

Rosalie Gascoigne

(1917–1999)

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE CAME TO ART LATE IN LIFE,

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE CAME TO ART LATE IN LIFE, BUT WHEN SHE DIED SUDDENLY AGED 82 SHE LEFT US AT THE HEIGHT OF HER POWERS AND WITH A RICH LEGACY, WRITES **JUDITH WHITE**.



A recent acquisition of the Art Gallery of New South Wales... Rosalie Gascoigne, *Metropolis*, 1999. Retro-reflective road sign on wood, 233x319.5 cm. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY'S GALLERY



Biography

Rosalie Gascoigne made a unique and imperishable contribution to Australian art. Her singular vision of the landscape was expressed in stunning, decisive constructions made from the worn and weathered objects she found within it. From the prosaic materials of battered drink crates, rusty nails and old road signs, she fashioned work which speaks lyrically to us of plains and paddocks, of outback roads and expanses of sky. Out of what was in appearance an ordinary life, she produced art of an extraordinarily transcendent nature.

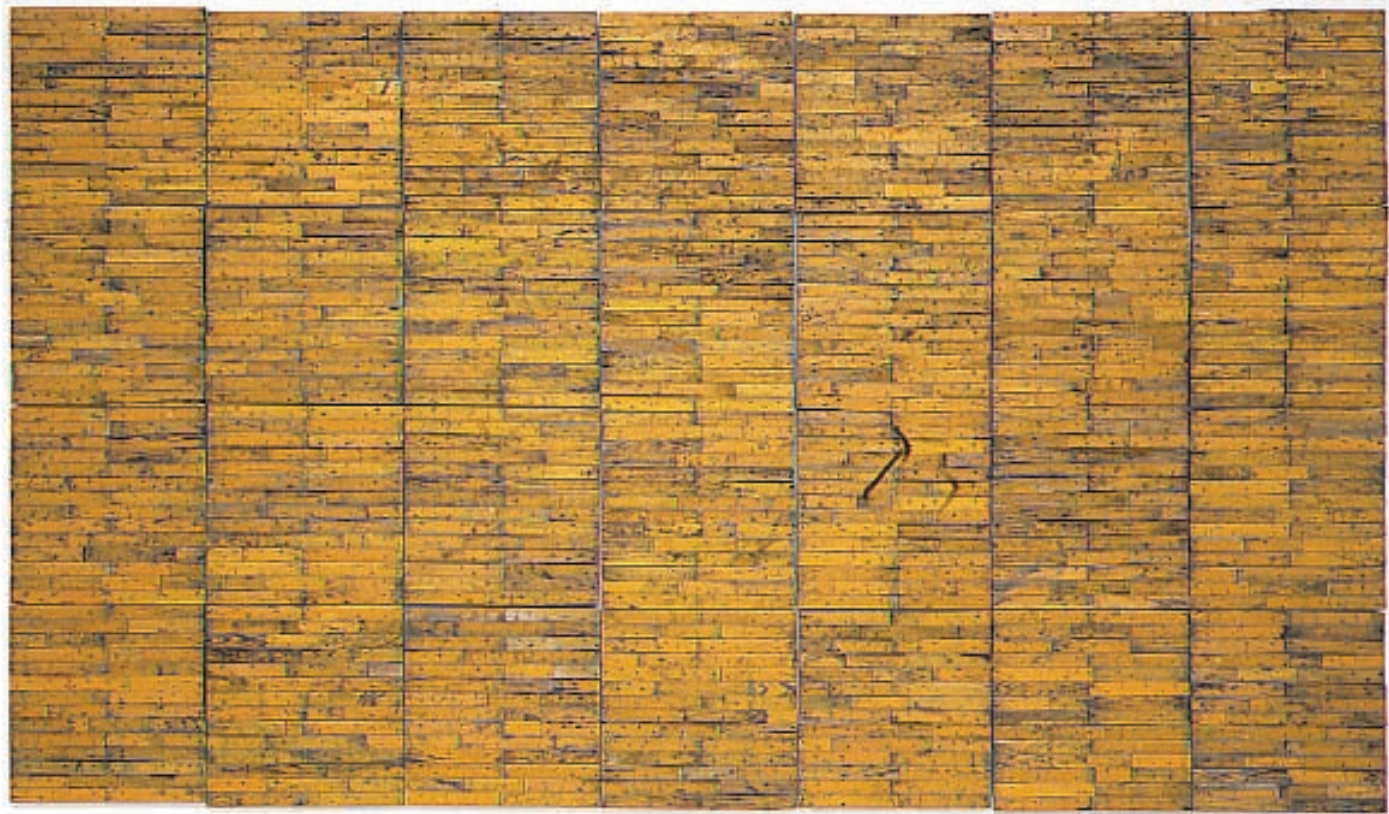
"I'm hopeless at painting and drawing, but I can arrange. I want to make art without telling a story: it must be allusive, lyrical."

