

ROAD CLOSED C O C Y C I N  
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D R I V E S L O W L Y A I O H E A H  
D W O R K A D D T O K M E N F E R T O  
A H E A D C I A H E A D A N I O S



# “ARTISTS ARE LIKE BARDS OF OLD, THEY SING A SONG OF THEIR DISTRICT” ROSALIE GASCOIGNE

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT AUSTRALASIAN ARTISTS of the 20th century, Rosalie Gascoigne (1917–1999) spent the first twenty-five years of her life in New Zealand, before moving to Canberra. Living on the outskirts of that city, she created art that was a song – or an ‘air’ in the Shakespearean sense – in praise of the infinite Australian plains and hill country.

Gascoigne thought of the artist as a bard and, in her case, the district being sung about included not only the country around Canberra but also remembered landscapes from her New Zealand childhood. This publication, and the exhibition it accompanies, includes artworks which reflect upon the artist’s early experiences, and which pay homage to one of her greatest influences, Colin McCahon.

With an introduction by City Gallery director, Paula Savage, this publication includes a major essay by Gregory O’Brien which explores the origins of Gascoigne’s work in her physical environment, the Romantic poetry she loved as a child, and the tradition of modernist assemblage art. Former director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Daniel Thomas contributes an essay exploring Gascoigne’s work in relation to the Canberra landscape; and one of New Zealand’s foremost novelists, Barbara Anderson, offers a personal response.

*Rosalie Gascoigne – Plain Air* is published to coincide with the major survey exhibition of Gascoigne’s work at the City Gallery Wellington, February–May 2004. Profusely illustrated, *Rosalie Gascoigne – Plain Air* includes colour reproductions of many works that have not been shown publicly before.





ROSALIE GASCOIGNE  
PLAIN AIR

CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON / VICTORIA UNIVERSITY PRESS



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FRONTISPIECE Rosalie Gascoigne with **Pink Window**, PHOTO: GREG WEIGHT  
Photograph gifted to City Gallery Wellington by Pat and Barbara  
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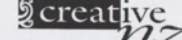
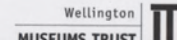
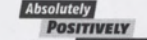
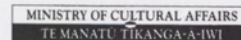
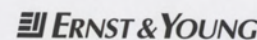
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## Sponsor's statement

**Ernst & Young are delighted** to join once more with City Gallery Wellington in presenting the best of contemporary art to the New Zealand public. This exhibition of Rosalie Gascoigne's work and the accompanying publication are the most recent outcomes of the long-standing relationship between Ernst & Young and City Gallery Wellington. In the past we have worked together on such significant international exhibitions as the 'Exhibition of the Century; Modern Masterpieces from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam', 'Viva La Vida; Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and the Mexican Modernists' and the 2002 International Festival exhibition of Sidney Nolan's 'Ned Kelly' paintings. We have supported major exhibitions by New Zealand artists including Ralph Hotere and Colin McCahon.

The works included in the exhibition 'Rosalie Gascoigne' and illustrated in this publication survey the diversity of Gascoigne's practice, from the whimsical early assemblages to the stunning late retro-reflective works. At Ernst & Young, we pride ourselves on our ability to generate exceptional ideas and innovative solutions. Gascoigne's work embodies these same qualities, transforming everyday materials into extraordinary artworks.

'Rosalie Gascoigne' is City Gallery Wellington's contribution to the 2004 International Festival of the Arts. It is appropriate that an artist such as Gascoigne, with strong links on both sides of the Tasman and a rising international reputation, is being recognised at a time when practitioners of many arts from throughout New Zealand and around the world are in the Capital. Ernst & Young are pleased to join with City Gallery Wellington and play a part in bringing Gascoigne's work to greater prominence in the country of her birth.

John Judge  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ERNST & YOUNG

## Acknowledgements

**The Rosalie Gascoigne exhibition** and catalogue publication have been some years in the making. We first discussed the prospect of a major survey exhibition with Rosalie Gascoigne in 1999, a matter of weeks before her death. This was followed up with ongoing discussions with the Gascoigne family and several visits to Rosalie's studio in Canberra. It was not, however, until early 2003 that the way became clear to start seeking loans for a major exhibition. Now, in 2004, we are proud to present 'Rosalie Gascoigne', the first overview of this artist's work to be seen in New Zealand, and the accompanying catalogue *Rosalie Gascoigne – Plain Air*, which features new insights into Gascoigne's practice, and colour reproductions of many works which have only rarely been seen.

This project would not have been possible without the encouragement and support we received from many directions. Above all, we are indebted to the Gascoigne family for their support of this project. In particular we would like to acknowledge Ben Gascoigne's scrupulous cataloguing of his wife's work over many years, a resource which has proved invaluable. We also acknowledge Charles Gascoigne's work transferring that database to digital format. As curators, we are also deeply appreciative of the care and devotion Martin Gascoigne and Mary Eagle brought to the project, sourcing photographs, checking facts and offering good counsel.

The committed investment of sponsors and art patrons has enabled City Gallery Wellington to publish *Rosalie Gascoigne – Plain Air*. We are grateful to Principal Sponsor Ernst & Young, whose ongoing involvement and support through the City Gallery Wellington Foundation reflects their commitment to the visual arts in New Zealand. Roderick and Gillian Deane have loyally supported the Gallery and its projects over a number of years, both through Roderick's leadership of the City Gallery

Wellington Foundation and, financially, as individual art patrons and collectors. We are grateful for Creative New Zealand's support and their recognition of the significance of this project to New Zealand. We are grateful to the New Zealand Government who have indemnified the artworks. We are pleased to acknowledge the core funding support of City Gallery Wellington by Wellington City Council through Wellington Museums Trust.

As a Gallery without a permanent collection, we rely upon strong relationships with other institutions when generating our exhibitions. We are very grateful therefore to the following individuals and organisations for their support of this exhibition and artwork loans: Dr Edmund Capon, Deborah Edwards, Anthony Bond, Wayne Tunnicliffe and Alice Livingstone at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Alan Dodge at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Chris Saines, Louise Pether and Laura Jovic at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; Rob Gardiner and the Chartwell Collection; Peter Shaw and the Fletcher Trust Collection; Elizabeth McGregor and Judith Blackall at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Dr Seddon Bennington, Ian Wedde, Jo Torr and Kate Button at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; Dr Brian Kennedy, Dr Anna Gray, Dr Deborah Hart, Leanne Handreck and Benita Johnson at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Dr Gerard Vaughan, Frances Lindsay, Dr Tony Ellwood and Jason Smith at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

The assistance of private collectors is also invaluable. We would like to thank Neil and Diane Balnaves, Dr Ian and Sue Bernadt, John Buckley, Pat and Barbara Corrigan, Amanda and Andrew Love, Milly Paris and the other private collectors for their willingness to share their works with a wider audience. We also acknowledge Pat and Barbara Corrigan's generous gift of Greg Weight's portrait of Rosalie Gascoigne to City Gallery Wellington.

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Paula Savage and Gregory O'Brien  
CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON





## Introduction Paula Savage

**While Rosalie Gascoigne has been** a well-known figure in her adopted homeland of Australia since the early 1980s, her work has been less visible in New Zealand, the country of her birth. Prior to 'Rosalie Gascoigne' at the City Gallery Wellington in 2004, the only major exhibition of her work in this country was a 1983 touring survey organized by the National Art Gallery under the directorship of Luit Bieringa. The current exhibition provides an opportunity for New Zealand audiences to appraise the career of one of the most important antipodean artists of recent decades.

The impetus underlying this exhibition and publication is not to claim Rosalie Gascoigne as a 'New Zealand' artist in any simplistic, overtly nationalistic manner. As was the case with two other great expatriate artists, Frances Hodgkins and Len Lye, much of her life was lived beyond these shores. Yet it should be acknowledged that Gascoigne's work was not only formed by her adopted territory, the Canberra region, but also contains echoes of, and references to, her upbringing in Auckland. Memory, as well as observation, was a vital component in her practice. Of the transition from the landscape of her childhood to the Australian outback, Deborah Edwards has written:

*This Australian region, 'all air, all light, all space, all understatement', was entirely foreign in its physiognomy from the water-saturated light and land of New Zealand and was, for Gascoigne, the crucible from which her art emerged.<sup>1</sup>*

Gascoigne's art is the by-product of many paradoxes. Ian Wedde has written that while she was 'a lover of the outdoors ... by the same token, her work displays all the formal qualities of the studio: as bricolage, as a formal deployment of aesthetic givens, it is entirely unprovincial'.<sup>2</sup> Gascoigne's assemblages are artful and refined, but they also keep a close proximity to the outside environment with its weather, flora and fauna. The works are, as

Hannah Fink observes, 'caught between the self-possession of still life and the panoramic ambitions of landscape, the stubbornness of objects and the capacity of space'.<sup>3</sup>

In 1999, when Gascoigne's work was included alongside that of Colin McCahon and Len Lye in the 'Toi Toi Toi' exhibition at the Museum Fridericianum Kassel in Germany, it seemed she was in the process of being claimed as a senior 'New Zealand' artist. Gascoigne was, by all accounts, a little uneasy – not to mention bemused – at being placed within the art history of a country she had left nearly sixty years earlier. Yet she was also pleasantly taken aback at the warm reception the work received. Throughout the 1990s her work was increasingly acknowledged in New Zealand, with the Auckland Art Gallery and Chartwell Collection actively seeking to buy works. In the final analysis, she emerges from this period as an exemplary, not to mention influential, Australasian artist. She is also a notable figure in an ongoing tradition of New Zealand artists who have furthered their careers in Australia, her precursors in this respect including Roland Wakelin and Godfrey Miller. In recent decades artists such as Patrick Pound, Euan Macleod and Joanna Braithwaite have followed suit.

This publication – and the exhibition which accompanies it – pays particular attention to the ways in which Rosalie Gascoigne's art was shaped by influences from both sides of the Tasman. The body of work she produced is certainly large and complex enough to contain both locales. New Zealand viewers will see strong affinities between her work and that of Colin McCahon; particularly in the 1994 sequence *Skylark* (which is a homage to the New Zealand painter), *Hill Station* (1989) – which echoes McCahon's 1963 *Landscape Theme and Variations* – and *Clouds I* (1992). Much has already been written about her admiration for McCahon's work. When asked by Art

OPPOSITE:  
Rosalie Gascoigne in  
Auckland, July 1999  
PHOTO: MARTI FRIEDLANDER



'I have a real need to express my elation at how interesting and beautiful things are and to see them arranged.' RG, 1997



and Australia in 1984 to write about an artwork that had influenced her, she had no hesitation in choosing McCahon's *Victory Over Death 2* (1970) from the National Gallery of Australia collection. The influence of McCahon is certainly an important one, but it is by no means her only point of reference in the recent art history of this country.

As an assemblage artist, her work parallels the productions of New Zealand artists such as Don Driver, Ralph Hotere, Bill Culbert, Mervyn Williams and Christine Hellyar. Integral to Gascoigne's art was the process of fossicking and salvaging materials, either from the open landscape or the rural tip. Alongside such large-scale pieces of 'recycling' as Hotere's *Black Phoenix* (1984–88) and Driver's *Produce* (1982), Gascoigne's *Scrub Country* (1982) and *Monaro* (1989) stand as epic salvage operations.

Affinities with other artists exist on both sides of the Tasman. In Canberra, Gascoigne's work hangs alongside that of Robert MacPherson in the National Gallery of Australia, with the landscape paintings of Fred Williams just around the corner. This, too, is a setting in which her work is very much at home. Gascoigne's meditations on the landforms and vast, empty space of Australia draw upon and continue the continent's rich tradition of landscape art.

Two recent exhibitions of Australasian art have provided a chance to see Gascoigne not only in relation to figures like Hotere and MacPherson, but alongside younger artists. The Auckland Art Gallery exhibition 'Home and Away: Contemporary Australian and New Zealand Art from the Chartwell Collection' (1998–99) placed Rosalie Gascoigne in a context spanning Tony Tuckson and McCahon to Hany Armanious and Seraphine Pick. 'Home Sweet Home: Works from the Peter Fay collection' (2003), a touring exhibition from the National Gallery of

Australia, included four Gascoigne constructions alongside the work of artists including Mikala Dwyer, Ani O'Neill and John Reynolds. Her work is also finding itself increasingly at home on the world stage. Affinities with artists as diverse as Joseph Cornell, Louise Bourgeois and Agnes Martin have been explored by various commentators. Since Gascoigne's work was launched on the international stage at the 1982 Venice Biennale it has been included in a number of international survey exhibitions and been purchased by the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

In an important essay published in 1986, Mildred Kirk explored the ways in which Gascoigne's geometrical arrangements of natural materials functioned as metaphors for landscape. Making a non-literal connection between art and landscape, Gascoigne takes the faded, weathered colours of road signs and old enamel and uses them to evoke their place of origin. It is this effect that the poet Tony Beyer writes of when he refers to her evocation of 'landscape in the form / of objects landscape has changed'.<sup>4</sup>

If, during the initial stages of her career, Rosalie Gascoigne was attracted to old pieces of iron, animal bones and sticks, by the 1980s three-dimensional objects appeared less frequently in her work. Her art was moving, consciously or not, towards abstraction. Kirk wrote:

*Like Agnes Martin's grids, they are generalizations, on the limited scale of an art work, for the expanse of landscape. Their interest lies not in the identity of the objects used in their construction but in the quality of material – its colour, texture and shape – which corresponds to the quality of a known and loved environment.<sup>5</sup>*

By drawing attention to the connections that exist between Gascoigne's practice and that of Agnes Martin, Kirk was suggesting affinities between her work and geometrical abstraction and minimalism. For an artist who gathered huge, some

OPPOSITE:  
West wall of Rosalie Gascoigne's studio, with yellow retro-reflective works, c. 1998–99  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY, SYDNEY



Rosalie Gascoigne at  
Mount Stromlo, 1955



would say excessive, amounts of materials – ‘If there is a lot of it, take it,’ she stated – Gascoigne was capable of some very restrained, minimalist constructions. Works like *Piece to Walk Around* (1981) and *Turn of the Tide* (1983) juxtapose abundance with austerity. Both use irregular natural materials in decidedly non-naturalistic configurations. Kirk continues:

*The Australian landscape has a disorganized and random appearance. Rosalie Gascoigne’s materials have a correspondingly random quality, but they are subjected to formal and carefully proportioned arrangement. It is this regularity of arrangement which enables [her found materials] to refer to the ever-recurring, but never monotonous, rhythms of nature.*<sup>6</sup>

There is an almost classical formality to Gascoigne’s works – they bespeak a staunchness and discipline as well as a scrupulous eye. In a poem written shortly after Gascoigne’s death Jenny Bornholdt imagined the artist’s widower Ben, a man with ‘heaven at his fingertips’, left searching the sky above, and the many works that also outlived her:

*... reassembled signs  
pointers on the road to a  
rough kind of beauty.*<sup>7</sup>

Gascoigne once described the artistic process to curator Ewen McDonald as going ‘back to what started you off in the first place and then you embrace the desert’.<sup>8</sup> That might stand as a credo for all her art. It was the landscape around Canberra which provided her with a ‘desert’ – in both the physical and metaphorical senses – in which to discover and evolve an artistic language entirely her own. Yet Gascoigne’s desert is a place of richness and diversity, with its own ‘rough kind of beauty’, a place of immense possibility.

