

ROSALIE'S MATERIALS

I don't live in the rest of the world; this is Terra Australis, the Great Southern Land. Use it and make something.

— Rosalie Gascoigne¹

Rosalie's letters, talks and interviews contain many references to her materials: where she found them, what she liked about them and what she did with them. A recurring theme is the beauty of the commonplace object. Rosalie hated the word 'junk' applied to her materials: it meant people had too easily dismissed the object and hadn't seen its beauty, its intrinsic aesthetic qualities, such as the 'faded Italian colours, the Piero della Francesca' blues and pinks in the discarded beer cans she collected, or the elegance of corrugated iron, reminiscent of the Corinthian pillars of ancient Greece. 'Elegance' and 'classical' are words she often used when talking about her materials. She realised, however, that the context in which her works were presented was important. 'If you use stuff like that, you have to divorce it from anything else that came from the dump or a waste yard, or anything like that. If you put them down with good furniture and good rugs, they can look so vital and exciting.' She was talking about old painted corrugated iron but could have said the same thing about any of her materials.²

She chose her materials for the visual pleasures they gave her. Nostalgia and sentiment were not part of her aesthetic. 'I'm not sentimental, I don't think I'm sentimental ... Sentimentality is old birthday cards.' James Gleeson once asked her if she was like Kurt Schwitters and collected objects because of their emotional or personal souvenir value, and she answered: 'No. I collect them because I personally like the look of them.' She spoke about having been accused of nostalgia for Arnott's parrots. 'I wasn't brought up with Arnott's parrots, I just think they look good.'³

This essay expands on comments about Rosalie's materials in the Biographical Note and Rosalie's Country, and in Catalogue Organisation and Terminology, which includes technical information about terms used for materials in the catalogue and essays. The discussion follows a loosely chronological arrangement, beginning with natural materials and moving on to farm iron, wire mesh, found objects, printed images, linoleum, apiary boxes, weathered wood and plywood formboard, galvanised iron, soft-drink crates, road signs and cable reels.

Rosalie working with pieces of cable reels
(*City block* 1996)

Reproduced courtesy of the photographer,
William Yang

¹ 'I don't live': 1997 Mollison and Heath, p. 7. She summarised much of her thinking about materials in an artist's statement for the *Drawn and Quartered* exhibition catalogue (see p. 191).

² 'Hated the word junk': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 28; 'faded Italian colours' and 'Corinthian pillars': 1998 Hughes; 'if you use stuff like that': 1998 NGA.

³ 'Not sentimental': 1997 Feneley, also 1980 Gleeson; 'accused of nostalgia': 1985 School of Art. Rosalie owned a large book on Schwitters and so was familiar with his work (Kurt Schwitters, Werner Schmalenbach, Thames and Hudson London 1970).

Natural materials

Grasses, salsify and thistles

Rosalie made twenty-three works using grasses, thistles and similar plant materials between 1970 and the mid-1980s, in addition to her ikebana pieces. A talk she gave on dried arrangements in c. 1960 throws early light on what she liked about these materials. It is worth quoting from at length:

Some years I gather ordinary roadside grasses in the spring and tie them in bundles and hang them under the house ... Grass gathered in the late spring won't drop its seed when dry ... Barley I find very decorative, and wheat, and wild oats, which grow plentifully along the roadsides ... Other grass I pick when it has burnt brown and blond and orange in the summer sun. Besides grasses there are tall spikes of verbascum ... which can be picked green and dried in the dark or picked later in any of its stages from brown to black ... Another thing I would not be without are the heads of a very tall thistle that spring from a plant with mottled leaves ... Left in the weather the heads become silver grey and the centre's a lightly mottled darker grey [probably the variegated thistle, *Silybum marianum*] ... There is also a smaller type of thistle which has a yellow flower [probably the saffron thistle, *Carthamus lanatus*]. This thistle has short thin stems branching from a stronger, main stem rather like a candelabra in form. I always smooth the small very prickly leaves from the stem so the individual heads seem to float free from the heavier mass of the arrangement ... Apart from firm favourites such as these I find any walk or drive in the country yields more things I can use ... Even the prickly blue devil [*Eryngium ovinum*] ... will retain enough of its original blueness to be interesting.⁴

Rosalie would later use many of the plants referred to in her talk in her assemblages. So the variegated thistle was used in several works including *Twig tidy* c. 1972–73, *Takeover bid* 1981 and *Flight* 1985, and was probably the tall thistle referred to when she spoke about her 'six-foot arrangement of thistle stalks in the Academy' in 1970. The variegated thistles used in *Flight* 1985 came from 'a place near Wee Jasper', a reference to the stands of thistles that grow alongside the roads near the intersection of Wee Jasper Road and Mountain Creek Road about 25 kilometres south of Yass. She used the saffron thistle in *Piece to walk around* 1981 and *Clean country* 1985, and blue devil in *[Still life]* 1983. The talk included a reference to the straight stalks of verbascum providing a strong vertical line, something she returned to years later when talking about her bone construction *Last stand* 1972 as 'reminiscent of that rank weed — verbascum — that grows and leans on the hills around Canberra'. (Verbascum, also known as mullein, is a biennial with small, simple yellow flowers on stems from 0.5 to 3 metres tall.)⁵

Collecting and preparation took a lot of work. When out collecting in February 1980, she 'became aware of (some) magnificent stands of grey thistle stalks (the saffron thistle candelabra style) and since I chased that particular and noxious specimen much further afield last year with little success, I started cutting. Came home in a lather of sweat at 12 o'clock with great grey armfuls. I have my eye on an installation of some sort. I have it clean and piled in the passage between the courtyard and the sofa I now write on. The light runs along it — a beautiful metallic light grey.' She remembered the light running along the grey stems and took up the idea in *Piece to walk around* 1981. Salsify, found by the old Canberra brickworks in Yarralumla, also required 'hours of stultifying labour stripping it' of its leaves and stems. Salsify, or *Tragopogon porrifolius*, is a member of the sunflower family with purple daisy-like flowers on tall stems. Regarding the salsify used in *Crop 2* 1981–82, she told Ian North: 'You pick day and night ... You strip it down ... you cut ... It takes absolutely hours and the house is full of the waste products.'⁶



The variegated thistle (*Silybum marianum*) beside Mountain Creek Road

Image by the author

4 c. 1960 RG 'Dried arrangements'.

5 'Six-foot arrangement': 26 Oct 1970 RG to TG; 'near Wee Jasper' and 'that rank reed': 1985 School of Art.

6 'Magnificent stands of': 14 Feb 1980 RG to MG, p. 60 (contrary to the inserted reference in the edited letter, the saffron thistle was not used in *Takeover bid* 1981); 'salsify': 26 Dec 1978 RG to MG, p. 57 and 1982 North, also 1985 School of Art.



Salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*)
Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Dried seed heads of salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*) (detail of *Crop [1]* 1976)

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



Cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) at
Jerrabomberra Wetlands near Fyshwick.
Note the grey stalks from the previous
season which Rosalie collected
Image by the author



Summer grass near Bungendore
Photograph from author's archive

Twenty years after the talk on dried arrangements, Rosalie's love of grasses was stronger than ever. 'I must say the golden grass [harvested in summer] looks marvellous in winter time — really holds the summer — scarcely believable at this time of year.' Ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*) and African lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*) were favourites. In 1985 she talked about grass works she made in 1977 'when I was struck yet again by the beauty of grass ... This is beautiful [rye] grass [*Grass rack* 1977] ... It was stiff grass, really quite firm, like a brush, and to me it is what the country says. I am a real grass watcher and I think if you want one of the most relaxed features of the Australian countryside around the Monaro — which is about all I know — it is that grass theme. To me it is lyrical.' Ryegrass 'came up in a great flood in the early summer and what you did was painstakingly take all the little white pieces off, the flowers.'⁷

There was something surreal in Rosalie's vision of the grass. In March 1979 she had an idea. 'There are still some fields brimful of golden grass. I have a vision of getting a team of people to play swimming in the grass, all bobbing heads and striped bathing suits — diving in off the fence posts and such. Fun photography!' So taken was Rosalie with the summer grass around Canberra that she thought Canberra should host a grass festival: 'I always have the feeling, it would be very nice in Canberra some time, instead of having a lilac festival [as Goulburn did], to have a celebration of the grass, because I think our grass is magnificent. Whenever I talk of grass festivals everybody immediately thinks that people can sit around smoking marijuana. But I wouldn't mind that. I think we ought celebrate our grass — that is, the ordinary ryegrass, there is an awful lot of it.' She returned to the idea in February 1980: 'The grasses are magnificent ... Some day, maybe, I'll really get to do my celebration of the grass — the blonds are beautiful like clean lace.' There is an echo of this interest in the title of one of her very last works, *Grassfest* 1999, a work made of yellow boards from Schweppes soft-drink boxes.⁸

Another material Rosalie collected was the stalks of cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*, also known as Queen Anne's lace). It grows in great stands along some roads around Canberra, including the dairy country near Fyshwick and along parts of the highway to Sydney, so it was an obvious target for her. The memory of those stands found their way into *Cow pasture* 1992. Rosalie used the stripped, dried stalks with wire cages in 1978–79 but dismantled the piece soon after (see 'Wire, wire mesh and cages' later in this essay). She kept great bundles of the stalks at Anstey Street, Pearce, which were still there when she died.

⁷ 'I must say': 20 July 1977 RG to MG, p. 49; 'the beauty of grass': 1985 School of Art; 'came up in a great flood': 1999 Auckland AG.

⁸ 'There are still some fields': c. 20 Mar 1979 RG to MG; 'host a grass festival': 1985 School of Art; 'the grasses are magnificent': 14 Feb 1980 RG to MG, p. 60.

Bones

Rosalie made about eight works using sheep, cattle and rabbit bones between 1972 and 1988, some a celebration of bones and a few in which bone was just one element. The Biographical Note includes an account of her first use of the sun-bleached bones in her flower-arranging days, 'nice and clean and white', and how ikebana helped her see more: 'I think they're very beautiful and I think that any artist of any persuasion should be able to find plenty of inspiration about a bone. They're good. Nature is just so much better than we are.' It was their shapes and colour that got her: 'they were interesting shapes ... the shapes nature does, they're absolutely wonderful ... And a beautiful grey-white.' In the late 1990s she had 'some kangaroo shin bones — beautiful things they are. [Alberto] Giacometti would have loved them.' When it came to collecting bones, she remembered: 'I just gave away Canberra and all its pretensions — I remember even scraping some flesh off, I was so keen'. She was talking about the bones used in *Spine* 1972: 'Was so taken with it [the spine] that I quelled my squeamishness and scraped intervening gristle off with the bread knife'. Jean Conron, an artist friend who lived nearby, remembers accompanying Rosalie to lunch at Michael Taylor's house in Bredbo when Rosalie spotted white cattle bones on the hill against the blue sky: Rosalie stopped the car and in their luncheon finery, they went off over the paddock, collected the bones which they placed on a rug held between them, got them back to the car and continued on to lunch. In 1972 and 1973 she constructed large, strung-out arrangements on the back lawn, and despite the need to move them to mow the grass they lasted five years or more, because some were photographed there in early May 1978. But bones left outside degrade and the three works with bones that survive did so because they were small works kept inside.⁹

Feathers

When Rosalie arrived in Australia she had been struck by the birds that she encountered on Mount Stromlo, which were very different to the birds she had known in New Zealand. Bird themes are present in many of her works. She was always pleased to find a pristine feather on her walks, glossy black and white from a magpie or currawong, a cockatoo's yellow curl, and the red and blue of a crimson rosella. It is not surprising, therefore, that sometimes these finds made their way into her early assemblages. In the late 1970s she used vast numbers of swan and cormorant feathers and in 1984 she used seagull feathers. She used feathers in eleven works.