When Gascoigne died in Canberra last October, after a short illness, she was 82 and had been a practising artist for just 25 years. She was born Rosalie Walker into a Scottish Presbyterian family in Auckland. They had “standards” to which she felt she never quite measured up. She studied literature at university, acquiring an abiding love of poetry: as an artist, she would describe her working practice by quoting Wordsworth on “emotion recollected in tranquillity”. She became a schoolteacher before moving to Australia in 1943 to marry fellow New Zealander **Ben Gascoigne**, a brilliant young astronomer working at the isolated Mt Stromlo Observatory. In the 17 years the couple spent there she brought up three children and in the long days of solitude, on the mountain and in the surrounding Monaro wheat belt, she developed her highly original powers of observation. Ben Gascoigne cannot recall his wife ever looking through his telescope, but she had her own view of the cosmos. “What you’re looking for,” she would later say of her

work as an artist, “is an expanding universe.” She found in the Australian landscape a degree of personal freedom she had not before experienced, and became absorbed by “the width and the rock under your feet and the high sky”.

Her earliest forays into using materials from the environment were simply arrangements of branches and flowers. She began to win prizes in local horticultural shows, and then when the family moved to Canberra in 1960 she took up the practice of *ikebana*, the Japanese art of arranging flowers and objects from nature. It was a short step from that to developing her own techniques of construction and assemblage. Soon the family house was surrounded by the materials she found in the countryside and in rural dumps, from beehives and fencing wire to kewpie dolls, enamelware and feathers from Lake George. She had a way of enlisting help from road workers and others she met on her expeditions. Her husband expressed amazement at her "obsession";

Rosalie Gascoigne, *Step Through*, 1980. Linoleum, pinewood and synthetic polymer paint.
15 units: 28x95x370 cm overall. COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY GALLERY



“What you’re looking for,” she would say of her work as an artist, “is an expanding universe.”

Rosalie Gascoigne, *Plenty*, 1986. Weathered painted wood. 246x430.5 cm. COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY'S GALLERY

she countered that he had pursued his own “legal” obsession all these years, looking at stars. But he was supportive. She set up a studio and Ben, now a professor at the Australian National University, took on the role of cook and archivist.

Rosalie Gascoigne never attempted to paint, and never sought to go to art school. “I’ve always known how hopeless I was at painting or drawing,” she told curator Deborah Edwards of the Art Gallery of New South Wales at the time of her 1997 touring survey show. “But I can arrange. I want to make art without telling a story: it must be allusive, lyrical.”

Eventually she met **James Mollison**, who was starting up the collection for the National Gallery of Australia. A solo show followed at Gallery A, and in 1978 a survey show at the National Gallery of Victoria. In 1982 she was selected, along with **Peter Booth**, to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. She found new acclaim when she turned in the mid-1980s to working with retro-reflective road signs. Her assemblages of signs, the letters

reworked with wit and ingenuity, became trademark pieces. They change as the light changes throughout the day.

In 1994 Gascoigne was awarded an Order of Australia for services to art. But she always shunned the limelight. After each success, after every round of accolades, she would return to her solitary habits in Canberra and the surrounding bush. “Everyone should return to the desert and repossess themselves after a public appearance,” she said after her 1990 exhibition *Sense of Place* was opened by the New Zealand Prime Minister. She often spoke of the need to take on “visual cargo”. Once back in the studio, her approach was utterly down-to-earth and workmanlike. “You have to keep your hands moving,” she said. She never started with the idea in her head of producing a masterpiece; it would emerge from the work. She liked to draw a parallel with what **Sir Edmund Hillary** said about climbing Everest: “We knocked the bastard off.” A highly articulate woman, well versed in art history, she refused to engage in much verbalising about particular works and disliked it

when critics attempted to attribute meanings to them. “It’s all about feeling, and you don’t have to give a name to your feeling,” she once said. She firmly believed that art could be accessible to everyone, that it should join the viewer to the artist.

“Whenever you looked at her work,” said **Roslyn Oxley**, her Sydney dealer of more than 10 years, “you saw these feelings she was trying to project. She was very strong and to the point; there was never anything timid about her work.” Landscape sang through her works, as their very names suggest: *Scrub Country*, *Plein Air*, *Southerly Buster*, *Wattle Strike*. In the last years of Gascoigne’s life pieces were bought by all the major public galleries, and her shows were unfailing successes. “Her following never wavered,” added Oxley. “Whenever we had a show, people came back and back.”