In his catalogue essay ‘Plain air / plain song’, Gregory O’Brien

explores the artist’s work in relation to the tradition of Romantic poetry and thought. He explores the notion of ‘plain air’ – of song and atmosphere in Gascoigne’s work – and also considers her work in terms of ‘concrete poetry’, the 20th-century movement which melded word and image. An old friend of Rosalie Gascoigne’s and a pivotal figure in the development of professional museology in Australia, Daniel Thomas, has written about the artist’s working methods and her engagement with both the highway – as a ‘hunter-gatherer’ in a station wagon – and the Australian landscape itself. The novelist Barbara Anderson writes about a pilgrimage to visit Gascoigne’s *Feathered Chairs* (1978) in Melbourne and offers some reflections on the artist as bricoleur. Together these essays paint a picture of the artist as tenacious worker, tireless observer of nature and also a deeply humane spirit. These qualities are also manifest in the artist’s works – the assemblages and installations that, as the artist herself said, ‘came as a surprise’ to her when she was well into her fifties. That sense of discovery is what we, as viewers, are also granted.

#### Notes

- 1 Deborah Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne – Material as Landscape*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, p.11.
- 2 Ian Wedde, *How to be Nowhere: essays and texts 1971–1994*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995 p.179.
- 3 Hannah Fink, ‘That Sidling Sight: Wondering About the Art of Rosalie Gascoigne’, *Art and Australia*, vol.35, no.2, 1997, p.203.
- 4 Tony Beyer, *Electric Yachts*, Auckland: Puriri Press, 2003, p.79.
- 5 Mildred Kirk, ‘Different Means to Similar Ends – Rosalie Gascoigne and Agnes Martin’, *Art and Australia*, vol.23, no.4, 1987, p.514.
- 6 Mildred Kirk, *ibid.*
- 7 Jenny Bornholdt, *These Days*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2000, p.26.
- 8 Quoted in Ewen McDonald’s essay ‘Roadworks’, *Rosalie Gascoigne – Colin McCahon: Sense of Place*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1990, p.52.



**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



'I was doing air. It's very hard to make air – have you ever tried to make air? It's very, very difficult.' RG, 1996



## Rhythm & Lift-off Daniel Thomas

**She didn't do much dancing** after university at Auckland. Tennis continued in Canberra until art-making led Rosalie Gascoigne into various manual pursuits. She was tall and slim and graceful and, especially when older, had physical presence.

Her works of art, too, have strong physical presence – and 'presence' was one of her favourite terms – but the works can also embody a surprising sense of movement. Marie Hagerty remembered Gascoigne saying, figuratively, 'you have to be "airborne" to be a real artist', and that, aged around eighty, 'she didn't seem like an old woman. She dressed with great style . . . she was agile mentally; and physically, too; she was like a younger person. The phone would ring and she'd skate the rug across the floor on the way to answer it.' Almost literally airborne on a flying carpet. Gascoigne, however, seldom spoke about physical activity, or the body. She emphasised visuality (her 'hungry eye') and emotions and words.

Her everyday conversation came out crisply formed. Poetry quotations flowed easily and often. So it must have been the rhythm of words and ideas and articulated emotions that more consciously fed into her rhythmic sculptural constructions.

The spectator's eye swoops and skates along and around unusually extended wall-hung or wall-leaning or floor-based works. There is also, especially in the more conventionally sized and shaped works, an invitation to observe close-up textures, and subtleties of overlaid colours in pre-used, worn or weathered materials, assisted by her own cleaning and rub-back attentions. The works invite intimacy. They advance and withdraw, and seduce, chastely.

She added titles at the end of the process, and many titles refer to landscape visualities. Yet, except for the aggressively shiny pieces made from retro-reflective road signs, the work is more

tactile than visual. An observer's body identifies with the physicality of her materials and forms, and with the way she makes the forms dance and levitate.

A decisive shift from the craft of dried-flower arrangement to a more elevated art-making probably occurred, says Mary Eagle, when in 1963 or 1964 Gascoigne read a big new book about Ikebana flower arrangement by Norman Sparnon, whose classes she had recently joined. The book favoured avant-garde Ikebana of the Sogetsu School, the leader of which, Sofu Teshigahara, would visit Australia in 1967.

Sogetsu did not really care for flowers, preferring much bigger things, like branches, in large quantities, of very few kinds. This approach infiltrated the world of high-art museums. In Sydney the Art Gallery of New South Wales, during an Ikebana jamboree masterminded by Sparnon, presented public performances by Sofu in the gallery foyer. He danced around with broom-sized brushes making a huge, wildly gestural black calligraphy painting, titled *Beast*, which remains in the New South Wales collection. As he danced he transformed a supply of tree branches into an over-human-height, artfully-angled mound, an Ikebana woodpile.

Gascoigne attended that Ikebana conference in Sydney and in Canberra saw another of Sofu's calligraphy performances. A decade later, in a letter to her son Martin in Hong Kong, she said: 'I remember Sofu doing his vast dragon calligraphy and think that I could well do a visible WHISPER out of feathers' (and did so, in her vast *Feathered Fence*, of 1979). One would like to think that watching Sofu's performance helped confirm her direction not only towards big things hoisted up in the air, which is the essence of Sogetsu Ikebana, but also towards works that transparently reveal their simple processes of making. Well-eased bodily activity, be it artistic dance or brushwork or artisanal carpentry or welding or masonry, leaves graceful traces.

OPPOSITE:  
Rosalie Gascoigne  
in her studio,  
October 1997  
PHOTO: WILLIAM YANG



**Enamel Ware** 1976  
wood, kitchen utensils  
1135 x 512 x 240 mm  
COLLECTION:  
ART GALLERY OF NEW  
SOUTH WALES



Almost all her materials are ready-made. As a young mother she would occupy her small children by setting exercises in connoisseurship of 'best' roadside stones and grasses. As a mature artist, when grown-up offspring visited her studio or shared a scavenging expedition, she would still say to them, 'This is good enamel', or, 'This is good wood', or, 'Good tin' (the last being a historically persisting term for what is really galvanised iron).

We feel delight in her well-made things. This delight is increased by the fact that her things are assembled from well-made common objects that were once part of everyday life. A 1977 letter to son Martin reported on artist-and-art-critic James Gleeson's first dinner at the Gascoignes: 'Really meaty conversation. . . . Full of scholarship . . . said something about getting the same "frisson" from my work as he does from Chardin!!'

Picasso was one of three artists whose work she profoundly admired. (The others were Colin McCahon and the Australian painter Ken Whisson.) Picasso the freewheeling sculptor and assemblagist would obviously have appealed to Gascoigne, who liked to characterise her own art-making processes as 'derailed'.

But he was also a still life painter of intense quiddity, or presence, in both his cubist and classical modes. Art-historical connections have been made between Picasso's 20th-century still lifes and those loaves and vessels by Chardin that smoulder quietly at us from the 18th century. For Gascoigne the word 'classical' was almost as talismanic as 'presence' and we must assume that when she took to assemblages of proletarian Australian enamel ware she knew the marvellous, fat-bellied earthenware *Jug and Apples* (c.1920), that the Spaniard retained from his classical phase for eventual donation to the Musée Picasso in Paris.

However, it was Joan Miró's surrealism, which she acknowledged as a lesser influence, that came to mind in 1976 when, for the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection, I purchased Gascoigne's *Enamel Ware* (1976). A teapot, a jug, four mugs, a saucepan, four bowls, three dishes and a spoon hovered and danced sideways inside three space-frames. If I had then known these were apiarists' timber frames in which honeybees might once have buzzed it would only have confirmed my delight in the swirl of flying food-and-fluid vessels. I saw a connection with Miró's jollified biomorphs and, three centuries behind him, with the extreme sobriety of Spanish still life painting. I have long remembered it as a characteristically sober work in Gascoigne grey, white and rust but now, nearly thirty years later, I am startled to see that among the white enamel ware one is red, one yellow and one blue. Mondrian's late paintings such as *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942-43) were always black and white with sparse occurrence of the three primary colours. And they were about his own enthusiastic dance campaigns in Manhattan clubland. I can't believe Gascoigne inserted the three strong colours unwittingly. The coloured fly-past of teapot, mug and saucepan have to be nods to the great abstractionist and dancer.

The grandest enamel ware piece is *Set Up* (1984) [plate 11], in which seventeen vessels, all of them white, are empedestalled on wooden blocks on nearly nine square metres of blue-checked waste-wood boards. Gascoigne simply brought up technique and materials when Vici MacDonald asked: '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. I put them up so they'd read sculpturally and you'd see the air around them. It came out clean.'

Some observers might think of a strange chess game. Others, noting the past laundry, bathing and dairy uses of these water and milk vessels, might think of clean, healthy, sturdy, fresh-air workers' bodies, or even of nude marble statuary on a palatial gallery floor. Whether chess figures or white human bodies, they are anthropomorphised: statues rather than sculptures. They aspire to the energised poses of triumphant athletes, or to the tabletop song and dance which was performed in Sydney and Melbourne by the 'Living Sculptures' Gilbert & George the year before she made *Set Up*.

Is Gascoigne's work gendered? In 1975 I carelessly reviewed the first works seen in Sydney: 'There is a poetic taste of domestic imagery, a hint of the satisfaction found in tidiness and house-keeping, a suggestion that a fireplace is a kind of shrine.' I quickly scored a sardonic comeback from Gascoigne upholding her self-image as a bad housekeeper, littering a family home with her art-material rubbish. If wrong about 'housekeeping', I was right about 'tidiness' in the works of art, and she was also keen on 'clean', and on 'neat' and 'crisp'. But my implication of women's work was certainly wrong. Her works of art are either even-handed about gender – men and women are equally at home in the dairy or at the wheel of a motor vehicle – or else they tilt towards appreciation of the aesthetics in men's worlds

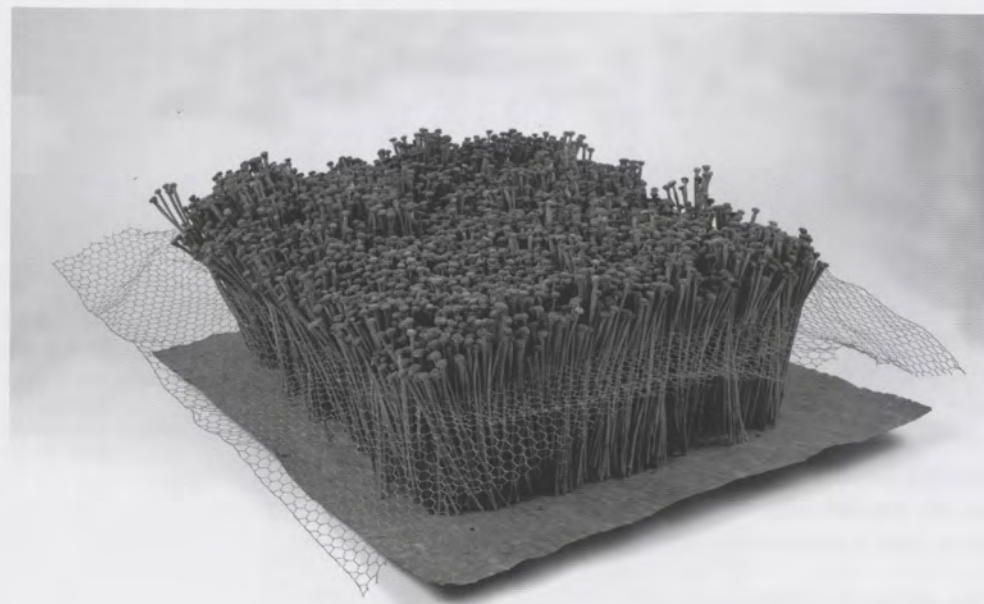
of manufacturing, roadwork, building, tinsmithing, trucking. Although in early years she would occasionally saw and glue and clamp in the absence of her handyman husband Ben, whose day job was astronomical science, and although she later quite enjoyed bandsaw work, she soon obtained male assistants in the studio. She also became adept at negotiating cast-off materials from male road workers and factory or wholesalers' storemen.

She disliked the shallow attractiveness of fresh materials. Late in life in a formal interview with James Mollison and Steven Heath she said: 'Beware of the nice things that you find that say nothing; they are like the new wood from a hardware shop. I look for things that have been somewhere, done something.' She had perceived a similar attitude in American assemblages made by her contemporary, Robert Rauschenberg.

The second work I bought for the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1976 was *Crop 1* (1976) [page 18], a 'nature' piece to accompany the human culture of *Enamel Ware*. Up from a square sheet of silver-grey galvanised iron, a material for harvesting water, we see a dense square cluster of dried salsify daisy stalks and heads rising through a plane of galvanised chicken wire. I think it was the most prophetically minimal work in the 'Assemblage' exhibition at Gallery A. I responded chiefly to the upwardness, the crisp shift through three levels: iron sheet, floating wire mesh, packed flower heads.

In the Mollison and Heath interview Gascoigne said: 'I needed art as an extension of what I honestly did like, air, hills, freedom, grass growing; I am so moved by natural things.' Here, as in most interviews, she seems at first to be speaking of visualities but, after all, air flows, hills rise, freedom takes one anywhere, and 'grass growing' for once emphasises a state of vital movement and seasonal rhythm.





**Crop I** 1976  
salsify heads, galvanised  
wire, galvanised iron  
300 x 900 x 960 mm  
COLLECTION: ART GALLERY  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

For the National Gallery of Australia I especially relished acquiring another change-of-levels piece, *Step Through* (1980) [page 84]. It was her first large work in linoleum, fifteen torn green floral fragments floating above the floor. Gascoigne told Vici MacDonald: 'Though a household material this has nothing to do with domesticity. It is about outdoor places. I was thinking about the unkempt empty blocks in built-up city areas which one is sometimes tempted to step through as a short cut ... usually covered in rank grasses and flowering weeds ... rubble, old tins and bottles. One steps through them gingerly and, with possible snakes in mind, lifts one's knees high ...'. Earlier she had written to Martin: 'I call it *Short cut* for the moment ... You get the feeling of stepping from one plane to another'; James Mollison had stepped in and out of it. 'And he felt it. "Very strange", he said.'

When I departed Canberra in 1984 I bought two souvenirs of the place for myself. *Wattle Strike* (1983) is a wall-hung panel of wooden slats from crates scavenged at a Schweppes soft-drink

depot. The slats rise in vertical rows, most of them grey, a few offer a flash of yellow, and Gascoigne has said, 'In Canberra particularly we are always very conscious of the wattle lighting up', thus its title. I am enamoured less by the association with a place and its seasons than with the rhythmic fizziness of the nail heads that accent the rising slats, with the fine gaps that separate and ventilate the slats, with the one vertical set that rises just above the upper edge and another set that projects just a little forward from the others. It is a piece not only to look at but also to walk past, and is now placed to catch passing traffic from a kitchen to a sunroom above the sea. It demands an encounter that includes gentle bodily movement on the observer's part.

