Rosalie went off Plate's idea of showing at Bonython's — 'too impersonal for me' — and decided she would like to show with Frank Watters because she liked Frank and the intelligent setting, but nothing came of that, to Watters's subsequent regret. The lack of resolution was frustrating, but ultimately Rosalie was much better served by the delay because she was able to put forward a stronger body of work when eventually she did show in Sydney.¹⁰⁶

Art takes over

After Rosalie decided to withdraw from Sparnon's ikebana group and wind back her ikebana practice, art rapidly took over her life. 'Like the old concept of religion', she said in an interview at the time of her first solo show, in June 1974, art was to 'be lived all the time, not just on Sunday'. Materials and works in progress spread through the house, and the sitting room joined the dining room as a workspace because she didn't have a studio

¹⁰⁴ Satisfaction with book: 4 Dec 1972 RG to MG; 'bush sculpture': 13 Dec 1971 RG to MG, p. 34; 'field-found constructions': 11 Jan 1972 RG to MG; 'commitment now': Bottrell 1972, p. 39. Rosalie still did not have a sure way of describing her art as late as November 1973, when she wrote 'whatever it is I am doing, it takes all my time' (6 Nov 1973 RG to TG).

¹⁰⁵ Bottrell contact: 8 Feb 1972 RG to MG, p. 32, 28 Mar 1972 and for Adelaide 30 Sep 1973, p. 42.

¹⁰⁶ 13 Sep, 16 Oct 1972 RG to MG, pp. 37, 38; Watters's regret: Hannah Fink 2009, p. 150.

(and did not get one until 1983). Or as Ben wrote in September: 'the sitting room ... is now the studio, and woe betide all visitors, except the ones the young men at the National Gallery keep bringing in [who] treat yr m. as a contemporary, more or less'.¹⁰⁷

It helped that Rosalie now had the family station wagon for her sole use, Ben having seen the light and acquired a small car for his own use around town. She was able to explore the country at will. Her explorations freed her from the mundane matters of everyday life and fed her need for visual pleasures. For the rest of her life Rosalie valued 'the sense of personal freedom, no phone, no nothing' that came with her country driving. 'Nobody can get you, you don't have to do your housework. You go, it's a nice fine day and the country is there waiting for you.' She would sashay out to take another look, to keep her enthusiasms up. 'I have got to go out in the country and confirm myself that it is good. You ... sit at home and you forget what a tree looks like ... And you forget the smell of it ... I've got to live it.' There were other attractions: 'air always does something for me I think. And smells, country smells ... I suppose it's relaxing and gives you a great feeling of freedom.' As her artist friend and confidant Marie Hagerty put it: 'Driving in the country was for her what drawing is for me. Liberating.'¹⁰⁸

She also discovered that the artist's life could be lonely, beyond the comprehension of people not likewise engaged. Her social life changed — no more Melbourne Cup day events or lunches with ambassadorial wives if she could avoid them, unless poets were to be present. She had been introduced to Rosemary Dobson, a neighbour, in 1972 and they got on well; through her Rosalie met David Campbell, Judith Wright and others, all sharing an interest in landscape and words.¹⁰⁹

So far as Rosalie's creative activities were concerned, 'her thing' in the summer of 1971–72 was constructions with rusted farm iron. Writing to me in January 1972, she said: 'I am having a week to myself — not unprofitably. Plenty of company, of the ironware variety. Consolidating ideas — a v. good opportunity. Made a chance seabird today — the fact that it has 4 skinny legs instead of two doesn't seem to detract from the clarity of the image. I have a lot of things coming to the boil, and ... I have plenty of time to consider.'

One of the problems with the metal constructions was their stability, so Ben took a professional welding course in February 1972 to help her with the problem, especially now there was talk of an exhibition, 'so her stuff has to stick together'. Rosalie was pleased: 'Welding equipment due to arrive on Tues — he has bought it ... Anyway, I hope to have a lot of stuff finished soon.' But she had a sense of foreboding: 'I sometimes have a vision of him going berserk at bottom of garden welding up huge sculptures for himself.' By October Ben reported that she had 'gone cold on welding', and by the end of the year Rosalie's interests moved on again. She would eventually dismantle most of her iron pieces and in 1974 would write that they 'are so far from what I am doing now that I find it embarrassing to have them on public display'.¹¹⁰

The iron pieces gave way to assemblages of found objects, which Rosalie began to arrange in boxes and which would account for a large part of her practice until the early 1980s. In 1982 she told Ian North how she started using boxes:

¹⁰⁷ 'Like the old concept': Jacqueline Rees 1974; 'the sitting room is now the studio': 22 Sep 1974 BG to TG.

¹⁰⁸ This catalogue raisonné includes a chapter dedicated to Rosalie's relationship with the country. Ben's own car, a Datsun 1600: 11 Sep 1972 RG to TG; 'sense of personal freedom': 1998 Hughes, and also, for telephone, 11 Oct 1977 RG to MG, p. 51; 'sashay out': 1982 North; 'I have got to go out': 1998 Desmond; 'air always does something': 1980 Gleeson (talking about *Country air* 1977); 'driving in the country': Marie Hagerty in Mary Eagle 2000, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ The letters have many references to poets, especially Rosemary Dobson: comes to lunch, 10 Apr 1972, p. 35; to join RG for country trip, c. 16 Nov 1972, p. 39; at dinner for Michael Taylor, 4 Dec 1972, p. 40; and Patrick White, 21 Apr 1977, p. 46; drives RD to Judith Wright, 4 Sep 1978, p. 55; trip to chalk quarry, 23 Oct 1978, p. 56. See also Rosemary Dobson 2004. Other local poet acquaintances included John Rowland and Geoff Page, who dedicated his poem *Monaro* to her (see p. 402).

¹¹⁰ 'Having a week to myself': 13 Dec 1971, 11 Jan 1972 RG to MG, pp. 34–35; welding references: 8 Feb 1972 BG to MG; 8 Feb, 10 Apr 1972 RG to MG; 6 Aug, 25 Oct 1972 BG to MG, pp. 35, 37, 38; 'embarrassing to have them on display': 10 Nov 1974 RG to TG.



Rosalie working with bones on the back lawn at Anstey Street
 Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

I was just making a pink circus at the time [I brought home the boxes] and every time anybody went past it ... fell to the ground, or people knocked it, and it got to be a terrible domestic curse. I thought I must contain it, you know; and suddenly I thought, well, I'll box it: that will stop it falling over. And that's what got me into boxes ... it was a practicality, I could now contain what I wanted to say in this box.¹¹¹

Rosalie first used old boxes she came across in the dumps. In May 1973 she found a new source when driving near Gundaroo. She chanced upon an abandoned apiary and came away with twenty-two weathered apiary boxes, which she described in a letter: 'lovely faded pink and green paint on some of them and lots of good greys'. She stacked them in her hallway with other boxes she had collected, and very quickly saw their potential for stabilising her perilous constructions. This was months before she ever saw any of Joseph Cornell's works using boxes. Rosalie would end up making about fifty works with boxes of different kinds.¹¹²

In between the metal works and the boxes, Rosalie turned her hand to something completely different: a remarkable series of works constructed out of bleached sheep and cattle bones she gathered in from the paddocks (some still with the gristle holding the joints together). They are notable both for her choice of material and for the innovative form that her constructions took.

Rosalie's appreciation of the sun-bleached bones had its origins in her flower-arranging days. She had used a sheep's skull in an arrangement in the late 1950s and in April 1961 she won first prize with an arrangement, 'Study in contrasts', that included another sheep's skull — 'nice and clean and white'. Ikebana helped her see other things in the bones: 'they were interesting shapes ... the shapes nature does, they're absolutely wonderful ... And a beautiful grey-white'. She began collecting bones in earnest in 1972, filling sacks with them as she roamed the paddocks. She ended up making four or five works from her bones in 1972–73.¹¹³

Her letters at the time reflected her interest: 'Found a lovely line of good quality cattle bones on last trip. Have a beautiful 6-bone spine in good working order. It's a poem of engineering ... I feel that the wonder is in it just as it is, and I am keen to keep it movable so that one can enjoy the clever mechanics (God's, not mine). At the moment I have it on ... [two] iron uprights on iron base. The idea is audience participation and

111 1982 North; see also 1984 Wood Conroy and 1998 Hughes. The circus work referred to did not survive.

112 Discovery of apiary boxes: 16 May 1973 RG to MG, p. 41, also 19 May 1973 RG to TG.

113 'Study in contrasts 1961': inscribed photograph in MG papers; show results in *Canberra Times* 24 Apr 1961, p. 6; 'interesting shapes': 1998 Hughes.

involvement. Spine carefully threaded on Pole A can be unthreaded piece by piece and threaded, face down, on Pole B ...' This was *Spine* 1972, exhibited in Adelaide in 1973.¹¹⁴

Two, much larger, bone works followed. *Last stand* 1972 was made of cattle and sheep bones strung two metres high on iron rods. 'Harsh weed shapes is what I am aiming at ... Could turn out to be something bigger than all of us!' *Joie de mourir* 1973 (Joy of death) was a 'large, looping bone sculpture on the croquet lawn ... waiting expectantly for Jim Mollison to visit it. He will be surprised.' Made mostly of sheep bones threaded on wire supported on rusty metal rods, they 'went across the lawn and they danced everywhere ... it was fairly low to the ground ... they were part of the landscape ... they were really beautiful'. This 15-metre-long arabesque owed something to Alexander Calder and also to Tony Coleing's wiry sculptures of the late 1960s, which she had seen in Sydney: 'I was surprised at the licence people took [in art]. That was when I first realized you could do things creeping along the ground.'¹¹⁵

Art-world context

As this remark about the sprawling bone pieces suggests, Rosalie's evolution did not take place in an art-world vacuum. She would later explain her transition from ikebana practitioner to assemblage artist in terms of her wider engagement with the arts world. 'I became more aware of other arts and more familiar with modern painting and sculpture, and I began to study the vision of other people and compare it with the vision I had of the spirit and features of the places I live in.'

Looking back, she recognised that the times were right for her wayward, unconventional art, which she described early on as 'lyrical derailments'. As she put it, 'it was sort of fortuitous in a way that the art of the time was geared perhaps to people more like me ... you know, you could break the rules, I think that's what it was. Before it was rules and you had to have this sort of thing to qualify as an artist. I found I could be an artist without, which was marvellous because I knew I didn't have any [conditioning], and I really didn't have any abilities either.' She had in mind arte povera and Australian artists such as John Armstrong, Tony Coleing and John Davis.

She might well also have been thinking of American Minimalism, which she knew through the American art magazines she subscribed to, the works James Mollison was acquiring for the Australian National Gallery,



The sitting room at Anstey Street in 1975, with Dick Watkins's *A charming study* 1963 over the mantelpiece. John Armstrong's *Tag rack* 1973 is next to the fireplace (and in front of a small Ray Crooke landscape) and Ken Whisson's *And what should I do in Illyria?* 1974 is above the sofa. Rosalie's works (from top to bottom) include *Norco cows* c. 1974–75, *Tap* 1974, *Pink parrots* c. 1974–75, *Pub* 1974 and *Interior decoration* 1975 on the hearth. The pedestal table holds *The cottage* 1974 and a collection of small pieces that ended up as part of *Games table* 1975–76.

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Dick Watkins's *A charming study* 1963

Reproduced courtesy of Dick Watkins and the Copyright Agency

114 'A lovely line': 16 Nov 1972 RG to MG, p. 39; 'exhibited in Adelaide': 30 Sep 1973 RG to MG, p. 42.

115 'Harsh weed shapes': 4 Dec 1972 RG to MG, p. 40; 'large, looping bone sculpture': 19 May 1973 RG to TG; see also Noel S Hutchison 'Aspects of geometrically non-figurative sculpture in Australia' *Art and Australia* January 1973, p. 273; 'they danced everywhere' and 'I was surprised': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 23; Calder reference: 25 Mar 1973 RG to MG.

and the exhibition *Some Recent American Art* at the AGNSW in April 1974, which included works by Carl Andre, Don Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Brice Marden and Agnes Martin, among others. The increasing recognition being afforded to 'outsider' and women artists also helped her gain acceptance, although Rosalie did not participate in the women's art movement.¹¹⁶

So the early 1970s was a period in which Rosalie educated herself as an artist and honed her eye by looking at art, by talking to artists and people she respected in the art world, and by looking at (rather than reading) magazines and books (including *Art and Australia*, *Art in America* and *Artforum*). It was a time when she was exploring the possibilities of art and sorting out what was right for her. Her practice evolved accordingly, and she experimented with forms, notably with her bone pieces, though her work would always be materials-driven and shaped by what she found and had at hand.

Rosalie's education involved trips to Sydney and living with art — my collection and then works she bought. She was good at describing works she liked and why. I don't recall whether Rosalie saw the exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting* in Sydney in 1967, but she certainly had an opportunity to become acquainted with Rauschenberg's pre-pop style of assemblage art through Dick Watkins's assemblage *A charming study* 1963, in the centre of which was a crude square of rough wood painted in turquoise and pink stripes. Rosalie struggled to come to terms with that bit of wood, but she took the piece on in September 1971 when I went overseas for three years and left my collection with her.



Dick Watkins's *Untitled* 1968, which Rosalie hung in her bedroom. Watkins was (and is) widely regarded as the most interesting and talented artist of his generation

Photograph by Matt Kelso, reproduced courtesy of Dick Watkins and the Copyright Agency

Rosalie looked long and hard at my works. She had problems with the minimalism of Robert Hunter's *Untitled No 10* 1968, white squares with the palest cream inserts in sections created by faint ridges of paint (although she preferred it to the one she saw in James Mollison's flat and hung it in her sitting room). She also had my Roy Lichtenstein lithograph *Shipboard girl* 1965, enjoyed Guy Stuart's indigo pastel of an oil drum (*Untitled* 1968) in her entrance hallway, and was much taken with a big hard-edge pop collage-like canvas by Dick Watkins, *Untitled* 1968, which she hung in her bedroom. This was a noteworthy success: 'I enjoy it more and more. There is a lot in it ... I watch it constantly.' She came close to buying her own Watkins shortly afterwards, a grey and white drip painting, but in the end decided against it because it did not work in the house or with her things. And she ended up hanging *A charming study* in her sitting room amid her own work.¹¹⁷

There was more new art in Canberra, including works from the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art in 1971, and more and more trips to Sydney, sometimes just for the day, to the extent that when Rosalie's cleaning lady retired, she saw the potential to use the savings to fund more visits. She visited the galleries: Watters, Bonython, Rudy Komon, Gallery A, Coventry, depending on what was on. There were trips for openings by Carl Plate and Michael Taylor, and another to see John Armstrong. She met dealers such as Frank Watters, whom she took to and who asked her to dinner and visited her in Pearce.¹¹⁸ In October 1973 at the AGNSW she took in *Recent Australian Art*, a survey of very contemporary Australian art with works in many styles, including sculptural

116 'I became more aware': RG manuscript 13 Mar 1983; 'lyrical derailments': Bottrell 1972, p. 39; 'sort of fortuitous': 1995 Topliss. *Some Recent American Art* was organised by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art New York and shown in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Auckland as well as Sydney (5 April – 5 May 1974). The exhibition coincided with a showing of Jackson Pollock's *Blue poles* at the AGNSW and Margaret Dodd's collection of Californian Funk art, both of which would have been further reason for Rosalie to visit the AGNSW. Even as early as November 1972 Rosalie made a small work inspired by a large minimalist piece by the Filipino artist Arturo Luz (*White relief #1, #2 and #3* 1972), which I had just bought and photographed for her, and she picked up on Luz again in 1977 (16 Nov 1972, 11 Oct 1977 RG to MG, pp. 40, 51) (see top illus. p 116, background detail).

