

# ROSALIE GASCOIGNE

CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON  
22 FEBRUARY – 16 MAY 2004

## EXHIBITION NOTES ON SELECTED WORKS

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE (1917–99)

***‘Artists are like bards of old, they sing a song of their district.’***

**Rosalie Gascoigne, 1998**

Born in Auckland in 1917, Rosalie Gascoigne (nee Walker) spent the first 25 years of her life in New Zealand. After studying English, French, Latin, Greek and Mathematics at the University of Auckland, she worked as a school teacher before moving to Mount Stromlo, outside Canberra, Australia. Married to astronomer Ben Gascoigne, she spent the next two decades bringing up three children, keeping house and, whenever possible, collecting natural and human-made objects from the surrounding landscape. During that time she became an accomplished flower arranger and went on to study Ikebana, the classical Japanese art of flower arrangement. Abandoning Ikebana for more sculptural work, she began exhibiting assemblages in the mid 1970s and was selected to represent Australia at the 1982 Venice Biennale.

Gascoigne is recognised in Australia as one of the country’s pre-eminent 20<sup>th</sup> century artists and in 1994 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia. She returned to New Zealand on a number of occasions and a major exhibition of her work, ‘Rosalie Gascoigne: Sculpture 1975–82’, toured this country in 1983–84. Virtually all of Rosalie Gascoigne’s major works were produced while she was in her sixties and seventies. Her age gave her artistic freedom, she believed: ‘I can come in late and careless because it is so unlikely and silly that I should.’

**Further details of Rosalie Gascoigne’s life and reproductions of all the works in the exhibition are contained in the exhibition catalogue ROSALIE GASCOIGNE – PLAIN AIR (City Gallery Wellington / Victoria University Press).**

THE EXHIBITION IS DIVIDED INTO FIVE PARTS.

**PART ONE:**  
TURN OF THE TIDE  
EARLY WORK

(GROUND FLOOR, LEFT GALLERY)

By the mid-1970s Rosalie Gascoigne was making assemblages which reflected her adeptness as an arranger of objects—a skill she had honed through the practice of Ikebana—and her growing awareness of modern and contemporary art. Gathering materials from depots, dumps and from fields and scrub-country, she was drawn to objects that showed signs of their past. Her favourite enamel ware was always chipped and scuffed; the beer cans in *Early Morning* (1977) were well-faded by the sun before she found them. Old beer cans were ‘as good as any Italian colours’ she once said. These materials—which already had a ‘history’ of their own—resonated with the artist’s memories. Incorporating unlikely combinations of found materials—such as birds’ feathers and office chairs, plastic dolls and shot-gun cartridges—Gascoigne’s assemblages evoke childhood memories while attending to the beautiful, if at times disconcerting environment in which she found herself.

**Turn of the Tide** (1983)

Central to Gascoigne’s practice was the transformation of mundane materials into artworks. Arranged in a formalist grid and framed up with wood and galvanised iron, the seashells in *Turn of the Tide* evoke Gascoigne’s childhood pastime of meandering along beaches and picking up things that caught her eye. It could be said that beachcombing was a childhood habit which she never relinquished, becoming, as an artist, a comber of roadsides, dumps and depots.

**The Colonel’s Lady** (1976)

In the 1970s Rosalie Gascoigne began collecting ‘beautifully weathered’ old boxes and these became the structures which held her arrangements of objects. ‘What I was doing at the time needed to be contained. If you put it in a box, it didn’t fall over.’ *The Colonel’s Lady* comprises various found objects: dolls,

Tooheys beer labels, Kiwi Boot Polish, barbed wire packets and a Cascade Bitter Ale can. This work sums up Gascoigne’s interest in the interplay between personal and social histories and her delight in placing familiar objects in surprising arrangements.

