

ROSALIE'S COUNTRY

The country Rosalie inhabited was at the core to her art. Country driving for her was an opportunity for renewal, satisfying her need for visual pleasures and liberating her from the mundane demands of domestic life. The great sense of freedom she felt in the country was something that helped release her creative processes when she was back in the studio. The country was also the source of her materials and the act of collecting them an integral part of her process. Her forays also gave her a yardstick for measuring her product: 'You've got to watch yourself all the time ... Nature is so much better. And there it is, mocking you. And being better. And also, discarding a lot of stuff. Nature discards an awful lot of stuff.'¹ All aspects of the country found their way into Rosalie's art: the landforms, the types and patterns of the vegetation, the play of light at different times of the day, the seasons and weather, the air that filled the spaces and the skies and clouds, the marks of human activity and even the birds and farm stock. 'My art is, I think, the outside come indoors.'

Rosalie's materials, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, and in their natural state or manufactured, had been exposed to the elements in country dumps or factory yards, as debris in rivers and creeks or as abandoned materials from rural properties in the scrubby paddocks she encountered on her frequent drives beyond Canberra. 'I like getting things in from the paddock. They've had the sun, they've had the rain, it's real stuff, it's not like stuff you buy from a hardware shop, I find that very inert.' She would cite Robert Rauschenberg, 'who never used new stuff', and would recall his remark about things having been somewhere and done something and are something. 'It's got life in it, you see. And what you're trying to get is vitality ... And it feeds all these things back to you.'²

In 1997 Deborah Edwards curated a major survey show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which she called *Rosalie Gascoigne: Materials as Landscape*. The focus, as the title implies, was on landscape themes and the exhibition explored the way in which Rosalie used her different materials to evoke the landscape. But there was a deeper truth in the title as it related to Rosalie's thinking about her materials: they *were* the landscape. 'I think things speak of the place they came from. After all they know about the wind and the sun and the casualness — casualness is a great thing.' Everything she gathered had 'to be something ... that is the language of the country where I live'. So she was happy to describe herself as a regional artist and liked to quote a remark she attributed to Fred Williams that 'if Australian art is any good at all it is because it is regional'.³

1 'You've got to watch': 1997 Ross; similar thoughts in 1995 Topliss and 1997 Feneley.

2 'From the paddock': 1997 Feneley; 'Rauschenberg': 1980 Gleeson, p. 15, 1997 Feneley and 1998 Hughes. Rosalie's notebook included the following entry: 'Robert Rauschenberg (on seeing a wrecked car) "It looked dead, but wasn't dead. It had been somewhere and done something and had become real — it had experience."'

3 'Things speak of the place': 1980 Gleeson, also 1990 Ross; 'language of the country': 1998 Hughes; 'regional artist' and 'Fred Williams': 1985 School of Art.

On the occasion of *Materials as Landscape* Stephen Feneley drew from Rosalie an anecdote that suggests another reading of Rosalie's materials, as a self-portrait. 'If I like it, that's it and therefore I think if you go by what you like the resonance is going to come out ... I've always said this to people who teach children, they want to get the kids to make a scrapbook and they paste in everything they like ... to look at it, the car and the hippo, whatever. And then after a while ... if you've been honest, you turn over [the pages of] that scrapbook and get a picture of yourself.' The same could be said of Rosalie and her materials.⁴

Andrew Sayers, then director of the National Portrait Gallery, once made an observation about the possibilities of an exhibition called 'Landscape as Portrait' in the Australian context. 'The idea would be that there is an emphatic relationship to the landscape, which makes landscapes embodiments, signs or projections of identity.' He might have taken his words straight from Rosalie who, after all, told the students at the Canberra School of Art: 'I think art should be your natural product. It should come out of you naturally ... That is what you have to plug into, the region where you live, and what you really know is in your bone marrow.'⁵

Rosalie's letters, talks and interviews include many references to her country travels, reactions to what she was seeing, the materials she found there and the landscape references in her works, and I have drawn on all of these to expand on the discussion of country in the Biographical Note (p. 48). It is important to remember, though, as Hannah Fink has so astutely written, that although Rosalie's vision 'undeniably originates in her relationship with the land ... to say that her works are purely about landscape is to inhibit their power'. By way of example she refers to *White garden* 1995, an arrangement of sheets of white-painted corrugated iron, which she observes has a great resonance within the Australian landscape and memory. The work 'seems more elemental than descriptive ... Yet in this work any nostalgia for a rural past is a byproduct, not the subject. The artist's aim is to convey the simple beauty of the material and perhaps to conjure the pure abstraction of silence or air.'⁶

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Rosalie negotiating with the keepers of a country dump

Photograph by Mildred Kirk from author's archive

4 'If I like it': 1997 Feneley. It is interesting in this context to note that some Aboriginal bark paintings have been called portraits because they describe the artist in terms of their traditions and family ties and lands (*Old masters: Australia's great bark artists* National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2013, pp. 202–204).

5 Andrew Sayers: see Vivian Gaston 'Faces in dialogue: An interview with Andrew Sayers' *Art & Australia* vol. 38, no. 3, 2001, p. 416; 'your natural product': 1985 School of Art.

6 As well as Rosalie's letters, interviews and talks, data on her travels comes from the calendars and diaries in which Rosalie recorded her travels for tax reasons from the 1980s onwards. 'Rosalie's vision': Hannah Fink 'The regional modernism of Rosalie Gascoigne' 2000.

Rosalie's first experience of the Australian landscape was in the blazing summer on top of Mount Stromlo, surrounded by pine forest. Initially confined to the unkempt gravel roads on the mountain, Rosalie's territory gradually widened to take in the valleys between the mountain and the Murrumbidgee River, especially after the family acquired a car in 1949 and the children were all at school. In 1960 the family moved from Mount Stromlo into Canberra, offering new opportunities as the town began rapidly expanding into the surrounding farmland, exposing places previously off limits. 'Champions are out of their house on Kambah Road and bulldozers are in. Walked around garden. Some lovely old roses and lots of irises. Also a huge wisteria vine if one could be bothered. Instead I took 2 seven foot lengths of knobbly espaliered pear tree for some future reference.' She discovered 'a marvellous place beyond the pine forest at back of the checking station, where you can get down to the [Molonglo] river (through cows), what a place for a natural Canberra park! Amphitheatre of hills, casuarinas, willows, calm sheets of water with ducks, springy turf, rock outcrops ... I am carrying uphill as many of the art forms as I can, which are loading its banks.' On another trip to the river she 'happened upon a marvellous natural John Armstrong. One of the rough bridges had broken loose in the floods and was standing upright against the casuarina trunks — abt. 20 ft. tall with the water surging all around.' She collected coloured rubber balls and tennis balls from 'near the Scrivener Dam, slipped from children's grasps'.⁷



Rosalie was passionate about the grasses that grew around Canberra, which she had first used in her dried arrangements in the late 1950s, and continued to do so when she moved into sculpture. This is an early 1980s image