117 *A charming study* and Mollison: 28 Mar 1972 RG to MG; Watkins *Untitled* 1968: 13 Dec 1971, 11 Jan 1972 RG to MG; possible Watkins purchase: 28 Mar, 2 Jun 1972 RG to MG, p. 35.

118 Re Frank Watters: 17 Sep 1972, p. 37; visits RG, 16 Oct 1972, p. 38; attends Watters's dinner party, 16 Nov 1972, p. 39; reportedly likes RG's work, 4 Dec 1972, p. 40.

pieces by Armstrong, Bill Clements, Aleksander Danko, John Davis, Ross Grounds and Nigel Lendon. She was taken with Dale Hickey's *Cup series* paintings, reflecting her interest in the beauty of everyday objects, and she could look at Robert Hunter and Dick Watkins again, in a setting quite unlike her sitting room.¹¹⁹

She thought about what she saw. Of the 1971 Arthur Boyd show in Canberra she would write: 'I spent quite a lot of time there and was amazed at how much I got out of the show after an initial disappointment. I feel Boyd has travelled such a long journey to reach the point he is at now, that it is hard for the uninitiated to comprehend him. Like air travel — the soul follows on foot.' Carl Plate's paintings were 'difficult serious pictures — out of mood with the times perhaps. You have to look and look at them.' Hilary Wrigley's show 'was clever. I didn't care if I never saw it again.' Alun Leach-Jones at Watters prompted 'Size for sake of size?', and she 'couldn't bear' Donald Laycock at Bonython's but she enjoyed George Baldessin's pears and white wooden chair and table at Komon's. Sydney Ball 'did nothing for me — big wafty things of no distinction', and Dickerson at Holdsworth was 'No dice' but Michael Taylor's *Frozen cloud* 1961, which she bought in 1972, 'opened up a whole new appreciation of abstract painting for me. I think I can read the artist's feelings right out of it — a degree of communication not hitherto arrived at.'¹²⁰

John Armstrong's show in 1973 was 'exciting' and she was very much taken with 'a vaguely ecclesiastical and very elegant piece' (*Tag rack* 1973, which I was to buy). Her description of the 'ecclesiastical' piece she was attracted to bore out the qualities she aimed for in her own work: 'Definite presence. Nothing to be added and nothing to be taken away. Also neatness and lasting qualities. Disciplined ... classical.' In my absence Rosalie took delivery of the sculpture and placed it in her hallway. It was something to measure her own work against, as Michael Taylor did, pointing out to her: 'there was a thing made by a man with a worldwide reputation standing among [your] things and everything looked right. [You] should find it very encouraging.' Rosalie would buy a small work from Armstrong's Canberra exhibition in March 1974 (*Feathered foot* 1974).¹²¹

Though Armstrong's aesthetic was very different from Rosalie's — she disliked the materials he bought in hardware shops, so new and unlike her weathered, found materials — years later there would be echoes of the works she saw in 1973 in her own work. In *Grass rack* 1977, Rosalie suspended sheaves of blond grass from a frame, echoing Armstrong's *Tag rack* 1973 (although she had also hung dried materials under her house in the late 1950s), and Armstrong's use of small pedestals supporting horizontal elements in *Bag rack* c. 1973 (NGA) would become a feature of some of her installations, of which *Step through* 1977/c. 1979–80 (NGA) was the first. This was a variation on an idea Rosalie had employed when she placed a smooth river rock on a wooden block in *[River stone]* c. 1966–68 to bring out the form of the stone, as she would do with her enamelware in *Set up* 1983–84.¹²²

119 *Recent International Art: Works from the Collection of the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, the University of Sydney* (an AGNSW travelling exhibition), Canberra, April 1971; *Recent Australian Art* AGNSW, 18 Oct – 18 Nov 1973, curated by Daniel Thomas and Frances McCarthy (later Lindsay).

120 Boyd: Oct 1971 RG to MG, p. 32 (*Arthur Boyd* Melville Hall, ANU, Oct 1971); Plate: 16 Nov 1971 RG to MG, p. 33; Wrigley: 13 Sep 1972 RG to MG, p. 37; Leach-Jones, Laycock, Baldessin: 4 Dec 1972 RG to MG, p. 40 (Baldessin); Ball, Dickerson: 25 Mar 1973 RG to MG; Taylor: 16 Nov 1972 RG to MG, p. 39.

121 Armstrong (later known as Jihad Muhammad John Armstrong): 27 May, 25 Jun 1973 RG to MG, p. 41. After the show she went off with Armstrong and James Gleeson to see his showpiece for the forthcoming São Paulo Biennial, and Armstrong was pleased with her response: 'It reminds me of pubs and breweries, and big old Melbourne bars that are being pulled down. It's very Australian. Nobody in England or Italy or the U.S. would have made a thing like that.' Taylor: 30 Sep 1973 RG to MG; *Feathered foot*: 11 Mar 1974 RG to MG (with sketch): 'A lovely ambivalence between Victoriana and Rococo. Funeral plumes Victorian, buttoned boots, aspidistras, tropical palms, bags of hashish in cages, miserable prisoners in wickerwork. Whole effect rather elegant.' Armstrong was a man of the moment: as well as selection for the 1973 São Paulo Biennial, Mollison was buying multiple pieces for the ANG, three of which were exhibited in Canberra in March 1975 (*Australia 75: Festival of Creative Arts and Sciences*), and the AGNSW featured him as one of three sculptors in *Project 3: Objects* (with Aleksander Danko and Tom Arthur, curator Robert Lindsay) in May 1975.

122 On Armstrong's materials: 1998 Hughes.

James Mollison

Then there was James Mollison, who was appointed acting director of the new Australian National Gallery in 1971 (and director in 1977) and gathered around him gifted curators, artists and scholars, introducing a new element to Canberra's art world. I had met him at the Australian Sculpture Gallery in January 1969, shortly after he arrived in Canberra, and introduced him to Rosalie. I used to take him out to Pearce for meals with her, and after I went away they continued to see each other and develop a deeper relationship. Mollison was an important figure because he helped Rosalie sharpen her thinking about what she liked and why, and gave her insights into what was going on in the contemporary art world. He was an early patron, acquiring works for his personal collection, for the Philip Morris collection of 'young, bold and innovative' artists and for the nascent Australian National Gallery. Rosalie admired Mollison for his commitment to art and for the passion with which he pursued his interest and communicated it to others: 'you need someone who can get airborne on art and see a sort of truth' she later recalled. He had exactly the sort of gravitas and knowledge she was looking for as she sought to test the validity of her ideas and find her place in the art world.¹²³

For Mollison the relationship offered a friendly safe haven from the considerable pressures of his job, comfortable dinners (sometimes self-invited), and engagement with an interesting emerging artist. He valued people who had a discerning eye and an instinct for art. The relationship unfolded slowly, as they discussed works of art when they met at the local exhibitions or social occasions, and Mollison would seek her views, testing her maybe, and assessing her eye. In July 1972 Mollison suggested she help him choose pots for shows: when she protested 'amateurism' he said to her 'there are amateurs and connoisseurs', and asked her to look at some European posters with him. For her part Rosalie quickly found that she needed to have a considered opinion and one she could stand by: this meant working things out for herself. In a 1974 letter she writes about visiting the national gallery art store at Mollison's invitation to see new works, where he showed her an 'instantly recognizable Man Ray mysterious object, wrapped sewing machine or whatever': this was *The enigma of Isadore Ducasse* 1920 (reconstructed 1971). She noticed that the string had slackened over the years and the tension of the really poked-up bit had disappeared. 'Which I thought was crucial. Said so. Jim said, "Well, he tied the string and we don't like to touch it". But showed me the photo [of the work when first made] which bore out my point.'¹²⁴



Patrick McCaughey, James Mollison and Pamela Bell outside the ANG art store at Fyshwick when Jackson Pollock's *Blue poles* arrived. Pamela Bell wrote enthusiastic reviews for *The Australian* when Rosalie showed in Brisbane, and in the early 1990s she sought Rosalie's opinion on a collection of her poetry

Photograph by Matt Kelso, courtesy of the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra

123 'You need someone': 1997 Ross.

124 Mollison would also call on several other older women associated with the gallery. 'Choose pots' and 'amateurs and connoisseurs': 24 Jul 1972 RG to MG, p. 37; Man Ray: c. 12 Feb 1974 RG to MG, p. 43.

Another dimension was added to the relationship as Rosalie's work developed, and she looked to him as a sounding board for testing new works and her plans for exhibitions. She well knew that when Mollison visited her he cased her pieces surreptitiously while she was out of the room, not saying anything, until one day in March 1972 he suddenly came out with a comment: 'you're really very good with your bits of rubbish'. This was particularly meaningful confirmation of what Carl Plate and Fay Bottrell had told her only a few months before. Six months later, when Mollison turned up for another dinner, he opened with 'what new goodies have you got ... that's the best thing you've done of that sort', and when he saw her large bone sculpture (*Last stand* 1972) in the Academy of Science in April 1973 he commented to Ben 'on how much she has improved — those bones are GOOD'.

But in coming to terms with Rosalie's art Mollison was really challenged by her unconventional pathway to art, especially via ikebana of all things. This was not how it was supposed to happen, and Rosalie remembered him as being very nervous about the reaction she would get in Sydney to her first solo show there. Despite his reservations, he bought the first two of several pieces for the Philip Morris collection in September 1974 and two more six months later, and then two for himself from her first solo show in Sydney in 1976 (along with four selected by James Gleeson for the Australian National Gallery).¹²⁵

His confidence in her views and her art was such that he would invite her, as one of a very few outsiders, to his gala picnic for the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art (New York) in 1975 (the subject of her work *Jim's picnic* 1975). When he was confirmed as the first director of the gallery in February 1977 he turned up that night, without any notice, with two bottles of French champagne under his arm. Rosalie continued to look to Mollison as a sounding board until the early 1980s, and he thought enough of her in 1980 to sound her out about becoming a member of the gallery council, though nothing came of that. But it wasn't always an easy relationship, and when Rosalie was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1994, prompting a congratulatory letter from Mollison, her reply briefly summarised their relationship: 'Thank you also James for your encouragement, often oblique to be sure. You have always been someone I needed to prove it to.' Or as she would put it when asked by others about their relationship: 'he was important in my scheme of things because it was always James's cold eye and cruel tongue that I had to convince'.¹²⁶

Michael Taylor and assemblage

Another person who was important in Rosalie's life at this time was the artist Michael Taylor. Taylor was regarded as one of the most gifted painters of his generation. She met him in September 1972, shortly after she bought one of his paintings, *Frozen cloud* 1961. The Taylors lived at Bredbo, about 80 kilometres south of Canberra on the Monaro Highway that leads to Cooma and the Snowy Mountains. Over the next three years Rosalie saw a lot of Taylor and his wife Rominie. When the Taylors came to Canberra, where Michael taught at the local art school (now the ANU School of Art and Design), they would come by for lunch or drinks or dinner and stay for long talks. In this way Rosalie discovered the pleasure of 'shop talk' between artists, something akin to the discussions among her scientist husband's colleagues. It was an important breakthrough



Michael Taylor and Rosalie at Anstey Street in 1976, with a *Flower tower* in the background

Photograph by Matt Kelso from author's archive

¹²⁵ 'Bits of rubbish': 28 Mar 1972 R.G. to M.G.; 'what new goodies': 16 Oct 1972 R.G. to M.G., p. 38; at Academy of Science: 7 Apr 1973 B.G. to T.G. Rosalie remembered Mollison's uncertainty about her early work: 'Jim wasn't so sure ... but after a while he came to be convinced that I was something different' (1998 Hughes). Mollison's repudiation about Sydney show: 'I remember his unmistakable relief and incredulity in Sydney': 28 Jun 1977 R.G. to M.G., p. 49.

¹²⁶ 'Turned up without notice': c. 27 Mar 1977 B.G. postscript on R.G. to M.G.; 'gallery council': M.G. personal recollection; 'thank you also James': 28 Jun 1994 R.G. to Mollison (original on NGV artist file); 'he was important': 1997 Ross, see also 1998 Hughes ('James could be cruel, he could be very cruel'). As early as May 1973 Rominie Taylor had cautioned her: 'you have to be careful with Jim', prompting this reflection by Rosalie: 'Which gave me food for thought. Remarks like that usually spring from specifics' (16 May 1973 R.G. to M.G.).

and the memory of it stayed with Rosalie throughout her life, as she would recall: 'The ease with which [I] could talk [with Michael] fed a great hunger in me. Michael was the first person who made me feel I could be a real artist.'¹²⁷

Rosalie's work-at-hand provided the background to these conversations, and the objects — made and half-made — were in the room while they talked. During these critical years the Taylors provided encouragement and confidence. Michael's support helped convince Anna Simons to offer Rosalie her first solo show, at Macquarie Galleries, Canberra, in June 1974. More significant for its impact on Rosalie's career was Michael's decision to nominate her for *The Artists' Choice* exhibition at Gallery A in April 1975, which launched her on the Sydney art scene.

In terms of their art, the painter Michael and the sculptor Rosalie touched common ground in collage and in their love of the Monaro landscape. In October 1973 Michael exhibited fifty collages and drawings in Canberra and Rosalie bought a large collaged drawing of a hillside (*Untitled* dated 24.3.73). Taylor's collages, though not the first she had seen, led her to try her hand at this art form and for a few weeks she cut up and pasted images into a large scrapbook.¹²⁸ This activity did not last. If there was a lesson she absorbed from the exercise, it was to consider the possibilities of the branding symbols on packaging in her supermarket and she began to include these images in her more sculptural assemblages and to make works that celebrated the intrinsic qualities of their designs: Arnott's Biscuits parrots, Norco Butter cows, Daffodil margarine logos. She also collected graphic images of the footballers, cricketers, and, briefly, racehorses. By this time also she was familiar with pop art and its use of similar images.