Joie de mourir 1973 on the back lawn, 1978

Photograph by author

⁹ 'I think they're very beautiful': 1985 School of Art; 'interesting shapes' and 'Giacometti': 1998 Hughes; 'collecting bones': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 23; 'quelled my squeamishness': 30 Sep 1973 RG to MG, p. 39. Jean Conron recalled the trip in a conversation with the author on 23 October 2006.



Black swans in flight, the white feathers in their wings clearly visible
Reproduced courtesy of the photographer, Geoffrey Dabb



Experiments with feathers glued on boards in the driveway at Anstey Street, c.1981.
Note the collection of old tree stumps
Image from author's archive

Rosalie's interest in feathers exploded when she chanced upon the bird sanctuary at Lake George in 1976. 'This was at Lake George before it all went shallow, and there were lots of swans [*Cygnus atratus*]. I walked along the banks and there were all these feathers and I am a natural picker-upper.' The bird refuge was located in the marshes where Butmaroo Creek joins the southern end of the lake. Rosalie made at least four trips to Lake George between 30 May and 18 June 1976 to gather feathers. What caught her eye was the white feathers which had dropped from underneath their wings, these lovely feathers 'all entangled with the blond rushes ... Some of them were full of mud and scungy, but I took them too, because I didn't mind.' Then they had to be washed, dried and sorted.¹⁰

She kept going back for more. 'It does guide you when you find a lot of something ... Now I am very conscious of the fact that when the hot weather comes, that those Lake George swans are dropping more beautiful feathers ... Sometimes you fear to go into feather country, because they are going to be irresistible.' In March 1977, when construction of *Pale landscape* 1977 was well under way, she wrote: 'I spent another day by the Lake on Friday — picked up nearly 1000 more feathers and now have 75 feathered sheets (and a stiff back)'. She aimed to have about 4000 feathers for the completed work. While she was picking up white feathers she discovered the feathers of the Australasian darter (*Anhinga novaehollandiae*). 'I couldn't resist them. I wasn't on about that but they were too good to leave.' They were 'black beautiful glossy [feathers] as if the birds had just undressed ... They're like the underside of mushrooms' and she used them to make *Feathered chairs*, which she finished in January 1978. In February 1978 she was still 'involved with Lake George and a great feather investigation ... The house is full of feathers ...' and in December 1978 it was: 'Tomorrow — hooray — I get to go down to Lake George with Monica [Freeman] [for] some clean feather pickups'. These endeavours resulted in *Feathered fence* 1978–79.¹¹

She tried new approaches: 'If you strip them, the spines are lovely curves — I keep thinking how Bob Klippel would like them — all that grasshopper agility. The feather part that one pulls off seems too good to waste and so I have experimented (à la tar and feathers) gluing it on to weathered boards [see *Feather studies 1–3*] 1978 and *Winter paddock* 1984]. James Gleeson said with delight "Just like a very old drawing". I remember Sofu [Teshigahara, the Japanese ikebana master] doing his vast dragon calligraphy and think that I could well do a visible

10 'This was at Lake George': 1985 School of Art; 'four trips to Lake George': RG papers NLA; 'lovely feathers all entangled': 1998 Hughes; on Lake George birds see also Graeme Barrow 'Magnificent' *Lake George: The biography* Dagrja Press, Canberra, 2012, p. 93 ff.

11 'It does guide you': 1980 Gleeson; 'I spent another day': c. 7 Mar 1977 RG to MG, p. 45; 4000 feathers: abt Mar 1977 RG to TG; 'I couldn't resist': 1985 School of Art; 'black beautiful glossy': 1982 North; 'involved with Lake George': 14 Feb 1978 RG to MG, p. 53; 'tomorrow — hooray': 26 Dec 1978 RG to MG, p. 57.

WHISPER out of feathers — especially the peculiar grey ones that the mud has coloured.’ The stripped quills became part of *[Still life]* 1983 and her experiments with gluing come to mind with the silver gull (*Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*) feathers from Lake Burley Griffin used in *Winter paddock* 1984: ‘I have painted them on to a piece of Masonite with a paint-brush, not stuck them down.’ In 1981 she also glued cockatoo feathers on boards to make the word ‘BIRD’ but the panels did not survive and are not catalogued.¹²

The swans stopped using the sanctuary when Lake George dried up, in 1986 (almost) and again in 2002 (completely). So there were no more feathers. But by then Rosalie’s interest had moved on.

Shells

Rosalie was a shell collector, not in the sense that she sought out examples of many different types of shells but rather in the sense that she loved the process of walking the beaches and picking up shells that caught her eye, as she had done in her childhood: periwinkles, scallops, limpets, pipis and cowries. When she first came to Australia she had only rare opportunities to visit the beach but in the 1970s (and after) seaside visits became an important if infrequent form of relaxation and she would spend a night or two at Batemans Bay with a friend, visiting different parts of the south coast. ‘I went to the coast for four days with Diana Woollard ... What a good idea. Beautiful weather. We walked the beaches and picked up thousands of shells.’ And two months later: ‘Am happily going down coast with Diana on Friday. More and more shells. A pleasant unpressurised break.’¹³

When collecting she would often focus on just one type of shell which she would bring home and store in containers. She was very deliberate in her selection: her shells had to have good colour and no chips. The studio and garage had boxes, bottles and even plastic bags full of one kind of shell or another. She had thousands of one small coloured cone-like shell which she would keep in open bowls in her sitting room so she could dip her hands in and let the shells run through her fingers, enjoying their tactile qualities and the beach memories they rekindled.

Rosalie made twelve works using shells. Of the shells she used in *Turn of the tide* 1983 (probably periwinkles, *Littorina littorea*), she said: ‘The shells seduced me. They were so beautiful and I had a lot of them.’ She was also keen on scallop shells from Tasmania (probably *Pecten fumatus*), which she got to know when visiting Toss in Hobart. She wrote to him asking for



Shells were carefully chosen, just one kind on each expedition, and later washed, sorted and stored in jars, tins and plastic bags. The screw shells were a particular favourite and Rosalie kept a large bowl of them in her sitting room, where she could run her fingers through them and recapture the sea and her childhood at Waiheke

Photograph by author

¹² ‘If you strip them’: 14 Feb 1978 RG to MG, p. 53; Sofu visited Canberra in 1967 and Rosalie helped him with an exhibition in the Academy of Science building, during which he did a large calligraphy ‘Dragon’ now in the ANU Menzies Library; ‘I have painted them’: 1985 School of Art.

¹³ Shell collecting in childhood: 1982 North; ‘I went to the coast’: Feb 1979 RG to MG; ‘am happily’: 30 Apr 1979 RG to MG.



Rocks found by Lake George in a 1977 arrangement on the bench in Rosalie's sitting room, the form of which she first used in *[River stone]* c. 1966–68 and returned to in *Set up* 1983–84

The 1977 arrangement was originally larger, about twice the length of that shown here. Rosalie described that first version thus: '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). Rosalie would later halve the length of the work so that the background comprised one and a half of the slatted squares, which is how it was photographed in August 1978.

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Collections of pebbles and other materials in the courtyard at Pearce, c. 1985

Photograph by Anthony Browell from *Vogue Living* February 1985, reproduced courtesy of the photographer

some in 1982: 'And one last thing I have a set of shells from a Tasmanian beach and if you run across any such please gather them for me'. Her daughter-in-law responded with samples and a package sent back with Ben following one of his visits: 'If you want more this size we can get lots for you when next in Bridport [north-eastern Tasmania] because that's the main catch of the fishermen there. However it's fairly unlikely we'd find smaller ones.' Toss visited Rosalie in late 1984, bringing 'a non-Christmas present, which was a cardboard box full of those magnificent [scallop] shells ... I find them absolutely fascinating.' They came from Seven Mile Beach near Hobart airport, which Rosalie visited in September 1985 on a trip to Hobart, writing to Toss afterwards: 'The first day I came home I spread out all my shells and I am already planning a return trip to that beach. I'll bring a tent! Every light hour I will walk the beach and catalogue it. And I'll put all the shells in rows and decide (pleasurably!) which I want more of. How clever of you to organise me there.'¹⁴

Stone and gravel

Rosalie's interest in the round, smooth rocks she encouraged her children to search for during riverside picnics in the late 1940s and early 1950s had its genesis in her childhood summers on Waiheke Island, and she was always on the lookout for them whenever she visited the beaches north and south of Batemans Bay. She had used stones in her flower arrangements, one of which was even titled 'Blue metal industry' and presumably featured the crushed rock used on black-top roads. Smooth stones feature in two works, *[River stone]* c. 1966–68 and *Stonerack* 1980, and rough rocks from Lake George in two other (uncatalogued) pieces from 1977–78 (subsequently dismantled). On her country travels her eye was caught by the many colours and textures of the gravels on ant heaps and she took many samples, which she used in *Industrial area* 1982–84. The colours of the earth also lay behind the title of the ten panels she made with her stock of FSC-coated plywood formboard, *Earth* 1999, the last but one work she completed before her death.

Rusted farm iron

Rosalie began collecting rusted iron in a serious way in the mid-1960s, drawn on by her ikebana studies (see 'Ikebana' in the Biographical Note). Between the mid-1960s and 1973 Rosalie made at least twenty-one pieces using rusted iron (and possibly more because there are no records with details of some works exhibited at Macquarie Galleries, Canberra, in 1974). She began collecting the iron because of her ikebana studies, using it in her arrangements. 'I took that on as containers because it had the shape in it. There's some marvellous shapes you get.' Much of the iron in her works is from old machinery and tools. One source was the old mine at Captains Flat: 'I used to go up to Captains Flat mine with a bucket. I remember trudging across that mud plain, it was magic. The iron work used to be like Giacometti's iron. It's all eaten away by the nasty acids ... I used to get buckets of that. Didn't use it, but I got buckets of it.'¹⁵

She stopped making iron pieces in 1973. Three factors contributed to Rosalie's change of heart: a concern about what Ben's welding might lead to, queries about the merits of her metal figures, and her new interest in the artistic possibilities of old bones. Regarding Ben's welding, she explained: 'He got very carried away, and I thought that he was going to get into the act if I wasn't careful ... I felt he was getting into my world that

14 'The shells seduced me': 1985 School of Art; 'and one last thing': c. Feb 1982 RG to TG; 'if you want more': 22 Feb 1982 Lyn Gascoigne to RG; 'non-Christmas present': 1985 School of Art; 'the first day I came home': 20 Sept 1985 RG to TG, also Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 12; 'Seven Mile Beach': 9 Jan 2014 Lyn Gascoigne to MG; Toss and Lyn would also visit Five Mile Beach, but less often.