Photograph from author's archive



The old Canberra brickworks, a source of corrugated iron and salsify in the 1970s

Photograph by author

The new suburbs being developed in southern Canberra drew Rosalie in. 'Yr father and I drove around Kambah last weekend — the first suburb of satellite town of Tuggeranong. To coin a phrase, you just won't know this when you see it again. It's amazing how quickly the countryside gets tamed. Surveyors sticks everywhere.' That was in 1973. By 1982 work was well under way at Erindale, several kilometres to the south-east: 'I spent two hours this morning out in the ghost suburb of Erindale — roads and crescents and circles and places but no houses. The grasses are magnificent, all the lovely old weeds [which are] fast disappearing in our immediate environment ... I became aware of the magnificent stands of grey thistle stalks [the variegated thistle, *Silybum marianum*].' And more surveyors' pegs: 'I found a whole lot of them in the mud over in Erindale where the grass had grown over and they'd obviously been left'. Later she found a great source of the variegated thistles along Mountain Creek Road where it meets the road from Yass to Wee Jasper.⁸

The old Canberra brickworks in Yarralumla was good for corrugated iron and salsify. She visited the site in 1974 when work to dismantle the brickworks had begun: 'I thought I'd go down and see what they were discarding ... I found four pieces [of corrugated iron] ... It was beautiful tin, it was beautiful.' In December 1978 she went back 'a few times and picked salsify by the brickworks'. Building sites were another source, especially for shaped formboard, notably in the mid-1980s when she parleyed access to the Questacon site opposite the National Library. The sites were also good for pink-painted offcuts.⁹

Over time Rosalie's territory expanded to take in the area within about 100 kilometres of Canberra, bordered in the west by the Brindabella ranges and north-west by Wee Jasper, in the north by the Hume Highway between Yass, Gunning and Goulburn, in the east by Braidwood and the tableland escarpment, and in the south by the Monaro district as far south as Cooma (see map at beginning of this essay). Within this area were several places particularly significant for Rosalie: Gundaroo, Collector, Lake George, Bungendore and Captains Flat. She occasionally ventured beyond these limits, to places such as Grabben Gullen, Shannons Flat and Adjungbilly.

7 'Champions are out': 2 Nov 1971 RG to MG; 'a marvellous place': 21 Jun 1973 RG to MG (about where the suburb of Coombs is, next to the Molonglo River corridor); 'happened upon a marvellous': 10 Nov 1974 RG to TG; 'coloured rubber balls': Jacqueline Rees 1974.

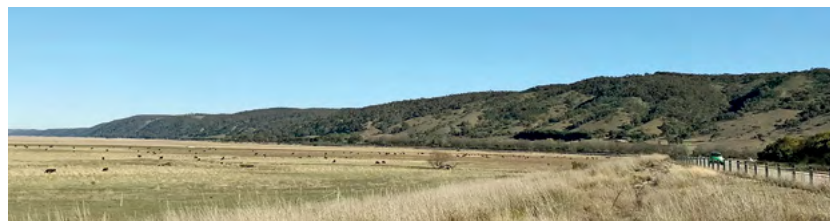
8 Kambah visit: 2 Mar 1973 RG to TG; Erindale visit: 1982 North.

9 Corrugated iron at brickworks: 1980 North; 'picked salsify': 26 Dec 1978 RG to MG, p. 57; 'shaped formboard': c. Feb 1987 RG to TG; 'pink offcuts': 1998 NGA.

These landscapes are shaped by broad, shallow valleys running mostly north–south between low ranges, including the Great Dividing Range, and by rivers and creeks draining west into the Murray–Darling basin, notably the Murrumbidgee, Molonglo, Queanbeyan and Yass rivers, as well as the Shoalhaven River draining north–east towards the coast. Europeans first settled the area in the late 1820s and left their mark in the small townships, abandoned mines and scattered farms with their sheltering windbreaks and rough-hewn timber stockyards. The better land is cleared but the slopes are covered in scrubby vegetation and trees, and marked with rocky outcrops. Summers are warm to hot; winters are cool to cold, often with frosty mornings and clear, sunny days. It can rain at any time of the year: the average throughout the area is 600–650 mm, but drier to the south and west.

The land then mostly supported sheep and cattle grazing, though hobby farms were also becoming more common, much to Rosalie's disgust because she disliked the way they changed the character of the land. She did not live to see the advent of the wind farms near Lake George and would have hated the solar farms that have sprung up along the Monaro Highway. I don't recall much canola being grown then, though now that it is widespread Rosalie would surely have had something to say about the brilliant yellow paddocks in spring when the canola is in flower.

Rosalie made trips into this country that might take all day. It helped when Ben bought a car for his own use in 1972, leaving Rosalie with unfettered access to the family's Holden station wagon. The Holden was followed by Mazda and Subaru wagons, equipped with a roof rack, various lengths of rope, a hammer and saw, a spanner and some tinsnips. She also travelled with large-scale maps of the region. The experience of driving through the country informed Rosalie's work, none more so than in *Suddenly the lake* 1995 (about encountering Lake George at Gearys Gap), and *Skylark* 1994–95, which can be read as a series of 'postcards' of hillsides and skylines encountered on her drives. The very roads she travelled inevitably also found their way into her works: *Beaten track* 1992, *Roadside* 1987, *Rocky road I* 1993/96 and *Rocky road II* 1996, as well as the road-themed works made with retroreflective road signs such as *Highway code* 1985 and *Through road* 1990–91.¹⁰

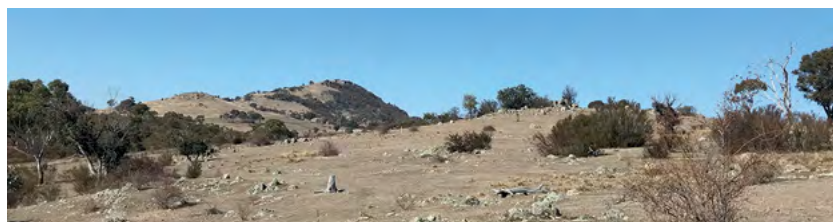


Near Collector, looking south over the dry bed of Lake George
Photograph by author



A remnant of the yellow gum – red box grassy woodland that was once widespread throughout the region
Photograph by author

¹⁰ Second car: 24 Jul 1972 RG to MG, p. 37; 'equipped with': RG 'Diary' 1987.