In November 1971, Fay Bottrell and Carl Plate had encouraged Rosalie to reach for her own star. Two years later, in December 1973, she realised that she might succeed. She had just completed *Parrot lady*, which she described in a letter to me at the time as 'a lovely mad woman in a box full of Arnott's Biscuit parrots that M[ichael] and R[ominie] admired yesterday. I feel a great flood of enlightenment every so often.' Rosalie always remembered that rush of certainty: 'I think it was the first work ... that made me think maybe I would make it as an artist'.¹²⁹

By the end of 1973 she had made three boxes and was working on another, and by February 1974 she had extended her range of logos to Norco cows: 'Also got nice Norco Butter cardboard carton stamped with blue cows. Am boxing them ... I think I'll go down and climb J.B. Young's mountain of boxes and drag out a few spare cows. I like to have a lot.'¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Rosalie occasionally visited the Taylors at Bredbo, and she went to Michael's exhibition openings in Sydney. Once the Taylor family joined Rosalie and Ben at the beach and stayed overnight (6 Nov 1973 RG to TG). There are many references to the Taylors in the family letters. 'Shop talk': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 25. Taylor exhibitions in Sydney visited: Watters August 1973, Watters May 1975, Coventry July 1977.

¹²⁸ *Michael Taylor: 50 drawings* Macquarie Galleries, Canberra, 1973 (exh. cat.); *Untitled* dated 24.3.73 (ANU collection). The show opened on 13 October. There were still collections of collage materials in her studio when she died. The collage *Untitled* is illustrated in *Michael Taylor: A survey 1963–2016* Canberra Museum and Art Gallery, 2016, p. 62, as is Taylor's *Pink sky* 1975 (p. 35), a large oil on canvas painting, which Rosalie and I bought in 1975.

¹²⁹ 'A lovely mad woman': 30 Dec 1973 RG to MG, p. 42. *Parrot lady* 1973, The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, UWA (gift of Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers). 'I think it was': Dec 1994 RG to John Cruthers (RG papers NLA). These early works used several different types of box, and not the apiary boxes. See also 1997 Feneley: 'And I really thought when I saw it standing there ... I really might make it. Just might make art you see.'

¹³⁰ 'Made three boxes': 30 Dec 1973, 12 Feb 1974 RG to MG, pp. 42, 44. J.B. Young's was a local department store, but the remark applies equally to her local supermarket.

December 1973 was important in Rosalie's development for another reason. During a brief visit to Canberra in mid-November 1973, I had noticed her interest in collage and assemblage, so when I stumbled across a copy of William Seitz's catalogue for his 1961 exhibition *The art of assemblage*¹³¹ at the Museum of Modern Art in New York I knew immediately it would interest her and sent it off as a Christmas present. It was only then that she understood where her art might fit and thereafter she referred to herself as an 'assemblage' artist, a term which required no further explanation and positioned her in the mainstream of art. Seitz's catalogue includes a chapter titled 'The realism and poetry of assemblage' and his observation that 'figuratively, the practice of assemblage raises materials from the level of formal relations to that of associated poetry' could have come straight from Rosalie's practice.

She wrote back to me about the book:

I am thrilled with it. None such in sight here. It couldn't be more timely. It's just what I am at the moment and there is all the difference between borrowing from a library and having a book of one's own. Michael [Taylor] was deep in it last night. I find myself so much at home among many of those artists — confirmed again when I found a great volume of Marcel Duchamp in the library on Saturday. How exciting.¹³²

The term 'assemblage' has been used to describe an artist's use of a diverse range of materials in a work of art and has its origins in the cubist collages of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque of 1910–12. In Australia the term 'assemblage' is most strongly associated with the early 1960s works of the Imitation Realists — Mike Brown, Ross Crothall and Colin Lanceley — which with their great diversity of found materials were sometimes referred to as 'junk art'. (This was a term Rosalie strongly resisted in relation to her own work because of its implication that her materials were not beautiful and that her work embodied the same anarchistic intentions as the others.) The term 'assemblage' could also apply to the use of a much narrower range of one or two materials, and in this respect Rosalie's evolving practice would show parallels with the French 'accumulationists' such as Arman and 'serial' artists such as Donald Judd, Louise Nevelson and Andy Warhol. In the Seitz catalogue I had made a notation drawing her attention to a work of Arman's that made use of many plastic dolls' hands glued inside a wooden drawer, having noted her use of a doll in *Parrot lady*.¹³³

In 1992, nineteen years after seeing the Seitz book, Rosalie was asked to judge an art prize for works of assemblage, collage and mixed media and wrote a short introduction for the catalogue. She began her essay with Picasso and included references to Kurt Schwitters, Juan Gris, Joseph Cornell and Salvador Dali, but the core of the piece was an observation about assemblage artists that clearly reflects her own work and creative processes:

I think artists of this persuasion are partially motivated by a very basic human love — the love of toys. They need things to delight in, to play with and to evoke dreams with. They like colours and shape and texture and things and, I think, chance. They pursue the allusive and elusive. They see the art underfoot in the city street, in the bush and on the beaches, and the lavish waste of exciting material strewn by nature and society. They delight in wayward inventiveness and lyric derailments ...

She concluded by stating: 'art is a very serious business whatever guise it takes'.¹³⁴

131 William Seitz *The art of assemblage* Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961 (exh. cat.), 2nd printing 1968.

132 'I am thrilled': 30 Dec 1973 RG to MG, p. 42. She would also get a large volume on Kurt Schwitters: Werner Schmalenbach *Kurt Schwitters* Thames and Hudson, London, 1970 and other volumes on assemblage.

133 'The practice of assemblage': William Seitz op. cit., p. 84. My thanks to Daniel Thomas for suggesting this broader art-historical context. Regarding the Imitation Realists, in 1975 Nancy Borlase drew the parallel and went on to observe, 'there is, however, no hint of Dada, no element of anti-art or irresponsible nihilism in these ingenuous and tasteful assemblages' (Nancy Borlase *SMH* 17 Sep 1976).

134 Rosalie Gascoigne 'Assembled art' 1992 *Gold Coast City Conrad Jupiters Art Prize* Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland, Aug 1992.

First exhibitions: 1974, 1975, 1976

In June 1974 Rosalie finally got her first solo show, *Rosalie Gascoigne Assemblages*, which took place at short notice at the Macquarie Galleries, Canberra. There were more than fifty pieces ‘shovelled in ... you couldn’t see a thing’. Mollison had advised her not to be too proud to show her beginnings, so there were many rusted iron figures, a few pieces with grasses and wood, and ten of her new boxes. Rosalie did not even have time to title her pieces, so the gallery proprietor provided her own ‘unsuitable’ names. The exhibition was well attended, iron works sold and Rosalie used the proceeds to buy a dishwasher. But she later regretted Mollison’s advice because, by and large, the new boxes were ignored among all the other works and only one sold, although in Rosalie’s eyes some of them were really good. There was a patronising review by Geoff de Groen in the *Canberra Times*: ‘although it is not profound it is quite an achievement for a first one-man show’.¹³⁵

The show was an important milestone for Rosalie who knew she needed one to establish her work. She got confirmation shortly afterwards, when Mollison bought two boxes for the Philip Morris collection (*Back verandah* 1974 and *The dredge* 1974) and two more in 1975. ‘So then I felt I was real’, and if anyone asked she could say she was in the Philip Morris collection. Afterwards she gave a box to Mollison’s assistant Gary Anderson (*Bottled glass* 1974) (AGNSW) and in November the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now University of Canberra) bought [*Glass insulators in box*] 1974. Others sold when exhibited in Sydney in 1975 and 1976.¹³⁶

If the Macquarie show did something good for Rosalie’s ego, what happened next would bring her to the notice of the Sydney art world. In February 1975 Michael Taylor told her Gallery A in Sydney had invited him to nominate an artist for an exhibition in May. He wanted to nominate her, and insisted that he would choose the works. Rosalie was amazed at what he chose: no boxes with poetic arrangements of found objects, instead, four quiet, abstract pieces that were all about the materials from which they were made. One was a work with dried seed heads of the purple daisy-like wildflower, salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*), arranged in wire netting and corrugated iron (from the Macquarie show) (*Standing piece* 1973/74) (Newcastle Art Gallery, NSW), another involved cubes of pink-painted offcuts roped to a board that leant against the wall (*Leaning*



Rosalie’s works in *The Artists’ Choice* exhibition at Gallery A in 1975: (left to right) *Lying piece* c. 1975, *Leaning piece* 1974, *Collection [1]* 1974 (on stand) and *Standing piece* 1973/74

Image courtesy of the National Art Archives, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

¹³⁵ ‘Shovelled in’ and ‘regretted Mollison’s advice’: 1982 North; ‘unsuitable names’: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 25; ‘dishwasher’: 1 Jul 1974 RG to TG; Geoffrey de Groen ‘Prints of classical brilliance’ *Canberra Times* 20 Jun 1974, p. 10.

¹³⁶ ‘Felt I was real’: 1982 North. Similar remarks in 1998 Hughes: ‘I remember lying on the carpet. I was so impressed with this fact that the things had been bought by such as Jim Mollison.’ Mollison’s first two purchases were included in the 2nd Philip Morris Arts Grant exhibition in Melbourne and Sydney in February–March 1975 and mentioned by Nancy Borlase in her review (*The Bulletin* 15 Mar 1975, p. 51). The works acquired in 1975 were *Woolshed* 1974 and [*Bowls of balls*] 1974–75. All the Philip Morris works were part of the Philip Morris gift to the Australian National Gallery in 1982.

piece 1974) (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney), the third had broken white porcelain insulators on wads of newsprint arranged in a grid (*Lying piece* c. 1975) and the fourth presented tight bundles of rusty bush nails in tins on a piece of curved grey wood (*Collection [1]* 1974). The works looked back to her late ikebana and forward to the innovations of the late 1970s and years following. Sydney had seen nothing like them (unlike the works of the other artists chosen). Three sold — the first things to sell — and the gallery immediately offered Rosalie her own show.

The critics noticed her, too. Most important of all was the judgement of AGNSW curator and *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic Daniel Thomas: ‘the most interesting choice is the only fully cross-cultural one: the painter Michael Taylor chooses sculptures by Rosalie Gascoigne, quite unlike his own work, and quite unlike anybody else’s in Australia ... She assembles disparate objects ... with a marvellously sure and fully sculptural taste in setting up contrasts of texture, colour, direction and weight.’ Others followed him, writing about Rosalie’s ‘small, intimate and poetic assemblages’ [Ruth Faerber], and her ‘instinctive feeling for the texture and colour of weather-worn discards ... are the most satisfying but least ambitious works here’ [Nancy Borlase]. Her work was ‘a welcome relief from the largely predictable look of the other artists’ [Sandra McGrath]. Nancy Borlase was already familiar with Rosalie’s work, having been drawn to her pieces in the Philip Morris collection when it was shown in Melbourne in February.¹³⁷

This flowering of Rosalie’s career had one other effect. Ben had been faced with a very tempting offer to take a position with the Anglo Australian Telescope, which he had been working on for the past ten years, but it would have meant moving to Sydney. On the eve of the Gallery A show, he turned down the offer, essentially because the move would be so disruptive to Rosalie’s art practice.¹³⁸

The solo show Gallery A had offered opened on 11 September 1976. *Rosalie Gascoigne Assemblage* was another big show, with fifty-four works, but quite unlike her offering at the gallery in 1975. The first room was dominated by a huge banner advertising a fairground boxing troupe — Bell’s Touring Stadium — and a fairground atmosphere filled the room because Rosalie had used materials the troupe had dumped at the Bungendore tip. Memorable among these were the plastic kewpie dolls, whose arms she had ripped off. When she showed her finds to Mollison he suggested she might do a whole show using only the sideshow stuff. But she didn’t, and the back rooms were quieter. If some elements



View of Rosalie's first solo show in Sydney from the entrance to Gallery A, September 1976
Image courtesy of the National Art Archives, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

¹³⁷ Daniel Thomas *SMH* 8 May 1975; Ruth Faerber *Australian Jewish Times* 15 May 1975, p. 16; Nancy Borlase *The Bulletin* 17 May 1975, p. 55 and earlier in *The Bulletin* 15 Mar 1975, pp. 51–52; Sandra McGrath *The Australian* 24 May 1975. On Rosalie's two shows at Gallery A, see Hannah Fink's invaluable 'The life of things' 2009.

¹³⁸ See SCB Gascoigne: Personal record (BG papers NLA) and 2000 BG interview with Bob Crompton for the Australian Academy of Science: www.science.org.au/learning/general-audience/history/interviews-australian-scientists/professor-ben-gascoigne-1915-2010.



Daniel Thomas (right) in 1971 with the visiting Swiss curator and art historian Harald Szeemann at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Photograph by Brian Adams, courtesy of the National Art Archives, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

suggested play, others called for contemplation, including a number of works that again emphasised the intrinsic beauty of materials used, such as discarded domestic enamelware, corrugated iron, plain wooden blocks and the dried heads of salsify. There was a fair showing of works using Arnott's parrot and Norco cow logos. 'As an entity', Hannah Fink would write, 'the exhibition *Assemblage* was like a collection of short stories, or perhaps a collection of ideas for short stories — an archaeology of bush life'.¹³⁹

The show was popular. The boxing banner was visible from the street and drew in patrons from the pub across the road. Gallery staff complained about being run off their feet. Rosalie was pleased: 'it was nice to get ordinary people involved. They'd seen art for the first time, these men from the pub.' Sales were impressive: James Gleeson bought four for the Australian National Gallery, Daniel Thomas two for the AGNSW and two for himself, and others went to the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston and the Newcastle Art Gallery. There were sales to art-world notables, including Kym Bonython, Pamela Bell, Robin Gibson, Grazia Gunn, Ann Lewis, James Mollison, Guy Warren and a collector in New York. 'The world opened up', Rosalie recalled, 'I found I was legitimate. And then there was no hiding me'.¹⁴⁰

Contexts, influences and appropriation

Years after the Gallery A show Daniel Thomas wrote about his reasons for buying the two pieces for the AGNSW. Thomas observed that curators always see art history in works of art. It was the minimalism of *Crop* [1] 1976 that appealed. 'It was made in the heyday of, or ten years after the heyday of, Donald Judd and Minimalism. We'd known for twenty years or so the assemblages of dirtier things that artists like Robert Rauschenberg made. And I thought, ah ha! This is neater and more minimalist than most Rauschenbergian assemblages.' In *Enamel ware* 1974 the thing he saw 'was primarily a kind of surrealist playfulness ... Biomorph forms dancing playfully in space. Rosalie did later admit to an influence from Miró, one of the great Surrealists'.¹⁴¹

Curatorial emphasis on art history is sometimes taken a step further, into a discussion about 'influences' — or 'pigeonholing' as Rosalie would say. Joseph Cornell is seen as the father of all boxes, hence his is the tradition to which everyone refers when thinking about Rosalie's boxes.

¹³⁹ Mollison suggestion: 8 Mar 1976 RG to TG; Hannah Fink 2009, p. 160.

¹⁴⁰ 'Run off their feet': 27–29 Sep 1976 RG to TG; 'it was nice to get': 1982 North; 'the world opened up': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 29.