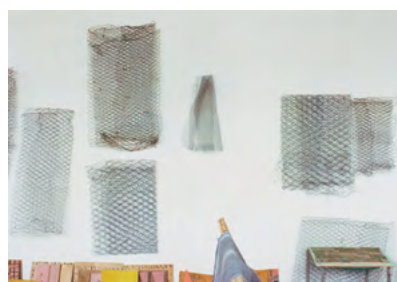
15 'I took that on' and 'up to Captains Flat mine': 1998 Hughes.

belonged just to me, where what I said went. And it was the first time in my life that what I said went.' Two friends raised doubts about her figures, Vicki Mimms, who 'can't bear things that look like things e.g. king's head' and James Mollison, who reacted with disgust when he admired a new piece only to have Rosalie describe it as 'my elephant pot'. She would argue that in her medium her things have to look like things or they don't look like anything. But in retrospect she recognised that her iron figures were 'perilously close to that awful junk stuff people make'.¹⁶

Wire, wire mesh and cages

Rosalie was intrigued with the many different sorts of wire and wire mesh she encountered on building sites and in the country, and had a collection of rusted or weathered samples outside the studio. Some ended up in a display on one of the courtyard walls. The mesh included flywire gauze, chicken wire and steel mesh used to reinforce concrete slabs. Again, it was ikebana that first piqued Rosalie's interest in rusty wire, which she incorporated in her constructions in the mid-1960s, and then in *Bee* 1972. As Rosalie transitioned to assemblage, she used wire to string up her weathered bones (*Joie de mourir* 1973) and construction mesh to hold the bottles on their shelves in *Bottled glass* 1974. Transparent wire gauze was used to suggest early morning mist in *Norco* (after Gruner) 1974, contain her parrots in *Italian birds* 1975 or suggest a curtain in *Early morning* 1977. Later she would use chicken mesh embedded with thistle stalks and similar material (*Clean country* 1985). Mesh was also used metaphorically: it could 'contain' air, as in *Jim's picnic* 1975, *Crop [1]* 1976, *Crop 2* 1981–82 and, especially, *Plein air* 1994.

Rosalie was keen, too, on old wire cages as containers (as in *Angels* 1976 and *Winter order* 1978–79). In the latter part of 1978 she experimented with cage-like structures on her back lawn. There were at least two such structures with the stripped dried stalks of thistles and/or cow parsley threaded through the openings. One, less finished, made use of a fairly rough cage, and the other more finished piece used an old bird cage. Work was sufficiently advanced for RG to show them to Nick Waterlow when he came to see her in early October about exhibiting in the 3rd Biennale of Sydney in 1979. 'I have had a visit from Nick Waterlow who wants me to put something in Sydney Biennale next March ... He chose three things — two still unfinished ... likes my Feathered Fence and a thing I am doing with lots of horizontal grey sticks in various cages', which she also referred to in a letter to Waterlow in December: 'the one with horizontal sticks in cages looks best against



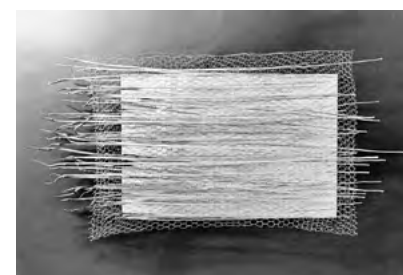
Some of Rosalie's collection of wire netting on the studio wall in September 1993; the piece at the top left was used in *Plein air* 1994

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Detail of *Plein air* 1994

Photograph by Gavin Handsford, courtesy of Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne



The piece Rosalie called *Going sideways* (dismantled, not catalogued), which she was working up in late 1978 for the 1979 Biennale of Sydney, but ultimately she abandoned the piece. The image on the top shows Rosalie's annotations on the image she sent to Nick Waterlow for the biennale. In 1985 she returned to the idea of stalks and wire in *Clean country* 1985 (detail, one of four panels)

Top: Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from the Biennale of Sydney archive at the Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library, Sydney

Bottom: Photograph by Matt Kelso from author's archive

¹⁶ 'He got carried away': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 20; 'Vicki Mimms': 10 Apr 1972 RG to MG; 'James Mollison': 16 Oct 1972 RG to MG, p. 38; 'perilously close': 1982 North.



Metal labels from the wooden cable reel spools dismantled and cut up for Rosalie's wood panels. But Rosalie clearly had another source for labels such as these as she used eight in *The colonel's lady* 1976

Image by the author



A collection of ceramic and glass insulators on the courtyard bench in 1976, with a stack of rusty metal in the foreground

Photograph by Matt Kelso from author's archive

the light', by then named *Going sideways*. In the end, a smaller, cage-like structure constructed on the back lawn (*Winter order* 1978–79) was exhibited and the others dismantled, but she would return to the idea of dried stalks/thistles and wire in *Clean country* 1985 and *Plein air* 1994.¹⁷

Found objects

Discarded objects of many kinds attracted Rosalie's eye and some ended up in her assemblages, especially in the 1970s. Importantly, she chose and used things 'for their look and their feel but never for their function'. For many things, such as the beer cans and rusted domestic enamelware, it was a case of looking past what the object was — naming the object — and recognising its visual qualities. She liked simple things. 'The problem is that people eschew simplicity. They feel they have to spend money. I have a range of tennis balls and coloured rubber balls in a box at the gallery [Macquarie Galleries, Canberra]. I found them near the Scrivener Dam, slipped from children's grasps. The children at the gallery like to pick them up. This is as it should be, people happy with art.' She also had a collection of copper floats (used in ballcocks), which she tried out in a bucket in 1975 but discarded the idea, although retained the copper floats, which were among the collections cleared from the courtyard at Anstey Street after she died. Many things caught her eye, but the three that stand out — because she had a lot — are plastic dolls, beer cans and enamelware. Other than for enamelware, however, from the late 1970s Rosalie gradually moved away from incorporating objects in her work, although the stockpiles remained.¹⁸

17 'A visit from Nick': 12 Oct 1978 RG to MG, p. 56, also 7 and 21 Dec 1978 RG to NW.

18 'Eschew simplicity': Rees 1974.

Plastic dolls

Rosalie made seventeen works using plastic dolls whole, or more usually, just part. The first work used a headless, limbless torso (*Japanese bathing* c. 1972–73), the next a head and one arm (*Parrot lady* 1973), and then a pair of legs (*Monument* 1974) and a head (*The cottage* 1974 and *Doll's house* 1975). The dolls were chance finds, washed away in the stormwater and found by the riverside, maybe picked up in a dump or, on one occasion (*Parrot lady* 1973), 'living under the station at Captains Flat a long time. She had terrible times. She had been through a lot. And I couldn't resist her expression ... She had grey hair and a wisp and startled eyes, she was very dramatic.' But not every doll would do: 'That doll's head worked for me, you can have fifty dolls heads and none of them work. One might.'¹⁹

The game changed when Rosalie discovered an abandoned fairground sideshow on the Bungendore tip in February 1976 and, among other memorabilia, came home with six varieties of kewpie dolls. 'I got over 300.' But what to do with them? In a discussion about the repeated image (which also took in Rosalie's use of beer cans) she explained:

It is very hard when you find say 300 assorted dolls to know what to say, and they are obviously saying 'dollies', and so the only thing really that you can do is order them, arrange them, so that the essence of dolliness comes out of them. I found that I could do this by sorting them in to different sizes, different colour eyes — some brown, some blue — and order them in boxes. Alas, I took all their arms off because their arms were reading away from that hardened image. I found that something like 150 dollies in boxes says 'dollies' unequivocally. I wanted to say 'dollies' because I had a lot of dollies, I had 300 plus dollies, and they were too good, they were very exciting ... and you wanted to sort of immortalise them into a work of art that wouldn't irritate you. It would have to be so tight and so firm and really so unsentimental that you just enjoy that dolliness of it.

This was *Dolly boxes* 1976.²⁰



Detail of *Parrot lady* 1973
Image courtesy of John Cruthers



Detail of *Dolly boxes* 1976
Image by Carl Warner, courtesy of the University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane

¹⁹ 'Dolls were chance finds': 12 Feb 1974 RG to MG, p. 44 ('Am also collecting dolls (pink) from the dumps'); 'living under the station' and 'worked for me': 1985 School of Art; 'grey hair and a wisp': 1997 Feneley.

²⁰ 'I got over 300': 8 Mar 1976 RG to TG; 'it is very hard': 1978 Lindsay, similar remarks 1985 School of Art and Janet Hawley 1997, which also has 'I ripped their arms off like Auntie Jack' (a reference to an ABC television comedy from the period).



Bucket of copper floats for ballcocks, c. 1975. The bucket had been used earlier, empty, in a multi-box installation photographed in early 1975 (see *Study: thistle stalks* c. 1974–75), and later as a container with plastic flowers (see *Bucket of flowers* c. 1976). Rosalie had about a dozen floats, one of which she used in *Germaine Greer* 1972 and the remainder were among the collections cleared from the courtyard at Anstey Street after she died

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Enamel ware 1974

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

Enamelware

Rosalie's love affair with rusted domestic enamelware is reflected in seventeen works made over twenty years, from 1974 to 1993. Sometimes she simply used an enamel cup or a jug as a container, but other works were full-on celebrations of the material, such as *Enamel ware* 1974, *Triptych* 1975, *Sideboard piece* 1976, *The teaparty* 1980, *Habitation* 1984, *Set up* 1983–84 and *Skewbald* 1993.

Rosalie would find the enamelware in old dumps 'and it was absolutely mesmerising'. Once she found a 'marvellous broken-down enamel kettle, large, rich clear blue, and an orange tea pot' on top of the hill before one gets into Bungendore. The orange teapot was used in *The teaparty* 1980. Of the teapot in *Enamel ware* 1974 she said: 'I thought [it] was a very vulgar little teapot. I went three times to that dump and the wretched thing kept getting under my feet and in the end I thought "All right!" and it forced its way into my oeuvre'. Her son Toss gave her some 'very high class [pieces] ... collector's items, must be rare'. She remonstrated about a critic who said that enamelware can be found in any Australian dump. 'Got news for him. It can't. It can't, it's very hard to find.' Once she even offered some children money to pull things out of the bramble bushes. And by the 1990s she found that 'nowadays you get awful enamel from Taiwan which is lightweight' unlike the 'good old solid stuff' she had collected.²¹

Rosalie's word for enamelware was 'elegant': 'I had a thing about enamelware because I see it as being elegant. People see the holes in it. I was collecting brown and white at the time. To me it had the sort of elegance that a Dalmatian dog has, spotty, very elegant ... I go for the look of it and the feel of it.' She thought that 'sculpturally it was very beautiful' and in *Set up* 1983–84 she put it on blocks so 'you saw the actual shape of it'. She aimed for a classical feel in her arrangements: of *Triptych* 1975 she said, 'I was after that elegance of still life you can get with no sentimental overlays, [the] shapes and spaces reading in a classical way'. James Gleeson made a friend for life when he observed: "'Triptych" ... seems to me to have that kind of real classicism of spirit which you find in Chardin still life or Morandi'. Her scorn was palpable when recounting how she had once been asked if she was a feminist because it was kitchenware. Of her last enamel work, *Skewbald* 1993, Rosalie wrote: "'Skewbald" is the product of my perception in a world of Friesian cattle, magpies, Dalmatian dogs, Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Glory be to God for dappled things", cowhide, and all the animals on the veldt.' It was her last enamelware piece. 'I've said everything that needs to be said [about enamelware], or that I'm interested in.'²²

Beer cans

Rosalie used beer cans in four pieces made between 1976 and 1979, using both old and new cans. Some were steel cans, others possibly aluminium. The first work used a faded pink Cascade can and parts of a Flag ale can (*The colonel's lady* 1976). Toss in Hobart noticed the can and obtained from the Cascade Brewery a dozen empty pink ones, especially run off for her. 'Very pretty cans they are', she wrote back, 'standing two deep and four across with their grey brewery labels reading neatly and their clever trick tops (How did the beer get out?).' Cascade sent her some more cans in 1978 and in her letter of thanks she congratulated Cascade 'on having one of the best designed beer cans in Australia'.²³

21 'Mesmerising': 1999 Auckland AG; 'marvellous broken-down': 1 May 1977 RG to MG, p. 47; 'orange teapot': 1985 School of Art; 'high class pieces': c. Sep 1977 RG to TG, the letter also refers to gifts from Ray Hughes; 'very hard to find' and 'offered children money': 1998 Hughes; 'from Taiwan' and 'good old stuff': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 51.