**Feathered Chairs** (1978)

From the time she was a child, Rosalie Gascoigne was interested in birds and birdsong. ‘As free as a bird,’ was an expression she often used. During the 1970s Gascoigne often incorporated cardboard parrots from Arnott’s cartons into her artworks. Later she made works using the swan feathers she gathered around Lake George, just north of Canberra. *Feathered Chairs* juxtaposes the by-products of the rural environment with the detritus of human society. The feathers and chairs have an almost phoenix-like presence, rising above their cast-off status.

**Parrot Country** (1983)

Constructed from weathered Schweppes soft-drink crates, this four-part work captures the colour and movement of the birds Gascoigne first saw upon her arrival in Australia. Parrots came to embody, for the artist, her new life in a new land. In 1985 she explained the genesis of this work: ‘We were getting eastern rosellas on our bird table. [The work] is meant to screech at you, and it does.’ This assemblage was included in the exhibition ‘Rosalie Gascoigne; Sculpture 1975–82’ which toured New Zealand. ‘This was the first time that New Zealand would have seen her as an artist,’ the artist’s son Martin has written. ‘She was concerned to keep and preserve the person she had become since leaving New Zealand in 1943.’

**PART TWO:**  
PLAIN / TEXT  
PLAIN / OBJECT

*Poetry and art move from where one is at to somewhere else. One has to be airborne to succeed with either. Pleasures of the eye are important to me. Nature provides for the most part. But the blow to the solar plexus provided by the right word in the right place, or the new word in the right place, gives me pleasure beyond belief.*

**Rosalie Gascoigne, 1998**

Rosalie Gascoigne was a gatherer and shaper of language, as well as of physical materials. She took words and letters apart and then put them back together according to a different set of rules. She referred to her assemblages as ‘stammering concrete poems’ in which fragments of language escaped their original meanings and became part of a visual design. Words were a part of Gascoigne’s physical environment, whether in the form of inscriptions on road signs or on the packaging and advertising materials she salvaged from depots and rural tips. Language was also a part of her background. While a pupil at Epsom Girls’ Grammar School in Auckland, she developed a love of the Classics and Romantic poetry. Just as her ‘word’ works are full of half-meanings, echoes and faint suggestions, the floor-based assemblages *Set Up* and *Habitation*, both from 1984, tease out new meanings and associations from ordinary objects.

**Cockatoos** (1990)

*Cockatoos* derives its visual kick from the choppy and vigorous arrangement of sliced-up signage. Like *Parrot Country* and *Feathered Chairs*, it calls to mind—through its title and through the white flashes that pattern its surface—Gascoigne’s fascination with birds and birdsong. *Cockatoos* captures the energy that Gascoigne found in these birds: ‘When you’re driving around the country the white cockatoos fly up, like porpoises in front of a ship. I’ve always seen the cockatoos going up... always, always. They’re untidy and their wings are every which way, and they’re shrieking.’

**Scrub Country** (1982)

Assembled from pieces of old drink crates, *Scrub Country* evokes the colour of the region around Canberra, which was, as the artist pointed out, ‘not that red centre look’ so often associated with the Australian countryside. ‘The light comes through the slats and the colours are very gentle,’ she said in 1997. By the early 1980s, Gascoigne’s husband, Ben, had retired from astronomy and with his retirement money was able to set up a studio which provided the space to construct much larger works,

and that could house the bandsaw which was necessary for the making of *Scrub Country*. While also helping to resolve technical problems, Ben increasingly devoted himself to becoming her archivist and photographer.

**Honeybunch** (1993)

Describing her works as evocations of the natural world through one person’s sensibility, Gascoigne likened her assemblages to lyrical poetry. Yet her works which incorporate language refuse to offer clearly articulated statements or meanings. A typically fragmented work, *Honeybunch* suggests hundreds of possible words or phrases without spelling out any. Gascoigne loved the different visual qualities of handwritten as well as printed lettering, and the way they combined to create an energised pattern which was perhaps closer to music than to literature—a point also hinted at by the title of the 1989 work, *All That Jazz*.