The other Gascoigne I bought was *Smoko* (1984), a wall-leaning installation of nine silvery-grey, heavily wrinkled and weathered timber fence-droppers, from whose wire holes spurt puffs of delicate native grass. She said its title came to her from the 'laconic' leaning attitudes of Australian workmen seen taking a break outside their workshops. It figures bodily experience.

Finally, Gascoigne the motorist. For her first five years in Canberra, on the astronomers' hilltop outside the city, she felt trapped without a car. From 1948 driving was a liberation. She explored her region, gazing ardently, and has said much about the looking. Yet two of her masterpieces jolt all Canberran observers with a gut feeling of physical lift-off.

For pedestrians something similar is found in the discourse of architecture and urbanism. Consider an example in Venice, where, on entering the openness of Piazza San Marco from the narrow alleys at its west, the paving suddenly drops and for a moment body-memory inhabits the previous level; one seems to float.

Motorists driving down from Canberra to Michelago and Cooma suddenly emerge from bushland and drop into the bare, rolling grasslands of the Monaro country. This swooping experience is figured in Gascoigne's four-and-a-half-metre panoramic assemblage of sawn soft-drink crates, the eponymous golden *Monaro* (1989) [plate 15].

Driving up from Canberra to Sydney there was always the surprise of cresting Geary's Gap with its sudden drop to the shoreline of Lake George. (A few years after Gascoigne made her most place-specific work a new freeway smoothed out the thrill.) In 1995 she was pushing around thick plywood form-boards, once used for containing poured concrete walls, in combination with thin sheets of galvanised iron, once used for roofing or other water-related purposes. The brown and the grey looked good together, then suddenly a sharp-angled conjunction became the Canberra-Sydney motorists' familiar surprise of water below dry hills. To accompany the image she then made a dense, anxiety-filled barrier of round plywood hills placed to the right, for the surprise view came driving south to north and we are expected to read the sequence right to left, Japanese-style, not our normal left to right: the contradictory directions give a strange tension. Heading north/left a third panel is landless, a blissfully calm galvanised-iron water horizon below a white board sky. The quartet closes with gentler hills on white board: that end of the erratic lake seldom fills with water. *Suddenly the Lake* (1995) [plate 22], a sequence of separated panels, each different in width and character, is unusually musical, a conversation containing anxiety and bliss. Like Mozart.

*Monaro* and *Suddenly the Lake* express a peculiarly Australian pleasure in long-distance, cross-country driving through rolling countryside. We enjoy the modestly flowing landform rhythms,

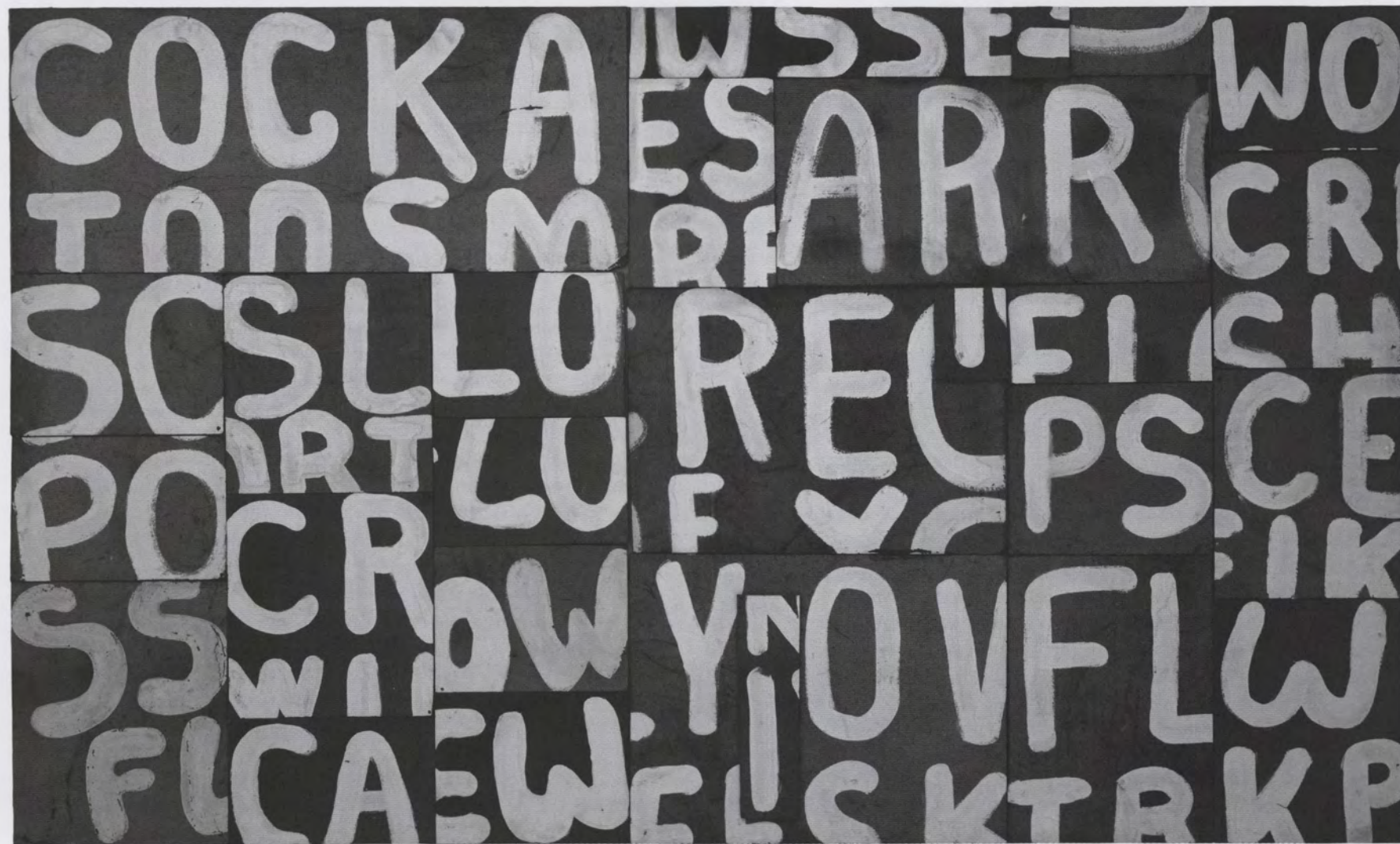
but now and then we are surprised by sudden switchbacks into a kind of suspension, a moment in the air.

Smaller places than Australia need not feel deprived. Motor-dancing can happen anywhere. I once realised a leathery old New York cabbie was avoiding potholes with exceptionally smooth and pleasing manoeuvres. He accepted a compliment: 'Yeah. Do it graceful. Like Fred Astaire.'

#### Acknowledgements

- Deborah Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne – Material as Landscape*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997; includes the James Mollison and Steven Heath interview.
- Vici MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, Paddington, NSW: Regaro, 1998.
- Mary Eagle, *From the studio of Rosalie Gascoigne*, Canberra: Drill Hall Gallery, The Australian National University, 2000; includes the letters to Martin Gascoigne and the remarks by Marie Hagerty.
- Martin Gascoigne, Canberra, telephone conversations, January 2004.





## Plain air / plain song Gregory O'Brien

### Bird / song

A small child growing up in the Auckland suburb of Remuera in the 1920s would have heard a lot of birdsong: native and exotic, the ample trees of the suburb providing an ideal platform for such a chorus. Here Rosalie Norah King Walker was born in 1917 and raised, the second of three children, in amongst these sounds and also the 'birdsongs' of poets which she learnt at school: the flickering intonation of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' and of Shelley's 'Ode to a Skylark':

*Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou never wert,  
That from Heaven, or near it,  
Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art . . .*

Like many of her generation, Gascoigne also knew poems by Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Mary Eagle has written that Gascoigne's study of 'the classics and the Romantic poets, remain her professional training in a very real sense . . .'<sup>1</sup>

After studying English, French, Latin, Greek and Mathematics at university, she went on to teach languages at Auckland Girls' Grammar up until her move to Australia in 1943. The rhythms, rhymes, patterns and stresses of the verse she knew from this time would have an unexpected reprise over fifty years later when, in a very different set of circumstances, she began making assemblages with titles like *Skylark* (1994) [plate 5] and *Birdsong* (1991) [plate 6]. The poetic 'birdsongs' she first learnt as a schoolgirl were among the remembered and half-remembered sources which would not only echo in, but also shape her art. From the time of Gascoigne's earliest sculptural assemblages, however, the heightened utterance and aspiration of the Romantic poet-artist would be grounded in a practice which

was also based upon a peculiarly Australasian vernacular of ordinary materials such as corrugated iron, soft-drink crates, road signage and advertising matter. Distant memory as well as distant landscape – and the objects that figure in both – would shape what Gascoigne called her 'allusive and elusive' art.<sup>2</sup>

### Parrot / country

If birds first flew and sang in the New Zealand of Gascoigne's childhood, it wasn't until she had transplanted across the Tasman and discovered the shrill, colourful parrots of Australia that her fascination was really ignited. The 1980–1983 assemblage *Parrot Country* [plate 2] expresses the amazement and delight she felt upon arrival in her adopted home. Establishing herself at Mount Stromlo, where her husband Ben Gascoigne was an astronomer, she was impressed by the scale and strangeness of the place. 'The birds were all big,' Gascoigne recalled, 'and they toppled from the branches like biblical birds . . . it was like living in a zoo . . .'<sup>3</sup> Living in a community of scientists and their wives, she felt conspicuously different – 'a sideways thinker', as she put it – not only on account of her sensibility, but because of her New Zealand background and education. Describing herself as a 'displaced person' in Australia, Gascoigne said she 'needed a friend and nature was my friend . . . I knew every pebble and every blade of grass'.<sup>4</sup> She began bringing home natural and human-made objects from her frequent forays around the Canberra environs and her mantelpiece was soon jammed with all manner of things she considered interesting – objects which invariably baffled visitors.

By the late 1950s Gascoigne's self-styled engagement with nature found a further degree of expression when she gained a considerable reputation as a flower arranger with an interest in

OPPOSITE:  
**Cockatoos** 1990  
found sheets of  
masonite with  
white script  
1240 x 2060 mm  
AUCKLAND ART GALLERY  
TOI O TĀMAKI



OPPOSITE:  
**Jim's Picnic** 1976  
wood base, cardboard  
cut-outs, mixed media  
440 x 750 x 22 mm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION,  
MELBOURNE

the use of dried materials and grasses. This, in turn, led to the practice of the traditional Japanese art of flower arrangement, ikebana, which provided a necessary discipline while allowing her, to some extent, to indulge her love of rough, vernacular materials. She continued to scour the country for materials and by the early 1970s her ikebana had evolved into an increasingly audacious sculptural practice using farmyard metal and large formations of animal bones (alongside smaller arrangements of birds' skeletons on trays). The trigger that switched her from floral arranger to 'artist' was an influx of modern art into her house, as Daniel Thomas has noted:

*Pop Art prints by Roy Lichtenstein, a Minimalist painting by Robert Hunter, a rough Rauschenbergian assemblage by Dick Watkins were parked in Gascoigne's house by her art-collector son Martin while he was posted overseas and her self-identity shifted from arranger of flowers and other objects to artist.<sup>5</sup>*

While she had seen art in the less intimate settings of galleries, it was this intrusion of fine art into the domestic setting that offered Gascoigne some kind of direction. The point at which fine art collided, and subsequently colluded, with the daily routine – the habitual life – was her starting point. Gascoigne's discovery of modern art, with its loud clamorous surfaces, its violent juxtapositions and irrationality, struck a similar note to her discovery of Australia three decades earlier. Works such as *Parrot Country* embody an engagement with the flat surfaces of Lichtenstein, Hunter and Watkins just as they do the Australian plains.

The four part assemblage *Parrot Country*<sup>6</sup> highlights what is undoubtedly Gascoigne's central preoccupation: *country* – especially that of the Canberra/Monaro region. Her experience of landscape was often, however, mediated by animal life – including the parrots in the title of this work (later road

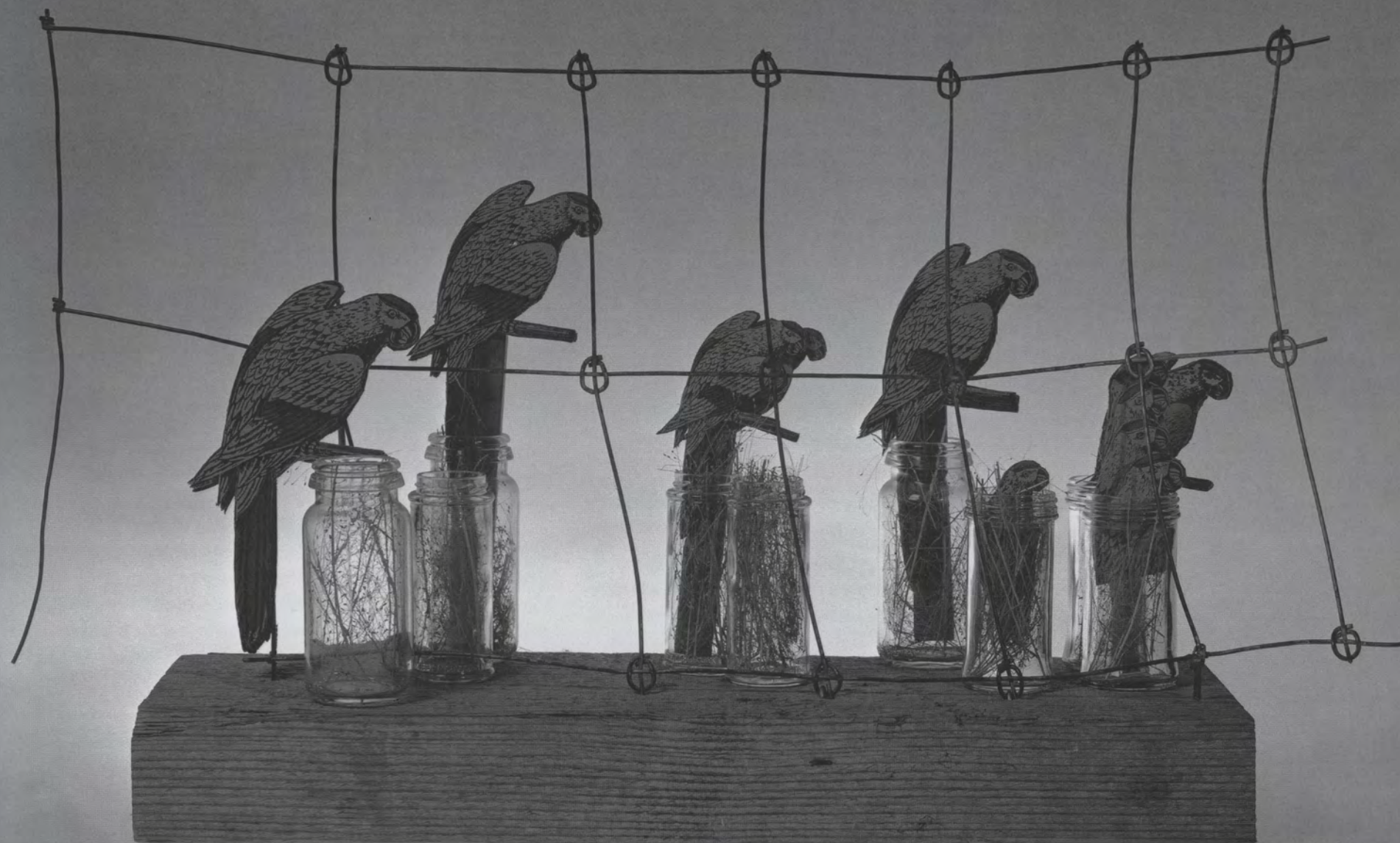
signage would be another intermediary between artist and landscape). James Mollison and Steven Heath have observed: 'For Rosalie, the sight of black and white cows in a field against a blue sky, or a cockatoo on a hill, involves a kind of immersion of the self into an infinite volume of air.'<sup>7</sup> Gascoigne associated open spaces with animal and plant life, just as she associated the open air with birds and birdsong. Gascoigne certainly talked of *Skewbald* (1993) [plate 4] in those terms, describing the installation as:

*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.<sup>8</sup>*

For Gascoigne, art was a mode of transport and a means of becoming, as she put it, 'airborne'. If she slips a line from Hopkins' 'Pied Beauty' into the above comment, there are echoes of earlier Romantic poets in a statement which has all the fervour of a manifesto:

*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 in 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.<sup>9</sup>*

Such was Gascoigne's notion of being 'airborne', of being swept away, knocked over, disorientated. Both nature and words had this capacity. She would often discuss her work in the most physical terms. She summed up *Parrot Country* as 'all sideways flight' and, during a talk at the Canberra School of Art in 1985, she described the work as 'stylised birds again . . . We were getting Eastern rosellas on our bird table . . . It is meant to screech at you, and it does.' In the same lecture Gascoigne





**Highway Code** 1985  
retro-reflective road  
signs, composition  
board  
1660 x 1310 mm  
GASCOIGNE FAMILY  
COLLECTION



described the parrots as belonging to the Australian landscape just as Ned Kelly belonged in the paintings of Sidney Nolan.<sup>10</sup>

The strikingly vocal work *Parrot Country* was featured in the 1983 exhibition, 'Rosalie Gascoigne: Sculpture 1975–82', which toured New Zealand. Martin Gascoigne recalls his mother's decision to include this particular work in that exhibition: 'This was the first time that New Zealand would have seen her as an artist. She was concerned to keep and preserve the person she had become since leaving New Zealand in 1943 and resisted being drawn back into old ways and old times.'<sup>11</sup> So, in a sense, the work was a statement of her new life in a new environment – it filled an autobiographical function, and was also an exercise in self-definition.

### 'Free of the mind's grasp'

'As free as a bird' might be a cliché, but it holds true in Gascoigne's life and work.<sup>12</sup> The many birds – metaphorical as well as literal – that were soon colonising Gascoigne's art came to embody her experience as a trans-Tasman emigrant. Mary Eagle has pointed to the 'two countries' of Rosalie Gascoigne's experience, describing Australia as 'sprawling free of the mind's grasp' whereas New Zealand was 'ordered to strict standard'.<sup>13</sup> On another occasion, Eagle observed that Gascoigne 'left her green, as she said, "well-disciplined" island for Australia which, by way of contrast, represented to her all that was lonely, free and untrammelled ...'.<sup>14</sup>

Her idea of Australia as being 'free of the mind's grasp' made it an ideal site for the Shelley-inspired 'unpremeditated art' which was to follow. The shrill parrots and parakeets of Australia also provided a model for the creative, imaginative life. If, for Romantic artists in general (and for one of Gascoigne's great influences later in life, Colin McCahon), angels were usually the harbingers of inspiration and insight, Gascoigne, in her characteristically matter-of-fact manner, replaced these celestial intermediaries with the disruptive presence of Australian birds. These same birds would later herald the beginnings of Gascoigne's series of works using retro-reflective road signage when they 'appeared' in her first retro-reflective work, *Highway Code* in 1985 [see above]. Recalling her discovery beside the highway of a stack of cut-up squares which would become this assemblage, Gascoigne remarked:

*That sign had white flashes on it that cancelled it out. 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. So I left the white on.<sup>15</sup>*

## BIRD / SONG

PLATE I *Feathered Chairs* 1978 white swan feathers, two discarded chairs, each 1100 x 500 x 500 mm COLLECTION JOHN BUCKLEY, MELBOURNE





PLATE 2 *Parrot Country* 1983 weathered and painted timber, four panels, each 1020 x 1000 mm COURTESY OF ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY, SYDNEY



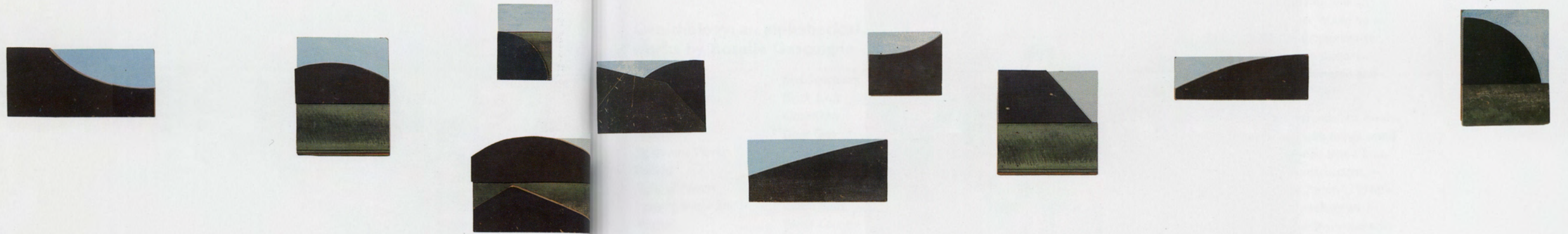


PLATE 3 *The Colonel's Lady* 1976 first-aid case, beer cans, shotgun cartridges, doll's head, etc 391 x 597 x 88 mm NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA  
PLATE 4 *Skewbald* 1993 enamel and masonite 1525 x 4270 x 1220 mm AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI, PURCHASED 1994





PLATE 5 *Skylark* 1994 formboard and painted wood, ten panels, each approximately 300 x 300 mm COURTESY ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY, SYDNEY







These same white cockatoos are transfigured into white lettering and set loose upon the black surface of *Cockatoos* (1990) [page 20]. Birds not only heralded her arrival in Australia but also her discovery of a hitherto unremarkable material – retro-reflective road signs – from which she would conjure some of her greatest works – among them, *Big Yellow* (1988) [plate 12] and *Metropolis* (1999) [plate 29].<sup>16</sup>

#### Ornithology: an alphabetical list of some works by Rosalie Gascoigne

<i>Bird House</i>	<i>Bird Sanctuary</i>	<i>Birdsong</i>
<i>Black Bird Box</i>	<i>Black Birds</i>	<i>Canary Bird</i>
<i>City Birds</i>	<i>Close Owly</i>	<i>Cloud Cuckoo Land</i>
<i>Cockatoos</i>	<i>Dove Grey</i>	<i>Eagle</i>
<i>Eighty-nine Parrots</i>	<i>Feathered Chairs</i>	<i>Feathered Fence</i>
<i>Firebird</i>	<i>Flamingo</i>	<i>Flight</i>
<i>Flight of Parrots</i>	<i>Flock</i>	<i>Galahs Rising</i>
<i>Hanging Yellow Bird</i>	<i>Italian Birds</i>	<i>Little White Bird</i>
<i>Magpie</i>	<i>Parrot Country</i>	<i>Parrot Lady</i>
<i>Parrot Morning, Tree Tops</i>	<i>Parrots</i>	<i>Pink Kookaburras</i>
<i>Pink Parrots</i>	<i>Side Show Parrots</i>	<i>Skylark</i>
<i>Small Parrot</i>	<i>Tiepolo Parrots</i>	<i>Two Owls</i>

#### 'The bird on the bough'

With the birds of Romantic poetry (Wallace Stevens' raucous 'bawds of euphony'<sup>17</sup>) playing in one ear and the birds of French Surrealism shrieking in the other, Rosalie Gascoigne found herself, in the mid-1970s, making assemblages from found objects: notably dolls, cardboard Arnott's parrots (which she would glue to plywood then cut out), glass bottles and dried

stalks. By this time she was familiar with the assemblage work of the Surrealists and such pivotal constructions as Joan Miró's *Objet Poétique* (1936), with its absurdist parrot perched atop a bowler hat and wooden stand. As part of an inspired collecting programme in the early 1970s, the National Gallery of Australia had purchased a number of assemblages, including two works by the maverick American artist Joseph Cornell (1903–72): *Untitled (for Stephanie)* (c.1945) and *Untitled* (c.1950) – both were accessioned in December 1973. The former would be a touchstone for Gascoigne; ornithological in its subject matter, dreamlike yet also assertively ordinary. It was into this art historical lineage that Gascoigne's early parrots fluttered and made themselves at home.

Gascoigne considered her box-constructions essentially a means of solving a practical problem: 'I was trying to make things stand on things and things kept falling over, and I decided that a box was the thing to put [them] in.'<sup>18</sup> If her early constructions – such as *Jim's Picnic* (1976) [page 23] and *Tiepolo Parrots* (1976) – manifest a creative allegiance with Cornell, they reflect an altogether different sensibility. More like open air environments than cages, they are perches on which their subjects might land, rather than museological enclosures. In *The Tea Party* (1980) [page 34], Gascoigne transforms an upended apiary tray (a huge stash of these kept her going for years) into a roost for some of the many kewpie (Cupid) dolls she had found discarded by a travelling sideshow at a local dump. As well as being a parody of the angelic beings of Western art, the creatures at this tea party belong to the Gumnut Baby school of Australian children's literature. The work is a paean to the busted and discarded remnants of childhood. With its jarring juxtapositions of enamel, wood and flesh-toned plastic, and its heavily weathered surfaces, *The Tea Party* is an unsentimental memory piece, poetic in its



RIGHT:

**The Tea Party** 1980  
wooden bee box,  
kewpie dolls, old  
enamel ware, feathers  
820 x 350 x 190 mm  
GASCOIGNE FAMILY  
COLLECTION



FAR RIGHT:

**Lillee Among  
Daffodils** c. 1975  
newsprint images,  
white paint, cardboard,  
plywood  
290 x 510 x 170 mm  
GASCOIGNE FAMILY  
COLLECTION



resonances. It is very much in keeping with William C. Seitz's assertion that:

*The assemblage artist is especially akin to the modern poet, however in using elements which (unlike 'pure' colours, lines, planes, or musical tones) retain marks of their previous form and history. Like words, they are associationally alive.*<sup>19</sup>

Coinciding with these ornithological and mock-angelic visitations, Gascoigne produced, during the 1970s, a number of works incorporating cricket players. Generally ambivalent about the game, Gascoigne was attracted to the whites of the cricketer's costume, particularly as highlighted against a green wicket – a flash of white in the landscape not unlike the white cockatoos that would later catch her eye.<sup>20</sup> These assemblages have the quality of Cole's *Funny Picture Book* illustrations or remnants from a shredded encyclopedia. *Lillee Among Daffodils* (c. 1975) [see above] is a marvellous wordplay – floral as well as florid. Absurdist, and playful in its handling of an Australian national icon, it is also a strangely coherent piece of surrealism featuring, in filmic fashion, three versions of the cricketer in the 'flower of his youth'. To Gascoigne's inventory of favoured inhabitants of the Australian countryside might be added the national cricket team.

## Habitation

The bird table on which Gascoigne's beloved eastern rosellas landed is alluded to in the installation work *Habitation* (1984) [plate 11], a work which also suggests, looking beyond the artist's immediate environment, a cityscape. The title suggests both the 'habitat' of the native bird life and the habitation or accommodation of people in high-rise buildings. As Martin Gascoigne relates, the work – which comprises thirty-two enamel mugs and seven wooden drink crates – is intrinsically 'urban, the work capturing the formality of the grids of the streets and in the apartments and offices that line them'.<sup>21</sup> (Enamel mugs had been appearing for some time in Gascoigne's smaller constructions – and were given the epic treatment in *Set Up* (1984) [on facing page] and another bird table-inclined work, *Skewbald*. Like the parrots, these mugs can also be sourced to the Arnott's Biscuit Company, whose trademark logo featured, alongside the biscuit-chomping bird, an enamel mug balanced on a branch.) Such an interplay of urban and rural, Martin Gascoigne writes, was an ongoing dialectic in his mother's work, which itself embodies the tensions and moments of reconciliation between nature and humankind.

Other of Gascoigne's constructions from the 1970s and early 80s resemble birds' nests and perches. In *Jim's Picnic*, a wire frame creates a vertical grid to which a number of Arnott's parrots cling, as they might to the side of a cage. Of the bird-like business of fossicking for materials, of stockpiling and assembling, Peter Vandermark observed that Gascoigne's hands 'were always moving things around, her eyes always assessing the arrangements her hands made'.<sup>22</sup> Hannah Fink likened Gascoigne's cherished found materials to 'the booty of the fickle-eyed bowerbird'.<sup>23</sup>



Perhaps the most strident ornithological manifestation in Gascoigne's art is her use of feathers in *Feathered Fence* (1979), a 7.5 metre long installation in the National Gallery of Australia, and the related construction from 1978, *Feathered Chairs* [plate 1], which comprises swan feathers gathered from the Lake George area. The floor-based work, *Pale Landscape* (1977) [page 38] (which the artist gifted to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 1984) similarly incorporates feathers, although in that case threaded through sheets of newspaper laid flat upon the floor. Infused with the air and light of the Canberra district, feathers were integral to the artist's ongoing meditation on her bird-landscape, her habitat.

In *Birdsong*, an aural pattern is suggested by fragments of lettering: a sporadic notation which could be likened to, as the title suggests, birdsong. If in many of Gascoigne's text-heavy retro-reflective works the voices and noise of the human-made world assert themselves, in this spartan work language has become an abstraction – it has been transformed into music, a musical signage. While *Birdsong* does not depict birds (unless you read the pairs of semicircles as curving birds' wings), the title links it with the Romantic birds of Keats and Shelley, while also referencing Colin McCahon's *Lark's Song* (1969) and, perhaps even more pertinently, his *Song of the Shining Cuckoo* (1974).

Whereas McCahon registered birdsong in the latter painting by way of an irregular series of dots flickering across a series of canvases, Gascoigne's *Skylark* (1994) uses small chunks of landscape which hover like a flight of birds in a line on the gallery wall. (Like the parrots in *Jim's Picnic*, they also inadvertently look like notes adrift on invisible staves of music.)