Between Tharwa and Tidbinbilla
Photograph by author



View from Lanyon, near Tharwa, looking south-west
Photograph by author

Driving on the highways had its problems, especially the road between Canberra and Cooma. Much as she enjoyed the views of the mountains and skylines along that drive, 'the Cooma road carries the snow traffic, always in a hurry with skis on top. It's all about getting there, not about enjoying the scenery.' So 'that meant you were battling the traffic all the way, and that's no good if you're looking — keep your eye on the road sort of stuff'. Rosalie preferred back roads 'and mostly I drive without a specific purpose, taking the most interesting options'.¹¹

Country roads also had their hazards, and Rosalie learned to be wary. 'Sometimes I used to go as much as 300 kilometres, way out and back. And if I got mud-bound or anything I was in deep, deep trouble. Especially as the night used to come down, back of the Brindabellas. You had to get out of the car and sort of see how deep [the mud pools] were before you went through. Because if they were too deep, you were stuck.' Adventuresome though she was, Rosalie had remarkably few incidents while out driving. She ran into trouble near Tarago in late 1976, but the local police constable helped rescue her and in gratitude Rosalie made a donation to the Goulburn Police Boys Club. On another occasion, she was stranded with a flat battery on the Shoalhaven River (resulting in an expensive taxi ride from Goulburn to Canberra), but the most dangerous incident occurred around January 1977 when the tyre on one wheel blew and the car came off the road. Rosalie was lucky: she only broke an ankle and her passenger was not hurt but the car needed extensive repairs.¹²

Sometimes Rosalie would take a break at the coast where she would walk the beaches between Ulladulla in the north and Narooma in the south, gathering shells and examining the debris along the tideline, repeating something she loved to do in her New Zealand childhood. 'I have been summering at Batemans Bay for 4 nights. What a good idea ... We stayed at a Country Comfort Motel at the head of B. Bay bridge, walked the beaches, picked up a million shells (why?) paddled on nice clean beaches, ate fish and chips on the waterfront and drank white wine in our rooms at night. Relaxing. Will do it again.' Ben reported on an earlier visit: 'Successful week at beach, thousands of pieces of driftwood laid out in rows like department store, not to mention stones of every size shape and colour.' These excursion and childhood memories found their way into works such as *Down to the silver sea* 1977/81, *Private beach* 1979, *Turn of the tide* 1983, *Twofold bay* 1988, *Beach house* 1990, *Shark* 1998 and *Tidal* 1997.¹³

¹¹ Quotes from 1998 Hughes and RG 'Diary' 1987.

¹² 'If I got mud-bound': 1998 Hughes; donation to Police Boys Club: letter of thanks dated 3 Aug 1976 (RG papers NLA); 'flat battery on the Shoalhaven': RG 'Diary' 1987; blown tyre: MG personal recollection and BG note in RG financial records (RG papers NLA).

¹³ 'Summering at Batemans Bay': abt Feb 1979 RG to TG; her companion was Diana Woollard; 'Ben reported': early Dec 1971 BG to MG.

Rosalie was happy to travel alone, but she would occasionally invite one of a very select group of friends to accompany her. One was her New Zealand friend Marjorie Daniel, who she described as an ideal companion: ‘so patient with my enthusiasms and, of course, wanting nothing for herself’. Another was the poet Rosemary Dobson: ‘At the moment I would like to drop everything and be out in the paddocks. Rosemary Dobson is ready and eager to come with me. I can see it would be the ideal outing for her — real escapism. Ideal companion for me, too — wouldn’t get between me and nature. Last person I took kept holding up things and saying “Look!” I had to gallop over the nearest hill whenever I stopped the car, to get out of earshot.’ Rosemary understood: ‘When we arrived at our destination dump we would immediately begin our separate searches. Rosalie was intent at once, and I quickly learnt to take a different path to hers, and not to obstruct her eagerness. But I was always keen to see what would attract her attention. At one stage it was certainly these white enamelled kitchen vessels, which became so calm and beautiful in their final arrangements, as in *Habitations* [sic] and *Setup* [sic]. So I kept out of her way then, looking myself, for small rounded stones.’¹⁴

Rosalie looked at the country with a poet’s eye. Her country was ‘the old, old tapestry woven by years of sun and wind’, in which she saw:

Muted greens — burnt yellows — stitched with the
brilliant pricks of red and citrus yellow
of tiny extravagant flowers and flashing bird-wing ...¹⁵

When Rosalie and Rosemary were out together they would discuss words to describe what they were seeing as they drove: ‘I remember the day I drove with poetess Rosemary Dobson and the culverts and the natural hollows were full of long pale winter grass — hushed, as it were. Stretching? Yawning? Sighing? We tried to think of words for grass of that sort. I kept coming back to the pallor of it. “Ashen” we thought but it has a dying fall to it. We suggested and discarded and found no right answers at the time.’ When Rosalie and I were driving together our conversations were always to do with what we were seeing — the way the light played on the passing landscape, and how the colours of passing cars read in the landscape and against the black road-top. We were both visual people.¹⁶



A day in the country, c. 1973: Rosalie’s friend Marjorie Daniel, who was ‘an ideal companion’ on their foraging trips

Image from author’s archive

¹⁴ ‘Patient with my enthusiasms’: 11 Sep 1972 RG to TG; ‘ready and eager’: c. 16 Nov 1972 RG to MG, p. 39; ‘when we arrived’: Rosemary Dobson 2004.

¹⁵ ‘Rosalie to a Melbourne critic’, 1986, written in response to Gary Catalano’s review of her 1986 exhibition at Pinacotheca (see the Biographical Note and 1986 entry in Appendix 1: Solo exhibitions). It begins: ‘How can I show you the land I walk? / You, who stand on pavements, / Have never seen the places I know’ (RG papers NLA).

¹⁶ ‘I remember the day I drove’: RG ‘Diary’ 1987.



Captains Flat in 1975, looking up to the old mine which was a rich source of rusted iron
Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia (A6180, 15/1/75/77)

Another companion was her studio assistant and artist Peter Vandermark: 'When I went out with her in the car she was almost silent, yet it never felt uncomfortable. At the tip we'd split up and go in different directions. After looking she'd get me to pick up the things she'd selected. Usually she'd come home with something, a couple of pieces of tin maybe, but it didn't matter if we returned with nothing. There was no music, I'd drive and she'd just check out the landscape. Rosalie would bring the same things each time: a thermos of coffee, a packet of date roll biscuits, some pieces of fruit — a snack. We'd take time off. At Captains Flat for example, we'd stop at the oval and if there was a road-working team, she'd go up to them, introduce herself, and explain how she used the signs. She knew the best way to get the signs was to carry a slab of beer in the car. She knew the currency of workers.'¹⁷

The country's drawcards included the township dumps, particularly those at Bungendore, Captains Flat, Collector and Gundaroo. She liked a dump that gave her 'the assortment of human living, which is what you need'. She was drawn to ordinary, readily available domestic objects, none more so than domestic enamelware: 'I just like ordinary stuff. People get so exotic about everything and ordinary stuff is so good ... I think a lot of people just discard all the ordinary things and produce this laborious end product [which I find] so unexciting ... I would like to say, "look this is better, it didn't cost this or that, but visually it gives you more feedback".'¹⁸

The old mining town of Captains Flat, much diminished following the closure of the mine in 1962, was 'loaded with what I need'. The town dump was the source of 'a whole lot of very good quality linoleum that they'd apparently ripped up from the city hall'. She found the grey wooden blocks used in *Cityscape* 1972 and the doll in *Parrot lady* 1973 in Captains Flat, and in September 1972 alone she made three visits there in as many weeks. The mine was a rich source of rusted iron: 'I used to go up to Captains Flat, up the mine, with a bucket. I remember trudging across that mud plain, it was magic. The iron work used to be like [Alberto] Giacometti's iron. It's all eaten away by the nasty acids and things they have in Captains Flat where the mine was.'¹⁹

Gundaroo 'used to be an absolutely marvellous dump, it was spread out over all the hillsides, nobody bothered to tidy it up, and there were old organs, and old shoes and old bottles and old everything. There were some awful, awful smells in the dump in summer, and you never went in really in the height of summer.' The dump at Bungendore was

¹⁷ Peter Vandermark in Mary Eagle 2000, p. 23.