22 'I had a thing': 1985 School of Art; 'sculpturally ... beautiful' and *Set up*: 1999 Auckland AG; 'classical feel' and 'friend for life': 1980 Gleeson; 'feminist': 1999 Auckland AG; *Skewbald*: RG artist's statement 1 Jul 1993 (the Hopkins reference is to 'Pied beauty' 1877); 'said everything': 1998 Hughes.

23 'Very pretty cans': mid-Nov 1976 RG to TG; second gift of Cascade cans: 19 May 1978 RG Wilkins Tasmanian Breweries Pty Ltd to RG and c. late May 1978 RG's response.

After Rosalie made *The colonel's lady* she became 'a connoisseur of beer cans' and had 'no trouble in picking up hundreds of them along country roads around Canberra'. She was attracted by their faded beauty, and wrote about her interest in January 1977: 'I am combing the grassy gullies between Queanbeyan and Bungendore for good quality fade on beer cans ... Flag ale fades beautifully — with lovely pale Australian flags. I even found three more Swan lager with black swans on faded gold and red. However, it's a hard medium to make work.' In 1978 she told Robert Lindsay she preferred the old cans: 'with the sun and the rain and the way they live in the grass with part exposed to the sun and part exposed to the damp or dry underneath, they fade in such different, casual ways, and you get beautiful, casual effects out of them and you get very ancient, lyrical pale pinks and pale blues and I think real beauty of colouring with the fade. The newly minted one is a bit aggressive for my taste.' Looking back, Rosalie remembered the faded colours 'were as good as the faded Italian colours, the Piero della Francesca colours. Faded pink, faded blue, beautiful ... I made things out of beer cans ... just so people could look at the colour.'²⁴

She knew that in most peoples' eyes 'a beer can is a laughable object, and they cannot see past it ... But I feel whatever I use I have to be able to get something of dignity or beauty out of it.' She wanted to make what she felt was a definitive arrangement out of beer cans 'because it certainly inhabits the Australian environment ... I feel it's a challenge to take something with the image that a beer can has in most people's minds and turn it towards beauty so that perhaps people can accept that beauty lies in very ordinary places sometimes.'²⁵

One final point concerns the use of multiple beer cans. In 1978 Rosalie explained her thinking to Robert Lindsay: 'I do think sometimes you say a thing definitively by repeating it. It's that old, old thing of a rose is a rose is a rose and you get the rose feeling out of it. In the same way that if you take a lot of something — if you're working with bones for instance, as I have done — a lot of bones will surround you with that bone thing and make you feel the feel of bones. I think the same goes for the repeated image of the beer can. You can as it were topple one beer can and in some senses you can't topple fifty.'²⁶

Printed metal and the Lysaght lady

As well as beer cans, Rosalie used a variety of metal containers and images on metal in twelve works between 1975 and 1990. She had a great collection of old cigarette tins and metal pill boxes, used in works such as *Mosaic* 1976. Sometimes she cut the containers up and used just part of the printed image or text. The three *Flower tower* works of 1975 were made with piles of ten-gallon fuel drums. She saved printed metal labels, and had a stock of labels for barbed wire used on hardwood cable reels. Rosalie had a particular liking for the lady (Queen Victoria) stencilled on sheets of galvanised iron (q.v.) by the Lysaght steel company. 'They used to stamp it with the image of Queen Victoria and the year it was made. If you go out to the country now, you can sometimes see this Lysaght lady in the grass. She's fending off the bushfires with her chin.'²⁷



[Homage with Lysaght lady] c. 1990 (detail)
Image by Jenni Carter, courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

²⁴ 'A connoisseur': late May 1978 RG to RG Wilkins; 'combing the grassy gullies': 4 Jan 1977 RG to TG; 'with the sun and the rain': 1978 Lindsay; 'faded colours': 1998 Hughes.

²⁵ 'Laughable object': 1980 Gleeson; 'definitive arrangement': 1978 Lindsay.

²⁶ 'I do think': 1978 Lindsay.

²⁷ 'They used to stamp': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 37, also 1998 Hughes and 1998 NGA.

Printed images

Rosalie collected a wide range of printed images, especially package branding, newspaper photographs and art postcards, and her interest extended to old engravings, cigarette cards and postage stamps. Her sense of the graphic qualities of the product logos on packaging, in particular, was informed by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. She kept newspaper images she was particularly taken with in albums, filled old cigarette tins with collectors' cards and had plastic bags full of postage stamps. 'The cigarette cards came as a blessed diversion. I have continuing pleasure in arranging and rearranging and picking out my favourites. All upright, too. I'll mount this lot' (*Homage with five cricket cards*] c. 1982).²⁸

For one very brief period in the spring of 1973 Rosalie experimented with collage, gluing compositions of images cut from magazines into a large scrapbook. But she quickly gave collage on paper away in favour of three-dimensional assemblage works, of which the first was *Parrot lady* 1973. Rosalie cut around an image she wanted to use, and either glued the silhouette directly to the work or, if the image was from a packing box, she used the rigidity of the cardboard to give it the stability she needed. In late 1977 she acquired a jigsaw, which allowed her to mount the image on plywood and then cut around it. 'Much work with new jigsaw', she wrote in December 1977, and over the years she would acquire others. She would make up batches of silhouettes and there were many stashed away in boxes in her studio when she died.²⁹

All up, Rosalie used printed images in about 100 works between 1973 and 1984. Most employ package branding, newspaper images and art postcards (discussed below), but twenty works use old photographs, vintage postcards, road maps, botanical engravings and collectors' cards.

Package branding: Arnott's parrot, Norco cow and others

Rosalie clipped her branding images from the cardboard packing boxes she found in her local supermarket. The Arnott's parrots in their different forms came first. 'I find it very difficult to move out of a supermarket when they've been unloading the Arnott's Biscuits and all those lovely parrots. You have to stop yourself from taking 24 more cardboard boxes and cutting out the parrots.' But in 1980 she observed, regretfully: 'They haven't got the variety they used to have. You used to be able to get blue ones and red ones and I have had a great store of them ... I use them a lot.' She was talking with James Gleeson about the parrots in *Jim's picnic* 1975. Norco cows were another early obsession and she was collecting them in a big way at the start of 1974: 'Also got nice Norco Butter cardboard carton stamped with blue cows ... I think I'll go down later and climb J.B. Young's mountain of boxes and drag out a few spare cows. I like to have a lot.'³⁰

She used the parrots from Arnott's Biscuits in twenty-two works between 1973 and 1982, cows from Norco dairy products in thirteen works between 1974 and 1979, and Queensland pineapples in seven works in 1985. She also used a few cows from milk cartons and powdered milk cans, and cats (probably from cat-food containers).

²⁸ 'Cigarette cards': c. Feb 1982 RG to TG.

²⁹ 'Collage': Rosalie decided to try her hand at collage after seeing an exhibition of Michael Taylor's collages in October 1973; 'new jigsaw': mid-Dec 1977 RG to MG, p. 59 (incorrectly dated Dec 1979).

³⁰ 'I find it very difficult': 1980 Gleeson and others including 1998 Hughes; *Jim's picnic*: 1985 School of Art; 'Norco cows': 12 Feb 1974 RG to MG, p. 44; contrary to Vici MacDonald's claim (1998, p. 30), the first Norco cow work was not c. 1969 but 1974–75.

Rosalie's use of the Arnott's and Norco logos set the pattern for an important aspect of her practice. At first she used the whole bird and whole cow, but soon she began to cut them up and reassemble them as mythical or comic figures, exploring the full potential of her material. It was a practice that would stand her in good stead when she worked with soft-drink boxes (and later retroreflective road signs and cable reels), first using the whole boards of the boxes and then splitting or sawing them into strips or small squares, and later even sawing up and reassembling panels of strips she had glued to backing boards. At other times she resurfaced the cows with china chips, and once even found cow images sufficiently small to fit on a postcard of Eadweard Muybridge's *Ox trotting* 1887. But eventually she stopped: 'if my delight is still there, I can still make something else' but 'it's very hard to say anything different that's not been said before'.³¹

Newspaper images

There are thirteen works using images from newspapers, almost all made between 1974 and 1984. Three works have faces cut from newspapers and magazines, two used racehorses and eight involved football players or cricketers (seven of them in action). Rosalie had images of the English team from the Australian tour in 1974–75, the West Indies tour in 1975–76 and some as late as 1981. She loved the body language and left behind a collection of images with the figures painted over in white paint, or outlined in black, or sometimes she cut out the figure so it stood alone, all to emphasise their shapes. The use of newsprint images of cricketers reflected a wider interest Rosalie developed in newspaper sports photography in early 1976: 'Have just done a collage of rumps of racehorses kindly provided by the page spread in *The Age* [*Study: horses*] 1976]. Am interested in all sports photographs so keep on keeping yr eyes open for me.' Rosalie told art students in 1985: 'Another thought if you are a regionalist is that part of your region is your daily newspaper and you see some magnificent sporting types in the sports pages. Wonderful body language ... The only way you can get a footballer looking as good as a footballer is to cut his picture out of the paper. Mount him on wood.' As with the cricketers, she also retouched the footballers. She returned to the sports pages in 1982–83 when she collected images of horseracing from her Sunday newspaper (*[Study: horse races]* 1983); the archive includes images of Gurner's Lane winning the 1982 Caulfield Cup and Sir Dapper winning the 1983 Golden Slipper, suggesting a time frame for her interest.³²



The Norco cow came in several sizes and shades of blue
Image by the author



Images of cricketers showing how Rosalie sought to emphasise the figures with gouache and outlining. Some she mounted on plywood cut to shape, as in *[Lillee and daffodils]* c. 1977–78

Image by the author



'The only way you can get a footballer looking as good as a footballer is to cut his picture out of the paper and mount him on wood.' As she also did with Braque's *Nu debout* (1908)

Image by the author

31 'If my delight': 1980 Gleeson; 'hard to say anything different': 1982 North.

32 'Collage of rumps': 8 Mar 1976 RG to TG; 'another thought': 1985 School of Art. In 1980 Ray Hughes wrote to Rosalie about a touring exhibition the Visual Arts Board had asked him to curate on the theme of collage and his letter referred, among other things, to 'the cricketer, footballer and racehorse pieces I have seen' (5 Mar 1980 RH to RG). The show did not eventuate.