¹⁴¹ Daniel Thomas 'Rosalie Gascoigne: Up in the air' lecture given at City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand, May 2004 (transcript RG papers NLA) and see his exhibition catalogue essay 'Rhythm and lift-off' 2004, p. 17.

Cornell's role in Rosalie's art was specific but limited: she had already taken boxes into her repertoire and begun using them for practical reasons — to contain and frame her assemblages and to stabilise them (an ikebana legacy) — before she encountered Cornell (and other artists using boxes) in William Seitz's book on assemblage. If Cornell's enigmatic boxes were about mysteries and cabinets of curiosities and the interiors of his mind, Rosalie's were poems about the world she lived in, the things she knew and materials that pleased her eye. 'Little ikebanas' was how she once described them. Rosalie's sensibility was very different to Cornell's. Describing Cornell's boxes as miniature theatres, she distinguished her work thus:

his [Cornell's] platform is quite different because he was doing it to divert his brother who was ill — of course he had the interest himself in these old theatre programs and everything but he was making little worlds for his brother to step into ... I wasn't doing it for those reasons at all, I was doing it to make the countryside here visible to me and I could have what I loved inside with me and I could watch it, and this is a different thing.¹⁴²

'Influence' is one thing; 'borrowing' or 'appropriation' is another. Rosalie wrestled with the problem — which for her was an issue of integrity: 'I worked abortively all day yesterday [29 December 1973]. What with your book and large [library book about] Marcel Duchamp I have taken on influences. Rewarding in end but clouding my own vision at moment. I assessed position last night. False, false, and this a.m. returned to my true loves and think I have pulled it off.' The work was *The dredge* 1974. With appropriation in mind, she goes on: 'Interesting to find that the finishing touch was something I got from your book [Seitz]. The [idea for the] base and the top piece of wood are really due to Cornell's influence and change the whole concept [of the box].' The idea of a plinth that Rosalie took from Cornell for *The dredge* is something she would make use of in other boxes from this period, including *Enamel ware* 1974, *The Pepper Pot* 1975, *Black bird box* 1976 and *Room with a view* 1976–77. The plinth provided the finishing touch and helped ensure that each work had 'presence'. For Rosalie, a work without presence was 'a proper nothing'.¹⁴³

Rosalie refined her views on appropriation, and spoke about them to students at the Canberra School of Art in 1985. After observing that 'we all see the overseas magazines. Lots of people travel', she went on to caution them, 'everybody takes on influence, but you have to digest them until you get them down to what you honestly feel yourself and what you like ... You want to speak louder than they do when you have finished.' Writers and curators would see in Rosalie's later work similarities with American minimalists such as Carl Andre, Eva Hesse, Jasper Johns and Agnes Martin, among others. As she said of her art, 'the times were right for me', so one might expect viewers of her art to find resonances in the art of the times. Rosalie could: she would refer to a piece of sawn formboard in *Suddenly the lake* 1995 as her 'Ellsworth Kelly curve', a reference to the NGA's Kelly *Orange curve* 1964–65 which she had seen and admired almost twenty years beforehand; to the void in the centre of Morris Louis's curtain paintings when talking of *Parrot country* 1980; and to the abstract calligraphy of Cy Twombly in talking about *Close owly* 1988.¹⁴⁴

142 'Little ikebanas': 1998 Hughes ('Unlike Cornell mine was stability problems and I was really making little ikebanas in boxes, you know, the positions and things.'). Rosalie was sensitive about comparisons with Cornell, as this extract from a 1980 letter shows: 'Have been trying to do a star one for ages. Not a BIT like Cornell. Your father went and got Cornell book just to show how different it was. For one thing, it has a strange black horse in foreground' (5 Feb 1980 RG to MG, p. 60). But she soon dismantled the piece (which she had called *The dark side of the moon*). On stability and ikebana: 1997 Feneley; 'his platform': 1995 Topliss; see also Mildred Kirk 1986 for a discussion on Rosalie's boxes and the work of Cornell and Kurt Schwitters.

143 'I worked abortively': 9 Jan 1974 RG to MG, p. 43; 'proper nothing': 1995 Topliss, 1997 Ross, 1997 Feneley, 1998 Hughes. The issue reared its head again, in 1980. Rosalie was working with 'all my pink wood, lovely bloom on it. Half arranged it and thought I was really getting somewhere. Then I realised I had the nearest thing to a pink [Louise] Nevelson that you would be likely to see. Which definitely will not do!' (24 Jan 1980 RG to MG, p. 60).

144 'Ellsworth Kelly': 1997 Feneley, 28 Oct 1977 RG to MG, p. 51; Morris Louis: 14 Feb 1980 RG to MG, pp. 60–61; Cy Twombly: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 32. Rothko's name also came up when she talked about *Clouds II* 1992: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 52.



Rosalie with Ken Whisson at Anstey Street in 1978

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Ken Whisson's *And what should I do in Illyria?* 1974, which Rosalie bought in 1974, echoes of which turned up in her work over many years

Photograph by Matt Kelso, reproduced courtesy of Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, and Watters Gallery, Sydney

Rosalie looked at other artists, but in the end there were only three who mattered to her: Ken Whisson, Pablo Picasso and Colin McCahon (of whom more later). Rosalie was a great admirer of Whisson's work, whose paintings James Mollison had drawn to her attention. In October 1974 she bought *And what should I do in Illyria?* and would acquire two more (*View from my window No 6 or 7* 1974 and *Flags* 1976). After living with *And what should I do in Illyria?* for only a few weeks, she described her responses thus: 'I wrote a short note to him saying "It NEVER goes to sleep". Rather like a cocky in a cage that you eventually put a blanket over ... Lovely grey sea levels and sportive blue sky with peculiar cloud shapes, and even more peculiar Whisson-type figures on foreshore ... Extraordinary how it brings the sea right into the room — and the air off the sea, too.' A year after buying *And what should I do in Illyria?*, Rosalie would find in it the means to complete her construction *Enamel ware* 1974. As she was later to acknowledge: 'That blue saucepan up there, I am sure I got its placement directly from Ken Whisson, whose paintings I am terribly interested in. I suddenly realised I should put the shape across the work. That was a big departure for me.'¹⁴⁵

Whisson visited Rosalie in Canberra in July 1978 when they 'got on like a house on fire'. He had been sufficiently impressed by her response to his work to invite her to write an introduction for a retrospective of his work to be held in Melbourne in September 1978. Her piece concluded: 'Whisson's paintings have the quality of looking freshly made. They continue to exercise the viewer long after his initial response to them; and the viewer, once involved, will not easily, if ever, get to the end of them.' Prophetic words: years after, Rosalie would recall the interest she and Whisson had shared in sky and air and clouds. When Rosalie started to tear up linoleum and Masonite board to make works such as the sequence *Clouds I*, *Clouds II* and *Clouds III* 1992 and *September* 1992, the shapes would echo those in her Whisson paintings. She described the shapes as 'Ken Whisson shapes'.¹⁴⁶

Picasso was the one artist in whom Rosalie had a long-term interest, reaching back to that book *Picasso's Picassos* I gave her in 1962. His art, his creative process and his colourful life all engaged her. As well as benefiting generally from Picasso's legacy to assemblage art, Rosalie shared his interest in circus themes, and the 'shabby tired performers' in *The players* 1981 have much in common with Picasso's Pierrots, harlequins and saltimbanques (and, indeed, the work includes an image of one of his saltimbanques). But it was his creative process which really mattered, and it provided a model for completing another of her circus-

¹⁴⁵ 'I wrote a short note': 10 Nov 1974 RG to TG; Whisson responded to Rosalie's letter on 10 Nov 1974 (RG papers NLA); see also 22 Sep 1974 BG to TG, 1998 Hughes; 'blue saucepan': 1985 School of Art.

¹⁴⁶ 'House on fire': 1 Aug 1978 RG to MG, p. 55. For her Whisson exhibition note dated 8 August 1978 see Ken Whisson *Selected paintings* RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, 1978. 'Ken Whisson shapes': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 32. *Wind and weather* 1994 is another work with an obvious 'Whisson' shape.

related works, *Side show parrots* 1981. The story echoes her recourse to Whisson when placing the blue saucepan in *Enamel ware* 1974: 'I'd been seeing things about Picasso. And I get the feeling about Picasso that he didn't give a damn. He made it work, however unlikely ... He knew he was a master and he just made it work ... And I'd thought of Picasso and his sportiveness, his enjoyment, you know, this sort of thing ... And so instead of being fussy, particularly about the pieces I chose [to use], I thought, right — and with my very positive hand I did these parrots, and I accepted that one, going the wrong way ... and I got a very different quality, I thought, [because] of it.'¹⁴⁷

Consolidation: 1976–79

One constant in Rosalie's practice was her way of working in units, which she would usually combine into larger constructions. Her circumstances encouraged this approach, which helped compensate for the lack of a decent workspace when her primary workbench was the dining table. It was a method she was very comfortable with, allowing her to explore her materials and to see where the results took her as she considered the pieces; she had learnt this early on, from the broken china insulators and wads of newsprint in *Lying piece* c. 1975, the columns of pink cubes of wood in *Leaning piece* 1974 and the many small cigarette tins filled with broken china in *Mosaic* 1976 (AGNSW).

Working in units helped Rosalie assess the form and scale of a piece she was working up, adjusting the number of units until she was satisfied with the overall size, as she did with *Step through* 1977/c. 1979–80, expanding it from nine to fifteen units to cover 3.5 square metres, or *Parrot country* 1980, which began as a single unit, was expanded to three and later reconstructed and expanded again to four units (*Parrot country II* 1980/83) (Te Papa Wellington, NZ). Of necessity, big works were constructed from units, which made them much easier to handle, as with the heavy boards which provided the base for *Paper square* 1979–80.

Rosalie's use of units was closely tied to another feature of her practice: her use of grids as an organising principle, which helped bring out the subtleties and richness of her materials. She used grids from the start, in works such as *Bottled glass* 1974, *[Glass insulators in box]* 1974 and *Lying piece* c. 1975. Grids and units also situated her practice in a broader tradition of 20th century art and, together with the minimalist look and repetitions of many works, meant her art was recognisably contemporary.¹⁴⁸

Rosalie continued to make boxed works until 1984, but in the six years after her show at Gallery A she also worked with a wider range of materials and used old favourites in new ways. She took on empty beer cans she found discarded by the roadside because there were lots of them and she liked their faded pastel colours, which reminded her of early Italian renaissance paintings. The summer of 1976–77 was a particularly good year for grasses and resulted in five works of golden grass. At the old Canberra brickworks she came across great sheets of battered corrugated iron with traces of faded paint, which she put together with the discarded window frames she also found there (*Country air* 1977) (NGA). A chance discovery of a bird sanctuary at the southern end of Lake George was the start of a romance with feathers — thousands of them, picked up from among the tussocks and mud, washed and sorted, and used in three major works: *Pale landscape* 1977 (Te Papa Wellington, NZ), *Feathered chairs* 1978 and *Feathered fence* 1978–79 (NGA). The daily newspaper was not ignored — first used as a source of images of racehorses and sportsmen, and later for the qualities of the newsprint itself,

¹⁴⁷ On RG's interest in Picasso's life see Marie Hagerty in Mary Eagle 2000, p. 26. On *The players* 1981 see catalogue entry. 'I'd been seeing things about Picasso': 1982 North. Picasso's creative process was the theme of her talk about his *Still life with mask* (NGA) in 1997, part of the farewell celebrations for Betty Churcher when she retired as director of the NGA in 1997. Unfortunately, there is no record, although I remember how she began, with Picasso in the studio picking the box off the floor, placing it on his canvas and asking himself 'what would go with that?' and later, 'what else do I need?'

¹⁴⁸ 'Easier to handle': 1982 North (talking about *Paper square* 1979–80). On Rosalie's use of the grid and work practice generally, see Mary Eagle 2007.



Black swans and drowned fences at Lake George in the mid-1970s, where a chance encounter led Rosalie to a bird sanctuary and thousands of feathers she used to make *Feathered fence* 1978–79 and other feathered works. The memory also inspired *Lake* 1991, of which she said: ‘you see the lake going like that and the levels of the lake, very level lake country ... And there’s nothing else there, but levels. And the curve. And nature says it all without saying too much’ (1998 Desmond)

Photograph c. 1977 by Ben Gascoigne from author’s archive

notably *Paper square* 1979–80 made for the Adelaide Festival in 1980, and described by Mollison as ‘opulent’. Rosalie’s first works with printed linoleum found at country dumps were made in 1977 (*River banks* 1977 and *Step through* 1977/c. 1979–80). In July 1978 she discovered the Schweppes drink depot in Queanbeyan where she found wooden soft-drink boxes painted red or green or white and a few yellow. Some of these materials she used only briefly, moving on after exhausting her exploration of their qualities. Others would be the foundation for her practice for the rest of her career. A word she often used to describe her materials was ‘elegant’, which she applied to newsprint, domestic enamelware and galvanised iron among others.¹⁴⁹

As Rosalie developed her ideas there were new forms and bigger works, insofar as she could manage them within the limitations of her working spaces. The modest floor piece she exhibited in 1975 (*Lying piece* c. 1975) exploded to cover almost thirty square metres in *Pale landscape* 1977, both works having newsprint as their base. There are echoes of *Leaning piece* 1974 propped against the gallery wall to be found in the stripped thistle stalks leaning against the four window frames that make up the 3.5-metre-long *Takeover bid* 1981 (Heide MOMA) and in the fence droppers against the wall in *Smoko* 1984. The sprawling arabesques of bones she made in 1973 (*Joie de mourir*) became a very disciplined line of feathers clamped between wood and placed on wire mesh stands (*Feathered fence* 1978–79). The same discipline is apparent in the bundles of stripped thistle stalks placed in a grid almost four metres by five metres (*Piece to walk around* 1981) (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney). Rosalie played with viewer participation in works such as *Step through* 1977/c. 1979–80, where she invited viewers to step among the blocks, or *Pale landscape* 1977 and *Piece to walk around* 1981 where viewers were encouraged to circle the piece and view the way the light played on the squares of stalks. With works such as these Rosalie had taken on another aspect of the contemporary art scene (much as she had invited participation in *Spine* 1972). And in her letters she began to mention ‘installations’.¹⁵⁰

Rosalie was keen to have Mollison’s reactions to new works and exhibition proposals, and he followed her work closely. He told her that her ‘beer can piece is a major work’ (*Room with a view* 1976–77) (QAGOMA) and in 1978 he invited himself to dinner to see her *Feathered chairs* 1978. It was a two-way street. He bought *River banks* 1977 (her first linoleum piece) and *Cloister* 1978 for his own collection and she gave him *Daffodil box* 1977. He offered her studio space if she would like it but

149 ‘Opulent’: c. 16 Nov 1979 RG to MG, p. 59.