**Set Up** (1984)

*Set Up* combines two of Gascoigne’s favourite materials: painted wooden panels and old rusting enamel. She was very particular about her materials: ‘I saved a lot of this enamel. I think it’s elegant by itself, but I’ve lost it all now. Nowadays you get awful enamel from Taiwan which is lightweight, but this is good old solid stuff.’ The jugs, buckets, bowls, teapots and cream cans in this work have been mounted on wooden blocks much the same way that marble statuary is mounted on pedestals. ‘I put them up so they’d read sculpturally and you’d see the air around them. It came out clean.’

**PART THREE:**  
PLAIN AIR  
OPEN COUNTRY

(GROUND FLOOR, RIGHT GALLERY)

*My country is the eastern seaboard, Lake George and the Highlands. Land that is clean scoured by the sun and frost... I love to roam around, to look and hear. Air with voices, an ungraspable thing of the landscape.* **Rosalie Gascoigne, 1998**

From the time of her arrival in Canberra in 1943, Rosalie Gascoigne loved the expansiveness of the

surrounding country with its rolling hills and stark plains. She equated the wide-open space with freedom and possibility. She would later say: ‘I have a real need to express my elation at how interesting and beautiful things are and to see them arranged.’ The works in this gallery reflect Gascoigne’s ongoing dialogue with the Canberra landscape:

*I look forward to foaming seas of crops, singing songs of the place. I don’t want to put it in words or spell it out as a literal picture, but rather, capture it in feelings...*

**Rosalie Gascoigne, 1998**

**White Garden** (1995)

Rosalie Gascoigne was drawn to weathered and worn pieces of corrugated iron which she cut up and arranged in works such as *White Garden* and *Steel Magnolias* (1994). Corrugated iron is a part of New Zealand and Australia’s shared history of settlement and artists on both sides of the Tasman—notably Ralph Hotere, Robert MacPherson and Jeff Thomson—have used this material in their work. Gascoigne was interested in taking this basic, ordinary material and adding ‘some poetry to it’. ‘It’s only old tin but I think it’s got real presence.’ With its simple arrangement of squares and its soft, grey painted surfaces, *White Garden* is a very restful work, as Gascoigne described it: ‘it’s beauty where you don’t expect to find it.’

**Piece to Walk Around** (1981)

*This is a piece for walking around and contemplating. It is about being in the country with its shifting light and shades of grey, its casualness and its prodigality. The viewer’s response to the landscape may differ from mine but I hope this piece will convey some sense of the countryside that produced it: and that an extra turn or two around the walk will induce in the viewer the liberating feeling of being in the open country.* **Rosalie Gascoigne, 1981.**

**Monaro** (1989)

*Monaro* refers to the Monaro district, just south of Canberra, which is, in the artist’s words, ‘partly grass, partly scrub, partly cut-down trees, which stretch all the way down to the sea’. While the undulating lines in *Monaro* were in fact determined by a band-saw which could not cut straight lines, the result

is a lyrical evocation of wind in long grass. Gascoigne wrote: ‘I like the gold of the Schweppes boxes. I think that sort of gold is one of the classical colours. I don’t care if it has got Schweppes written all over it, people seem to think I care. I don’t care! I just like the black and yellow. When I started I had lots of off-cuts, little pieces too good to throw away. So I started joining them up...’

**PART FOUR:**  
PLEIN AIR (1994)

(UPSTAIRS, TURN RIGHT)

*I was doing air. It’s very hard to make air – have you ever tried to make air? It’s very, very difficult.* **Rosalie Gascoigne, 1994**

*I suppose air and space and a sense of physical freedom are considerations to which I return, as are nature and the products of my immediate environment, and familiar things which have re-engaged my attention.*

**Rosalie Gascoigne, 1999**

The work’s title alludes to the painterly technique of working ‘en plein air’, out in the open, directly confronting nature. Gascoigne regarded her forays into the Canberra district searching for materials as an intrinsic part of her working process. Echoing the atmospheric landscapes of the English painter J. M. W. Turner, Gascoigne’s wall panels are filled with a hazy, impressionistic light. However, Gascoigne was quick to point out that she did not consider herself a painter and the only paint she kept in her studio, apart from spray-cans of blue and black, was a bucket of white house-paint which she used to create the bleached, scuffed white of the wall panels in this work.