Art images

Rosalie made twenty-four works incorporating images of works of art. One source was the Mary Martin Bookshop in Canberra where she bought remaindered books of reproductions, often in multiple copies. In the studio after she died there were dismembered copies of paperbacks on Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, the Western tradition of portraiture, and a Russian publication titled *Dionysus*. She would buy loose prints of works such as Pablo Picasso's *Family of saltimbanques* (multiple copies) and Gerard David's *The rest on the flight into Egypt*. She was keen on art postcards, carefully making her choices at gallery bookshops. Others came in bulk from Mary Martin Bookshop: 'I had just bought two packets [of Leonardo postcards] from Mary Martin. Was greatly impressed by the freshness of them. And the beautiful moulded quality of the mother and child. More a sculpture than a painting. It reminded me how little I have looked at his work.' She also had several postcard sets of Picasso and Goya published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; a postcard book on the Basilica at Assisi and multiple copies of Raphael's *Portrait of Angelo Doni* 1506 used in *The gallery man* 1978. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's portrait *Mademoiselle Caroline Rivière* turns up in three works and the Louvre's Egyptian *Body of a woman, probably Nefertiti* in two. Rosalie ended up with hundreds of cards covering all periods and subjects from many cultures.³³



Australian National Gallery poster with Renior's *La loge*
Image by the author

In 1977 James Mollison gave Rosalie a lot of black and white photographs of Georges Braque's *Nu debout* 1908 while the debate raged about his thwarted plans to acquire it for the Australian National Gallery. She made several studies with the image, having cut out and retouched the figures as she had done with the cricket players, but in the end turned out just one completed work using them (*Down to the silver sea* 1977/81). Visiting blockbuster exhibitions were another source, especially once the gallery in Canberra opened in 1982. Rosalie had multiple copies of a poster with images of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *La loge* (*The theatre box*) 1874, published in conjunction with *The Great Impressionists* exhibition at the national gallery in the winter of 1984, one of which she used in [*Homage with Renoir's La loge*] c. 1984–86.

Rosalie extended her practice of framing art works she admired to other images that caught her eye, including the merino rams in *Woolly wood* c. 1973, patterns on linoleum sheets in *Interior* 1989 and [*Vase of flowers*] 1992, images of the Lysaght lady in *Matriarch* 1983, and stencilled images on a hessian sack (*Pink kookaburras* 1984), wooden oil crates (*Shell 1* 1981, *Shell 2* c. 1981–84) and a tea chest ([*Homage: the cup*] c. 1993–95).

Newsprint

Printed newspaper was another material Rosalie had in quantity and she used it in five works between 1975 and 1984. This material was also one she described as 'elegant'. Explaining her use of newspaper in *Pale landscape* 1977, she said: 'I was terribly fond of newspaper because I think it is very elegant'. She was talking about newspapers that were printed only in black ink, and before the use of colour-printing technology became commonplace. She used them in wads (*Lying piece* c. 1975), in sheets threaded with feathers (*Pale landscape* 1977) and in many rows of thick sun-bleached squares (*Paper square* 1979–80 and *Harvest* 1981–82). Regarding the last, she told James Gleeson: 'what I have is newspaper cut into about six-inch squares in thick wads all aligned and I have nailed them ... over the whole surface, so you get rows and rows of paper squares, thick. Then I've weathered it so that the paper curls with the sun and goes yellow with the sun. And the whole thing takes on a sort of organic form. It's what the sun and the wind do to things. You see it doing it to trees and you see it

33 'Bought two packets': 28 Aug 1979 RG to MG; art books (some dismembered) in RG papers NLA; Luciano Berti *Fra Angelico* Thames and Hudson, 1968; Alberto Busignan *Piero della Francesca* Thames and Hudson, 1968 (at least four copies); Malcolm Warner *Portrait painting* Phaidon Press, 1979 (at least two copies); Valentin Bulkin (compiler) *Dionysus Masters of World Painting Series*, Aurora Art Publishers, Leningrad, 1982.

doing it to flowers and it takes on a living colour from the air. And I think (a) I like newspaper, (b) I like large plain statements, and (c) I like things that the weather has [changed].’ Rosalie tried two arrangements of stacked paper nailed to boards, one using squares and the other with somewhat larger rectangles (in photographs of her living room), before settling on squares as her format.³⁴

China shards, electrical insulators and glass

Rosalie worked with china shards and glass in various forms for about seven years, from 1971 to 1978. There are eight works with china shards, sometimes glued over another image such as a Norco cow, seven using broken glass (again, sometimes glued over a printed image), seven more with glass or ceramic insulators (whole or in part), seven with bottles and five with sheet glass. The glass or ceramics insulators were originally made to attach telephone, telegraph or powerlines to utility poles and transmission towers.

Rosalie was a china lover all her life and took great pleasure from her small collection of fine china teacups. When she was in Venice for the 1982 biennale, she ‘sat on the side of a canal where they were building the [Australian pavilion]. They were excavating, and they were digging up the most beautiful old china chips of Italian civilisation. I used to sit on the balustrade and place them all along (it).’ It was much the same with glass shards: talking about *Bottled glass* 1974 she said: ‘I made this piece for, I think, the first show I ever had. I was excited perhaps by the worn and broken glass. There was a lot of broken glass around Canberra those days before they started going hygienic and building trenches and burying all the good stuff. This is green glass. I collected purple, yellow and pink and green but the green was the only one that worked for me [in this piece].’ She liked the transparency of coloured glass and for this reason displayed works such as *[Glass insulators]* c. 1971, *Bottled glass* 1974 and *[Glass insulators in box]* 1974 against the light. She had a penchant for the rich blue bottles that held medicines and similar, and was happy to take home vintage bottles with a good colour or shape.³⁵

Linoleum

Linoleum was a very popular, inexpensive, cloth-based, water-resistant floor covering invented in England by Frederick Walton in 1855, although it was eventually superseded by other floor coverings, including a polyvinyl chloride (PVC) product also known (incorrectly) as linoleum. Rosalie used the PVC linoleum. ‘I’ve done quite a lot of things with lino, but you don’t see it much, it’s difficult to get. But people used to have it all over the place.’³⁶

The linoleum came in sheets and she found some of it in dumps: ‘I remember going out once to Captains Flat and finding a whole lot of very good quality linoleum that they’d apparently ripped up from the city hall or something, and I remember making one work. It just worked for me, that particular linoleum, but in most tips you see that’d be at the bottom of the ditch and burnt.’ She asked Toss about linoleum in Hobart: ‘By the way, can you really get that old fashioned lino in Hobart? Remember the grey with the pink and yellow rose I have stuck on planks over the fire place [*River banks* 1977]? That sort of stuff. I might like to buy some eventually — something subtly awful.’³⁷



[Glass insulators] c. 1971

Photograph from author's archive



China shards were washed, sorted by colour and placed in old cigarette tins, and tins were also used to house images of early Italian renaissance paintings (detail of *Mosaic* 1976)

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

34 ‘Fond of newspaper’: 1985 School of Art; ‘what I have is newspaper’: 1980 Gleeson.

35 ‘Sat on the side of a canal’: 1998 Hughes; ‘I made this piece’: 1985 School of Art.

36 ‘I’ve done quite a lot’: Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 56.

37 ‘I remember’: 1997 Feneley; ‘she asked Toss’: c. 10 Jun 1979 RG to TG. In her letter she mentioned buying some awful linoleum from Clark Rubber but she never used it.



Linoleum torn like shards of china
Rose pink 1992
Image courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Rosalie made some fifty works with linoleum, with maybe fifteen different patterns. ‘When I found linoleum first at a dump I found it was the nearest I could get to a drawing of anything, because if you can’t draw you’re slightly limited, and if you can’t paint you’re very limited. So you’ve just got to use what you are and what you’ve got.’ She was attracted to the patterns and began isolating small motifs by tearing them out and gluing them to boards, much as she had used her china chips and glass shards in the mid-1970s. (She went on to adopt the tearing method for works made with Masonite board, such as *Clouds I, II and III* 1992 and *September* 1992.) In other works the linoleum was cut into regular squares or oblongs, which she glued to boards and sometimes mounted on blocks, and once she even used linoleum in its sheet form (*Cow pasture* 1992). It was a twenty-year love affair.³⁸

The first linoleum work was *River banks* 1977 where she glued torn pieces directly onto board. Rosalie described this linoleum as ‘terrible stuff, really garish big flowers growing on pink’. She used the same linoleum in *Step through* 1977/c. 1979–80, gluing it to plywood and cutting around the motif with her new jigsaw. Of *Blossom* 1982 it was a different story: she discarded the flowers and kept the background: ‘I tore off the floral part and used the grey-white dotted background. To me — I always read things back to something I have seen — that is an old black almond tree breaking into white blossom.’ Of the green and orange linoleum used in *First fruits* 1991, she said: ‘That’s green linoleum. Look at an apricot tree ... green leaves and apricots at various stages of ripening. That, to me, was straight out of nature.’ As for the linoleum used in the *Sheep weather alert* 1992–93 series: ‘Somebody gave me a lot of that lino. I couldn’t stand the inferior red and green on it, which in theory were the colours, but the black and grey were good so I tore it by hand.’ The works she made from linoleum had little to do with its domestic origins. As she said of *Step through*, ‘Though linoleum is a household material this piece has nothing to do with domesticity. It is about outdoor places.’ So were most of the others.³⁹

While a few of her linoleum pieces contain architectural allusions (*Interior* 1989, *Leadlight* 1991), many of Rosalie’s titles allude to landforms, agriculture, gardening and the natural environment:

Landforms	Agriculture	Gardening	Natural environment
<i>River banks</i> 1977	<i>Cherry orchard</i> 1988	<i>Herb garden</i> 1982	<i>Blossom</i> 1982
<i>Shoreline</i> 1986	<i>First fruits</i> 1991	<i>Municipal gardens</i> 1983	<i>Deciduous</i> 1984
<i>Aerial view</i> 1988	<i>Lambing</i> 1991	<i>A rose is a rose</i> 1986/88	<i>Maculosa</i> 1988
<i>Archipelago</i> 1993	<i>Cow pasture</i> 1992	<i>Formal flowers</i> 1988	<i>Woodland</i> 1990
	<i>Sheep weather alert</i> 1992–93	<i>Maze</i> 1992	<i>Green piece</i> 1990–91
	<i>Vine</i> 1996	<i>Lily pond</i> 1993	<i>Letting go</i> 1991
		<i>Garlands</i> 1994	<i>Meadow-sweet</i> 1991
		<i>View of the garden</i> c. 1991/95	<i>Midsummer</i> 1992
		<i>Parterre</i> c. 1994/97	<i>Regeneration</i> 1994
			<i>Poplars</i> 1996/97

38 ‘When I found linoleum’: 1999 Auckland AG.

39 ‘Terrible stuff’, ‘green and orange’ and ‘somebody gave me’: Vici MacDonald 1998, pp. 56, 58 and 60 (respectively); *Blossom*: 1985 School of Art; ‘nothing to do with domesticity’: 24 Feb 1987 RG to John McPhee (NGA file 75/1869-01).