150 ‘Installations’: ‘Meanwhile I am mostly working and feel I am getting up a new head of steam ... Have also done a work with birds [made] of Lake George stones about 5 ft long, still in the making, all beiges and grey with three slatted squares as background ... Question at moment is whether I could present it as a sort of installation and not try to stick down the very heavy bird forms. Mustn’t let practicalities slow down the flow of art!’ (11 Oct 1977 RG to MG, p. 51).

nothing came of the offer, although when she needed a place to set up *Feathered fence* 1978–79 — ‘impossible to see 30 ft clear of background here’ — he said, ‘Bring it down here [to the gallery store]. Bay 5 is empty at moment.’¹⁵¹

Rosalie consulted Mollison before accepting Robert Lindsay’s invitation of a survey show at the NGV because he had previously cautioned her about showing in Melbourne. In October 1978 she wrote: ‘On Jim’s recommendation I have agreed to have a show of ten boxes in Brisbane about June next year’, and reports that ‘he said he thought I ought to do more boxes, that it was a pity to have them spread too thinly about the country’. But gradually she also learnt to trust her own judgement more: ‘Jim doesn’t always know, and sometimes I think he mistakes all this carry-on at home for what I’d do in an exhibition. I remember his unmistakable relief and incredulity in Sydney.’¹⁵²

Mollison continued to respect Rosalie’s eye: he invited Rosalie to preview the hang of his *Genesis II* exhibition in 1978, which would be the first public showing of major new acquisitions for the national gallery collection. Rosalie made a few suggestions regarding the spacing of several items, which he seized upon. ‘He was exhausted. Seemed really grateful to hear me voice pleasure in the show ... Then he asked if he could come and visit in weekend.’¹⁵³ Michael Lloyd, who watched Rosalie and Mollison together, would also seek out Rosalie’s views on his displays in the 1980s when he was curator of international art at the Australian National Gallery and later assistant director.

Another person Rosalie liked to show her works to was James Gleeson, surrealist artist, critic and from 1975 visiting curator of Australian art at the Australian National Gallery. She had first met him in 1973 at Watters Gallery looking at John Armstrong’s show, but it was only when he was visiting Canberra as visiting curator that they really got to know each other, and he became ‘a real family friend’. No wonder: after he first came to dinner at Pearce she wrote: ‘He talks very well — your father most impressed ... a really meaty conversation ... James talks about art quite differently from Jim. Full of scholarship — says Carl is too sophisticated in a French way to be popular with Australians ... James said something about getting the same frisson from my work as he did from Chardin.’ She was sorry her installation windows (*Country air* 1977) had not come back from Brisbane so that she could try them out on him, and when he did see them later that year he asked if he could put them to Mollison for the gallery collection. She noticed how much of their thinking matched and warmed at his responses to her works. Gleeson laughed delightedly at her two feathered chairs (*Feathered chairs* 1978) and when she showed him what would be the first panel of *Parrot country* 1980 he confirmed her feelings for it: ‘The parrot is the country ... Albert Tucker TRIED to do that.’ She gave him some of her stripped feathers to use and he invited her to Sydney to see the joint work (*Locus solus* 1979) he and Robert Klippel had just completed, thus opening up another relationship. Their mutual respect is evident in Gleeson’s interview of Rosalie in February 1980 about her works in the national gallery’s collection.¹⁵⁴

Rosalie exhibited her corrugated-iron windows *Country air* 1977 and her *Pale landscape* 1977 with its feathers on newspaper at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in 1977, where they were well received by the critics. In 1978 she had her survey show at the NGV, with only three solo shows at dealers’ galleries under her belt.



James Gleeson, whom Rosalie first met in 1973 and got to know when he became visiting curator at the Australian National Gallery in 1975. She noticed how much of their thinking matched and appreciated his responses to her works

Photograph by Matt Kelso, courtesy of the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra

151 ‘Beer can piece’: 28 Jun 1977 RG to MG, p. 49; ‘to see her *Feathered chairs*’: 23 Feb 1978 RG to MG, p. 53; ‘offered her studio space’: c. Oct 1978 RG to MG; ‘bring it down here’: c. 23 Feb 1979 RG to MG, p. 58.

152 NGV show: 4 Jul 1977 RG to MG, p. 49, also 7 Apr, 28 Jun 1977, pp. 46, 49; ‘ten boxes in Brisbane’ and ‘ought to do more boxes’: 12 Oct 1978 RG to MG, p. 56; ‘Jim doesn’t always know’: 28 Jun 1977 RG to MG, p. 49.

153 ‘He was exhausted’: 27 May 1978 RG to MG.

154 ‘Real family friend’: 11 Jan 1978 RG to MG; ‘talks very well’: 23 May 1977 RG to MG, p. 47; *Country air* for ANG: 8 Nov 1977 RG to MG; ‘laughed at *Feathered chairs*’: 28 Jan 1978 RG to MG; ‘parrot is the country’: 14 Feb 1980 RG to MG, mid-Mar 1980 RG to TG; re Klippel: 24 Jun, 27 Nov 1979, 14 Feb 1980 RG to MG; ‘mutual respect’: 1980 Gleeson.

The NGV survey was one of a series of small shows by emerging artists instigated by curator Robert Lindsay. Rosalie's show was popular with the public and the press, and the catalogue sold out in ten days. Lindsay made a short, videotaped interview with Rosalie for the show: it was to be the first of many in the years ahead. There was a solo show at the Ray Hughes Gallery in Brisbane in 1979 with nine boxes, three grass works, her surrealist *Feathered chairs* 1978 and *March past* 1978–79 (NGA) (the first work made with slats from soft-drink crates) and a couple more. The boxes included two with images of classical art works, the start of a practice of reframing such images as homages. Rosalie bought a new jigsaw with the proceeds. She decided she didn't want to show in Brisbane again because she needed a more clued-up audience and an understanding dealer, which was also the reason she gave for not showing again at Gallery A in Sydney. After the Brisbane show Mollison told her not to show for another two years.¹⁵⁵

The 1979 Biennale, New York, Pinacotheca and Venice 1982

Rosalie's work began to be included in major surveys of contemporary art: the 3rd Biennale of Sydney (AGNSW) in 1979; *Drawn and Quartered: Australian Contemporary Paperworks* (Art Gallery of South Australia) for the Adelaide Festival in 1980 (*Paper square* 1979–80); and in 1981 both *Australian Perspecta* at the AGNSW (*March past* 1978–79) and the *First Australian Sculpture Triennial* in Melbourne (*Piece to walk around* 1981). In Adelaide *Paper square* 1979–80 had 'pride of place right opposite the stairs and lift on wall of its own' and in Melbourne *Piece to walk around* 1981 was singled out as 'the most stylish of the pieces in the La Trobe University Union Hall' where its 'quietness ... was a relief and a joy'.¹⁵⁶



Nick Waterlow in his biennale office
Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia
(A6180, 18/12/78/5)

The 3rd Biennale of Sydney, *European Dialogue*, was the first time Rosalie showed in international company and the first time she attracted any sort of international attention. Rosalie showed two works: *Feathered fence* 1978–79 and *Winter order* 1978–79 (QUT Brisbane), chosen by Nick Waterlow, the biennale director. It was the start of an important relationship: Waterlow would become a great supporter, selecting Rosalie and Peter Booth as the two artists to represent Australia at the 1982 Venice Biennale and including her works in the 1988 and 2000 biennales of Sydney, among other exhibitions. In Sydney Rosalie was pleased that 'my things are saying what I meant them to — all pale country air. Will they understand?' Waterlow thought so, recalling that '*Feathered Fence* ... epitomised for the visiting Europeans the psyche of the Australian landscape and it helped them understand it more effectively'. Which is why he thought she would be a good choice for the Venice Biennale.¹⁵⁷

Rosalie enjoyed meeting some of the other artists, including Richard Dunn and Tom Arthur, but overall she did not get much out of the 1979 biennale. 'There is a lot of carry-on that I don't find particularly refreshing. I think I will soon want to go back to walking the beaches and the paddocks.' She 'didn't feel moved by most of the clevernesses. Just more confirmed in what I do myself.' One work that did stick in her mind

155 'New jigsaw': 22 May 1979 BG to TG. It was acquired several months later. Wanted a 'more clued-up audience' in Brisbane: 28 Jun 1979 RG to MG, and Sydney: 11 Apr 1979 RG to MG; 'don't show for another two years': 28 Jun 1979 RG to MG, p. 58.

156 'Pride of place': 3 Mar 1980 RG to MG; 'most stylish': Jeffrey Makin 'Sculpture lacks challenge' *Sun News Pictorial* 4 Mar 1981; 'quietness': Janine Burke 'Do you see the koala-bears with machine guns?' *Art Network* no. 3 & 4, 1981, pp. 26–28.

157 'My things are saying': 11 Apr 1979 RG to MG, p. 58; 'epitomised for the visiting': Nick Waterlow in Ewen McDonald 2000, p. 168; also '*Feathered Fence* ... became for the visiting artists a poetic metaphor for this place that none had previously visited' (Nick Waterlow 1992). I am grateful to Katrina Rumley for clarifying Waterlow's role in selecting Rosalie for the Venice Biennale. On the biennale's significance and background see Anthony Gardner and Charles Green 'The Third Sydney Biennale: "White elephant or red herring?"' *Humanities Research* vol. XIX, no. 2, 2013, pp. 99–116. Waterlow also chose RG's work for an exhibition of seven sculptors — *Confrontations* — at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in 1993 and *Spirit + Place: Art in Australia 1861–1996* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1996–97.

was Nikolaus Lang's *Samples of earth colours and paintings* 1978–79, which Mollison bought for the Australian National Gallery. Rosalie had an opportunity to revisit Lang's work when it was exhibited in Canberra in the summer of 1980–81 and later adopted the concept and format for her *Industrial area* 1982–84.¹⁵⁸

Waterlow's biennale had been preceded by a lot of discussion about the weighting to be given to Australian and foreign artists, and to the number of women artists to be included. These were debates that did not interest Rosalie. When Janine Burke asked six women artists to write personal statements about their art, Rosalie was crystal clear on the point. 'I don't feel involved/committed to the idea of women's art, I feel committed to the idea of my art.' She went on: 'Art is desirably the reflection of a whole person — what the artist is, and how he/she is shaped by the human predicament. I feel that being a woman fits very neatly into the category of what I am ... To women who call themselves women artists I would say that an artist is neither man nor woman, has been born an artist and not become one.'¹⁵⁹

In late April 1980 Rosalie headed off to New York, alone, to see the art, and took the train to Washington to see more. She had been thinking about getting away since her 1979 Brisbane show and James Mollison had been encouraging her to go 'to see what the big boys are doing'. She timed her visit to coincide with his — they would overlap for five days — and hoped he would give her pointers on what to see, some chat and maybe some contacts. She did not want to go around with him and chose to stay in a different hotel (the legendary Algonquin). But it did not work out: 'Jim let me down with a thump. Finally got on to me the morning he was leaving.' He preferred the company of the embarrassed young friends accompanying him. All was not lost, however, as she met up with Patrick McCaughey and his father and they saw the film *The tin drum* together, which she found extraordinary and not to be missed, and they talked of visiting Washington together.¹⁶⁰

Nor did it help that it rained torrents for several days at the start and she had no luggage, which PAN-AM had mislaid en route. But when the weather cleared she walked miles all over Manhattan, halfway across the Brooklyn Bridge, through Central Park, all the way up Madison Avenue and took the ferry around the Statue of Liberty. She was taken with the chewing gum on the pavements. 'It patterns the whole place over like lichen, green, pink, apricot, white. It's worn down with weather and lost all its unpleasant quality and looks rather beautiful — to me at any rate.'

As for art, she went to the Metropolitan Museum where she enjoyed the early Italian art, the 'gentle' Pompeian things and an exhibition of Chinese bronzes. The Museum of Modern Art was closed because it was setting up for its Picasso retrospective. At the Whitney she loved Arshile Gorky's *The artist and his mother* and saw 'a wonderful circus made by Calder [*Calder's circus* 1926–31] ... so lively and inventive' and a room of sculptures by people she had seen in magazines — Oldenburg, Cornell and others. She visited three loft spaces, which were in districts 'where you expect to see lots of rats'. She could not be bothered with a lot of the art she saw, which she found as boring as its Australian counterparts, decided that she had made several pieces that were as good as, or better than 'a heap of green wire mesh' at the Whitney, and was unimpressed with Walter De Maria's *New York earth room* (1977) — 'the product of a decadent society, it should be left out in the sun with a pigeon sitting on it' — and his *The broken kilometer* 1979 — a mile of brass pipes in an upstairs room. So Rosalie saw

158 'A lot of carry-on': 11 Apr 1979 RG to MG; 'didn't feel moved': 30 Apr 1979 RG to MG; Lang in Canberra: *Landscape – Art: Two Way Reaction*, an Australian National Gallery exhibition at the ANU 1980–81.

159 Janine Burke 1979, p. 314.

160 'Thinking about getting away': c. 10 Jun 1979 RG to TG; 'see what the big boys are doing': 16 Nov 1979 RG to MG, p. 59. Further references to New York plans in 3 Oct 1979 RG to MG, 9 Dec 1979 BG to TG, 12 Dec 1979 BG to MG, 7 Jan, 5 Feb, 14 Feb 1980 RG to MG, mid-Mar 1980 RG to TG.



Bruce Pollard 2 by Robert Rooney 1979

Image courtesy of Trevor Fuller, copyright the Executors of the estate of Robert Rooney

‘the big boys’ and found a lot of the art ‘very false’, but there was other art ‘that was truer’, and in this she found a valuable lesson: it confirmed in her the wisdom of sticking to her guns.¹⁶¹

Just before Rosalie went to New York she had been in contact with Bruce Pollard of Pinacotheca Gallery in Melbourne and in April he had written to her advising that she would be ‘most welcome’ to show with him. Rosalie had met Pollard in 1978 at her survey show at the NGV, and taken to him and his atmospheric Richmond factory, a great bare space with rough wooden beams and timber floors, which she liked better than the other galleries she had seen in Melbourne, and she began to think about showing there. Rosalie found in Bruce a dealer in whom she recognised a similar sensibility, confirmed when he remarked to her after looking long and hard at her work: ‘Your work is about feeling, it’s not about seeing’. Pollard ran a minimalist operation and Rosalie’s one frustration concerned the lack of feedback on reactions to her shows. Rosalie would have seven solo shows at Pinacotheca, the first in May 1981, the last in 1993, and Pollard would buy eight of her works for his own collection.¹⁶²

The first Pinacotheca show differed from previous shows in that the major element was eight works made with reassembled boards from soft-drink boxes to hang on the wall. Many of the works were bigger than pieces she had previously shown, including two multi-panel works (*Parrot country* 1980 and *Reading left to right* 1981). There were two floor pieces (*Piece to walk around* 1981 and *Step through* 1977/c. 1979–80), two works with the stripped stems of thistles (*Takeover bid* 1981 and *Piece to walk around* 1981), two linoleum pieces and ten smaller works, five of which involved collaged Arnott’s parrots. NGV curator Robert Lindsay reserved three (including *Piece to walk around* 1981) but they were turned down. Press commentary was lukewarm but Pollard wrote a rare letter saying that the show was much loved and drew out of people a type of warmth and appreciation he rarely saw.¹⁶³

Shortly after the Pinacotheca show closed Rosalie received a letter inviting her to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1982. It was from the Visual Arts Board (VAB) of the Australia Council, the federal government’s arts agency (where Nick Waterlow was director and Ann

161 Account of New York visit: 9 May 1980 R.G. to T.G., also Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 32, 1998 Hughes and MG recollections. Re PAN-AM losing her luggage, Ben suspected she failed to collect it in Los Angeles when she went through customs there. Rosalie would later use an image of the Gorky painting in her [*Homage with Arshile Gorky’s The artist and his mother*] c. 1984.