¹⁸ 'Assortment of human living': 1997 Feneley, also 1980 Gleeson and Jacqueline Rees 1974.

¹⁹ 'Loaded with what I need' and 'three visits there': 13 Sep 1972 RG to MG, p. 37 (part quote); 'good quality linoleum': 1982 North; 'wooden blocks': 2 Jun 1972 RG to MG, p. 35; 'up the mine': 1998 Hughes.

a favourite: 'Mildred [Kirk] and I did Bungendore tip again last week. What an embarrassing choice of art forms.' She remembered it in 1997: 'it was a marvellous dump to find refuse from people's lives. Once they'd tipped out a whole failed sideshow and I picked up 300 plastic dollies.' The dolls found their way into *Dolly boxes* 1976. Rosalie also had success at the dump at Collector, where she found the sawn-up road signs used in *Highway code* 1985, a by-product of 'the new road through to Goulburn'. Other finds included the clove-pink 'Stop' sign used in *Red* 1992 and two pieces of old water tank used for *Swell* 1984, which she found 'outside the fence where somebody had just dropped it'.²⁰

But times change and so did the dumps. Rosalie's letters reflect the change. In 1972 she wrote about the tip at Gundaroo: 'My last visit to THAT dump — the real dump I mean. It has got very sordid and regimented. Trenches bulldozed and filled in. All that is valuable now lying full fathom five under clay.' In 1973 she discovered the same about Captains Flat: 'Went twice to Captains Flat with Mildred last week. They are doing big clean up and soon there won't be any pickings ...' And so it was also with the 'lovely dumps' beyond Yass. Looking back she reflected: 'They've ruined dumps now, for people like me. Modern dump hygiene, recycling and selling have become terrible words.'²¹

She found other sources. One was the Schweppes depot in Queanbeyan just over the railway bridge on the road from Canberra (see p. 68). Thus began a long relationship with Schweppes. When Schweppes phased out its wooden crates Rosalie had to look elsewhere. Peter Vandermark remembers going to Hope's Goulburn Cordials depot in Goulburn with Rosalie in 1990. 'We hired a covered truck, the biggest I was allowed to drive, and went to Goulburn, and came back with it chock-a-block with soft-drink crates.' Another source, also close to home, was that modern innovation, the recycling centre. A favourite was Revolve at the dump in south Canberra near Hume where salvaged items were for sale at modest prices. Rosalie frequented Revolve in the 1990s, especially in 1994–95 when she made at least seventeen visits between July 1994 and June 1995. Revolve was the source of the white cable drums used in *White city* 1993–94 and the many white works in 1994, the blue wood in *Plein air* 1994 and *Suddenly the lake* 1995, and the red road signs in *Hung fire* 1995.²²

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Rosalie's art was dependent on what the country yielded up: 'I haven't got any stuff to work with if I don't find it and I can't go to the drawing board and sketch ... (and determine) that now I need all this plywood or I need all this ... I don't do it like that. I wait till I've got the stuff and then I think: well, what can I make.' Chance was a great friend: 'it is very much a question of which road you take, and which day, and what your eye happens to be sharpened to at the time'. Rosalie wasn't looking for apiary boxes when she came on an abandoned apiary as she was driving in the bush one May morning. She had no expectation of finding the remains of a travelling fairground sideshow at the Bungendore tip, but she was instantly taken with the visual quality of the material. 'I went over a hillock ... they had thrown the whole sideshow out ... I was excited ... You have got to be there on the right day!' A day or so later, another scavenger might have found the stash or, more likely, the tip managers might have burnt or buried the lot. She came upon the swan feathers used in *Pale landscape* 1977 and *Feathered fence* 1978–79 when she was looking for a 'nice place for lunch' with her New Zealand friend, who couldn't stand the smells of the 'beastly dump' at Bungendore any longer. They happened on a side road near the southern end of Lake George and came across the feathers in a bird sanctuary



'The assortment of human living ... I just like ordinary stuff. People get so exotic about everything and ordinary stuff is so good.'

Photograph by Kath Giovanelli from author's archive

20 'Gundaroo used to be marvellous': 1997 Feneley; 'Mildred and I': 30 Nov 1973 RG to MG; 'it was a marvellous dump': Janet Hawley 1997; 'the new road to Goulburn': 1998 Hughes; 'clove-pink stop sign' and 'outside the fence': 1998 NGA.

21 'My last visit to THAT dump': 11 Sep 1972 RG to MG, p. 37 (part quote); 'went twice to Captains Flat': 30 Nov 1973 RG to MG; 'dumps beyond Yass': 1997 Feneley; 'they've ruined dumps now': Janet Hawley 1997.

22 'Hired a covered truck': Peter Vandermark in Mary Eagle 2000, p. 23; 'white cable drums' and 'red road signs': 1995 Topliss; 'blue wood': 1998 Hughes.



Unexpected bounty. Rosalie first chanced upon an abandoned apiary in May 1973 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'

Photograph from author's archive

'which I had never actually found before'. When Rosalie collected the first retroreflective road signs, already sawn into squares and slashed with white paint, she wasn't thinking of the art possibilities; rather, she had in mind their potential as play material for her young grandsons. Then one day she noticed the gleam on them, wet with rain, looked at them with a new interest and took them into the studio.²³

Tactics were also involved. The sight of a truck loaded with Schweppes boxes led her to a factory just over the railway bridge in Queanbeyan, which had a large pile of boxes ready to burn. She realised immediately it was much closer to home than the country dumps, did not smell and had great quantities of boxes that were going to be destroyed. So in 1978, just after her survey show at the National Gallery of Victoria, Rosalie paid a visit, 'waving my Melbourne catalogue as credentials' and having 'sweet-talked the yard man' she was granted access to the discards pile. She did the same again, in 1982 after she came back from the Venice Biennale, when she called on the manager with copies of the exhibition poster, which featured *Scrub country* 1981–82 made with boards from Schweppes boxes, and said to him, 'you've been so kind with your discard pile, maybe you'd like one of these'. Indeed, the manager wanted ten, and in return offered her a case of soda water and, most importantly, said, 'feel free with our pile'.²⁴