Apiary and other boxes

Rosalie made about fifty works with boxes, the first in 1973 (not c. 1970 as Vici MacDonald wrote) and the last in 1984, but mostly in the period 1974 to 1978 (see also the later discussion on soft-drink boxes). She used many different sorts of boxes, a lot of them one-off finds. Boxes were used as a frame and gave stability. Sometimes the boxes were simply containers — for surveyors' pegs, balls, dolls or limpet shells. At other times the box effect was achieved using an old cupboard or other piece of carpentry. Sometimes Rosalie used only part of the box, removing one side from it to open it up as a theatre. In the homages Rosalie used part of a dismantled box to suggest a window. About half the boxed works used old apiary (beehive) boxes. She never made boxed works using the colourful painted soft-drink boxes.⁴⁰

The Biographical Note (p. 49) includes an account of how Rosalie began using old boxes she came across in the dumps to stabilise her assemblages, and the subsequent discovery of the abandoned apiary near Gundaroo in May 1975, which provided her with a new source. 'Had three trips out Gundaroo way, more bones. Then, miraculously, an abandoned apiary. Wooden crates, open-ended, piled under trees and mostly rotting. Faded pink, green, brown and white paint. Some unpainted in delectable shades of grey. Which to take?? I have 22.'⁴¹

Rosalie's first instinct was to use them all: 'first night I piled them nonchalantly in gallery between sitting-room and courtyard and was amazed at how good they looked ... Have now put them on terrace outside dining room. Not so good there. I think they need the confinement of the gallery and not so much sky. However, definitely a new look full of potential. The trick will be to get all the Covent Garden images (vegetables, not opera) subdued.' She did not go on with her multi-box trials then, although she returned to the idea in an uncatalogued installation in 1975 (using the boxes to hold enamelware and thistle stalks, see p. 166 illus. 093B) and again in *Habitation* 1984 and *Skewbald* 1993. She did not make her first works using the apiary boxes until early 1974. The tops of the apiary boxes sometimes came with (painted) metal sheets to help weatherproof them and these also found their way into Rosalie's work (as in *Turn of the tide* 1983 and *Grove* 1984).⁴²

Weathered wood

Rosalie used wood in many works, both as a component of the arrangement and as a background. It was always old, weathered, recycled wood, from dumps, building sites or recycling centres. Wood was special: unlike tin or aluminium 'it's nice to touch and it's a real living thing'. She had her favourites, notably surveyor's pegs, a dozen discarded pink-primed window frames, pink-primed carpenters' discards, fencing droppers and rails, and weathered plywood.⁴³

When Rosalie was using old wood she 'put the best side, or the most interesting side, and the more interesting shade of grey to the front'. She had a keen eye for grey wood: 'I can live with grey — I like bright colours but I always go back to the grey.' Her first wooden piece was *Cityscape* 1972, made with rows and rows of unpainted weathered wood blocks 'in various shades of good grey' found at Captains Flat. There were greys and greys: 'Somebody once heckled me and said, "Is there such a thing as a bad grey?" Certainly there is. That was a good grey patina on it.' In talking about *Graven image* 1982, she said: '[Grey] is a thing that I think everybody should

40 Incorrect dating of *Specimen box* 1975 (called *Moth box*): Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 25.

41 First use of boxes: 1982 North, also 1998 Hughes; 'abandoned apiary': 19 May 1973 RG to TG; Rosalie even bought some new, unpainted apiary boxes, which became bookcases and side tables, and she may have used a few in *Skewbald* 1993.

42 'First night I piled them': 16 May 1973 RG to MG, p. 41.

43 'Nice to touch': 1998 NGA.



'Good greys': *Graven image* 1982
Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand



'Good greys' and pink: *Galahs rising* 1984
Image by Margund Sallowsky, courtesy of RMIT University Art Collection, Melbourne

notice who does the Australian countryside ... Those are two good greys and actually they've both been exposed to the sun. And one of them was part of a butter box, the middle part, and the other part was a very good piece of grey [plywood] I found.'⁴⁴

Rosalie used a lot of grey, weathered plywood in her works. The plywood came in many thicknesses, depending on its intended application. In some forms it is known as marine plywood, which usually comes in thicknesses varying from 3 to 18 millimetres. Despite its name (and popular misconception) marine plywood is not waterproof, although its glue lines are. Rosalie rarely used new plywood, other than to back works, although in a few cases in the mid-1990s she may have coated new plywood with white paint to use in some of her 'air' works (as she did with the new Masonite panels in *But mostly air* 1994–95). She also put paint on the browned-off rectangles in *Afternoon* 1996 and (possibly) the warped sheets in *Overland* 1996.

The grey woods she used included old fencing, used in five works between 1979 and 1995, and before that in her ikebana as early as 1962. 'I used to go out into the country and find beautifully greyed fence posts that didn't have holes drilled into them. I got some of the longer ones from a timber yard in Queanbeyan. They were very twisted — a carpenter's nightmare — so I took them all.' They ended up in *String of blue days* 1984.⁴⁵

The pink window frames were used in three works, and a couple of experiments, and pink-painted wood appears in another fourteen works (plus minor studies) made between 1974 until the late 1990s. In 1974 she was working with 'a great pile of (pink) builder's offcuts' on the dining room table. She loved 'building sites where there is pink wood — undercoat pink on discarded scraps of timber ... That pink undercoat on wood strikes me as a very beautiful colour.' She was talking about *Pink on blue* 1982–83. She must have had a stash of the wood then because it was a significant component in two other works made soon afterwards, *Galahs rising* 1984 and *Totemic* 1984, and she returned to the wood again in the mid-1990s in works such as *Pink perpendicular* 1996, *Rocky road I* 1993/96 and *Rocky road II* 1996.⁴⁶

44 'Put the best side': 1980 Gleeson; 'I can live with' and 'once heckled me': 1985 School of Art, also 1999 Auckland AG; *Cityscape*: 2 Jun, 16 Nov 1972 RG to MG, pp. 35, 39; *Graven image*: 1998 NGA.

45 'Beautifully greyed fence posts': 1996 Davidson, pp. 14–15. Re early use of fence posts, RG inscribed a 1962 image saying the fence post came from Lake George; there are also references in press reports by visitors to the house at Pearce in the *Canberra Times* 13 Nov 1968 and 17 Apr 1970, p. 10.

46 'Pink builder's offcuts': 1982 North; 'loved building sites': 1998 NGA.

Surveyor's pegs, either unpainted or daubed with yellow, white, red, blue or black paint, caught Rosalie's eye and the developing suburbs on the outskirts of Canberra were a happy hunting ground. The pegs had shape and colour, and turn up whole or in part in eleven works made between 1973 and 1989. 'I don't actually steal these surveyor's things. I found a whole pile of them in a mud pit over in Erindale where the grass had grown over and they'd obviously been left. But I dug, at some pain to myself, a whole lot of the things with my bare hands out of the mud.' She cut the black points off — 'they are very like the clouds of starlings' — fixed them to parrot heads and used some in *City birds* 1981. The pegs were 'such a good white and grey'. The first work with surveyors' pegs actually used yellow pegs — another favourite colour of Rosalie's: this was *Surveyor's pegs* 1973, the first of her works to be exhibited. About a year later she experimented with a mass of grey peg tips in a wire-mesh safe (photographed in early 1975) but later dismantled that piece.⁴⁷

Builders' or plywood formboard

The term 'formboard' in this catalogue refers to thick plywood coated with a synthetic (phenolic surface) film and used to contain poured concrete, ensuring the finished product has a smooth surface. The film is usually coloured black or brown and the coated product is sometimes referred to as FSC-coated plywood. Sometimes the discards Rosalie found were in sheets, but frequently there were pieces cut into eccentric shapes to accommodate columns or other building features.

FSC-coated formboard first turns up in *Pet sheep* 1976, where it is used as a base and a background in a box-like construction, but otherwise Rosalie did not begin to make serious use of shaped formboard as a design element until *High country [1]* 1986 and *Shoreline* 1986. She wrote in February 1987 about the discovery of an early source of FSC-coated formboard. 'My dining room floor is covered with builder's formboard in various shades of brown, dull purple, and tan. I made a killing at a new building site opposite National Library. Stepped daintily down to the manager's office in my Carla Zampatti linen and my social shoes and asked if I might have any spare bits. So now I know "John" who says I can cope with anyone hustling me by mentioning his name. I returned next day in my old pants and took a LOT. Enough??? Plenty to go on with anyway! I wonder that no other artist is using it. I keep scrubbing concrete off it and laying it all over the floor until such time as it tells me what it wants to become.'⁴⁸

Between 1986 and 1995 Rosalie used FSC-coated formboard to make fourteen works having a pictorial element in them suggestive of landscapes, and ranging in size from modest (*High country [1]* 1986, *Shoreline* 1986) to expansive (*Skylark* 1994–95, *Suddenly the lake* 1995). In all these works the formboard was combined with other types of wood, galvanised iron and Masonite board. However, in her *Earth* 1999 installation Rosalie restricted her palette to FSC-coated formboard alone, cut in squares and rectangles and glued to base boards. The raw material had been accumulating outside her studio and covered almost the whole of the courtyard for several years, where she watched it as the light of day changed and talked about the way the colours differed when wet or dry. The stockpile represented unfinished business; the completed work was a final, sombre meditation on the colours of the formboard.



'Starlings' in a cage c. 1976 (dismantled and not catalogued)

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Formboard and cut-up cable reels spread all over the courtyard and up the wall, August 1996

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

47 'I don't actually steal': 1982 North; 'good white and grey': 14 Feb 1980 RG to MG, p. 60, see also 2 Mar 1973 RG to TG about collecting at Kambah.

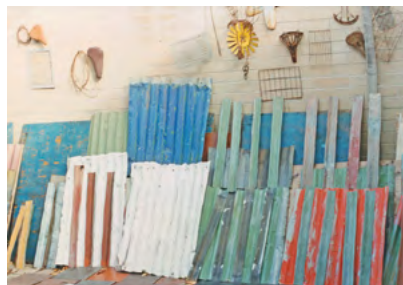
48 'My dining room floor': c. Feb 1987 RG to TG; the building site was the Questacon National Science and Technology Centre.

Galvanised iron

Rosalie used galvanised iron — either sheet or corrugated — in forty works between 1973/74 and 1998, usually as a compositional element but sometimes as a background. About thirty works used corrugated iron, and the remainder used galvanised iron sheeting. The works included boxed assemblages, floor pieces, single and multi-panel wall pieces, and two installations. Some of the pieces had been painted and used as the walls or roofs of sheds or similar buildings. Two pieces had been used as waterproofing on apiary boxes (*Turn of the tide* 1983 and *Grove* 1984) and the curved iron in *Swell* 1984 had been part of a water tank.

She was very keen on corrugated iron and thought it was very Australian and, once again, elegant. 'It hits the spot for me because I think it's indigenous to the country. It's a very honest material. To me it's got that Australian elegance I talk about that is straight from Corinthian pillars ... It's very elegant.' She came across a cowshed at Gundaroo which had 'been there since the year dot. And the woman [who] had bought the hobby farm painted it once, a sort of battleship grey or something, and it had faded and it was standing in the ground. It was absolutely lyrical.' Rosalie liked the 'vitality' of good corrugated iron, which was 'marvellous'. Another attraction was the Lysaght lady (previously discussed).⁴⁹

Collecting taught her that there were very different qualities of iron. The four pieces of iron in *Country air* 1977 had 'that very heavy quality and it had a very good sort of greeny painted tinge to it that gave it a sort of elegance and interest. The ordinary run of corrugated iron does not have [that superior quality].' Those four pieces 'came to be the real thing. It was beautiful tin. It was beautiful.' She took the two pieces of water tank used in *Swell* 1984 because they had 'an especially good bloom'. Ben would recall 'accompanying Rosalie on foraging expeditions, turning over hundreds of sheets to assess their merits. She looked at every individual sheet.' Good stuff was hard to find: 'you have to be very selective when you are picking up tin because there are pieces that do it and pieces that don't.' It was a case of: 'here a piece, there a piece. But for the amount of time I put into it, there wasn't all that much. But it collects over the years.' Many years might pass before Rosalie used her finds. It was almost twenty years before she found a satisfactory use for the triangular-shaped iron in *Rose red city* 2, 5 and 8 of 1992 and 1993 (there are photographs of it used with a window frame in about 1975, much as she did with *Pink window* 1975), and her use of wavy iron in *Rose red city* 10 1993 echoes the use of similar iron in *New wave* 1986.⁵⁰



Corrugated iron in the courtyard; note the wire pieces hanging on the wall
Photograph by Lyn Gascoigne from author's archive

The iron was presented as found: she learnt that the secret was 'to choose the right piece of tin and leave it alone. Do minimal things with it. Let it have its own personality. And it does. I think it's wonderful.' Of the iron in *Rose red city* 1991–93 Rosalie wrote: 'The iron is screwed to timber backing but otherwise presented as found. I will spray small patches of rust sometimes with a car engine preservative, clip off an awkward corner or scrub things down but I really present the naked material.'⁵¹

When it came to creating a work with the iron, Rosalie 'wanted to make it large in people's imagination. Let them see the other thing about corrugated iron.' She had strong views on how to display her corrugated iron works. 'I still think that if you put corrugated iron down in a place that has good rugs, good furniture, good

49 'It hits the spot', 'cowshed' and 'vitality': 1998 Hughes, also 1998 NGA.