162 ‘Most welcome to show’: 14 Apr 1980 BP to R.G.; Pinacotheca plans: 24 Sep 1978 R.G. to MG, p. 56 (second meeting with Pollard), 12 Oct, 26 Dec 1978, Feb 1979 R.G. to MG, p. 67; ‘feeling, not seeing’: 1997 Feneley, 1998 Hughes. At various times Pollard owned *Venus* 1980, *Shoreline* 1986, *Grasslands [I]* 1987, *Formal flowers* 1988, *Plantation* 1988, *Denim* 1990, *Lantern* 1990 and *Amber* 1992. On Pollard’s aesthetic and style as a gallerist, see Jonathan Sweet *Pinacotheca 1967–1973* Prendergast Publishers, Melbourne, 1989 and interview with Christopher Heathcote ‘The making of Pinacotheca’ *Art Monthly Australia* no. 37, Dec 1990/Jan 1991, pp. 3–7.

163 Pollard letter: 15 Jun 1981 BP to R.G. (R.G. papers NLA). For exhibition reviews see Appendix 1: Solo exhibitions.

Lewis chairman of the VAB). She would be partnered with Peter Booth. The idea was to present two facets of contemporary Australian art, with Booth's focus on the human predicament in neo-expressionist paintings and Rosalie's on landscape in assemblage sculptures. For Rosalie, the invitation was the final seal of her acceptance as an artist, coming only seven years after her first solo show. She was delighted and, I think, a bit humbled by this recognition of her work by the art community. She knew Venice was a significant opportunity and consequently she was determined to put her best foot forward. After she was selected James Mollison telephoned her to try and dissuade her from accepting the offer because he thought it would be better if Peter Booth was the sole representative, but she was not to be talked out of the offer (which, she argued, after all was the considered judgement of the VAB).¹⁶⁴

Waterlow's catalogue foreword spoke about Rosalie's ability to create new and totally unexpected life from nature's excesses and from utilitarian discards. Rosalie showed works made with corrugated iron, swan feathers, salsify heads, yellowed newsprint and dismantled soft-drink boxes, and four Arnott's Biscuits parrot boxes. She remade *Crop [1]* 1976 and *Paper square* 1979–80 for the exhibition (exhibited as *Crop 2* 1981–82 and *Harvest* 1981–82 respectively) and completed the nine-panelled *Scrub country* 1981–82 in time for it to be included. One side-product of the catalogue was the lengthy interview Rosalie did with Ian North for his essay, the first time she had spoken at length about her life and art (New Zealand-born North was then curator of photography at the Australian National Gallery).¹⁶⁵

Venice was tough because the promised space for the Australian exhibit did not eventuate, and for the vernissage it was mounted in an incomplete pavilion without waterproofing. The exhibit was taken down immediately afterwards, though not before the international press had been through and noticed Rosalie's work. It took six weeks of hassling and threats to withdraw before the show was installed in a proper location. Rosalie liked meeting other artists in Venice, enjoyed drinks at Harry's Bar, and was pleased with the Missoni jacket she bought, but Venice itself did little for her, being so remote from the country that fed her art (she described Venice as a Gilbert and Sullivan set). She had a great time at *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany, to which she repaired briefly to escape the chaos and depression of Venice. In the end, over-decorated, man-made Venice confirmed her love of the marvellous, fresh, pristine natural beauty of the spare Australian landscape.¹⁶⁶



Rosalie with Katrina Rumley in the half-completed Australian pavilion in Venice as they sought to ready her exhibit for the vernissage. They had to paint the walls themselves — helped by visiting Australians — because the builders were on strike about concerns over protected olive trees. The whole experience reinforced the argument for a permanent Australian pavilion, which opened in 1988 and was replaced in 2015

Photograph from author's archive



Rosalie with Ann Lewis at the vernissage, Venice Biennale 1982, with *Scrub country* 1981–82 in the background

Image courtesy of Mossgreen

¹⁶⁴ 'James Mollison telephoned': MG recollection; Ben remembered likewise. Rosalie still wanted the confirmation of Mollison's eye — 'more the eye of Nemesis now' she wrote — and he agreed on a time to visit but failed to materialise (6 Jan 1982 RG to TG).

¹⁶⁵ 'Lengthy interview': 1982 North.

¹⁶⁶ Reaction to Venice: 1988 Ewen McDonald, 1997 Mollison and Heath, p. 7; for more references see Appendix 1: Solo exhibitions. 'Harry's Bar': Aug 2016 Katrina Rumley to MG. There was another legacy of the trip — Rosalie lost the hearing in one ear as a result of an infection caught shortly before she returned to Australia.

On their return the Australian exhibits at Venice and at *Documenta* were displayed at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The context is telling — Rosalie was grouped with three young men regarded as working at the cutting edge of contemporary practice, the only woman of the four, and a generation older than the three men: Peter Booth, John Nixon and Imants Tillers.

D. Mature years: 1983–99

The studio

If the years up to Venice were about Rosalie finding herself and her metier, and becoming accepted as an artist, the years that followed are about her practice as a fully matured artist. When Rosalie returned from Venice she was ready to address an issue that had been hanging over her for several years: the need for a studio. An architect and builders were engaged and in June 1983 she moved in. Eight metres long and five metres wide, the new building on the back of the garage offered much more space than anything in the house, including two big walls for hanging works, good light, some storage and winter warmth. There was a workbench with her tools and, down the centre, a large trestle table made with thick planks of Oregon pine about two metres long. Ben paid for the studio with money he had received as part of his retirement package in 1980.¹⁶⁷

The studio was an immediate success. 'New studio is putting a different complexion on large carpentry pieces. And it's light and warm ... I've never had it so good.' The first work Rosalie made there was *Club colours* 1983. The scale and ambition of her work grew, and within six months she had completed *Parrot country II* 1980/83, a rebuilt 1980 work which she extended to four units, and had begun two major floor pieces, *Piece to walk on* 1983–84 and *Set up* 1983–84, which were soon to be followed by *String of blue days* 1984 (AGWA) — a precursor for the great airy installations of the 1990s — and *Industrial area* 1982–84.¹⁶⁸

Rosalie would say that when she started out she had no mechanical skills, but gradually — and with Ben's help — she mastered a whole range of them. In her maturity as an artist she could use a drill press or an electric screwdriver or the bandsaw or the nibbler (used for cutting corrugated iron) or the sander or even the circular saw, all with some assurance, which, as Ben noted, was just as well because she always insisted on



The new studio in late 1983. Rosalie relished having a large, dedicated space to work in and responded immediately. On the back wall *Club colours* 1983, on the floor *Set up* 1983–84 and (foreground) *Piece to walk on* 1983–84 under construction. Note the corrugated iron on the wall on the left, which she only turned to in 1993 when she made the *Rose red city* pieces. The blue CRYSTAL boards in the left-hand corner may be panels used in *String of blue days* 1984

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

¹⁶⁷ Ben's letters include references to the need for a studio: 27 May, 30 Sep 1981, 19 Jan, 28 Jun 1983 all BG to TG.

¹⁶⁸ 'Immediate success' 28 Jun 1983: BG to TG; 'large carpentry': c. Jun 1983 RG to TG. Years later Rosalie spoke about the effect of the new studio on her work: 'My work got bigger. If I had a hangar, it would be different again. You need height above your head, because you use the air. I could do with four times the space now' (Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 33).

doing as much as she possibly could of her own construction work. As Rosalie's skills grew she needed Ben's assistance less, and though he would be invited to help out with some of the heavier pieces, his assistance was mostly provided out of the studio, as record keeper and photographer. In time Rosalie would hire a part-time studio assistant to help square up works, apply aluminium strip bracing to their backs and prepare them for exhibition.¹⁶⁹

Rosalie was in the studio every morning, leaving only for lunch and her daily dose of the television soap opera *Days of our lives*. She would cast an eye over the previous day's efforts and if she decided it 'was a proper nothing' it was put aside, to be reworked another day or abandoned. While working, Rosalie let her materials 'take her by the arm'. The idea of drawing, or trying out compositional ideas on paper or using collage meant nothing to her. Her artist friend Marie Hagerty observed that Rosalie was actually opposed to the idea of planning. Drawing was an academic practice. Premeditated. She didn't like premeditation.¹⁷⁰

Her approach was visual and practical, not conceptual. She strongly believed that art came from inside the person, hence her liking for the Jasper Johns remark quoted earlier about a picture being whatever an artist has got put into it. And that art was driven mostly by passion, because 'it is passion that drives you through unlikely places to unlikely things. Because you have got to have it [art].' Rosalie 'needed so badly something to look at', and fell back on the only skills she had: 'I can't do anything except I can see and I can arrange ... but mostly I can arrange'. She went on: 'I can do something that feels like something but I can't do anything that looks like something.'¹⁷¹

Peter Vandermark, who started helping her in 1989, remembered Rosalie's way of working: she would keep shifting the assemblage about, her hands moving, constantly in process, trying out the look of things and when the assemblage showed something, leaving it there. She would have many things going at once in the studio, several works in process, one stacked on another and others kicking around the floor. Even when she had completed a work, she would watch it on the wall, in passing, or by chance or out of the corner of her eye while working on something else, 'trying to catch them unawares and get the freedom of a first sighting', much as she had with her early finds of 'interesting shapes' when exploring the mountain or, later, searching the country for ikebana materials. Vandermark also observes that her works, no matter at what stage of completion, were open to reformation.¹⁷²

She continued working — primarily but by no means exclusively — with units, large and small, sometimes with the units separated (*Letting go* 1991, *Orangery* 1998), sometimes joined together (*Plenty* 1986, *Standard* 1990–91, *Rose pink* 1992) and sometimes mixing different sizes or different materials (*Plein air* 1994, *Skylark* 1994–95, *Night and day* 1996). Occasionally, small units were treated as individual works, which she called *Tesserae*. Working method and creative temperament were aligned. Vandermark observed that 'she liked the hazard of not knowing. There was no preconception of whether to produce a single panel, or a work comprising several panels, with her size was never preordained, not even orientation; typically, the size was determined at the end when she judged the work complete.' Sometimes she decided against using all the units she had made (*Monaro* 1988–89, *Archipelago* 1993 and *Skylark* 1994–95), the remainders either being treated as a separate

169 For a more comprehensive account of Ben's role see Ben Gascoigne 2000, pp. 9–15. Rosalie's first assistant (in the mid-1980s) was Stuart Vaskos, a local art student. From 1989 she employed the sculptor Peter Vandermark. See 'Peter Vandermark and Marie Hagerty in conversation with Mary Eagle' in Mary Eagle 2000, pp. 19–27. Eagle 2000 also includes a comprehensive list of Rosalie's tools, p. 17.

170 Marie Hagerty in Mary Eagle 2000, p. 20. Throughout the 1990s Marie visited Rosalie on a weekly basis, ostensibly to help in the house, but their conversations about art and Marie's work and what was going on in the art world were far more important, for both of them. On 'proper nothing' see, for example, 1997 Ross.

171 Quotes from 1997 Ross.

172 Peter Vandermark in Mary Eagle 2000, pp. 23, 25; habits of the 1960s: see earlier discussion in this essay and Australian Information Service c. 1969.



Studio interior with Ben photographing *White city* 1993–94 for his records. *White city* was the first of the white works made from dismantled cable reels. The big yellow work is *Loose leaf* 1990

Image from author's archive

work (*Outback* 1988) or catalogued as studies ([*Archipelago studies A & B*] 1993). Occasionally she turned the process on its head, cutting up large panels or even finished works and reassembling the pieces in a different order (*Target* 1991, *Byzantium* 1997).¹⁷³

The studio was always full of works, some completed and others still in progress, and cane baskets, tubs, cardboard boxes and plastic bags stuffed with offcuts, all sorted by size and colour. Rosalie, who always needed to have a lot of material to hand, was a hoarder and discarded very little. So the studio was also a storehouse, which spilled over into the courtyards outside and which inevitably became workspaces as well, places to observe, sort and rearrange her stuff. Materials could lie around for months or even years before they were used, if they ever were.¹⁷⁴

The 1980s: Soft-drink crates and road signs

Several things happened with Rosalie's art in the mid-1980s. She stopped making boxes, *Habitation* 1984 being the last, although their legacy is to be found in the small, framed homages she continued to make, using art reproductions and graphic images that caught her eye. She developed an interest in making installations or environments, to which she would return in the 1990s. The first of these was *String of blue days* 1984, made of warped weathered wooden fence railings and blue soft-drink box boards, prompted by the silhouettes of old stockyard fences against a clear country sky. There were more floor pieces including *Piece to walk on* 1983–84 (soft-drink box boards), *Industrial area* 1982–84 (gravel heaps on newsprint), *Flight* 1985 (thistle stalks) and *Inland sea* 1986 (rusted corrugated iron) (NGV).

If weathered wood was one of Rosalie's favoured materials, then the wood from discarded soft-drink boxes must be at the top of the list. In the course of her career she made about 127 works in which wood from dismantled soft-drink boxes was the sole or a major component of the piece. They range in size from some of the biggest she made to the most intimate, and account for about twenty per cent of her total production. Another, unlikely, favourite was discarded retroreflective road signs. The road sign works became something of a signature material of Rosalie's, especially the yellow, although she also used the orangey-red non-reflective signs. Rosalie made 108 works (including four studies) using road signs, always plywood and never the metal signs (she did not like the material and, apart from anything else, they were too hard to

173 'Vandermark observed' and 'turned the process on its head': Mary Eagle 2000, p. 25; see also Vandermark's description of the reformatting of *Byzantium* 1997 in the catalogue entry for the work.