A similar outgoing approach yielded results in 1987 when her stock of road signs had dried up. She returned to the original source. "I come bearing gifts and seeking information", I said, putting down a 24-can pack of Fosters. My contact sketched the merest glance at its direction. "Gifts are always welcome", he said. He filled me in: lists of depots — Yass, Gundagai, Goulburn, Cooma; names of men — he rang people up. Chance is a fine thing and it serves me well, but this was organised opportunity ... On the way back to Canberra I came upon a road gang sitting among the winter tussocks having a smoko. I pulled up. Heads turned. Six men, one stare, closed ranks. Embarrassment gets me nowhere and nothing. I assumed confidence. "I want, I NEED some broken retroreflective road signs. I am a sculptor." They looked concertedly amused and sceptical. "I've just been up to Cooma and Mr. X has let me have some from the depot; they are in the boot" (seen to be true). The foreman detached himself, sorted through his signs, and offered me one I didn't want. I accepted gratefully. "Maybe", I suggested,

23 'Stuff to work with' and 'which road': 1995 Topliss, also 1997 Feneley; 'apiary boxes': 16 May 1973 RG to MG, 19 May 1973 RG to TG; 'over a hillock': 1998 Hughes; 'right day': 1985 School of Art; 'happened on a side road': 1982 North, also 1998 Hughes (the bird sanctuary was in the sheltered area where Butmaroo Creek enters the lake); 'first retroreflective road signs': 1985 School of Art, also 1995 Topliss, 1998 Hughes and Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 35.

24 First visit to Schweppes depot: 15 Jul 1978 RG to MG, p. 55, also 1998 Hughes (where the two visits are conflated).

“I could have that lovely yellow one? It does, after all, have a hole in it.” He stretched a point and let me have it. He carried it to my car. I was touched. In the scavenging business one usually lugs one’s own.’²⁵

Materials taken home would be allowed to accumulate, inside and outside the house and studio. They had to be cleaned, stripped down, pulled apart, sawn up — hard work. She would coat rusted iron with a transparent acrylic resin (Bedacryl) to stabilise the rust. The prickly leaves of dried thistles (particularly the yellow-flowered saffron thistle, *Carthamus lanatus*, and the purple-flowered variegated thistle, *Silybum marianum*) needed to be stripped off to bare the stalks. Salsify seed heads on stalks needed the same treatment (*Tragopogon porrifolius*, a common biennial wildflower with a daisy-like purple flower and button-like seed head). Ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*) was hung upside down to dry and shed its seed. Muddy feathers needed to be washed carefully and allowed to dry. Soft-drink boxes took a lot of dismantling — hacksaws were used to cut through the many nails — and when the job was done the various components were neatly stacked in the courtyard between the house and studio until they were further dismembered and the individual boards separated, some later to be split with a tomahawk or sawn in strips. The hardwood cable reels were a challenge and crowbars were needed to help separate the parts. Sometimes Rosalie would experiment with the surfaces of the retroreflective road signs, sanding back the lettering until only their ghosts remained. Very little was thrown away. As the years passed the courtyard between the house and studio filled up with builders’ plywood formboard, scarred and scratched and stained with concrete or paint, with rusted corrugated iron and the offcuts of dismantled soft-drink boxes sorted by size and colour. There were collections of old cigarette tins, blue glass bottles, copper ballcocks, shells and many types of fencing wire. The first sight guests might encounter on arrival would be stacks of newly gathered materials by the front door at the bottom of the driveway.

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In July 1987 Rosalie was asked by Peter Townsend, then editor of *Art Monthly Australia*, to describe what she had been doing that month. She wrote about how she had ‘been driving north because I have been hunting specific material at my most likely dump. But sometimes I go west to Wee Jasper — different sort of country, fatter cattle, kinder contours: or along the Cooma road which has the best mountains, and skylines that are more varied and exciting than any others around here.’ That northern country included the area around Gundaroo: ‘unspoilt, unscavenged country, we saw white cockatoos, a wallaby which fled in front of the car for hundreds of yards, a slim black snake, a fox, a field full



Materials stacked in the courtyard in 1982, before the studio was built, including a panel from *Parrot country* 1980 and *Last stand* 1972 (restored in 1985)

Photograph by Matt Kelso

25 ‘Stock of road signs’: RG ‘Diary’ 1987, also 1998 Hughes. In Rosalie’s papers I found a bit of paper with the names and numbers of the various contacts she was given during this foray, later recorded in one of her notebooks.



Rosalie amid the throne-like stumps on the ridge above Lake George in the early 1980s
Photograph by Pat Horner from author's archive

of long grass and long-beaked ibises'. A few weeks earlier Rosalie had taken a turning just past Gundaroo in the direction of Yass, 'and almost immediately [we] were in different and more beautiful country. Even came upon black boys (*Xanthorrhoea*) growing in paddocks'.²⁶

She knew the country around Lake George intimately and from all directions. One of her favourite drives took her through Gundaroo, along the escarpment above the lake, and down to Collector, bypassing the Federal Highway, and with a stop at clearings overlooking Lake George. 'Standing on the ridge above Lake George ... you suddenly find that there's nothing much there but everything's there for you, and there's the white cockatoos going over, which I think are marvellous, Lake George floating away to the right, lots of air, and the air is beautiful. What's that Shakespeare quote in *Macbeth*? "This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses."' It was a place she liked to take visitors: 'That's what Australia's like, the distance, the height, the clarity ... Everything is there that you could possibly need ... the place is splendidly ornamented — ornamented, but it's not trying, it's not standing on its ear putting everything in.' It was this sense of air and space and nothingness that informed *Plein air* 1994 and *But mostly air* 1994–95 and other air-related works of the mid-1990s. Air — and sometimes the wind — was also there in earlier works, such as *Country air* 1977, where the breeze disturbs the iron curtains, *Jim's picnic* 1975 where 'the wire netting ... is mountain air. I was enclosing air with those spaces', *Scrub country* 1981–82 where 'I have let air through it because we see a lot of filtered light, random pattern and carelessness in the Australian landscape', and *Letting go* 1991, where the moving air has the leaves swirling as they fall from their trees.²⁷

Up on the ridge there was a paddock of grey tree stumps. 'Years ago someone had gone to work with a chain saw and there was a legacy of bush chairs. All grey, some monumental as thrones — statuesque, lurching, personalised. An obliging friend took photos for me — one chair per picture (centred). Pasted in rows on a grey board, thin blue winter sky, close khaki-green winter grass, grey trunks in gentle threadbare country — they read well. The mind reaches for the absentee sitters out on the hillside.'²⁸

²⁶ 'Been driving north' and 'almost immediately': RG 'Diary' 1987; 'unspoilt, unscavenged country': 9 Nov 1972 RG to TG.