50 'Heavy quality': 1980 Gleeson; 'the real thing': 1982 North; 'especially good bloom': 1998 NGA; 'accompanying Rosalie': mid-2000 BG with Mary Eagle, pers. comm.; 'you have to be very selective': 1990 Ross; 'here a piece': 1998 Hughes, similar in 1998 NGA.

51 'Wanted to make it large' and 'choose the right piece': 1998 Hughes; 'presented as found': 7 May 1993 RG to Tineke Fijn (who had written asking about her 'response to corrugated iron') (RG papers NLA).

everything then you're winning. If you put it down with other corrugated iron — junk, it can look like that ... If you put it down in poor surroundings you don't get the vitality out of it, and I think that anyone who is game enough to introduce corrugated iron into their house and give it space they can have wonderful vitality.'⁵²

There were also other dangers for one who turned over sheets of iron to assess their merits: 'Everyone now tells me that I have been in the worst tiger snake country in the state — that the CSIRO goes there to milk venom and that when they want to lay traps for the snakes they put down sheets of corrugated iron for the snakes to crawl under'. This was on the edges of Lake George where Rosalie also collected feathers.⁵³

Soft-drink boxes

In the course of her career Rosalie made about 130 works in which wood from dismantled soft-drink boxes was the sole or major component of the work. They range in size from some of the biggest pieces she made to the most intimate, and account for about twenty per cent of her total production. For many years Rosalie got a lot of her soft-drink boxes from the Schweppes depot in Queanbeyan. The momentous first visit to the depot took place in July 1978 (see p. 89). While she was careful to make friends with the manager and obtain his permission to help herself to the waste pile, she found the yardman less willing to accommodate her because it was his job to burn the boxes. As time went on Schweppes gradually replaced the wooden boxes with plastic containers, which were of no interest to Rosalie: 'The last ones they had were yellow Schweppes boxes, which I used in an exhibition in Adelaide [in 1996].'⁵⁴

Writing shortly after her first visit to the factory, Rosalie described the outcome: 'At the moment the house is flooded with dismantled drink boxes ... it is like being washed over by a great rainbow'. Rosalie explored the new medium for the rest of 1978: 'Am trying to burst into new larger works with an eye to Pinacotheca next year ... Have done several pieces with unbroken wood — more like striped flags. Torn wood is something else. And I have a lot of coloured wood. Nice to have some clear space to try it out.' Two weeks later she wrote: 'I have been doing more moving about of my great stock of coloured wood ... I work under the wisteria [over the terrace outside her dining room] and think big'. This was five years before she got a studio.⁵⁵

By February 1979 she had finished her first piece (*March past* 1978–79). It took a lot of work: 'I had to unpick 160 boards with hammer and hacksaw to do it — not to mention paying a second visit to Queanbeyan drinks factory to get more boxes.' On that visit Rosalie 'spotted a line in blue Sydney boxes on discard heap, and can see I am in business again'. In March 1980 she was there again, on consecutive days, when she spent 'the morning getting a car load ... and reefed in a whole lot of white boxes for a new project'.⁵⁶

52 'I still think': 1999 Auckland AG (speaking about *White garden* 1995).

53 'Tiger snake country': 30 Mar 1977 RG to MG, p. 45. Rosemary Dobson remembered Rosalie wearing a bell attached to her belt to warn snakes of her presence (Rosemary Dobson 2004).

54 'The yardman' and 'plastic containers': 1998 Hughes; 'the last ones they had': 1996 Davidson, see also Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 34.

55 'At the moment': 15 Jul 1978 RG to MG, p. 55; 'am trying to burst': 26 Dec 1978 RG to MG, p. 57; 'I have been doing': 12 Jan 1979 RG to MG, p. 57. There are several 1978 photographs showing RG's initial experiments with the boards from the soft-drink crates.

56 *March past*: Feb 1979 RG to MG, p. 57; 'I had to unpick' and 'spotted a line': Feb 1979 RG to TG; 'white boxes': mid-Mar 1980 RG to TG.



Soft-drink box stacks

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive



Rosalie with her stockpile of soft-drink boxes

Photograph by Richard Briggs/Fairfax Syndication (from the *Canberra Times* 13 June 1994)

Breaking the boxes up was hard, and the job was eventually delegated to studio assistants (but not until the late 1980s). 'What you find is you get broken boxes and you get one-of-a-kind boxes and what you have to do, hour after hour with a hacksaw, is cut them apart. Though they are wrecked they are very well made when it comes to hacksawing them.' Rosalie used all parts of the boxes: the individual boards, which she used whole, split or sawn, the ends, the broken boards and the sawn-off trimmings which 'were too good to waste'. She also saved the nails, their flat heads coloured with the paint used on the boxes ([*Nail study A*] and [*Nail study B*] c. 1979–80).⁵⁷

The first work used whole boards (*March past* 1978–79) but, even then, she also experimented with the jagged ends of boards, which found their way into *Parrot country* 1980, and slivers of broken boards, which were used as tail feathers in boxes with parrot cut-outs, such as *Parrots* 1980, *Side show parrots* 1981 and *City birds* 1981. She used small, regular sawn slivers of boards in *Reconstruction* 1980–81 and *Eighty-nine parrots* 1981. Towards the end of 1982 or early 1983 she experimented with split boards, making a small panel out of material left over from the boxes she had used for *Scrub country* 1981–82: this was the precursor for *Celebration* 1983 (made mid-year). As she exhausted the possibilities of using whole boards, Rosalie began to make more extensive use of split boards, beginning with *Daffodils* 1986 and, more so, *Prescribed text* 1986. Sometimes she used a tomahawk to split boards and at others a light bandsaw, but the game changed when she acquired a tradesman's bandsaw in November 1988 and she could easily slice the boards into whatever widths she wanted. *The marriage feast* 1988–89 and *Monaro* 1988–89 were two early products of this new tool.

The most memorable board works are arguably the ones made from yellow Schweppes boxes. There are yellow boards in works made as early as 1980 (*Parrot country* 1980), but it was not until 1985 that Rosalie made the first work using only yellow boards (*Honey flow* 1985). Then or shortly afterwards Rosalie must have discovered a big cache of the Schweppes boxes, enough to make *Plenty* 1986 (2.46 × 4.305 metres), with enough left over to make (in order) *Orchard*, *Prescribed text* and *Daffodils* (all 1986). Thereafter, wood sourced from Schweppes boxes dominated Rosalie's output of soft-drink box pieces (though not exclusively). Even the smallest offcuts were saved and stored, sorted by size and colour and drawn on as inspiration moved her. Rosalie began to exploit both the textures she could create with her small pieces, as in *Fragmentation [I]* 1991, and the black stencilled lettering on the boards, as in *Ledger* 1992, a lesson she took from *Monaro* 1988–89 and her road

57 'What you find': 1985 School of Art (talking about *Celebration* 1983); 'too good to waste': 1997 Feneley (talking about *Monaro* 1988–89).

sign works. She used most of her remaining stock of yellow wood over the summer of 1998–99 to make *Great blond paddocks* 1998–99, though when she died she left behind on her workbench two smaller, unfinished arrangements made with small, similar-sized trimmings from earlier works.⁵⁸

The studio contents in 1999 included boards from 23 brands of soft-drink boxes, reminders of the days when each country town of any respectable size had its own drink bottler and distributor. Some were the product of a trip to the Hopes Cordial depot at Goulburn with Peter Vandermark in 1990 (described in the essay *Rosalie’s Country* in this catalogue). The National Gallery of Australia has a sample of each board in its study collection.⁵⁹

Brands of soft-drink boxes used by Rosalie in her artworks		
Blue Bow (Tooth’s)	Hopes Cordials	Schweppes
Boorowa	Jewel	Sharpe Bros
Coca Cola	Knipes	Sheekey’s Wagga
Cosmo	Loy’s	Shelley & Sons Sydney
Cottee’s	Miranda	Swing
Crystal	Newings	Tarax
Dale’s	Opal	Woodroofe’s
Goulburn Cordials	Pepsi	

Road signs

Rosalie made 108 works (including four studies) using plywood reflective road signs, and five more (including one study) made from hand-painted roadside signs advertising goods for sale. Before she could do anything with the road signs, she had to get them out of the metal frames: ‘it’s an agony to get them out: it kills you ... And then you [have to] cut them up.’ Rosalie used both the retroreflective yellow and the reflective and non-reflective red signs. Some included arrows and a few red ones included figures warning that workmen were on the road. She never used metal signs because she did not like the material and, apart from anything else, they were too hard to cut up.⁶⁰

The first road signs she took home were, fortuitously, already cut up. They came from a roadside dump near Collector: ‘Somebody had cut them into squares and they were all lying face downwards in the mud. Some of them had that white slash of paint on. Don’t know what it was — very random. That is as many as I could get.’ Once she began to use the signs in her work she would scour the highways for abandoned signs, and she had a list of contacts and phone numbers for the men in charge of the road maintenance depots between Goulburn in the north, Yass to the west and Cooma in the south. She resisted taking signs that were in use — it was a safety issue after all, tempted though she was occasionally: ‘I find it very hard when I am driving — I see another two letters I could have had’. In 1995 she found a huge pile at Revolve, the recycling depot

58 Early in 1988, writing for the Biennale of Sydney catalogue, Mary Eagle asked Rosalie for the order in which she produced the yellow wood works. The order she recorded was: 1. *Plenty* 1986 (afterwards using the spare bits for works marked X), 2. *Orchard* 1986 (X), 3. *Prescribed text* 1986 (X), 4. *Daffodils* 1986 (X), 5. *Grasslands [1]* 1987, 6. *Thirty two* 1987, 7. unnamed work, 8. *Stubble field* 1988. The unnamed work was either *Golden wedge* 1987 or *Roadside* 1987 (small enough to hang over the fireplace). The list is incomplete, omitting *Honey flow* 1985, *Poor man’s orange* 1987 and either *Golden wedge* 1987 or *Roadside* 1987.

59 ‘Cordial depot at Goulburn’: Peter Vandermark in Mary Eagle 2000, p. 23.

60 ‘It’s an agony’: 1995 Topliss.