174 'Materials could lie around': 1998 Hughes.

cut up). When the road sign works were first shown, the lighting was arranged to bring out the retroreflective gleam but Rosalie ultimately preferred to do without special lighting as it was too harsh, and instead hoped for an accidental, unexpected flash to light up the room briefly.¹⁷⁵

Over time Rosalie explored every aspect of her boxes and signs (and their lettering), whole, sliced and diced, and arranged in grids or small units and glued or screwed to backing boards (much as she had cut up and rearranged her parrot and cow logos in the mid-1970s). The cutting became easier when she acquired a full-sized tradesman's bandsaw in November 1988. The move into soft-drink boxes raised new issues of technology for her: how to secure her arrangements of boards. The solutions she found with Ben's help laid the foundation for her practice thereafter, being just as applicable to works made from road signs and dismantled cable drums. Most of these flat works were made by screwing or gluing the wooden component pieces to plywood (or, later, composition board) bases. One of the earliest soft-drink box works was *Dove grey* 1980. Ben remembered that it 'had to be screwed to a back support, with screws no one could see. We had a lot of trouble working out a solution. Eventually we glued them on, then screwed.' To help with the screwing Ben bought Rosalie a cordless electric drill in April 1983. By the mid-1980s Rosalie found that she could get by if she just glued the works to the backing.¹⁷⁶

There was another problem: 'The plywood bases had a tendency to warp, countered by strengthening them with lengths of aluminium strip, which we usually screwed in place, parallel to and near the edges, and this became a regular practice. The strip was 30 mm wide and 3 mm thick, and we used hundreds of metres of it.' Rosalie described the first occasion: 'Your father has discovered aluminium strips and we have been playing unpick, unpick, unpick followed by join up, join up, join up. Result is lighter and much more professional looking.'¹⁷⁷

Critical responses

Rosalie had a second show at Pinacotheca in 1984, followed by shows in 1986 and 1988. Unlike the enthusiastic reception she got from the mostly female writers in 1978, the predominantly male Melbourne critics of the 1980s were very slow to take to her work and patronising, arguably highlighting the parochialism of the Melbourne art world and the influence of post-modernist writers there. In 1981 Robert Rooney thought that 'the materials she uses are often more interesting than her formal arrangements' although Alan McCulloch found her work 'all done with taste, energy, talent' but fingered a problem for viewers: 'Rosalie Gascoigne's work makes for one of those art forms that seems so strange to a generation sure of its definitions — painting was painting and sculpture was sculpture and so on.' Ronald Millar thought her Venice works looked 'precious' next to Peter Booth's and in 1984 found 'a whiff of nostalgia' and 'nothing even a bit rough or un-artistic; the good taste never lets up'. Rod Carmichael, too, picked up on her 'impeccable' taste. Sue Cramer at least responded to 'a gentle, poetic art'. By 1986 Millar had softened and thought Rosalie made 'brilliant use' of her found objects and 'arrives at such serenity that you forget that she begins with a load of old rubbish'. Most notable of all, however, was Gary Catalano, who wrote: 'Gascoigne's sculptures are empty and entirely without merit'. As he saw it, there was not a single work 'made in response to a genuine imaginative pressure'. It took the Sydney-based artist Ewen McDonald to see things differently: he thought the 1986 show was an 'excellent

¹⁷⁵ On the display of the retroreflective road sign pieces see 1988 Ewen McDonald and 1997 Ross.

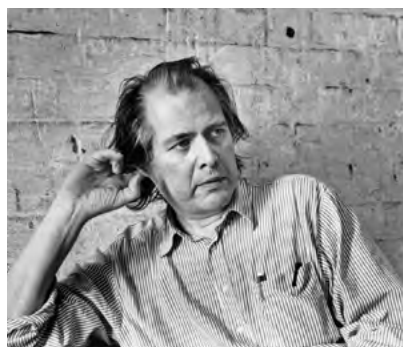
¹⁷⁶ 'Most of these flat works': Ben Gascoigne 2000, p. 12; '*Dove grey*': mid-2000 BG to ME, pers. comm.

¹⁷⁷ 'The plywood bases': Ben Gascoigne 2000, p. 12; 'your father has discovered': c. Jan 1981 RG to TG. Some of the earlier, larger pieces made of columns of slats were backed by wooden battens and/or aluminium strip. In *Scrub country* 1981–82 the aluminium strip was screwed directly to the wooden slats from behind, although in *Parrot country II* 1980/83 the slats were screwed to wooden battens which were joined up using aluminium strip.

exhibition' by 'a remarkable woman' whose 'work has a monumentality that comes from its sheer simplicity'. The critics ignored the 1988 Pinacotheca show. It was not until 1990, when Rosalie was paired with Colin McCahon in *Sense of Place* at the Ian Potter Gallery, The University of Melbourne, that the Melbourne press — but not Gary Catalano — really responded warmly to Rosalie's work. Robert Rooney converted, so much so that in 1993 he argued that she should have won the triennial Clemenger Contemporary Art Award for that year (rather than Bea Maddock).¹⁷⁸

Despite the lukewarm media response in Melbourne, Rosalie found strong supporters there. After Catalano's review in 1986, Bruce Pollard wrote to her that his remarks had had no effect: 'in fact, it bounced back on to him as most people were moved enough to say how ridiculous his statements were. Some people used more obscene or violent language.' His advice to her: 'the show had such a strong impact that you do not have to rush shows in Sydney or elsewhere'.¹⁷⁹ Rosalie only started showing commercially in Sydney again in 1989, when she came to an arrangement with Roslyn Oxley.

Pollard was right about Rosalie's impact. As a now-established artist Rosalie's presence in important group exhibitions included an exhibition of contemporary Australian art in Tokyo in 1983, the *Second Australian Sculpture Triennial* in Melbourne in 1984–85 and the biennales of Sydney in 1988 and 1990. The biennales had unexpected consequences. In 1988 the visiting New York curator Dan Cameron was so taken with Rosalie's work that he included eight of her works in a show of international contemporary art he curated in Sweden in 1989, along with artists such as Jeff Koons, Katharina Fritsch, Rebecca Horn, Mike Kelley and Sherrie Levine. Cameron's catalogue essay includes the following comment about Rosalie: 'What is unique about her practice, however, is neither its labor-intensiveness nor its inherently handmade qualities, but rather Gascoigne's evocation of a sense of place that is both nowhere and everywhere at once. This is the famous edgelessness which appears repeatedly as a motif in Australian art, even when, as in Gascoigne's work, the intimate presence of the land itself is part of the texture of the work.'¹⁸⁰



René Block in Sydney, 1990

Photograph by Heidrun Lohr, courtesy of René Block

The 1990 Biennale of Sydney, *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th Century Art*, was selected by the noted European curator René Block and Rosalie once again was hung in the company of international artists. Block would later select Rosalie for his 1999 exhibition *Tôi Tôi Tôi: Three Generations of Artists from New Zealand*, shown in Kassel in Germany and in Auckland. Another outcome was Rosalie's brief foray into printmaking, Block persuading her to contribute to the print portfolio he commissioned for the Biennale of Sydney (see *Close owly* 1990).

178 On reactions to the exhibitions see Appendix 1: Solo exhibitions. Melbourne critics: Robert Rooney *The Age* 6 May 1981, *Weekend Australian* 10 Apr 1993, p. 13; Alan McCulloch *The Herald* [Melbourne] 7 May 1981; Ronald Millar *The Herald* [Melbourne] 25 Nov 1982, 18 Oct 1984, 23 Oct 1986; Rod Carmichael *The Sun* 24 Oct 1984; Sue Cramer *The Age* 17 Oct 1984; Gary Catalano *The Age* 22 Oct 1986, 29 Aug 1990; Ewen McDonald *Art review* ABC Radio National, 20 Oct 1986 (unpublished transcript 20 Nov 1986). Rosalie was thinking of Catalano when she said, 'I have critics in Melbourne who I think have never stood in a paddock in their lives. Would hate a paddock, couldn't bear it, would run screaming out of it. And they like bookshops and things in Melbourne, you see. Well you can't speak to people like that because they don't need that emotion, you see. But you don't bother about them. You go for yourself and then people who feel the like way. So that's, that's a dividend. It pays for you' (1998 Hughes). She put her feelings in a poem, the first lines of which read: 'How can I show you the land I walk? / You, who stand on pavements, / Have never seen the wide places I know' (RG papers NLA).

179 7 Nov 1986 Pollard to RG (RG papers NLA).

180 Dan Cameron *What is contemporary art?* Rooseum (Centre for Contemporary Art), Malmö, Sweden, 1990, pp. 17–18.

New Zealand and Colin McCahon

Rosalie's inclusion in *Tōi Tōi Tōi* neatly captured the distance she had travelled since leaving Auckland. It was a remarkable turnaround for someone who thought she could never have become an artist had she stayed in New Zealand. When the artist Rosalie had opportunities to engage with New Zealand art and artists, she began to take a more positive attitude. The key was Colin McCahon, whose *Victory over death* 2 1970 and *Crucifixion: the apple branch* 1950 she saw in the newly opened Australian National Gallery in 1982. She wrote about *Victory over death* 2 for *Art and Australia* in 1983. Her appreciation of McCahon firmed in December 1983 when she visited New Zealand. It was the first visit since 1957 and it was art that brought her back. She was there for an exhibition of her work at the National Art Gallery in Wellington, which coincided with the gallery's exhibition *Colin McCahon: The Mystical Landscape*. She sought out his dealer, Peter McLeavey, and bought a painting related to the *Gates* series (*Floodgate 1* 1964–65). Rosalie was of the same generation as McCahon and had been brought up in the same landscape, which helps account for her immediate response to his art. She would have been delighted with the observation by New Zealand poet and art critic Ian Wedde about their coinciding shows: 'These beautiful works [of Gascoigne's] using a variety of "found" materials were a good complement to the McCahon landscapes.' She came to think so highly of McCahon that, when asked to show with him in *Tōi Tōi Tōi*, she said: 'As soon as they mentioned Colin McCahon, well I would cross the seas to go anywhere with Colin McCahon. I really think he's the greatest antipodean, he gives you the country they would never know in the northern hemisphere.'¹⁸¹

It also helped Rosalie to re-engage with New Zealand — albeit reluctantly at first — when she found an appreciative audience there for her art, beginning with her solo show in Wellington, which opened at the National Art Gallery in December 1983 and travelled to Auckland, Palmerston North and New Plymouth in 1984. Viewers applauded: to New Zealanders she was one of them. In 1990 she was paired with McCahon in *Sense of Place*, an exhibition at university galleries in Sydney and Melbourne to commemorate New Zealand's sesquicentenary, curated by Louise Pether and opened in Sydney by New Zealand's Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer. Buyers began to cross the Tasman in



Colin McCahon in early 1961 with *Moss* 1956 and *Gate* c. 1961. Rosalie bought his *Floodgate 1* 1964–65 when she visited Wellington in 1983

Photograph by Bernie Hall, courtesy of the EH McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

181 'She wrote about': Rosalie Gascoigne 1984, pp. 490–491; 'these beautiful works': Ian Wedde 'Where was the best art this summer' *New Zealand Art News* vol. 1, no. 1, 1984; 'as soon as they mentioned': 1998 Hughes; re Rosalie's first encounter with McCahon, see Ewen McDonald 'There are only lovers' 1990, p. 13. She apparently did not see or did not remember his works from an Australian tour of eight New Zealand artists that came to Canberra in April 1966 and I suspect may not have remembered Hamish Keith's article on him in *Art and Australia* vol. 6, no. 1, 1968, p. 61 or seen an *Art New Zealand* 1977–78 article until shortly before she came to write about him in 1983. Rosalie met McCahon once, at his show associated with the 1984 Biennale of Sydney: *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon's Word and Number Paintings* Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Sydney, 11 April – 17 June 1984.

search of her works. Public institutions in New Zealand made significant purchases, particularly the Chartwell Trust and Auckland Art Gallery. In 1988 she visited New Zealand again, to see the McCahon retrospective in Auckland, and she returned in 1999 to speak about her work at the Auckland Art Gallery. During this last visit, just three months before she died, she was able to engage closely with the local art community; the visit was a great success and she left deeply impressed with all that she encountered.

If New Zealand was keen to claim Rosalie as one of its own (notwithstanding a debate in the local arts press about her inclusion in *Tōi Tōi Tōi*), Rosalie herself thought otherwise. Place of birth was one thing, but what mattered was the places that formed her, ‘and it was certainly circumstances in Australia that formed me’, although echoes of her New Zealand years would turn up in the works she made forty and fifty years after she left Auckland. These echoes were inherent in her creative process, for which her shorthand summary was simply a Wordsworthian reference from her youth: ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’.¹⁸²

In a longer account of her process, Rosalie told James Gleeson about what stirred her creativity:

I like this material, it always excites me. And then I think, I don’t want to make it less than it is now, because as it is it’s exciting. And then sometimes I find an unlikely juxtaposition, a chance. And I think ... that works or that’s exciting and you get more knowing as the work goes on ... And suddenly there’s an association in your mind, or something you have had an emotion about. It’s that Wordsworthian thing about emotion remembered in tranquillity. Because you felt about various things in your life, and suddenly you’ve got these inanimate objects and ... you can plug into that. Old experiences, old emotions ... you have to work something you genuinely felt into it. It’s not a question of just making pictures as it were. It’s expressing something.¹⁸³



Hill station 1989, made when Rosalie was thinking of her sister Daintry who had farmed in New Zealand and had just died. Rosalie had visited her sister at the farm in November 1988

Image courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Rosalie’s strong sense of place reinforced the emotional content of her work, including the fourteen McCahon-like formboard landscapes made in the ten years between 1986 and 1995. Most were inspired by her Australian experiences but *Age of innocence* 1993 recalls her childhood holidays on Waiheke Island, *Landfall* 1989 school lessons about Captain Cook in New Zealand, *Beach house* 1990 (slivers of soft-drink boxes) the holiday cottages she stayed in, and *Hill station* 1989 was inspired by her sister Daintry’s farm near Putaruru (south of Hamilton), a work made shortly after Daintry died. Rosalie had visited Daintry and her farm in November 1988 when she had gone to Auckland for the McCahon retrospective. When one museum director wondered whether *Hill station* 1989 was perhaps too like Colin McCahon, she explained: ‘I look at these mountains. I see the same things [as McCahon] ... So you fit the things you’ve got into a format that reminds you of something.’¹⁸⁴

‘Feelings’ is a word Rosalie often used in talking about her works. In *Room with a view* 1976–77 she recalled what it felt like to stand before the picture windows at the Art Gallery of New South Wales; in *Herb Garden* 1982 she is thinking of Sunday Reid’s garden at Heide; in *Early morning* 1977 about holidays in simple beach cottages; and in *But mostly air* 1994–95 she is on the escarpment high above Lake George. The feelings in other works might relate to loneliness and her early years on Mount Stromlo (*Pink window* 1975), or her sense of freedom and infinite open space while out in the country (*Piece to walk around* 1981, *Plein air* 1994, *Overland* 1996). And if her viewers had other feelings, that was OK too (*Pale landscape* 1977, *String of blue days* 1984).