²⁷ 'Standing on the ridge': 1997 Feneley, also 1996 Davidson; 'this castle': Duncan, *Macbeth*, act 1, scene 6; 'that's what Australia's like': 1998 Hughes, also Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 37; 'mountain air' in *Jim's picnic*: 1985 School of Art; 'air' in *Scrub country*: 1985 School of Art, also 1982 North and Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 4.

²⁸ 'Years ago': RG 'Diary' 1987. The boards with attached photos (not catalogued) turned up in the studio after Rosalie died, hidden away and badly faded, and they were subsequently destroyed. They had something about them of Robert Rooney's early 1970s work using multiple photographs. Prints of the photos survive.

Approaching the lake on the old Federal Highway from Canberra, at Gearys Gap, there was a different view: ‘before you go down to Lake George, suddenly there’s that water, that straight line, it’s absolutely miraculous, it’s breathtaking to me, every time I see it’. Her recollection of this encounter found its way into *Suddenly the lake* 1995. A bit further on, fences ran from the road out into the lake. ‘I’ve always loved those long, pure horizontal lines of fences that stretch out across the shallows of Lake George, almost as if they are floating.’ *Feathered fence* 1978–79 refers directly to this landscape. She wanted it ‘to read like one of those half-drowned fence lines stretching out into the lake — very pure and uncluttered with a lot of air.’²⁹

The flatness was something that also struck Rosalie when she viewed the lake from the bird sanctuary at the southern (Bungendore) end. The first Lake George work, *Pale landscape* 1977, was ‘all about horizontals and pallor’. It ‘read to me like the levels of the lake where I collected the feathers’. Talking about her work *Lake* 1991, Rosalie said: ‘I’d spent quite a lot of time down on the end of Lake George that is near Bungendore ... there’s nothing else there, but levels. And the curve. Nature says it all without saying too much. And this is what I’ve tried to latch on to.’³⁰

Rosalie’s way of talking about particular works reveals the sharpness of her observations and a sense of the country she had claimed, picking up on its many different aspects. *Monaro* 1988–89, for example, ‘is the grasslands, partly grass, partly scrub, partly cut-down trees, which stretch all the way down to the sea’. *Piece to walk around* 1981 ‘is about being in the country with its shifting light and shades of grey, its casualness and its prodigality ... I hope this picture will convey some sense of the countryside that produced it and ... induce in the viewer the liberating feeling of being in the open country.’ *Plenty* 1986 is ‘the countryside around Canberra when the yellows are out ... and it’s like a great, unmade bed. Terrific. When I started making that, I thought, “It’s got to be big enough for a horse to roll in”. And it was.’³¹



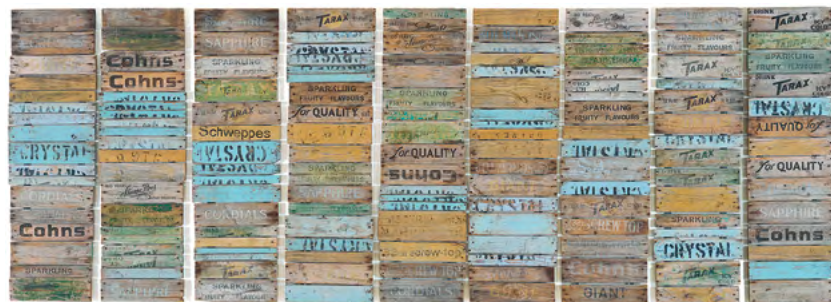
Lake 1991 (detail, three of seven panels): ‘There’s nothing else there, but levels. And the curve. Nature says it all without saying too much.’

Image courtesy of Menzies Art Brands

29 ‘Before you go down’: 1997 Feneley, also Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 84. The old highway at Gearys Gap is now called Hadlow Drive, opposite the Weereewa lookout. The view represented in the third panel of *Suddenly the lake* more closely approximates the view as the road from the Federal Highway to Bungendore descends from the escarpment to the lake plain, rather than the view at Gearys Gap (even before the highway was realigned). ‘I’ve always loved’: Janet Hawley 1997; ‘to read like’: 7 Dec 1978 R.G. to Nick Waterlow (R.G. papers NLA), see also 14 Feb 1978 R.G. to MG, p. 53, and 1998 Hughes. Lake George was the source of an old fence post Rosalie used in a flower arrangement in 1962, according to her inscription on a photograph of the work.

30 *Pale landscape*: 1998 Hughes; *Lake*: 1998 Desmond, also 1998 NGA. Horizontals in the landscape were also an element in *Crop [1]* 1976 and *Crop 2* 1981–82.

31 *Monaro*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 66, also 1998 Desmond; *Piece to walk around*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 48 (see also R.G. in *The first Australian sculpture triennial* 1981, and 1985 School of Art); *Plenty*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 65.



Scrub country 1981–82

Image courtesy of John Cruthers and Bonhams



'I have let air through it because we see a lot of filtered light, random pattern and carelessness in the Australian landscape.'

Image by the author

Rosalie's driving took her through a lot of bushy country which found its way into her work, none more so than in *Scrub country* 1981–82. Soon after finishing the work she spoke about it before it went off to the Venice Biennale: 'It's the product of the experience of standing on lightly wooded country where things are self-sown and there's a lot of air between the trees and gentle grass and these things grow up as they will. With that colour weight of grey, and brown and black oven-stick ... the writing on the boards — reads very nicely as the black note in the landscape. And the ... foliage, that is blue-grey ... it is almost the [*Eucalyptus*] *pulverulenta* that you can see through here [in my garden]. And yellow wattle. Or even yellow flowers in the grass. It's the first spring colour you see amongst that khaki.' She continued: '[It's] that sort of feeling you get in the country, to me a lyrical quality of acceptance, of taking things as they come, and accepting the perfect with the imperfect. That feel. You know, you get the perfect branch and you get the scruffy one. And you get the one that falls down and the one that stays up. And that lightly balancing look of the scrub. And a lot of air again.'³²

Other aspects of the bush also made their way into her work. Of *Wattle strike* 1983 she said: 'I am always fascinated when I think how the first settlers must have felt when suddenly a dark hill lit up unexpectedly, randomly, with the wattle when they had not seen it before. I think in Canberra particularly we are always very conscious of the wattle lighting up.' And there was the aftermath of the bushfires that marked the area: *Regeneration* 1994 is 'the bushfires, the regeneration powers. When the gums burn, you get sprouts like that. The bush fire went through here, and it was heady stuff; it's beautiful, it glows at night ... After the flames had died down it was amazing to see what was standing and what was burnt to a cinder. All of the gums looked shattered, but you get those blue-green shoots after, it's very gentle.'³³

Rosalie liked the country in winter. One attraction was the cross light on the landscape from the sun lower in the sky. It was a good time to be out: 'We've been lucky with the weather lately: high blue days ... the wind from the snowfields not too keen, not much mud and, of course, no snakes or flies. Good country-going weather.' She recalled a winter trip to Cooma when there was hoar-frost. 'You went over the hill and into Bredbo and the whole place was standing with hoar-frost. It was absolutely like a wonderland. And even the willows, like Druids, they were, all their sagging branches were covered. And the paddocks looked through the hoar-frost, ancient gold. It was absolutely marvellous.'³⁴

³² *Scrub country*: 1982 North, also 1985 School of Art and Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 42. Rosalie's language mirrors the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi, sometimes described as one of beauty that is 'imperfect, impermanent and incomplete'. My thanks to Hannah Fink who first drew my attention to the concept of wabi-sabi.