Her last show, in September 1999, was perhaps her boldest and most confident ever, and every last piece sold.

She was collected by Australians, Americans and Scandinavians. Works were bought by French ambassador **Dominique Girard** and by **Lachlan Murdoch**, for whom the retro-reflective works brought back the outback roads of his Australian childhood holidays.

Much to the artist’s chagrin, in her later years rural dumps were cleaned up and sanitised, and retro-reflective road signs went out of production; but she was ever inventive. Critic **Sebastian Smee** noted at the time of her 1998 show, “Gascoigne increasingly resembles a scavenging bowerbird in a world where the production of blue plastic has ceased. What to do? What to do...? Nest while you can!” And so she did, with a sure but light touch. Her last show, in September 1999, was perhaps her boldest and most confident ever, and every last piece sold.

Rosalie Gascoigne was witty, self-aware and totally unpretentious. She was one of those rare artists who change our way of looking at the world, and when she died the art world was united in paying homage to her. Her place in Australian art history is still being established, and will long be discussed.

The works and where to see them

Public galleries around the country have works by Gascoigne. Her evocative *Monaro* (1989), inspired by birds flying above the wheat fields, is in the Art Gallery of Western Australia. The

National Gallery of Australia has the brilliant late work *Plenty* (1998), made from yellow boxes, and earlier pieces such as *Feathered Fence* (1979). The Art Gallery of New South Wales has one of her last retro-reflective works, *Metropolis* (1999) and from the same year *Great blond paddocks*, made from sawn-up wooden crates, as well as works from the 1970s and 1980s. La Trobe Regional Gallery has *Firebird* (1991). Overseas museums with works include the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Many of her finest pieces went to private collections, but there were some she kept in her own, among them *Piece to Walk Around* and *Highway Code* (1985).

Gascoigne always said that her works looked best not in proximity to their rustic origins, but in well-appointed, spacious rooms with good furniture. Judging by the kind of

Homage from the art world

“Gascoigne’s art communicates a fervent commitment to life. She flourished from middle into old age, while her peers underwent the more usual passage to resignation and calm wisdom. Most people accept the weakening. Rosalie, growing older, sharpened herself. Her art affirmed the sap of life within withered forms.”

Mary Eagle, *The Age*

“Her art reveals the emotions – mostly elation – that come from working in the natural world. There is also, in her use of old planks, corrugated iron and cable layers’ drums, a strong sense of a woman engaging in a man’s world... Down to earth, she revealed the spirit of her particular Australian place.”

Daniel Thomas, *The Australian*

“She sprang, like Athena, fully armed into the Australian art world... Using a relatively narrow range of materials, Gascoigne created works that resonate with an endless, elusive and allusive power. Her rigorous abstracts are forms of poetic possibility, which speak in complex terms about the construction of landscape...”

Deborah Edwards, *Sydney Morning Herald*

“She was one of the most outstanding women artists of our time in Australia. She has influenced many people, but nobody influenced her. She was an independent spirit.”

Edmund Capon, interviewed on *Sunday Channel 9*

“Landscape was at the heart of her work, but it was a landscape evoked rather than depicted... Rosalie was beyond fashion, and beyond artistic vanity. She compressed a brilliant career into 25 years, never regretting the long, slow path she took to her vocation... There is no doubt that her best testament is the work itself, which will long command a cherished place in Australia’s public galleries.”

John McDonald, *Sydney Morning Herald*

As time goes on the public's response will fulfil her wish that art be "a joiner, not a divider".

people who have bought them in recent years, some will be in very well-appointed rooms indeed. *Rosalie Gascoigne*, a comprehensive monograph by British writer Vici MacDonald, was published in 1998 by Regaro Pty Ltd.

Collecting

Rosalie Gascoigne's work was so recent, so avidly sought and so highly prized by both public institutions and private collectors, that little remains on the market today. Her sudden final illness came just after her last, much applauded show. Only five years ago significant works could still be purchased for around \$10,000. Prices at her dealers rose well above those figures in recent years, ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000. Relatively few works have gone to auction so far, the highest price paid being for the 1986

Promised Land, which sold at auction in 1992 for \$12,650. In the future, it is likely that more of the works which come back on the market will go direct to auction, and may well command substantially higher prices.

Future successful bidders will most likely be thoroughly familiar with the range of Gascoigne's work to be found in the major public galleries. The best published source for studying the artist's work is Vici McDonald's 1998 monograph; further studies can be expected in the years to come.

Whichever public gallery first organises a major retrospective will deserve the thanks not only of collectors but of the wider public. As time goes on their response will undoubtedly fulfil her wish that art be "a joiner, not a divider". Her works will find their way into the hearts of a new generation, and her life will remain an inspiration to art lovers everywhere. •