While, nearly two decades earlier, Gascoigne had thought of parrots as the embodiment of Australia, stating that the parrots



LEFT:

**Set Up** 1984  
paint on wood,  
enamel ware  
approximately  
500 x 2700 x 2700 mm  
MUSEUM OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART,  
SYDNEY, PURCHASED 1995

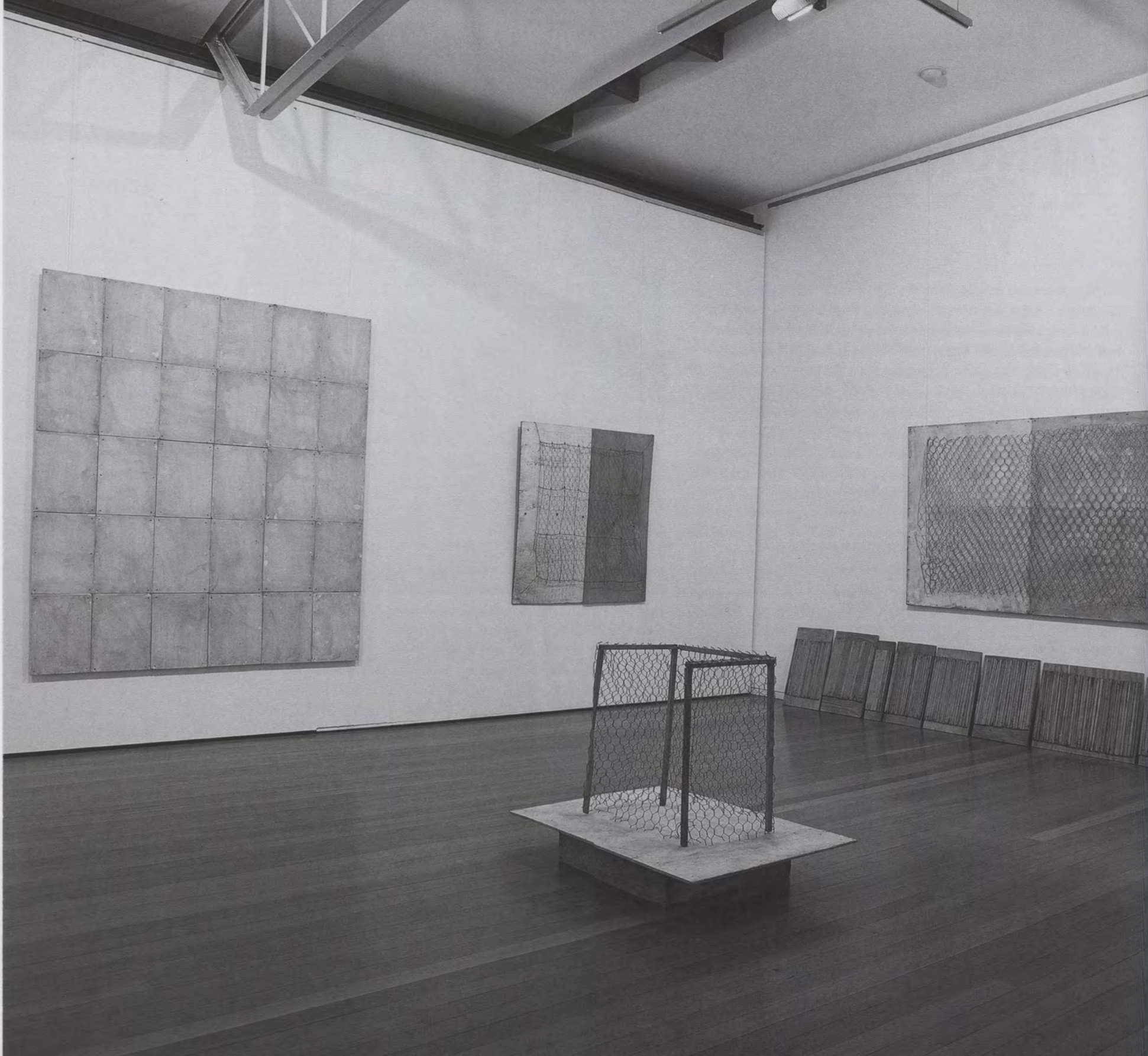
FAR LEFT:

Detail from Arnott's  
biscuit carton

were the landscape, in *Skylark* the landscape (in this case segments of a McCahon-esque New Zealand) had become the birds, flickering in formation along the gallery wall. This work is a direct homage to Colin McCahon and, like *Suddenly the Lake* (1995) [plate 22], it echoes the hill forms of McCahon's *Landscape Theme and Variations: Series B*, (1963) which Gascoigne had seen in 1990.

Gascoigne was continually processing remembered places and experiences. She considered her works to be instances of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', to use a phrase of Wordsworth's which was dear to her. So *Skylark* contained memories not only of birdsong, but of landscape and McCahon's art. In a similar fashion, the seemingly inexplicable *Feathered Chairs* took her back to a remembered encounter – perhaps a pair of swans drying their outstretched wings beside Lake Burley Griffin.





## Airborne

*Pink Window* (1976) [plate 7] sums up certain qualities in Rosalie Gascoigne's art: the tension between the earthbound and the airborne, and also between indoors and outdoors. It continues her investigation into flight and the state of being airborne – a state she also explored in relation to plants, seedpods and pollen, as the titles of many works reiterate. Perhaps *Pink Window* stands as a bird-composition from which the bird has flown; the corrugated iron curtain left flapping in the wind. The open window was one of the great tropes of Romantic literature too – as a portal of inspiration or a metaphor for freedom and imagination. It can also signal the bird-like flight from one life into the next – as Shelley wrote: 'Am I not like a wild swan to be gone so suddenly?'

## Plain Air Depot

*Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky . . .*  
GEORGE HERBERT, 'Virtue'

The installation *Plein Air* (1994) [plates 23 and 24] was first exhibited at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, in 1994. It comprises eight wall-based panels, three free-standing pieces and twelve metres of leaning panels. These components are all, in their different ways, a means of describing or containing air. The formations of wire meshing on the floor enwrap space in a provisional fashion; some of the wall panels are painted a bleached, scuffed, airy white. All of these components make the viewer aware of the 'air' in the room while also alluding to the 'open air' in which the raw materials of the work were gathered and which

their surfaces still, in a sense, contain. The work's title alludes to the painterly technique of working 'en plein air', out in the open, directly confronting nature. In that respect, Gascoigne pays homage to Paul Cézanne, yet the atmospheric panels are closer in effect to the light-infused canvases of J. M. W. Turner.

There is something of the feeling of Gascoigne's studio about *Plein Air*, with its tentative arrangement of materials and white-washed panels. She kept in her studio a bucket of white house-paint, which she used on this work and its companion piece *But Mostly Air* (1994–5). Although she was always quick to assert that she was not a painter, increasingly in the later years she used paint to get the effects she wanted.

A few months after her death, the artist's son Martin made an inventory of equipment in the studio which included an impressive number of saws and cutters, drills, sanders, grinders, welders, clamps, 10kg weights (some of which are visible in the photograph on page 50), the aforementioned white paint, and a couple of small spray-cans of blue and black.<sup>24</sup> Like the weather outside the studio, the implements therein tended to be corrosive and reductive, a means of hurrying along the aging process, although Martin Gascoigne points out that his mother's initial impulse to use such implements 'was more concerned with cleaning off dirt, stabilizing surfaces . . . But she did also scrape the surface off some of her retro-reflective works, and if she had materials she found too pristine she would work on them.'<sup>25</sup>

Installed in a gallery, *Plein Air* creates a space which is partially fenced, partially open, with its horizons of floor and ceiling, with its foci and atmosphere. Rosalie Gascoigne talked about finding 'air' in her raw materials. While making *But Mostly Air* she commented that when she joined sheets of masonite together she discovered 'air right there' and then, after three coats of white

OPPOSITE:  
*Plein Air* (detail) 1994  
masonite, white wood,  
box, wire netting,  
soft-drink crates,  
craftboard  
approximately  
12000 x 4000 mm  
COLLECTION SUE AND  
IAN BERNADT, PERTH



... you suddenly find there's nothing much there but everything is there for you ...  
 there are the white cockatoos going over ... lots of air and air is beautiful.  
 What's that Shakespeare quote from *Macbeth*: This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air  
 Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself / Unto our gentle senses.  
 That's what air is. It's alive ... RG, 1997



**Pale Landscape** 1977  
 white swan feathers,  
 newspaper  
 4000 x 7300 mm  
 MUSEUM OF NEW  
 ZEALAND TE PAPA  
 TONGAREWA  
 PHOTO: NORMAN HEKE.  
 NEGATIVE NUMBER B038782

paint, 'it looks like grey cloudy skies'.<sup>26</sup> In her early assemblages she was constantly drawn to objects with such 'air' in them: thistle stalks, the spaced apart boards of soft-drink crates, wire mesh and swans' feathers. (Later works like *Skylark* seem particularly attuned to the fact that a flight of larks comprises the space between the birds as well as the birds themselves.)

'Look at what we have: space, skies. You can never have too much of nothing,' remarked Gascoigne, having just returned from the bustle and crowds of the 1982 Venice Biennale, where, alongside painter Peter Booth, she represented Australia.<sup>27</sup> This attachment to 'nothing' was something she would have known through her study of Ikebana and attendant strands of Oriental thought – although it also echoes Samuel Beckett's remark that it is better to write nothing than not to write at all.

Gascoigne's frequent forays into the rural landscape around Canberra were a reprise of her childhood habit of combing the beaches around Auckland. By way of her interest in the 'plein air' tradition of Western art and, even more appositely, the art of Ikebana, by the mid-1970s new possibilities were suggesting themselves:

... I was all wild surmise. Ikebana gave an absolute. It gave form.  
 To do things exactly steadied you down. From practising Ikebana I  
 got the vision of how to use the things I liked.<sup>28</sup>

From the Sogetsu school of Ikebana she recalled learning 'to use the unusable'.<sup>29</sup> While *Plein Air* contains the viewer (as it did the artist) within its ensemble, it contains a sense of emptying as much as it does gathering, of the immaterial as well as the material. The gallery space also becomes an outdoors setting reminiscent of the tips – those depots of the 'unusable' – Gascoigne would visit in search of materials.

Made in 1992, *Clouds I* [plate 17] explores the paradoxical nature of air and clouds which are 'something' yet also 'nothing'. The work also echoes the Muriwai aerial views by Colin McCahon, one example of which – *Oaia and Clouds* (1975) – Gascoigne knew well from the exhibition 'Rosalie Gascoigne – Colin McCahon: Sense of Place', which had been shown in Melbourne and Sydney two years earlier. These further explorations of air and clouds also echo the Romantic poets with their euphoric odes:

*O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being ...  
 Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,  
 Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed ...*

The sense of open space which is an almost palpable presence in *Plein Air* is again manifest in two wall-based assemblages produced a short time later: *Steel Magnolias* (1994) [plate 20] and *White Garden* (1995) [plate 25]. These are both numinous works akin to the post-painterly abstraction of Agnes Martin (b.1912). If there is an affinity with Buddhism and Eastern notions of oneness with nature in Rosalie Gascoigne's art, there is also the sense – particularly in *White Garden* – that her practice remains resolutely a part of the ordinary business of a day.

#### Of air and atmospherics: an alphabetical list of works by Rosalie Gascoigne

<i>Aerial View</i>	<i>Afternoon</i>	<i>Airborne</i>
<i>But Mostly Air</i>	<i>Cloud Cuckoo Land</i>	<i>Clouds</i>
<i>Country Air</i>	<i>Far View</i>	<i>Highway to Heaven</i>
<i>May Morning</i>	<i>Midsummer</i>	<i>On a Clear Day</i>
<i>Pale Landscape</i>	<i>Plain View</i>	<i>Plein Air</i>
<i>Room with a View</i>	<i>Sheep Weather Alert</i>	<i>Spring</i>
<i>String of Blue Days</i>	<i>Sun and Shadow</i>	<i>Thermals</i>
<i>Tidy Summer</i>	<i>White Out</i>	<i>Wind and Weather</i>

#### A song sung of a district

Describing one's surroundings and exploring one's inner life have long been fundamental concerns for artists who are, as Gascoigne put it, 'like the bards of old, they sing a song of their district'.<sup>30</sup> Her works, then, are odes to the surfaces on which life is lived – be they geographical or domestic, flat lands or hardboard. As well as bespeaking an inner life of remembered places, the works sing a song of a day-to-day life spent between the wide-open expanse of air, earth and light and a studio/yard crammed with old crates and road signs. When Gascoigne said: 'I look forward to foaming seas of crops, singing songs of the place,' she was referring to both being in the landscape and making that landscape manifest in her art.

If the parrots in *Parrot Country* offered a metaphor for the self – or at least for the 'new self' in the new land – so did the elemental landscape. As well as engaging with the Romantic idea of 'the interior' – the inner life – Gascoigne's art explored the idea of the 'Australian interior', the outback. The essential paradox that the wilderness beyond human habitation is also the 'interior' is at the heart of such epic meditations as *Monaro* (1989) [plate 15] and *Suddenly the Lake*.

'I think artists should go out into the desert and confront themselves: in solitude they get nearer to what they intrinsically have to offer,' Gascoigne stated.<sup>31</sup> This Wordsworthian conflation of outer nature and innermost self is echoed in a poem by Gascoigne's close friend, Rosemary Dobson:

*A shell scoured by the wind. A river-stone  
 Rounded by water, or a bone that's blanched  
 Upon an endless white deserted shore.  
 That's how I saw myself – spare, clean and hard ...*<sup>32</sup>



'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.' RG, 1999



In its formal rigour and passionate detachment, Gascoigne's work has more in common with the landscapes of Australian painter Fred Williams (1927–1982) than with the mainstream of Australian outback art history with its bushrangers and dramatic encounters: a tradition spanning Tom Roberts, Russell Drysdale and early Sidney Nolan. (Impervious to such narratives of confrontation, conquest and resistance, Gascoigne's art explores the infinite spaces, mirages, pauses and emptinesses.) *Steel Magnolias*, with its verticals and partitioned spaces eloquently replays the compositional strategies of Williams, exploring the austere formality of the Australian bush scene. Elsewhere, Gascoigne's geometrical grids also have something of the aerial view about them, calling to mind not only the flattened space of Williams's meditations on the outback, but also McCahon's explorations of the North Canterbury plains as seen from an aeroplane in the 1950s. (Such a conflation of geographical expansiveness and the pictorial strategies of modernism also harks back to the work of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich.)