**PART FIVE:**  
PLAIN / SONG  
WORKS 1989–1999

(UPSTAIRS, TURN LEFT)

While Rosalie Gascoigne’s epic meditation on the Australian landscape continued during the 1990s, early recollections were increasingly shaping her work. A memory of gym smocks worn at Epsom Girls’ Grammar School, where she was a pupil from 1930 to 1935, inspired the triptych *Orangery* (1998). The birdsong she heard as a

child and the Romantic poetry she learnt in school echo in *Skylark* (1994) and *Birdsong* (1999). *Hill Station* (1989) looks back to the rolling landforms of the central North Island of New Zealand, where Gascoigne's sister Daintry farmed. These works, and the sequence *Clouds I* (1992), also echo the works of Colin McCahon, who was one of Gascoigne's three self-professed influences (the others being Pablo Picasso and the Australian painter Ken Whisson). She admired the 'airborne' quality in the paintings of Whisson and McCahon—a quality her own works manifest abundantly: for example, in the floating segments of landscape that make up *Skylark*.

#### **Skylark (1994)**

In *Skylark*, ten small chunks of landscape hover on the gallery wall. These glimpses of landscape, made up of the lines where hill meets plain meets sky meets sea, echo the iconic landscapes of Colin McCahon. Like *Suddenly the Lake*, *Skylark* is a direct homage to McCahon. Gascoigne recalled flying into Wellington airport in the early 1980s, and being struck by the intense greenness of the 'Colin McCahon hills'. Although Gascoigne's art is most often associated with the Australian landscape, *Skylark* is evidence of the deep visual impression that New Zealand left upon her.

#### **Suddenly the lake (1994)**

*Suddenly the Lake* (1994) conveys what Daniel Thomas has called the 'peculiarly

Australian pleasure in long-distance, cross-country driving through rolling countryside... the modestly flowing landform rhythms but now and then [the] sudden switchback into a kind of suspension, a moment in the air.' The work references Geary's Gap, where the road between Canberra and Sydney drops down and Lake George becomes suddenly visible. The viewer, writes Daniel Thomas, 'is expected to read the sequence right to left, Japanese-style, not our normal left to right: the contradictory directions give a strange tension'.

#### **Metropolis (1999)**

Rosalie Gascoigne first used retro-reflective road signs in her work in 1985, after happening upon a pile of sawn-up pieces of signage on the roadside. 'You've got to find your raw material,' she recalled. 'I would never have gone out, cold-bloodedly, and chosen retro-reflector... I thought it was pretty ugly, but now, having worked with it for so long, I go along through the landscape and I do indeed see a tiger crouching in the grass flashing at me...' With its hectic, layered surface, and its noisy bricolage of sounds and signs from the human world, *Metropolis* (1999) is the largest work she ever made out of this material. Shortly before her death, Gascoigne arranged for the work to be taken up to Sydney—the 'metropolis' referred to in the work's title—and subsequently gifted it to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

### LIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

#### PART ONE:

##### TURN OF THE TIDE / EARLY WORK

*Turn of the Tide* 1983, shells, galvanised iron and wood, 560 x 400 x 40 mm, Collection of Diane and Neil Balnaves, Sydney

*Early Morning* 1977, bee box, beer cans, gauze screen, wire, 610 x 540 x 360 mm, Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

*Parrot Country* 1983, weathered and painted timber, four panels, each 1020 x 1000 mm, Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Pink Window* 1976, window frame, pink undercoat, corrugated iron, 1160 x 1040 x 100 mm, Gascoigne Family Collection

*The Tea Party* 1980, wooden bee box, kewpie doll, old enamel ware, feathers, 820 x 350 x 190 mm, Gascoigne Family Collection

*The Colonel's Lady* 1976, first aid case, beer can, shotgun cartridges doll's head, 390 x 600 x 90 mm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

