

INTRODUCTION

Rosalie Gascoigne (1917–1999) was a highly regarded Australian artist whose assemblages of found materials embraced landscape, still life, minimalism, arte povera and installations. She was fifty-seven when she had her first exhibition. Behind this late coming-out lay a long and unusual preparation in looking at nature for its aesthetic qualities, collecting found objects, making flower arrangements, and practising Ikebana. Her art found an appreciative audience from the start. She was a people person, and it pleased her that through her exhibiting career of 25 years her works were acquired by people of all ages, interests and backgrounds, as well as by the major public institutions on both sides of the Tasman Sea. Reflecting on her success, she recognised she was in the right place at the right time, when the art world was embracing new forms of art and was becoming receptive to the work of outsider artists.

Rosalie's aesthetic was informed by an early love of the romantic poets and her close engagement with the country around Canberra, although her formal art training was limited to the study of ikebana — the Japanese art of flower arranging — in the 1960s. Her art was an art of feelings, of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' as she was fond of saying. 'I like pleasures of the eye, and I feed on nature', she told Peter Ross in 1990. Her materials were ordinary, simple things from everyday life: battered enamelware, discarded beer cans, torn linoleum, weathered galvanised iron and discarded retroreflective road signs and soft-drink boxes. She liked the look of them and her art celebrated their intrinsic aesthetic qualities.

It has fallen to me, Rosalie's oldest child, to prepare this catalogue raisonné as the definitive statement of the artist's oeuvre. The foundations were laid by Rosalie's husband and my father, Ben Gascoigne, who kept excellent records. He began photographing her work in the mid-1970s, often recording the dates on which the negatives were processed, and in the mid-1980s started to compile a database of her works, recording titles, materials, dimensions and their first exhibition. At first he recorded his data on cards, but in the 1990s he transferred the information into a computerised database, to which his grandson Charles added images of the works. He also compiled individual albums for each of her exhibitions and, in the 1990s, started recording the dates on which he photographed works. I took over the database in 2001 and added information about materials, inscriptions (where available), subsequent exhibition histories, references in reviews and the literature, and comments Rosalie made about specific works in her letters, talks and interviews. Works are dated in accordance with the date inscribed (where known) or listed in exhibition catalogues unless there is evidence, from contemporary sources such as photographs or letters, that points to an earlier date. Usually the difference is only a year or two. Sometimes the letters and talks included references to the construction history of

a particular work and this has informed the catalogue entries. Those construction histories, when read together with the remarks on Rosalie's treatment of her materials and the general observations on her studio practice, demonstrate the hands-on, rather than conceptual, approach she took to her work.

The catalogue covers all 692 works, almost all of which were exhibited in her lifetime, other than a small number of studies and related items from her studio. To provide context I have included a biographical note, an essay on Rosalie's engagement with the country around Canberra, and a note on the materials from which she fashioned her art. The biographical note is not a full biography — rather, it looks at Rosalie's evolution and career as an artist, as much as possible using contemporary sources. The focus is on the people, places, events and experiences that were important in her journey, and the text reflects the very close relationship I had with Rosalie on art matters, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. I have included only a few broad observations on the broader art world in which Rosalie practised and made no assessment of the art-historical significance of her work, tasks better left to the art historians.

Family letters while I lived overseas from 1971 to 1974 and 1977 to 1980 (and while my brother Toss lived in London and Hobart) provide a detailed contemporary account, particularly of the critical first half of Rosalie's career. Rosalie wrote lively letters, a skill honed in a thirty-year correspondence with her mother, who was equally as good. The letters are full of pithy observations about people she was meeting, accounts of family activities, her reactions to art she was seeing and reports on her creative activities. The records of Rosalie's many talks and interviews have been an important additional source. Rosalie was a compelling speaker and sadly the printed word, quoted extensively throughout, cannot capture the vitality of her delivery or the nuance in her message.

This catalogue is not a substitute for the real thing, the artwork itself. In this regard Rosalie was adamant, as she made clear in her opening address for *Australian Perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, on 5 October 1993: 'Art is a visual medium ... words come later. Artists are not communicating with words, and you, the viewer, can only communicate with them by standing in the presence of the work. They after all have gone the journey to arrive at this place. They have lived in mirage country — now you see it, now you don't. And you have to meet the work first on their terms. Afterwards — the big secondary industry of words takes over.'

I am grateful for the interest shown and assistance provided by many people over many years — family, friends, curators, gallerists, owners, photographers, archivists, librarians — as listed (as best I can) in the Acknowledgements. There were many benefits in being Rosalie's son as I worked on this catalogue, but its production also called for detachment and a broader perspective on the art world that my family connection might cloud. In this regard I am immensely grateful to two very fine art historians and curators — my wife and companion on this journey, Mary Eagle, and my friend and mentor, Daniel Thomas — for the encouragement, advice and exemplary standards they set me. I also thank Daniel for his thorough and constructive reading of the complete text.

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