#### The Romantic Poets: an alphabetical list of works by Rosalie Gascoigne

<i>A Rose is a Rose</i>	<i>Acacia</i>	<i>Age of Innocence</i>
<i>Angels</i>	<i>Blossom</i>	<i>Byzantium</i>
<i>Clouds</i>	<i>Down to the Silver Sea</i>	<i>Early Morning</i>
<i>Full Fathom Five</i>	<i>Gentlemen of Japan</i>	<i>High Country</i>
<i>Indian Summer</i>	<i>Landfall</i>	<i>Lantern</i>
<i>Last of the Summer Wine</i>	<i>Lily Pond</i>	<i>May Morning</i>
<i>Moonrise</i>	<i>Morning Glory</i>	<i>Mother and Child</i>
<i>Night &amp; Day</i>	<i>Promised Land</i>	<i>Shoreline</i>
<i>Skylight</i>	<i>Snowdrop</i>	<i>Solitude</i>
<i>Star Chart</i>	<i>Sunflowers</i>	<i>Sweet Lovers</i>
<i>Sweet Sorrow</i>	<i>Tiger Tiger</i>	<i>Turn of the Tide</i>

#### 'The simplest things come to my rescue'

Reiterating the connection between her work and the physical world, Rosalie Gascoigne described her assemblages as 'bush sculpture' – "bush" partly because of their content and partly in the context of "bush lawyer", "bush carpenter" . . .'.<sup>33</sup> Her many remarks about her own art are characterised by a resolute commonsense and also a laconic sense of humour. In marvellous yet typical fashion, she wrote that, upon her arrival in Australia:

*I found it very lonely . . . You had to learn that feeling of rock under your feet. We have squelch in New Zealand because it's green; there are no snakes and you can walk in it, and it smells sweet.*<sup>34</sup>

Such statements – just like the titles she gave her works – ground her practice in everyday reality and frequently in senses other than sight: hearing, smell, touch.

Gascoigne would constantly reference her work back to its point or place of origin: the air that was breathed, the particulars of a location, the look or feel of an object, a certain time of day. 'The simplest things come to my rescue,' she stated unequivocally, not long before her death.<sup>35</sup> Like the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, Gascoigne's art pays attention to the seasons, to cyclical nature, and to the elements. (Dobson was a kindred spirit in this regard also.) Like the Romantics, Gascoigne wanted to capture the lilt and fall, the flutter of things, to explore weightlessness as well as the gritty, earthen matter-of-fact. This was something she learnt early on. The extent to which she remained attached to the underlying impetus of Romanticism is spelt out in the titles of her works. While these titles were invariably arrived at after the completion of the works themselves, they accurately convey the direction of the thinking.

OPPOSITE:  
Rosalie Gascoigne on a foraging trip, Captain's Flat, Canberra  
PHOTO: MILDRED KIRK



RIGHT:  
**F.T. Marinetti**,  
 'Words-in-freedom'  
 (Chaudronneries)  
 1912

FAR RIGHT:  
**Christian  
 Morgenstern**,  
 'Fisches Nachtgesang',  
 pre-1914



### 'Stammering concrete poetry'

Rosalie Gascoigne's frequent description of her work as 'stammering concrete poetry' is worth exploring. The term 'concrete poetry' originated in the early 1950s to define poetry that was spatially structured. It is a 'visual' poetic tradition that stretches back in time through the work of French poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) to the early 17th-century poet George Herbert, whose visual poem 'Easter Wings' (1633) Gascoigne may well have known from school. One of the most notable manifestations of early 20th-century 'concrete poetry' was produced by the Italian Futurists, chief among them F.T. Marinetti (1876–1944) who created *parole in liberta*, or words-in-freedom, using non-syntactical arrangements of words.<sup>36</sup> These productions can be considered as both poems and drawings (as indeed can the later work of artists like Colin McCahon and Ian Hamilton Finlay). Gascoigne's word-works – such as *Apothecary* (1992) and

*Metropolis* (1999) – issue forth from the same modernist 'language laboratory', as indeed does *Birdsong*, which echoes the pre-Dada poetry of the German Christian Morgenstern (1871–1914), whose 'Fisches Nachtgesang' ('Fish's Nightsong') was perhaps the first 'poem' ever written using no words.<sup>37</sup>

A manifesto written by one of the founders of the concrete poetry movement in the 1950s, Oyvind Fahlstrom, proposed that, instead of using words as symbols, poetry could be created and experienced 'on the basis of language as concrete material'.<sup>38</sup> For Gascoigne, words were certainly 'concrete' material, something that could be wrenched free not only from syntax but from syllabic order. Individual letters could be fragmented, atomised, stood on their heads – yet she had neither the programme nor political intent of an artist like John Cage who dismissed conventional writing on the grounds that 'syntax, like government, can only be obeyed. It is therefore of no use except when you have something particular to command such as: Go buy me a bunch of carrots.'<sup>39</sup> While Gascoigne used road signs which were originally intended to direct people, her works annihilate any clearly articulated statement. In *Cockatoos*, a number of roadside signs (which had quite literally instructed people to buy bunches of carrots) were recomposed and made poetic through Gascoigne's characteristic 'elusive and allusive' articulation.

Around the time that Fahlstrom was claiming concrete poetry for northern Europe, the Brazilian writer Augusto De Campos, in a 1956 manifesto, proposed that 'far from attempting to evade reality or to deceive it, concrete poetry intends to place itself before things, open, in a position of absolute realism'.<sup>40</sup>

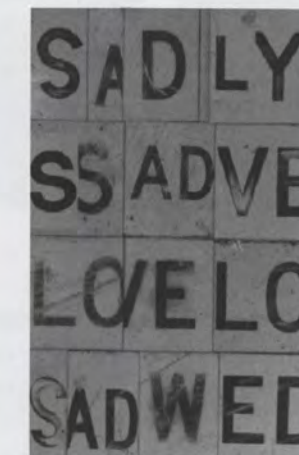
Being placed 'before things, open, in a position of absolute realism' sounds like something Gascoigne might have said. ('It is a

search for beauty and a search for reality,' she did in fact say of her work.<sup>41</sup>) However, the central paradox remains that while her 'stammering concrete poems' commit a kind of violence upon language, they are not only informed by traditional poetry but also have objectives which are consistent with that tradition. Her work is not a drowning out of the birds of Romanticism, rather it is a replaying of them, in concert, with the surrealist birds of Joan Miró and Joseph Cornell, the phonetic bird life of Hopkins and McCahon, and the ever-present brightly plumaged birds that circled the house at Mount Stromlo and later at Pearce.

Gascoigne's art proposes a grammar of the incomplete and the untethered phrase – and in this respect a further allegiance with Oriental culture is manifest. Just as the Japanese haiku in the original language is without syntax – it exists as a visual 'motif' – so Gascoigne's art comprises a de- (and then re-) constructed syntax, without beginning or end. *Tiger Tiger* (1987) and *Sweet Sorrow* (1990) [on right] (works which reference Blake and Shakespeare respectively) are apposite works in this regard. Short lyric poetry, of the kind Gascoigne had in mind when titling *Tiger Tiger*, is itself predicated on a working definition of the 'fragment'. The fragmentary, inconclusive nature of the lyric poem is intrinsic to its shape and beauty.

Gascoigne's love of the incomplete phrase is manifest in titles of works like *Suddenly the Lake, But Mostly Air* and *The Colonel's Lady* (1976) [plate 3] (which is an extract from Rudyard Kipling: 'The Colonel's Lady an' Judy O'Grady / are sisters under their skins!').<sup>42</sup> Her works are acts of editing as well as assemblage.

As a 'concrete poet', Rosalie Gascoigne orchestrated plain fragments, without obscuring the fact that they were just details or shards lifted from their context and reorganised according to



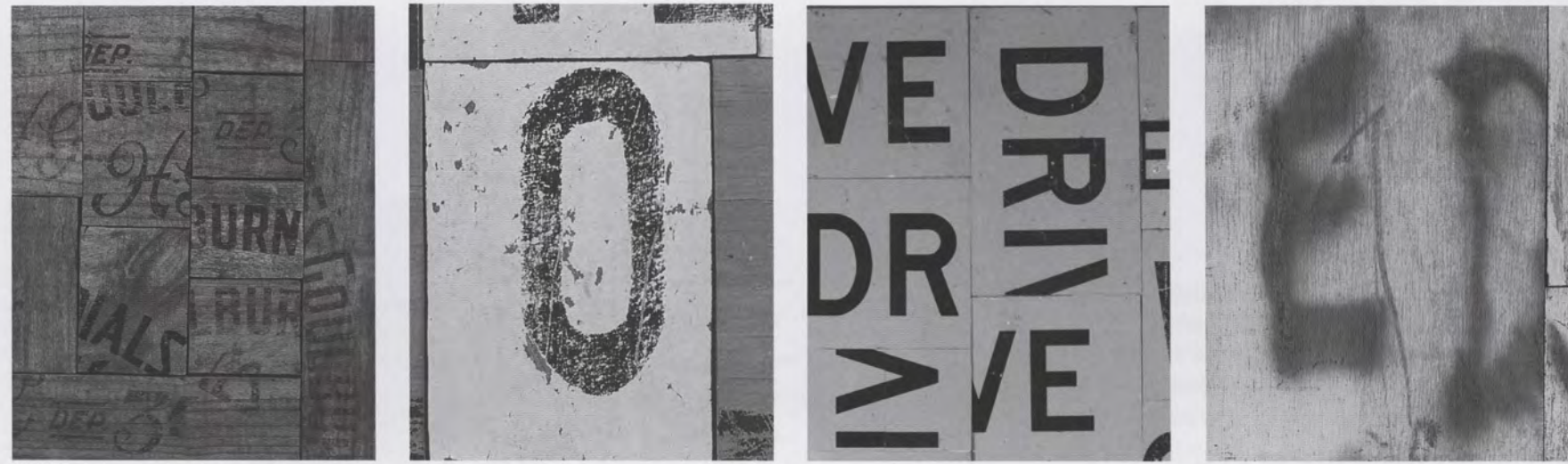
**Sweet Sorrow** 1990  
 retro-reflective road  
 signs on plywood  
 1200 x 790 mm  
 COLLECTION SUE AND  
 IAN BERNADT, PERTH

different principles. *Honeybunch* (1993) [Plate 19] might be thought of as a layered haiku or perhaps even a number of overlaid or interspersed, simultaneous poems. As well as being a term of endearment, the work's title invokes Sappho's line 'neither for me honey nor the honey bee'.<sup>43</sup> Another surviving piece of Sappho's poetry contains only one word:<sup>44</sup>

*honeyvoiced*

As such verbal remnants suggest, time can itself be an editing process, stripping down its raw materials, reducing and refining them. In much the same way, the plain air, weather and happenstance of the natural world have gone to work on Gascoigne's materials, rendering them 'beautiful' (to use a word Gascoigne did not shy from). Such processes of reduction and fragmentation were integral to the 'aesthetic of glimpses' proposed by Ezra Pound early in the 20th century – an aesthetic which, directly or indirectly, influenced Gascoigne.





When recasting the aforementioned Sapphic fragments, some of which were smaller than one word, translator Anne Carson sought, she said, to restore the 'musicality' and 'syntactic motion'.<sup>45</sup> Gascoigne's best works are comparable exercises in 'syntactic motion'. The works stammer and cajole, they pipe up and they whisper things. Perhaps Gascoigne is a true translator if you follow Ezra Pound's dictum that 'the poem is not its language' and that translators should 'convey the energised pattern and let go the words'.<sup>46</sup>

Isn't that precisely what Rosalie Gascoigne's best works do: they convey an energised pattern – a pattern of reality, both observed and remembered – while letting go the words?

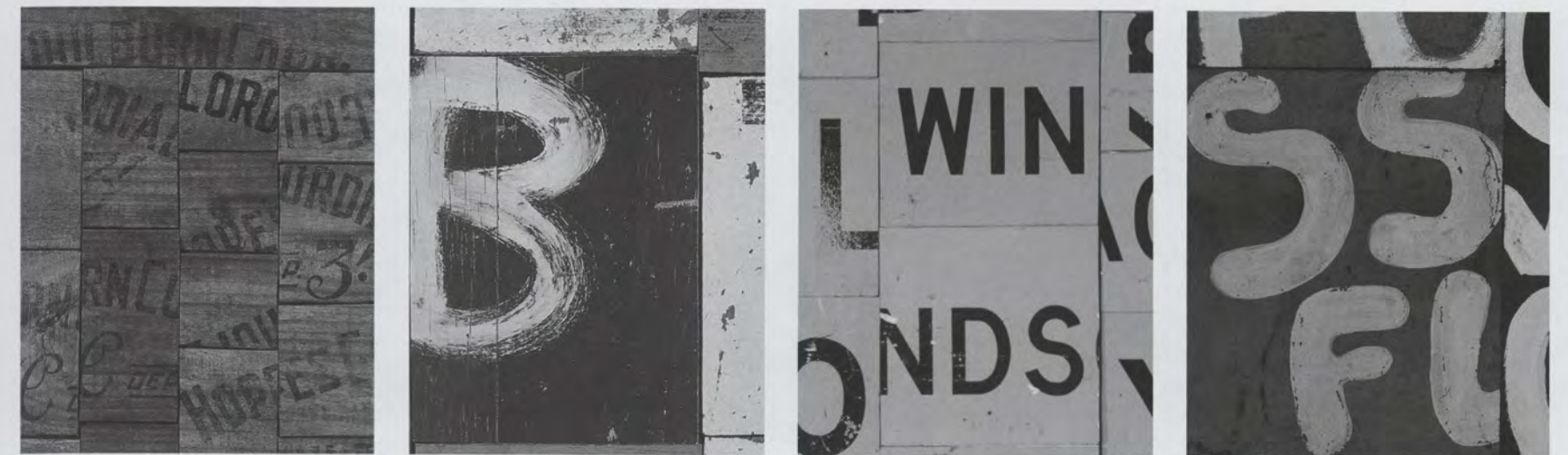
### Visual sonnets and surrealist games

Rosalie Gascoigne used two different kinds of road signs in her work. Her son Martin elaborates: 'There were the ones authorities make and use to signal hazards, activities and to control traffic . . . and there were those advertising signs used by vendors to sell products from the roadside and which provide the basis for *Cockatoos* and *Apricot Letters* (1990) [plate 14].'<sup>47</sup> Those two text-related works hark back to the poems constructed by André Breton and the Surrealists using 'random words cut from newspapers which they scattered and then

reassembled. As well as exploring such 'irrational' treatments of the written word, the Surrealist movement and its various offshoots were drawn to collage and bricolage.

The collage – and its three-dimensional equivalent the assemblage – is, according to Roger Lipsey, 'a visual sonnet, a refined mutual adjustment of elements'.<sup>48</sup> If the practice is often associated with a Dadaist or Surrealist excess, Lipsey also notes the affinity between the art of assemblage and Eastern thought, an association which explains its significance for a practitioner like Gascoigne: 'Collage is a Western ikebana, an art of arrangement, and like Japanese flower arrangement its aesthetic impact can go far beyond the separate impacts of the materials it employs.'<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Gascoigne did make a number of collages between 1972 and 74, gathering them in a scrap-book. (This was shortly after she had met the artist Michael Taylor who used collage extensively in his drawings.)

As noted earlier, Gascoigne's constructions of the late 1970s pay homage to the bricolage of Joseph Cornell. She would have identified with the elder artist's description of his archive of found materials as 'the core of a labyrinth, a clearing house for dreams and visions . . . childhood regained'.<sup>50</sup> However, if Cornell's assemblages present an eternal night-time in which dreams play like movies, Gascoigne's remain adamantly, as we



have seen, *en plein air*; they merge with or energise the space around them.