*Feathered Chairs* 1978, swan feathers, two discarded chairs, each 1100 x 500 x 500 mm, Collection John Buckley, Melbourne

#### PART TWO:

##### PLAIN / TEXT

##### PLAIN / OBJECT

*Cockatoos* 1990, found sheets of masonite with white script, 1240 x 2060 mm, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 1999

*All That Jazz* 1989, sawn and split soft-drink crates on plywood, 1310 x 1000 mm, The Corrigan Family Collection

*Scrub Country* 1982, weathered wood supported on aluminium strip, eight panels, approximately 1440 x 3760 mm overall, The Corrigan Family Collection

*Honeybunch* 1993, sawn timber rectangles, 1090 x 820 mm, Gascoigne Family Collection

*Apricot Letters* 1990, sawn-up sign from fruit stall, 1120 x 800 mm, Private Collection, Auckland

*Set Up* 1984, paint on wood, enamel ware, approximately 500 x 2700 x 2700 mm overall, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, purchased 1995

*Apothecary* 1992, split and sawn soft-drink crates, 1310 x 1000 mm, Private Collection, Auckland

*Foreign Affairs* 1994, sawn wood on craftboard, 778 x 772 mm, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

*Checkers* 1996, wood, 520 x 490 mm, Gascoigne Family Collection

*Habitation* 1984, softwood compartmented drink boxes, enamel mugs, seven boxes each 450 x 280 x 240 mm, Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

#### PART THREE:

##### PLAIN AIR

##### OPEN COUNTRY

*Graven Image* 1982, weathered wood, 1050 x 890 x 90 mm, Private Collection, Canberra

*White Garden* 1995, white painted corrugated iron on wood, 1770 x 1840 mm, Private Collection, Sydney

*Steel Magnolias* 1994, corrugated iron strips on plywood, 1045 x 985 mm, Collection of Amanda and Andrew Love, Sydney

*Piece to Walk Around* 1981, saffron thistle sticks, 20 squares arranged on a 4 x 5 m grid, approximately 3800 x 4800 mm overall, Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Monaro* 1989, paint on sawn and split soft-drink crates on plywood, four panels, 1310 x 4570 mm overall, Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia

*Big Yellow* 1988, sawn-up retro-reflective road signs on plywood, 1715 x 2700 mm, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

#### PART FOUR:

##### PLEIN AIR (1994)

*Plein Air* 1994, masonite, white wood, box, wire netting, soft-drink crates, craftboard, approximately 12000 x 4000 mm, Collection Sue and Ian Bernadt, Perth

#### PART FIVE:

##### PLAIN / SONG

##### WORKS 1989-1999

*Skylark* 1994, formboard and painted wood, 10 panels, each approximately 300 x 300 mm, Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Hill Station* 1989, builders' formboard and galvanised iron mounted on plywood and aluminium, 1300 x 980 mm, Gascoigne Family Collection

*Skewbald* 1993, enamel and masonite, 1525 x 4270 x 1220 mm, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1994

*Orangery* 1998, sawn-up cable drums, three panels, approximately 3200 x 830 mm, Fletcher Trust Collection

*Metropolis* 1999, sawn-up retro-reflective road signs, 2320 x 3195 mm, Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of the artist, 1999.

*Clouds I* 1992, hardboard on plywood, 1245 x 3910 mm overall, Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased with funds provided by the Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1992


*Suddenly the Lake* 1995, formboard, plywood, galvanised iron sheeting, paint on composition board, four panels, approximately 5240 x 1190 mm overall, Collection, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Given by the artist in memory of Michael Lloyd 1996

*Flagged Down* 1998, sawn wood on wood, 1200 x 1150 mm, Private Collection, Auckland

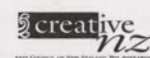
*Checkerboard* 1996, retro-reflective road signs on plywood, 1230 x 1020 mm, Private Collection, Canberra

*Birdsong* 1999, sawn-up retro-reflective road signs on wood, 1220 x 900 mm, Paris Family Collection


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