³³ *Wattle strike*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 64; *Regeneration*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 63.

³⁴ 'We've been lucky': R.G. 'Diary' 1987; 'You went over the hill': 1998 Hughes.

In winter ‘the paddocks go back to their bones and the hills go back to their shape’. Rosalie described it as clean country. ‘The grass gets bare and the fences get bare. It’s a very thin time of the year. And it’s very beautiful.’ Using just feathers and sheets of newspaper, she translated this thought into *Pale landscape* 1977: ‘you could see that if you made an awful lot of [the feathered sheets] you had indeed the winter landscape around Canberra which goes back to its bones’. The same thought lay behind *Clean country* 1985, where she employed wire netting and stripped thistle stalks on weathered wood bases. Of *Winter paddock* 1984 she said: ‘That is a colour weight I return to all the time. To me it is the winter paddock when it is bare and the colours are pale — rather drab, but beautiful. The top section is made of feathers. There is ambivalence as to whether this is to be read as birds or whether it is meant to be the quality in the winter sky ... That is the quality of a winter’s day to me, and for me it is right.’³⁵

All seasons feature in Rosalie’s work. Many works have summery titles, combining her twin loves of the tall summer grasses and the colour yellow. But the heat and the glare could discourage exploring. In February 1974 she reports a conversation with Rosemary Dobson: ‘We still plan a country trip. But it’s too hot.’ In March 1980: ‘Another hot afternoon. Autumn is what I want.’ As for the glare: ‘The light kills you here, if you’re born somewhere else’. The times of day also featured in her works, especially morning (including *Winter morning* 1976, *Early morning* 1977, *May morning* 1992, *Top of the morning* 1993–94 and *Morning glory* 1996).³⁶

Sometimes Rosalie’s landscape was a landscape with a human presence, by implication rather than representation, which she wrote about and referred to in her talks, though she never managed more than a good story out of her encounter with the woman and her old transvestite father camped in the bush beyond Braidwood. *Smoko* 1984 caught something of the Australian workman in the road gang she encountered taking a break among the winter tussocks: ‘I am rather keen on this lackadaisical air you get both in the landscape and in a lot of Australian attitudes and for me that [work] is about it. You lean and you stay where you lean and you don’t arrange yourself too much.’ Her most figurative work is *Pink on blue* 1982–83, which alludes to bathers in the river or at the seaside: ‘that’s skinny dipping, you know, that’s all those people jumping in the water with their pink arms shrieking’. *Hill station* 1989 includes ‘a slight tracing of a Lysaght lady’s face ... standing way out in the paddock’. Rosalie thought about the women who lived on the land, drawing on memories of her own lonely days when she first arrived on Mount Stromlo. Of *Pink window* 1975 she said: ‘At the time I was on about the emptiness of the Australian landscape, and I kept thinking of a woman stuck out there on the plains standing at her window. She looks out, what does she see? Nothing. It spoke of loneliness.’ Rosalie spoke of the ‘nothingness in the Australian landscape ... and the sort of hope that that [sound] might be a car or galloping hooves or something. Nothing happened on Stromlo a lot, and people did sort of yearn for other places, familiar times, friends.’ *Country air* 1977 took up a gentler aspect of country living: ‘what I saw eventually in it was a row of windows as in a country place and the wind coming into the building, lifting the curtains ... and you are looking out through this very humble shed and there is the landscape, the clover field and the green field and the curtains’.³⁷



The human presence: *Smoko* 1984
Image from author's archive



The human presence: *Pink on blue*
1982–83
Image courtesy of Menzies Art Brands

35 ‘The paddocks go back’: 1998 Desmond; ‘the grass gets bare’: 1998 Hughes; *Pale landscape*: 1999 Auckland AG; *Winter paddock*: 1985 School of Art. Other works with a winter theme include *Winter morning* 1976 and *Winter order* 1978–79.

36 ‘We still plan’: 12 Feb 1974 RG to MG; ‘another hot afternoon’: mid-Mar 1980 RG to TG; ‘the light kills’: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 80.

37 Writings on people: see Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 28, and RG ‘Diary’ 1987 (including the transvestite story); *Smoko*: 1985 School of Art; *Pink on blue* and *Hill station*: 1998 NGA; *Pink window*: 1985 School of Art; ‘nothingness in the Australian landscape’: 1998 Hughes; *Country air*: 1980 Gleeson.



Jim's picnic 1975 — the poetry of it: wire netting 'containing' air, parrots standing in for kangaroos

Image by Jenni Carter, courtesy of John Cruthers and Bonhams

Then there were the animals, farmed and native, beginning with her Norco cows of the mid-1970s. *Sheep weather alert* 5 1992–93 'is a misted over one; they're washed over, and it reads like shapes looming in the mist. When you have shearing time round Canberra, the yards are full of sheep, the trucks are full of sheep, the hills are full of shorn sheep — sheep, sheep, sheep — you're just surrounded by it. That's what I was after.' [*High country cows*] c. 1976 was 'the high country where the cattle go up for the summer, then they're driven back down for the winter. You just see these shadowy beasts. Nothing there but grass and sun.' More abstract is *String of blue days* 1984 where grey fencing is placed against blue soft-drink boards: 'I would go out into the country and there would be the sheep yards, with grey rails surrounding them, sometimes on the top of a hill, enclosing the blue of the sky. Each cow had a bit of blue sky to stand against.' *Jim's picnic* 1975 involved a poetic flight of the imagination using Arnott's Biscuits parrot cut-outs. 'It was [about] a marvellous impractical picnic with the clouds coming over, the kangaroos hopping up and down. The kangaroos are the parrots, if you can bear the transition, but that was the life element in it and it was to capture the actual event ... for me [the parrots] are almost the animal in the landscape as Ned Kelly is to Nolan. I use them a lot.' The linoleum used in *Cow pasture* 1992 'looked like cow pasture — cow parsley and things. A bit of manure there too. If you go through cow paddocks watching where you tread, and there's a lot of flowers around, that's exactly what I see there.' In one piece, [*Sheep yard*] c. 1982–83, she actually used sheep droppings, precisely set out in a grid much as she did with her shells, and for several years displayed the work over the mantel in her sitting room. In others she used the wool from sheep and cattle that collected where they had scratched themselves on fencing (*Pub* 1974). And wool was the subject of *Wool clip* 1995. Nor did the crop growers escape her attention, in works such as *Orchard* 1986, *Stubble field* 1988, *Wheat belt* 1989, *Summer stack* 1990, *Sunflowers* 1991 and *Vine* 1996.³⁸