Road sign works on the studio wall, 16 March 1998 (and the bandsaw on the right). From left to right, top row, *Pentimento* 1997, *Cloud cuckoo land* 1998, *Medusa* 1998, *Ship's log* 1996/98 (soft-drink box wood), and *Canary bird* 1996, and below, *Shark* 1998, *Golden bamboo* 1997, *Reserve* 1997 above *Siesta* 1997 and *Please drive slowly* 1996. Other works can be identified in the stacks on the floor

Photograph by Ben Gascoigne from author's archive

in south Canberra. Her Sydney gallerists, Roslyn and Tony Oxley, would look out for discarded signs for her, and once her son Toss in Hobart sent her some. It got harder to get supplies as the wooden ones — 'a sound, sweet material' — were replaced with aluminium ones.⁶¹

The first yellow road sign work was *Highway code* 1985 followed by *Streetwise* 1986; the first red one was *Persimmon* 1986–87. 'I have been sawing up yellow road signs all day in case I want to show a group in Oct [1986 at Pinacotheca]. It is going to be this show or never to use up all that material. Have some orange too — unbelievably ugly.' Depending on supplies, Rosalie worked with road signs over fifteen years, using the last of her stock to make *Metropolis* 1999, her very last work and the only one to incorporate whole signs.⁶²

Rosalie thought road signs were 'pretty hideous when you see them in the flesh' and said that she 'would never have chosen in cold blood to use [them] ... I brought them home for the grandchildren to play with ... I kept some out in the courtyard and one day the rain washed down and they came up a glory.' It was the flash, the glint that did it for her. 'It took me on my blind side.' She spoke about the shine in *Highway code* 1985, then hanging in her house: 'This shines so that when you see it on the wall of a house and you're standing with the light behind you, it comes up like that. Electric. Liquid gold really. And only sometimes when the light comes through the window do you get it. But you certainly get it.' When it came to hanging a retroreflective road sign work Rosalie 'always liked the glint to be brought out. I don't want it to be dramatically lit, but I do want it to sometimes flash at you, as road signs do, and then go sullen, then flash, like a living thing.' But they still had to read without the retroreflective shine.⁶³

61 'Dump near Collector': 1985 School of Art (talking about *Highway code* 1985), see also 1995 Topliss, 1998 Hughes and Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 35; 'I find it very hard': 1985 School of Art; 'Revolve': 1995 Topliss; 'harder to get supplies': 1998 Hughes.

62 'I have been sawing': [Sep] 1986 RG to TG. Early in 1988, Mary Eagle asked Rosalie for the order in which she produced the reflective road sign works: 1. *Pineapple pieces* 1985 and *Highway code* 1985, 2. *Shoreline* 1986 (incorporating pieces of retroreflective material), 3. *Streetwise* 1986, 4. *Persimmon* 1986–87, 5. *Flash art* 1987, 6. *Tiger tiger* 1987, 7. *Wind change* 1988, 8. *Court* 1988 (Mary Eagle 2007, p. 475, footnote 1). Regarding whole road signs, two works incorporate small, round handheld signs — *Red* 1992 (a 'stop' sign) and *Amber* 1992 (a 'slow').

63 'Hideous' and 'on my blind side': Vici MacDonald 1998, p. 35 and 1997 Ross; 'would never have chosen': 1995 Topliss and 1988 Ewen McDonald; *Highway code*: 1998 NGA; 'always liked the glint': 1988 Ewen McDonald, see also 1997 Ross.

Rosalie also came to recognise something else about the road signs: they ‘say something of the country they came from. I think you do get a reflection of the sort of country you’ve become familiarised with.’ She told Ewen McDonald: ‘I go along through the landscape and I do indeed see a tiger crouching in the grass flashing at me’. The tiger reference is to *Tiger tiger* 1987: ‘two square heads, the right colours and the actual reflective road signs out in the grass, like the Australian tiger, crouching’, a work which took its name from William Blake’s poem ‘The tyger’.⁶⁴

As with her other materials, Rosalie explored every aspect of her road signs. In works in which whole words survived, the meaning of the words is largely irrelevant, because it was the ‘feel’ of the whole that mattered, although there were a few exceptions, as in *Sweet lovers* 1990, *Sweet sorrow* 1990 and *Please drive slowly* 1996 (with word fragments). On the other hand, it was the indecipherable pattern of the cut-up words that prompted the titles of *Highway code* 1985, *Conundrum* 1989–90 and *News break* 1994. As she did with her Schweppes boxes, Rosalie looked at the stencilled black lettering, and extracted all sorts of shapes and patterns from it (such that some such works have been likened to concrete poetry).⁶⁵ This was particularly noticeable in the mid-to-late 1990s, in works which made use of a single, recurring shape, as in *Loopholes* 1995, *Downbeat* 1997, *Medusa* 1998 and *Birdsong* 1999. Nor did the shapes on signs escape her attention, whether the black arrow that became the menacing *Shark* 1998 or the solid black balls that she used in the red *Float off* 1993. Not every work had lettering or shapes: some were monochromatic, including yellow works such as *Dandelion* 1990, *Fool’s gold* 1992 and *Grasslands II* 1998, and red ones such as *Love apples* 1992.

Rosalie played with the different reflectivities of the cut squares, some very bright, others with little or none, and sometimes used combinations of them in her works. She took to the surfaces of her signs, scraping the lettering and the retroreflective coating back to a ghost of the original: the title of *Pentimento* 1997 captures this precisely, and she described works such as *Wind change* 1988 and *Court* 1988 as ‘the rubbed ones’.⁶⁶ Sometimes she combined pieces of road sign with other materials, the unexpected glimmer in a complex assemblage imparting a frisson that brought an extra dimension to the work (as in *Gaudy night* 1992, *Skylight* 1993 and *Top of the morning* 1993–94). The reflective shine inspired the titles of works such as *Flash art* 1987, *All that glisters* 1989, *Fool’s gold* 1992, *Danegeld* 1995 and *Lasseter’s reef* 1993/1996–97. And she honoured the origins of her material in titles such as *Highway code* 1985 (again), *Streetwise* 1986, *Through road* 1990–91, *Traffic snarl* 1998 and *Directives* 1999. But who knows what alchemy of mind and matter prompted the titles of *Plainsong* 1988, *Vintage* 1990, *Canary bird* 1996, *Siesta* 1997, *Cloud cuckoo land* 1998 and others?

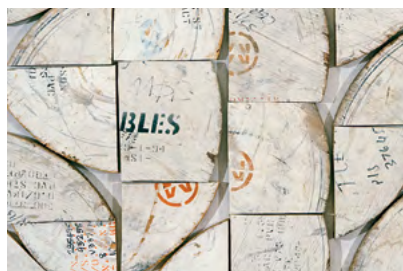
Rosalie’s eye was also caught by hand-painted signs used at roadside stalls to advertise goods for sale, from which she made four works and a study: *Legend* 1988, *Painted words* 1988, *Apricot letters* 1990, *Cockatoos* 1991 and *[Study with painted road signs A & B]* c. 1990–98. *Legend* was made from a sign selling cars, *Painted words* from a sign selling cherries and other fruit, and *Apricot letters* had sold peaches. She liked the elegance of the script and might have made more if she had had the material. ‘I was very taken with the elegance of lettering ... And so you cut out all the pieces that are applicable. It takes a long time ... to get out all the pieces that are going to say anything good, and then place them together in the right thing. But in the end you get quite an elegant looking script. I made several of those but not very many people seem to throw out road signs.’ Some of the script in *Cockatoos* 1991 is in Rosalie’s hand. *Honeybunch* 1993 and *Ensign* 1995 were made using black and white road signs, and also had lettering in Rosalie’s hand. Rosalie had experimented with calligraphy in *['Bird' studies]* c. 1991 when she painted the word ‘BIRD’ on boards.⁶⁷

64 ‘Something of the country’: 1998 NGA; ‘tiger’: Ewen McDonald ‘There are only lovers’ 1990, p. 12; ‘two square heads’: 1997 Feneley.

65 ‘Concrete poetry’: Gregory O’Brien ‘Plain air/plain song’ 2004, pp. 42–45.

66 ‘The rubbed ones’: 1988 RG with ME (pers. comm). For an excellent discussion on RG’s use of road signs see Mary Eagle 2007.

67 ‘Elegance of lettering’: 1998 NGA; *Cockatoos*: 1999 Auckland AG. Some of the road sign squares in *Honeybunch* 1993 are also scraped back.



Thermals 1998 (detail)
Image courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney



Rose hips 1998 (detail)
Image from author's archive



Gay Gordons 1996 (detail)
Image courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney



White city 1993–94 (detail)
Image courtesy of the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra

Cable reels

In 1993 Rosalie discovered another new material — the thick coarse hardwood used in cable reels, the large cotton-reel-like constructions around which electrical cables, copper wire and even barbed wire were wound. 'Some of them are double, some of them are single. You can get lovely wood off them that has been all weathered, if you're lucky.' The reels came in various sizes, and Rosalie was selective: 'The small ones are too thin, tinny. You've got to use strong material to get your message across. And the very thick ones are too heavy, unless you slice them in half, which you can do with a lot of labour.' It was a tough job, sometimes needing wood-splitting wedges, sledgehammers and pinch-bars. All metal labels were removed and retained: Rosalie had a collection of 75 labels, mostly for 'Waratah'-brand barbed wires of different kinds. Many of the reels came from the recycling centre, but in mid-1998 Rosalie's Sydney gallery purchased 22 reels on her behalf and shipped them to her.⁶⁸

The reels had other attractions. They were painted, often had numbers and letters stencilled or stamped on them and sometimes carried handwritten inscriptions. The first reels Rosalie worked with were painted white, with black and red-orange markings. 'Sometimes you get a good grubby white ... the grubbiness is part of it.' Rosalie spoke about almost having an all-white show in 1994 in which works from the reels would have played a big role: 'I was really turned on by white; white really does turn me on'. She also liked the black reels and pinky-red ones, and the egg-yolk yellow of the ones used in *Orangery* 1998 reminded her of the gym tunic she wore at school, but she turned down the blue ones she saw at Revolve, even though they had a lot of them.⁶⁹

Rosalie made 69 works from the cable reels (including nine studies). Mostly she cut the wood from the reels into fairly small pieces, which might be squares, rectangles or triangles. She enjoyed finding ways to use the enticing curves and holes in the reel wood: curves feature in eleven and the circular holes in another six. 'They make nice shapes', which she would exploit in her compositions (such as *Kaleidoscope* 1994, *Acanthus* 1995 and *Gay Gordons* 1996). And of their use in *But mostly air* 1994–95 she said: 'I was cutting up cable [drums] — I made a lot of white pieces — and those were the pieces left over and I sort of tossed them aside. 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 did them for fun.'⁷⁰

Epilogue

By mid-1999, in a burst of creativity, Rosalie had used up all her stocks of yellow soft-drink boxes, reflective road signs and FSC-coated formboard to make *Great blond paddocks*, *Metropolis* and the *Earth* panels, respectively. In July 1999 she visited New Zealand to talk at the Auckland Art Gallery and when she returned her health was such that all she could do was supervise the preparation of works for her forthcoming solo show at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney. She did not see the show because she was ill, made nothing more and died on 23 October 1999. Despite her efforts earlier in the year, there was still a vast accumulation of materials in the studio and the sheltered spaces outside. There was an initial cull in 2000, but in the aftermath of the 2003 bushfires that burnt the nearby suburbs and Mount Stromlo, her remaining stockpiles were seen as a real fire risk, so the family got rid of almost everything else. What little remained was disposed of when the house was sold in 2011.

⁶⁸ 'Some of them are double': 1998 NGA; 'the small ones are too thin': 1998 Hughes (although she used thin reels for their shape and colour to make *Airborne 1* and *Airborne 2* 1993); 'sometimes needing': Ben Gascoigne 2000, p. 12; 'Sydney gallery purchased': receipt dated 31 Jul 1998 and statement of account dated 12 Nov 1998 (R&G papers NLA); Ian North (1999, p. 16) has suggested that *Orangery* 1998 was one work made from the reels.

⁶⁹ 'Sometimes you get': 1998 NGA; 'all-white show': 1995 Topliss; 'egg-yolk yellow': see catalogue entry on *Orangery* 1998; 'blue ones': 1998 NGA.

⁷⁰ 'They make nice shapes' and 'I was cutting up': 1995 Topliss.

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