Like Cornell (and, famously, his mentor Marcel Duchamp), Gascoigne used her art to explore the forms and discipline of chess.<sup>51</sup> Chess provided not only the compositional grid for the aptly-titled *Checkerboard* (1990) [plate 26] and *Checkers* (1996) [page 86]. While the latter work is more or less the size of a checker or chessboard and alternates black and white blocks, the squares are out of kilter, with erratic spaces between them. The lettering stamped upon the black squares invokes other pastimes such as crosswords and scrabble. Like the best played games, Rosalie Gascoigne's assemblages can be humorous and touching. Amongst other things, art is, as the artist herself would have been quick to point out, a game.

The symmetry of the chessboard is also referenced in the large installation *Piece to Walk Around* (1981) [page 46], which is as geometric as any of Gascoigne's wall-based assemblages. Gascoigne was attracted to the grid format so beloved of post-painterly abstraction because, as Deborah Edwards has written, it 'conveys a sense of infinite expansiveness through a structure which is understood to be open-ended, and which can theoretically be added to infinitely'.<sup>52</sup> But it is a tenuous, unstable symmetry – the sticks move, the edges shift a little.

### Walking backwards into the light

*We had sea on both sides; I could stand on Mount Hobson and see the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Tasman Sea on the other. I used to walk along the beaches and collect all sorts of things. I would also go on university field trips . . . with geologists and botanists who knew what they were looking at. I was just looking at it for fun.*

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE<sup>53</sup>

*Winter, the land goes back to its bones.*

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE<sup>54</sup>

In October 1999, when Rosalie Gascoigne lay dying in the John James Memorial Hospital, Canberra, her family and friends installed an arrangement of objects on a shelf in her hospital room: small items from her studio including some fragments of retro-reflective signage, a 'homage' to Matisse, tiny animal bones, a pattern of box-fragments . . . There was something in the unpremeditated arrangement of these things which pleased her: a sense that emerged from the items themselves, which bound them together, beyond human design. Such objects – tokens of a life lived – had come to embody for her almost sixty years spent in the Canberra landscape, twenty-five years of which were devoted to making art. Gascoigne found herself looking back in time, just as she had done in July 1999 when she spoke

DETAILS OF WORKS  
FROM LEFT:

*Apothecary* [plate 16]  
*Honeybunch* [plate 19]  
*Big Yellow* [plate 12]  
*Apricot Letters* [plate 14]  
*Apothecary*  
*Honeybunch*  
*Big Yellow*  
*Cockatoos* [page 20]





of the yellow-orange in her triptych *Orangery* (1998) [plate 28] as being inspired by the colours of the gym smocks worn at Epsom Girls' Grammar, the Auckland secondary school she attended from 1930 to 1935 and where her mother worked as a teacher.<sup>55</sup> The colour of her found material had rekindled memories that, until then, had slipped from reach. The autobiographical, almost Proustian impulse contained in Gascoigne's work can be thought of as a retro-reflection of a different kind. Abstract art is seldom imbued with such a personal and personable nature.

During the last fifteen years of her life, Gascoigne returned, via a number of works, to her earliest memories. As was the case with another great expatriate New Zealand artist, Katherine Mansfield (who, *en passant*, spent considerably less time in this country than Gascoigne), the late works return to some of the earliest sites: the school yard, the bird life, the New Zealand coastline. Vincent O'Sullivan has written of Mansfield's use of cinematic cutting techniques in 'Prelude' (1918) to achieve 'a vivid emotional resonance, realising "that special prose" she equated with both elegy and celebration'.<sup>56</sup> Something of that same effect is manifest in Gascoigne's memory-saturated assemblages over the years, with their dolls and curved, remembered bays, with their formica surfaces, shells and dried arrangements. Comprising an almost typographical grid of seashells contained within a folio/frame of tin, *Turn of the Tide* (1983) [plate 10] suggests itself as one such page of Mansfield-esque 'special prose', summoned by memory. The work is also a Hopkins-esque reflection on the rhythms and repetitions of nature: 'Be shelled eyes, with double dark / And find the uncreated light ...'

Alongside an ongoing engagement with the Monaro district, Gascoigne's assemblages increasingly through the 1980s and 1990s teased out nuances of personal history, excavating

fragments of remembered objects, places and voices. In 1989 she wrote: 'I keep seeing bays, it's my New Zealand childhood I think. . . . I love these bays, twofold bays.'<sup>57</sup> *Hill Station* (1989) [plate 13] and *Landfall* (1989) both explore specific locations from her New Zealand childhood. Gascoigne provides a marvellous gloss on the latter work which, knowingly, adopts the title of New Zealand's best-known and longest running literary journal:<sup>58</sup>

*I had a lot of curved wood, and it reminded me of old tales we used to hear a lot in New Zealand. Captain Cook sailed around New Zealand and what did he see but bays and bays and bays and beauty and colour and bays. And everywhere he'd see an empty beach; the Maoris didn't show themselves too much. I called it Landfall because it was the explorer and those colours, the greys and the blues, it seemed to work.*<sup>59</sup>

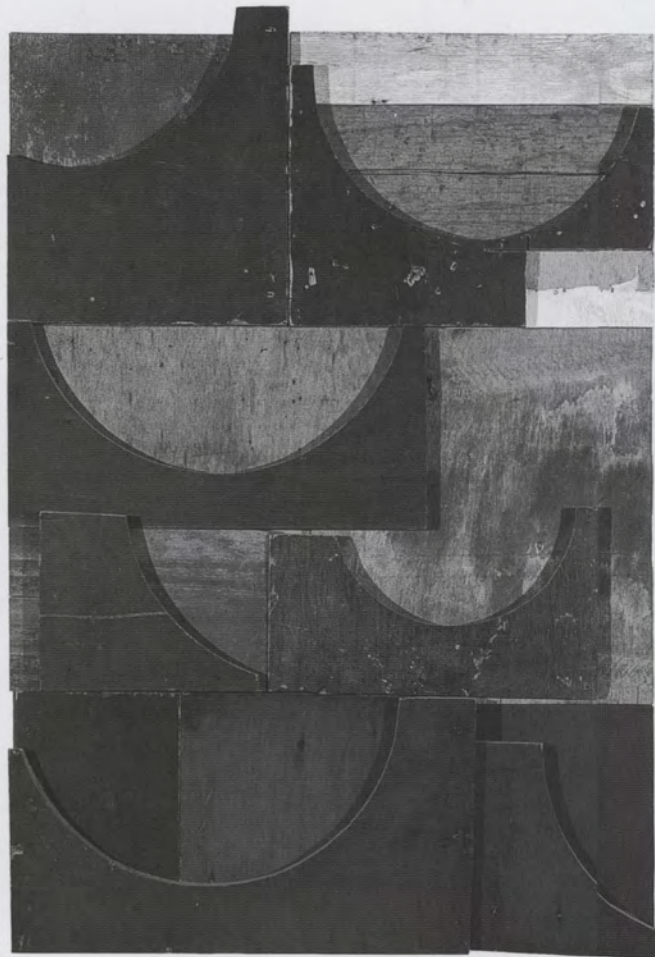
Colonial history, at the time Gascoigne was growing up, was imbued with such a sense of pageantry and adventure. It was an integral part of the same school syllabus that instilled lines of Keats and Shelley in her generation.

'The tug of memory' – to use Gascoigne's phrase – was the impetus behind *Hill Station*, which is an account of Kohatunui, the North Island farm near Putaruru, where her sister Daintry lived. 'She was a big cattle expert and she used to live amongst the hills, and the tin – what people think is a lake – is the obdurate soil.'<sup>60</sup> The work also alludes to the paintings of McCahon which Gascoigne had grown to love by the early 1980s. Born in the same year, Gascoigne and McCahon were the by-products of similar schooling and, despite extraordinarily different career paths, had remarkably aligned interests in poetry, language, landscape and modern art. After seeing his retrospective 'Gates and Journeys' in 1989, Gascoigne created

OPPOSITE:  
**Piece to Walk  
Around** 1981  
saffron thistle sticks  
arranged in 20 squares  
on a 4 x 5m grid  
approximately  
3800 x 4800 mm  
overall  
COURTESY OF ROSLYN  
OXLEY9 GALLERY, SYDNEY



**Landfall** 1989  
 painted timber and  
 formboard on plywood  
 1120 x 780 mm  
 COLLECTION OF  
 MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY,  
 SYDNEY



her own domestic homage to McCahon, incorporating a greeting card reproduction of his 1947 *The Angel of the Annunciation* within a trademark wooden construction, some fragments of hardboard and the number 14 (alluding to the Stations of the Cross). Like Rosemary Dobson in her poem 'Out of Winter', Gascoigne contemplates the mysteries of art, the natural world and the human mind which connects them:

*Water contents me and the sky at evening,  
 The promise of flowers in the air at noonday;  
 Schooled in the miracles of Fra Angelico  
 I await the Angel of the Annunciation.*

*Bare tree, bare mind swept clean of anguish  
 Accept simplicities, be patient,  
 Await the bird in the bough, the tremor  
 Of life in the veins, another springtime.<sup>61</sup>*

Rosalie Gascoigne frequently constructed frames for art reproductions – or fragments thereof – that she loved. Still hanging in her house are some of these 'mementos' which contain reproductions not only of works by McCahon but also by Ingres, Picasso, Matisse and others. Similarly, family photographs are collaged onto wood and accompanied by seashells. A miniature retro-reflective sign was still in daily use on the roadside outside the Gascoigne household in July 2003 – affixed to a milk-crate and inscribed: 2 PINTS 2 [facing page]. While, in artistic terms, Gascoigne's miscellaneous domestic assemblages are slight, incidental works, they do suggest a thing or two about the larger finished pieces. They highlight the proximity of the artistic production to the everyday life. The frame constructions are structures in which memories are enshrined – a usage which underlines one very central purpose of Gascoigne's art: the preservation of the personal.

### The weight of words delivered on a truck to the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Shortly before her final trip to New Zealand in July 1999, Rosalie Gascoigne and her assistant Peter Vandermark loaded the biggest work she had ever made out of retro-reflective signage onto the back of a truck and sent it from Canberra to Sydney, where it was exhibited at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery before being deposited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. *Metropolis* [plate 29] was nearly four metres long and had such a weight of signage glued to it that within a short time of it going on display at the gallery it had to be taken down and the backing reinforced. This hyper-retro-work was a gift to the city Gascoigne had thought of as The Metropolis. Referring to her first exhibition at Sydney's Gallery A in 1975, Gascoigne said: 'Sydney was definitely the metropolis for me – I knew only Auckland and Stromlo ...'.<sup>62</sup>

Gascoigne always considered the rites of collection, delivery and installation an integral part of her 'work'. Driving, looking and collecting were as integral to her process as sorting and assembling. While, on occasion, family and friends delivered found materials to the artist's studio, Gascoigne resisted suggestions from dealers and others that they assemble fresh materials on her behalf. The sourcing, in a sense, had to be a part of a working process which was autobiographical in design. The materials had to have entered 'the life'. Without that they remained inert. Of her approach, Gascoigne remarked shortly before her death: 'I start doing things with materials I like and then suddenly I remember something usually and I move the work along that path. But it is always something that has been personal to me or remembered.'<sup>63</sup>

In a photograph taken in winter 1999 outside Gascoigne's garage, she and Peter Vandermark are surveying the as-yet-unnamed



TOP LEFT:  
 The Gascoigne's milk-crate, made from retro-reflective road signage

TOP RIGHT:  
 Road signs, Canberra

BOTTOM:  
 Rosalie Gascoigne's homage to Colin McCahon  
 PHOTO: BEN GASCOIGNE







work which will become *Metropolis*. They have something of the demeanour of outdoor chessplayers – standing on the perimeter of the game-in-progress, pondering their options. Work is taking place in the open air on account of the assemblage's scale. As well as applying pressure to retro-reflective segments which are being glued in place, the weights may also be a precaution against the Canberra winds.

Whereas much of Gascoigne's art was an exploration of the provincial, of the Australian Capital Territory landscape as it extends towards the horizon, *Metropolis* is orientated towards the urban environment with its cramped spaces and surfaces, with its plethora of signs and instructions. The work embodies this overload (and fragmentation) through its three-dimensional layering. One sign hides or partially hides another. The instructions are never complete.

At the same time as she was finishing *Metropolis*, Rosalie Gascoigne completed a sequence of works called *Earth* (1999), made up of pieces of brown and grey hardboard.<sup>44</sup> While *Earth* is muted and sombre, elegiac almost, *Metropolis* is an insistent, clamouring work. These are the last two notes that linger in her art: on the one hand an earthy but nonetheless stringent formalism; on the other a euphoric, noisy bricolage of sounds and signs from the world of poets, motorists, gardeners, trampers, astronomers and family-persons. Gascoigne's work was shaped by both the marvellous din of human interaction and the silence of formal thought and process, hence, on the one hand, its human content and, on the other, the rigorous geometry of it. You could almost boil these two components down to content and form – things as different yet as connected as a flock of parrots and a field of wheat.