Birds in the landscape were a recurring theme. At the sanctuary on Lake George 'the swans and all the other birds, the pelicans and everything, were going up and down — it was like Venice, flotillas of birds. Marvellous.' Cockatoos were a favourite, and she loved watching them on the bird table outside her kitchen. There they are in *Highway code* 1985: 'that sign had white flashes on it that cancelled it out. When you drive around the country the white cockatoos fly up, like porpoises in front of a ship. I've always seen the cockatoos going up ... always, always. They're untidy and their wings are every which way, and they're shrieking. So I left the white on.' They are also there in *Cockatoos* 1991: 'To me it was linked with the personal experience of driving through the country, scrubby old paddocks, and suddenly the cockatoos go up, and they are absolutely

³⁸ *Sheep weather alert* 5: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 60; [*High country cows*]: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 30; *String of blue days*: 1996 Davidson; *Jim's picnic*: 1985 School of Art; *Cow pasture*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 62.

wonderful. Strap-like white leaves — wings — all going in different directions and squawking. This is very noisy, everybody has said that who has seen it ... it's not that it is a picture of cockatoos, it's the feel of cockatoos.' And in *But mostly air* 1994–95: 'The mouth of the bird, the circle, is in the middle of it, you see, and to me it was what happened when you get a flock of cockatoos and you frighten them and up they go screaming, screaming ... I'm going to put it in an installation ... about the country atmosphere here.'³⁹

Parrots evoked memories of her early years on Mount Stromlo. 'It was like being inside a zoo when I first came [to Mount Stromlo]. I couldn't believe these brightly coloured parrots for free. Flying around in our balconies. We had a berried pyracantha hedge. And they went snip, snip, like dressmakers in it. Snip, snip, snip. And then they flew onto your balconies. Just amazing.' Parrots turn up in many works, none more so than in the dazzling yellow, green and scarlet *Parrot country* 1980 and *Parrot country II* 1980/83. 'It is a fairly big piece and it's made of natural coloured Schweppes boxes. We were getting Eastern rosellas on our bird table. It's meant to screech at you, and it does.'⁴⁰

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Although it was her Australian experiences that enabled Rosalie to find her calling, echoes of her New Zealand years would turn up in the works she made forty and fifty years after she left Auckland, including works such as *Hill station* 1989, *Landfall* 1989, *Beach house* 1990, *High water mark* 1992 and *Age of innocence* 1993. From time to time Rosalie would be asked about what part other places played in her art. Her response throws back to her schooldays and the time she needed to settle into the holiday house: 'I'm not keen on travelling because though the country is my thing, I've got to make friends with it first. It's got to be familiar to me ... I'm an east coast type of person ... I don't think I can relate to desert, because I don't know about it. I really never lived in it, real sandy type desert.' It was the same when she visited Kakadu in tropical northern Australia in December 1994: 'I didn't particularly like it. The vegetation was different; I thought the rocks belonged to the Aboriginal people, not to me. You salute it but it's not your thing.' Nonetheless, the trip resulted in two works, *Top End* 1994–95 and *Kakadu* 1994–95 (later dismantled and not catalogued). In 1980 Rosalie visited New York and Washington



Cockatoos in flight near Canberra
Reproduced courtesy of the photographer, Geoffrey Dabb



The cockatoos in *But mostly air* 1994–95
Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

39 'The swans': 1998 Hughes; *Highway code*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 72; *Cockatoos*: 1999 Auckland AG; *But mostly air*: 1995 Topliss. For an extended discussion of bird themes in Rosalie's work see Gregory O'Brien 'Plain air/plain song' 2004.

40 'Like being inside a zoo': 1998 Hughes and 1982 North; *Parrot country* and *Parrot country II*: 1985 School of Art.



'This ornamentation in a bare place': Rosalie's bird table
 Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

to see the art. 'I found a lot of the art was very false. But the vibe in the street was something you just had to experience.' She had, of course, been brought up in a city, albeit a pretty small one.⁴¹

Rosalie rarely travelled beyond Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart, but memories of more distant trips sometimes made it into her art. Rosalie would talk of 'taking on visual cargo' which could resurface years after the event. So *Municipal gardens* 1983 embodies a memory of the public gardens in Ballarat and Bendigo she saw when driving back from the Adelaide Festival in 1976: 'band rotundas and fat beds of blue salvia and marigolds and petunias', and *Herb garden* 1982 memories of Sunday Reed's enclosed garden at Heide. *Out of Africa* 1994 and *Africa* 1995 hark back to 1963 when the cargo ship Rosalie was travelling on from Sweden stopped in South Africa and she visited the Zulu market in Durban. *Madonna and child* c. 1970–72 was inspired by a 1970 trip with Ben to Portugal: 'It was the sort of thing they had in churches with flowers in jam jars — very primitive.' Possibly her reference to the elegance of corrugated iron 'straight from Corinthian pillars' comes from a stopover in Greece to visit a cousin in Athens in 1963. *Reconstruction* 1980–81 was suggested by New York's 'skyscraper horizon', which she had seen in 1980, and the *Pavement* works of 1997–98 possibly allude to the sidewalks there, which had intrigued Rosalie with their patterns of discarded gum. More generally there are many city allusions in Rosalie's titles (including *Cityscape* 1972, *City birds* 1981, *Across town* 1990, *White city* 1993–94, *Down town* 1994, *City block* 1996 and especially *Metropolis* 1999).⁴²

Travel confirmed Rosalie's sense of what was important to her. 'After I left Venice, I thought "who needs that?" Everything man-made and so decorated. Look at what we have: space, skies. You can never have too much of nothing.' She told another interviewer: 'The visuals were not my visuals, they were more ornamented. And they were terribly decaying, which I found, coming from a fresh clean country, wasn't my thinking.' Rosalie knew where she belonged: 'I remember as soon as I got home ... it was the winter, and we had one of those very fine, clear winter days — very thin blue sky, very pure — and a white cockatoo arrived on top of the pergola with his yellow comb — the beauty of it! This ornamentation in a bare place, instead of the ornamentation everywhere in Venice. You wouldn't change it, that, for this lovely threadbare winter landscape, olive green and pale green. The beauty of it! It was, and I hate these terms, a "moment of truth"'.⁴³

41 'I'm not keen on travelling': 1998 Hughes; 'Kakadu': 1995 Topliss; 'New York and Washington': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 32, also 1998 Hughes.

42 'Visual cargo' and 'Africa': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 21; 'band rotundas': 8 Apr 1976 RG to TG; *Madonna and child*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 20; 'Corinthian pillars': 1998 Hughes; *Reconstruction*: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 34.

43 'After I left Venice': 1997 Mollison and Heath, p. 7; 'the visuals were not': 1998 Hughes; 'I remember as soon as': 1988 Ewen McDonald, also 1997 Mollison and Heath, p. 7.

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