¹⁸² New Zealand claiming Rosalie: her death was widely reported in the New Zealand press, and the City Gallery Wellington used the tagline ‘Rosalie Gascoigne: Australia’s most famous New Zealand artist’ for its survey show of her work in 2004 (see notes on *Tōi Tōi Tōi* 1999 in Appendix 2: Selected group exhibitions for debate about RG’s inclusion, and also the notes on *Rosalie Gascoigne: Plain Air* 2004 in Appendix 1: Solo exhibitions); ‘it was certainly circumstances in Australia’: 1998 Hughes.

¹⁸³ ‘I like this material’: 1980 Gleeson. The Wordsworth quote reads: ‘Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity’ and is from his preface to *Lyrical ballads* 1800.

¹⁸⁴ ‘I look at these mountains’: 1998 NGA. The director was Ron Radford at the Art Gallery of South Australia. The New Zealand poet and curator Gregory O’Brien has written beautifully about the New Zealand elements in Rosalie’s work; see O’Brien ‘Plain air/plain song’ 2004.

The 1990s: Cable reels, linoleum and installations

Rosalie's work in the 1990s was marked by the introduction of new materials and a renewed interest in installations. As her supplies of road signs and Schweppes boxes ebbed and flowed, she turned to the thick wood from cable reels, which she discovered in 1993. The reels were used to transport cables for telephone or powerlines, or fencing wire. They had several attractions: they were painted in good colours (dark red, yellow, orange, white and black), often had numbers and letters stencilled or stamped on them and sometimes carried hand-written inscriptions. When cut up, the curves from their rims provided a new range of shapes, and the holes with which they were pierced added another element to her compositions. Rosalie made sixty works and nine studies using wood from cable reels. Linoleum also resurfaced in a big way in the early nineties, and she extended the tearing technique used with the linoleum to sheets of Masonite board and similar building materials.

Over the decade Rosalie created nine large multi-unit works exhibited as installations (although in two cases the units were offered for sale separately, to Rosalie's later regret). Rosalie drew on the full range of materials in her store for these works: torn linoleum, painted corrugated iron, weathered plywood formboard, rusted enamelware, apiary boxes, wood from soft-drink boxes, cable reels, packing cases, wire netting. In one work she also used full-sized sheets of new Masonite board, which she washed with a thin coat of white paint (a rare example of her creating materials for her work). The references were varied: autumn leaves (*Letting go* 1991) (NGA), the ancient city of Petra (*Rose red city* 1991–93), mountain weather (*Sheep weather alert* 1992–93), rural Australia (*Frontiers I–V* 1998), Gerard Manley Hopkins (*Skeubald* 1993) (Auckland Art Gallery), the coloured soils in the landscape (*Earth* 1999) (NGA).

The most ambitious works call to mind Claude Monet's quest for the 'unobtainable': 'I want to paint the air around the bridge, the house, the boat. The beauty of the air where they are, and it is nothing other than impossible.' Rosalie's subject in works such as *Plein air* 1994 (AGWA) and *But mostly air* 1994–95 (Art Gallery of South Australia) was the high sky and the marvellous width of the land and the air that filled the space. They were an attempt to 'do air', to capture the 'nothingness' of the countryside. 'I was enraptured with the feeling of getting out of my car at the top of the range above Lake George and Gundaroo [Collector] and seeing Australia stretch away under a big dome of sky. Nothing is there, but everything is there. It was very free and uncalculated. You cannot really express it in concrete terms, you have to be elusive and allusive at the same time.' It was an important theme for Rosalie: 'I think people who paint Australia and don't put in the towering sky are missing out on one of the real factors of Australia, the personal freedom of it and the big sky'. Way back in 1979 she had identified 'air and space and a sense



Lake George and the escarpment under the high sky, looking south towards Bungendore
Image by the author



Roslyn Oxley, with whom Rosalie would have six very successful shows. Her exhibition in 1989 was her first solo show in Sydney since 1976 at Gallery A

Photograph by Jon Lewis, courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

of physical freedom' as something she always returned to, having first discovered it on Waiheke Island as a child and then again — albeit very slowly — on Mount Stromlo in the 1940s.¹⁸⁵

In the 1990s many of the new works were exhibited in Sydney at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, where Rosalie would have six solo shows, all successful critically and for their sales. The gallery also showed some of Rosalie's white cable-reel works in Switzerland at the Basel Art Fair in 1996. Her last commercial show at Pinacotheca was in 1993 (although she did show *But mostly air* 1994–95 there in 1995). She also had two shows with Paul Greenaway in Adelaide, in 1996 (as an Adelaide Festival event) and 1998, and both did well. The cultural diplomats sought out her work for exhibitions in Asia, one of which resulted in Rosalie being awarded the Grand Prize of the Cheju Pre-biennale in South Korea in 1995 for *Set up* 1983–84.

Three late 1990s exhibitions

Three late-period exhibitions stand out: *In Place (Out of Time): Contemporary Art in Australia* at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, United Kingdom, in 1997; *Material as Landscape* at the AGNSW, also in 1997; and *Tōi Tōi Tōi* in Kassel, Germany, and Auckland in 1999 (already discussed). The Oxford show, curated by David Elliott and Howard Morphy, paired Rosalie with eleven other artists, nine of them Aboriginal. She showed four works, *Highway code* 1985, *Afternoon* 1996 (TarraWarra Museum of Art), *All summer long* 1996 (Bendigo Art Gallery) and *Overland* 1996 (Queensland Art Gallery). She wanted to create 'a feeling of infinite space and air' and she succeeded: 'this is thin air, shifting, sultry, off-peak, embodied in warped board'. Laura Cumming wrote about *Afternoon* 1996 in *The Observer*. The show received extensive and very positive media coverage, Rosalie's work included, including in the *Wall Street Journal*: 'The whole of the Oxford museum is given over to this show, which has been sparsely hung — with stunning results in the large central gallery, where Ms Gascoigne's art-from-debris pictures and floor installations are absolutely "beaut"'.¹⁸⁶

The AGNSW's *Material as Landscape* was the first extensive look at Rosalie's art in twenty years, since Robert Lindsay's smaller show *Survey 2: Rosalie Gascoigne* at the NGV in Melbourne in 1978. When AGNSW curator Deborah Edwards spoke with Rosalie about the show that became *Material as Landscape* they agreed that neither wanted a full-scale

¹⁸⁵ Monet's oft-quoted remark is from an 1895 interview with the Danish author Herman Bang for the publication *Bergens Tidende*, published 6 April 1895. 'I was enraptured': 1996 Davidson; 'people who paint Australia': 1998 Hughes; 'air and space': Janine Burke 1979, p. 314.

¹⁸⁶ 'This is thin air': Laura Cumming 'The week in reviews: Art' *The Observer* 3 Aug 1997, p. 13; 'the whole of the Oxford museum': Paul Levy 'The gallery: Mondrian and his heir' *Wall Street Journal Europe* 15 Aug 1997, p. 11, also the *Wall Street Journal* 10 Sep 1997, p. A20.

retrospective. It was billed as a ‘mid-career survey’ rather than a ‘full stop’ because Rosalie wanted to leave open the possibility that there could be more: ‘I always think you have for yourself if you’re an artist, my sort of artist, that you have an expanding universe and as long as you’ve got the heart and strength to your elbow you can discover something else.’ And Rosalie did make more works, in her last year using up her stockpiles of soft-drink boxes, road signs and formboard to make, respectively, *Great blond paddocks* 1998–99, *Metropolis* 1999 (both AGNSW) and *Earth* 1999 (NGA).¹⁸⁷

Material as Landscape focused on the landscape component in Rosalie’s work and the linkages with her materials, Edwards selecting thirty works to make her point, to great acclaim. Way back in the 1940s Rosalie might have begun by looking ‘long and hard at a very ordinary piece of Australian countryside, and tried to wring visual interest and variety’ out of what she saw. But as she grew more familiar with the Australian landscape and formed an emotional attachment with it, the connection became something more: ‘You see something very beautiful or very moving in nature, and then there’s part of your human nature that wants to have it. Possess it.’ She had Picasso in mind, whom she remembered saying, ‘“If you want to possess anything, you paint it.” Like a rose. If you painted a rose he had it, it was part of him.’ This idea of possession stayed with her, and when James Mollison interviewed her in 1997 she remembered that ‘standing on the mountain, looking to the Brindabellas, is so beautiful. I always wanted to possess it, to set it in time.’¹⁸⁸

Recognition and reflections

Rosalie’s late career brought with it recognition of a different sort, reflecting her standing among her peers. James Mollison invited her to judge the John McCaughey prize at the NGV in 1991 (she chose Paul Boston over Mollison’s preference for Louise Hearman).¹⁸⁹ Edmund Capon invited her to open the contemporary art survey *Australian Perspecta* at the AGNSW in 1993 (quote on page 2), having been asked to do so by its curator, Victoria Lynn, both because of her ‘enormous’ respect for Rosalie’s art and because she saw Rosalie as a role model for many emerging female artists at the time. Her art caught the eye of a younger generation, notably Imants Tillers, who in 1996 began to include references to Rosalie’s work in his explorations concerning place, locality and evocations of the landscape. There was recognition, too, at the other end of the scale: somebody once painted a large inscription on the plywood hoarding that was screening development near St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney: the inscription read ‘Installation by Rosalie Gascoigne’. This was while *Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape* was showing at the AGNSW in 1997–98. Poets and novelists wrote about her. Educators noticed and Rosalie’s work was included in the school arts curriculum and discussed in associated textbooks. Less welcome recognition came from a varied group of imitators who tried their hand at works ‘influenced by’ Rosalie, using weathered wood and sawn-up road signs in constructions modelled on hers.¹⁹⁰

In 1994 Rosalie was made a Member of the Order of Australia for her services to art. The media discovered she was good copy and a natural at the televised interview, notably the Film Australia interview with Robin Hughes broadcast in the Australian Biography series in 1998. The National Library of Australia recorded her thoughts for its oral history archive in 1995, and in 1998 Vici MacDonald’s monograph on Rosalie, based on extensive interviews with her, was published.¹⁹¹



Homage to Rosalie on the hoardings outside St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney, January 1998

Image from author’s archive

187 ‘I always think’: 1997 Feneley.

188 ‘Looking long and hard’: Bottrell 1972, p. 39; ‘something very beautiful’ and Picasso: 1984 Wood Conroy; ‘Brindabellas’: 1997 Mollison and Heath, p. 7.

189 McCaughey prize: RG to JM ‘Sunday’ (Mar 1991) NGV artist file 157 (on RG). She judged the Gold Coast City Conrad Jupiters Art Prize in August 1992.

190 Victoria Lynn and *Australian Perspecta*: 14 Aug 2016 email Victoria Lynn to MG; Imants Tillers first referenced Rosalie’s work in *Farewell to reason* 1996 (NGA) and by February 2018 had done so 73 times, with *Monaro* 1988–89 being a significant source (1 Feb 2018 email Imants Tillers to MG); ‘Installation by Rosalie Gascoigne’: Leo Schofield *SMH* 10 Jan 1998, p. 26; poets and novelists: see Bibliography pp. 401–402; ‘educators noticed’: examples include Donald Williams 1987, p. 143, Donald Williams and Colin Simpson 1996, p. 171 ff. (3 illus.) and Margaret Marsh, Michelle Watts, Craig Malyon *ART: Art, research, theory* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 199–200 (illus.).

191 NLA oral history: 1995 Topliss. The Bibliography lists talks and interviews with transcripts.



Rosalie and Ben at home, 1997
Reproduced courtesy of the photographer,
William Yang



The last photograph of Rosalie, taken in
Auckland in July 1999 by Marti Friedlander
Photograph from author's archive, reproduced
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The talks and interviews were opportunities for Rosalie to reflect on her life, work out a narrative that made sense of her journey, and identify those things that mattered most for her as an artist. What stood out were her love of nature (born in part of her love of the romantic poets), her sense of being out of step — different — for much of her life, her need for personal freedom and the sense of freedom she found in the Australian countryside.

It was in her art that Rosalie became herself. A favoured remark about her life was ‘art confirmed me’, pointing to the sense of fulfilment, of completeness, that she got from her creative work. She might have been channelling Robert Rauschenberg, whose observation that ‘I do what I do because painting is the best way I’ve found to get along with myself’ she had written down in her notebook of memorable quotations. When she spoke about what it took to be an artist, she emphasised honesty and self-knowledge and the solitude of the desert, as well as hard work and a certain bloody-mindedness. She was fond of paraphrasing Bette Davis’s remark about old age, though in her version being an artist, like old age, was not for sissies.¹⁹²

Rosalie liked to talk about the expanding universe of art. ‘I think it’s a great human fear of being boxed in by life’, she told Peter Ross. ‘I want my universe to expand visually to see more and to feel more and to be aware of more.’ And, ‘I like to feel something splendid could still happen, you see’. This was the reason she kept on venturing into the country and going out to her studio every morning until the cancer that killed her caught up with her.¹⁹³

Rosalie died on 23 October 1999. Her passing was marked in Australia and New Zealand by numerous obituaries lauding her achievements. Her ashes were later scattered with Ben’s on a hill overlooking Mount Stromlo and the landscape that they, in their different professions, had made their own. In the years after her death Rosalie’s work was the subject of a major survey show at the City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand, in 2004 and a full retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2008–09. Her works attracted sustained, strong interest on the secondary market and in 2018 the Tate Gallery in London (in partnership with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney) acquired her work *Habitation* 1984 for its collection.

¹⁹² The comment ‘in her art Rosalie became herself’ is an observation Elizabeth Cross made about Kevin Lincoln in *Kevin Lincoln: The eye’s mind* Art Gallery of Ballarat, 2016, p. 13; ‘art confirmed me’: a term R.G. used as early as 1985 — see Mary Eagle 1985; on bloody-mindedness, she wrote to Mollison in 1994: ‘Talent is only one of the things it takes (quoting Robert Klippel). Necessary also I think is a certain bloody-mindedness and a steel-plated persistence’ (28 Jun 1994 R.G. to JM), see also 1997 Ross on what it takes to be an artist; ‘Bette Davis’: 1998 Hughes.

¹⁹³ ‘Expanding universe of art’: 1990 Ross, 1995 Topliss, 1997 Feneley; ‘I want my universe to expand visually’: 1995 Topliss; ‘a great human fear’ and ‘I like to feel’: 1990 Ross. The cancer was only diagnosed in September 1999. Rosalie’s late-life remarks are mirrored in an observation by the noted neurologist Oliver Sacks, who wrote that it was insufficient for human beings to live on a day-to-day basis: ‘We need to transcend, transport, escape; we need meaning, understanding, and explanation; we need to see over-all patterns in our lives. We need hope, the sense of a future. And we need freedom (or, at least, the illusion of freedom) to get beyond ourselves ... to rise above our immediate surroundings.’ Rosalie’s accounts of her life, career and inspiration mirror what Sacks described. His references to transcending, escaping, need for freedom and a sense of the future were deeply embedded in her story (Oliver Sacks ‘Altered states’ *New Yorker* 27 Aug 2012).

This text is taken from *Rosalie Gascoigne: A Catalogue Raisonné*, by Martin Gascoigne,
published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.