OPPOSITE:  
Rosalie Gascoigne  
with Peter Vandermark,  
working on *Metropolis*  
outside the garage, June  
1999  
PHOTO: BEN GASCOIGNE

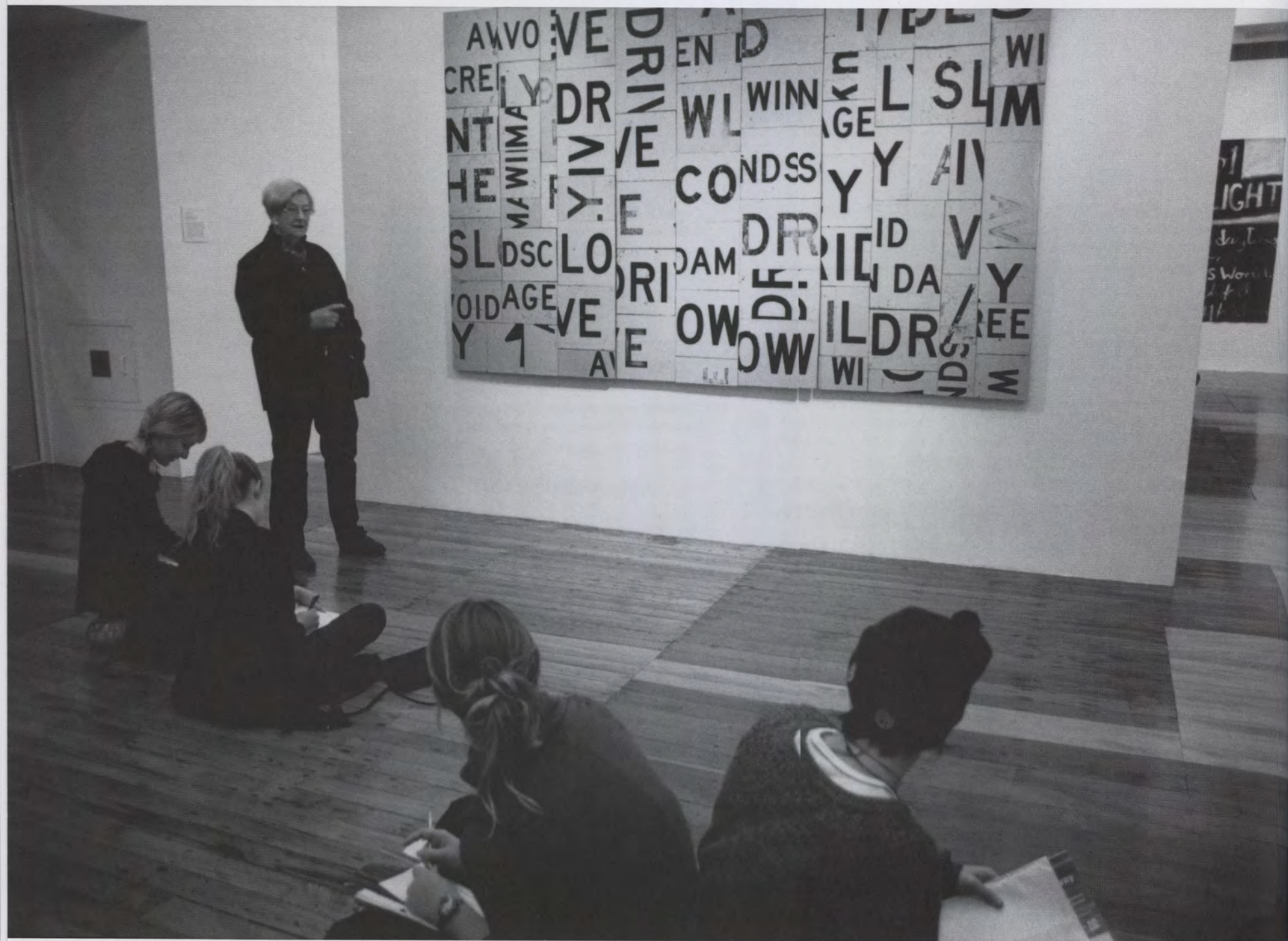


## Notes

- 1 Mary Eagle quoted in *Biennale of Australia 2000* catalogue, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p.52.
- 2 Artist's statement, dated April 1978, in 'Survey 2' exhibition catalogue, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1978, unpaginated.
- 3 Interview with Stephen Feneley, ABC 4, December 1997.
- 4 Interview with Rae Lamb, New Zealand National Radio, 23 July 1999.
- 5 Daniel Thomas, 'Obituary, Rosalie Gascoigne', *The Australian*, 29 October 1999, p.18.
- 6 An earlier version of *Parrot Country* was exhibited at Pinacotheca Gallery in 1980; the work was reconstructed in its present form in 1983.
- 7 Deborah Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne – Material as Landscape*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998, p.7.
- 8 Unpublished typescript of talk delivered at Canberra School of Art, 21 August 1985.
- 9 Gail MacCallum (ed.), *A Return to Poetry*, Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1998, p.28.
- 10 Unpublished typescript of talk delivered at Canberra School of Art, 21 August 1985.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 'Free as a bird' was, in fact, a phrase she herself used to describe how she felt when embarking upon her new life in Australia.
- 13 Mary Eagle, 'Obituary, Rosalie Gascoigne', *Gallery News*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, December–February 1999–2000, p.2.
- 14 Mary Eagle, *ibid.*, p.2.
- 15 From an interview with Peter Ross at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997. *Highway Code* and Gascoigne's comments about the work were reproduced on the order of service at her funeral, St Paul's Anglican Church, Manuka, ACT, 5 November 1999.
- 16 A curiously retrospective work, *The Colonel's Lady* incorporates traces of birdlife from Gascoigne's New Zealand upbringing: kiwis on boot-polish lids and ducks printed on used shot-gun cartridges.
- 17 Wallace Stevens, 'Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird', from *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, New York: Knopf, 1991, p.94.
- 18 Unpublished transcription of interview with Diana Wood Conroy at the University of Southern Queensland, 1984.
- 19 William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961, p.17. This publication is a key reference in relation to Rosalie Gascoigne's early work. Martin Gascoigne suggests the six Cornell assemblages reproduced therein probably made an even greater impression on her than the works in the National Art Gallery collection.
- 20 Ben Gascoigne comments that despite the fact that in her youth Rosalie Gascoigne was wicketkeeper in the Epsom Girls' Grammar First XI, her preferred summer sport was tennis.
- 21 Martin Gascoigne quoted from unpublished notes, July 2002.
- 22 Mary Eagle (ed.), *From the Studio of Rosalie Gascoigne*, Canberra: Drill Hall Gallery, The Australian National University, 2000, p.20.
- 23 Hannah Fink, 'That Sidling Sight: Wondering About the Art of Rosalie Gascoigne', *Art and Australia*, vol.35, no.2, 1997, p.202.
- 24 Mary Eagle (ed.), *From the Studio of Rosalie Gascoigne*, op. cit., p.17.
- 25 Correspondence with the author, January 2004.
- 26 Gascoigne quoted in Mary Eagle, *From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art, c.1940–88*, Australian Biennale catalogue, p.132.
- 27 Deborah Edwards, op. cit., p.7.
- 28 Mary Eagle, *From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art, c.1940–88*, op. cit., p.132.
- 29 Deborah Edwards, op. cit., p.12.
- 30 Quoted in Vici MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, Paddington, NSW: Regaro, 1998, p.37.
- 31 Gascoigne quoted in Janine Burke, *Field of Vision: A Decade of Change: Women's Art in the Seventies*, Ringwood, Victoria: Viking, 1990, p.36.
- 32 Rosemary Dobson, *Selected Poems*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980, p.125.
- 33 Daniel Thomas, op. cit., p.18.
- 34 Quoted in Vici MacDonald, op. cit., p.37.
- 35 Interview with Rae Lamb, op. cit.
- 36 An extensive archive of 'concrete poetry' can be accessed at [www.ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com)
- 37 Edward Lucie-Smith, *Primer of Experimental Poetry I, 1870–1922*, London: Rapp & Whiting, 1971, p.64.
- 38 Oyvind Fahlstrom, 'Concrete Poetry Manifesto', [www.ubu.com/papers/fahlstrom01.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/fahlstrom01.html)
- 39 John Cage, *M, Writings*, London: Calder and Boyars Ltd, 1973, p.215.
- 40 Augusto De Campos, 'Concrete Poetry: A Manifesto', first published in *Ad-Arquitectura e decoracao n.20*, November–December 1956, Sao Paulo, Brazil. Refer to [www.ubu.com/papers/decampos.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/decampos.html).
- 41 Interview with Rae Lamb, op. cit.
- 42 Kipling's biographer, Harry Ricketts, adds the following gloss: The lines come from the final stanza of 'The Ladies', first published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 May 1895, and first collected with other second series 'barrack-room ballads' in *The Seven Seas* (1896):  

*What did the Colonel's Lady think?  
 Nobody never knew.  
 Somebody asked the Sergeant's wife,  
 An' she told 'em true!  
 When you get to a man in the case,  
 They're like as a row of pins –  
 For the Colonel's Lady an' Judy O'Grady  
 Are sisters under their skins!*
- 43 Quoted in *If Not, Winter, Fragments of Sappho*, trans. Anne Carson, New York: Knopf, 2002, p.295.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p.353.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p.xii.
- 46 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, London: Faber and Faber, 1972, p.150.
- 47 Martin Gascoigne quoted from correspondence with the author, January 2004.
- 48 Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, Boston: Shambhala, 1988, p.358.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p.358.
- 50 From the papers of Joseph Cornell, Archives of American Art – Smithsonian Institution, quoted in Charles Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell*, New York: Ecco Press, 1992, p.35.
- 51 See Vici MacDonald, op. cit., pp.34–35.
- 52 Deborah Edwards, op. cit., p.14.
- 53 Interview with Kate Davidson, 'String of blue days', in *Island: Contemporary Installations*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1996, p.17.
- 54 Interview with Rae Lamb, op. cit.
- 55 Conversation with Peter Shaw, who was responsible for *Orangery* being purchased for the Fletcher Challenge Collection.
- 56 Quoted in Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.39.
- 57 Vici MacDonald, op. cit., p.81.
- 58 The work appeared on the cover of the journal: *Landfall* 199, March 2000.
- 59 Quoted in Vici MacDonald, op. cit., p.82.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p.83.
- 61 Rosemary Dobson, 'Out of Winter', op. cit., p.78.
- 62 Interview with Rae Lamb, op. cit.
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 The 'Earth' sequence was exhibited posthumously at the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, in 2000.





## Open to the Weather – Discovering Rosalie Gascoigne Barbara Anderson

*'You've got to keep very honest and sharp.'* ROSALIE GASCOIGNE

Claude Levi Strauss once described the artist as a bricoleur, the one who, when the rest of the nomadic tribe has moved on, remains among the discards of little value, the bric-à-brac which has been left behind by his/her more pragmatic kinsmen, those scraps of bright fabric, pointed firesticks, a cracked cooking pot, chicken skulls. From these disparate objects the bricoleur creates a work of art, something which pleases the eye, gives them a good 'read', as Rosalie Gascoigne described the way she looked and looked and looked again at her work in process.

Nobody had a better eye than she for creating wonders from the 'inorganic refuse' of humanity and discards of nature: old faded Schweppes boxes, swan feathers, great grey sheets of corrugated iron abandoned in tips or tossed aside in the sun-burnt scrubby country around Canberra which she grew to love. She hated the word 'junk'. It was an insult to the treasures she found or begged, and lugged home to transform into works of subtle mystery, strong contrasts of textures, shapes and colours; beauty where one did not expect to find it. She says somewhere, (and incidentally I have never known an artist speak about their work with such endearing clarity) that she never used anything that had not been 'open to the weather'.

I came to Gascoigne's work late in life, just as she herself did. In characteristic fashion, she once said: 'I can come in late and careless because it is so unlikely and silly that I should.' I regret the delay, as who would not, but on the other hand am glad to discover that the physical reaction, the shivering pleasure when confronted by great works of art stays with us as we grow old. We can still be 'surprised by joy'.

Gascoigne became famous as an artist in the last three decades of her life, yet when you see her work from that period you are

struck by its vigour and freshness. The maker of them has not lost the intensity of youth, the necessity to keep her work 'very honest and sharp'. To move on, as she did all her life. Her later work particularly gives a sense of time passing, of lived experience and flashbacks from places known long ago. A lifetime of seeing and remembering how things looked.

One of the things we can learn from such artists is to watch things closely, to think about what we see:

Those cows, for example, staring back unremittingly at you from their lush paddock – perhaps they remind you of the coloured blocks of childhood. Their solid browns and the bright green of the grass go well together.

Watch the way the expiring waves fall on a calm day at the beach, how the frill of broken mini-waves chivvy along the shoreline like that. How could any artist catch that bustling, hustling movement?

A centuries-old wall in Shropshire seen years ago, its ancient bricks still ranging from soft pinks and corals to sooty blacks ...

Great artists can make us see things we knew already, but had forgotten until they remind us. Bertolt Brecht was another artist who honoured the old, the worn. The first verse of one of his poems reads:

*Of all works my favourites  
are those which show usage.*

And the last verse:

*dilapidated buildings  
again seem like half completed  
enormous projects: their fine proportions  
can easily be inferred;*

OPPOSITE:  
Rosalie Gascoigne  
with *Big Yellow* at the  
Auckland Art Gallery,  
July 1999  
PHOTO: MARTI FRIEDLANDER



yet they still need  
our understanding. At the same time  
they have served their purpose  
been sloughed off. All this  
delights me.

The weathering process is intense in Australia. Day after day the sun fades the bright pinks and greens of beer cans, bleaches discarded crates to colours Gascoigne described as 'as good as any Italian colours'. Now that she reminds us, we too see the bleached blues and chalky pinks of Piero della Francesca in the more gentle of her landscapes.

Gascoigne has not been a hero of mine for long. I knew her name and reputation and had admired her assemblages I had seen in Canberra and Melbourne in the eighties, but there had not been many. I also knew nothing of her life until recently I read *Rosalie Gascoigne* by Vici MacDonald. Last October I made an appointment at the John Buckley Gallery in Melbourne in the hope of seeing two works in the gallery and, with luck, a third larger one which was in storage nearby.

We rang the bell and were greeted by Marguerita Wu who showed us two smaller works, *Parrots* (1981) and *Airborne* (1993), both beautiful, both completely different. In *Parrots* the sedate birds appeared planed down, almost camouflaged. *Airborne*, from a decade later, was made with pieces of curved wood in faded blues and greens and rusty reds; from these she created haunting images of the bays and cliffs and hills and sea of New Zealand. 'The tug of memory,' as she called it. But it was the third work, *Feathered Chairs*, that was exciting beyond words. In a large store-cum-studio near the gallery, I discovered them on a mezzanine space. Climbing to the top of a long ladder, I was confronted by two muddy-brick coloured skeletons

of early model four-legged chairs, discards from some refurbished office. The chairs had been transmogrified into things of beauty by the addition of some 'very good quality featherers picked up at Lake George', as Gascoigne described them. 1.

The inspirational juxtaposition of materials in *Feathered Chairs*, the sheer thinking, the idea of them astonish, quite apart from the magic of the result. High in the air, weak at the knees and teetering on my ladder, I had found another great piece of art by a woman both inspiring and inspired.

The same pleasure occurs when a previously unknown poem or piece of prose excites one. A poem may not look like a good poem or behave like a good poem, but if it invokes a physical reaction in some readers it probably is a good poem. Positive reactions may vary from that of Franz Kafka who was liable to leap to his feet in moments of aesthetic bliss, to the reader who shouts to anyone within earshot, 'Hey look at this', to the solitary reader who mutters, 'Who is this guy?' In any case the poem has worked. Not necessarily for the rest of the world. They have found it and it excites them. It is theirs. The writer – or in Gascoigne's case the visual artist – has given it to them.

## PLAIN / SONG

PLATE 7 *Pink Window* 1976 window frame, pink undercoat, corrugated iron 1160 x 1040 x 100 mm GASCOIGNE FAMILY COLLECTION





PLATE 8 *Scrub Country* 1982 weathered wood supported on aluminium strip, seven panels, approximately 14 1440 x 3760 mm overall THE CORRIGAN FAMILY COLLECTION





PLATE 9 *Graven Image* 1982 weathered wood 1050 x 890 x 90 mm PRIVATE E COLLECTION, CANBERRA

PLATE 10 *Turn of the Tide* 1983 shells, galvanised iron and wood 560 x 400 x 40 mm COLLECTION OF DIANE AND NEIL BALNAVES, SYDNEY



PLATE 10 *Habitation* 1984 softwood compartmented drink boxes, enamel mugs, seven boxes, each 450 x 280 x 240 mm GASCOIGNE FAMILY COLLECTION





PLATE 12 **Big Yellow** 1988 sawn-up retro-reflective road signs on plywood 1715 x 2700 mm CHARTWELL COLLECTION, AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI

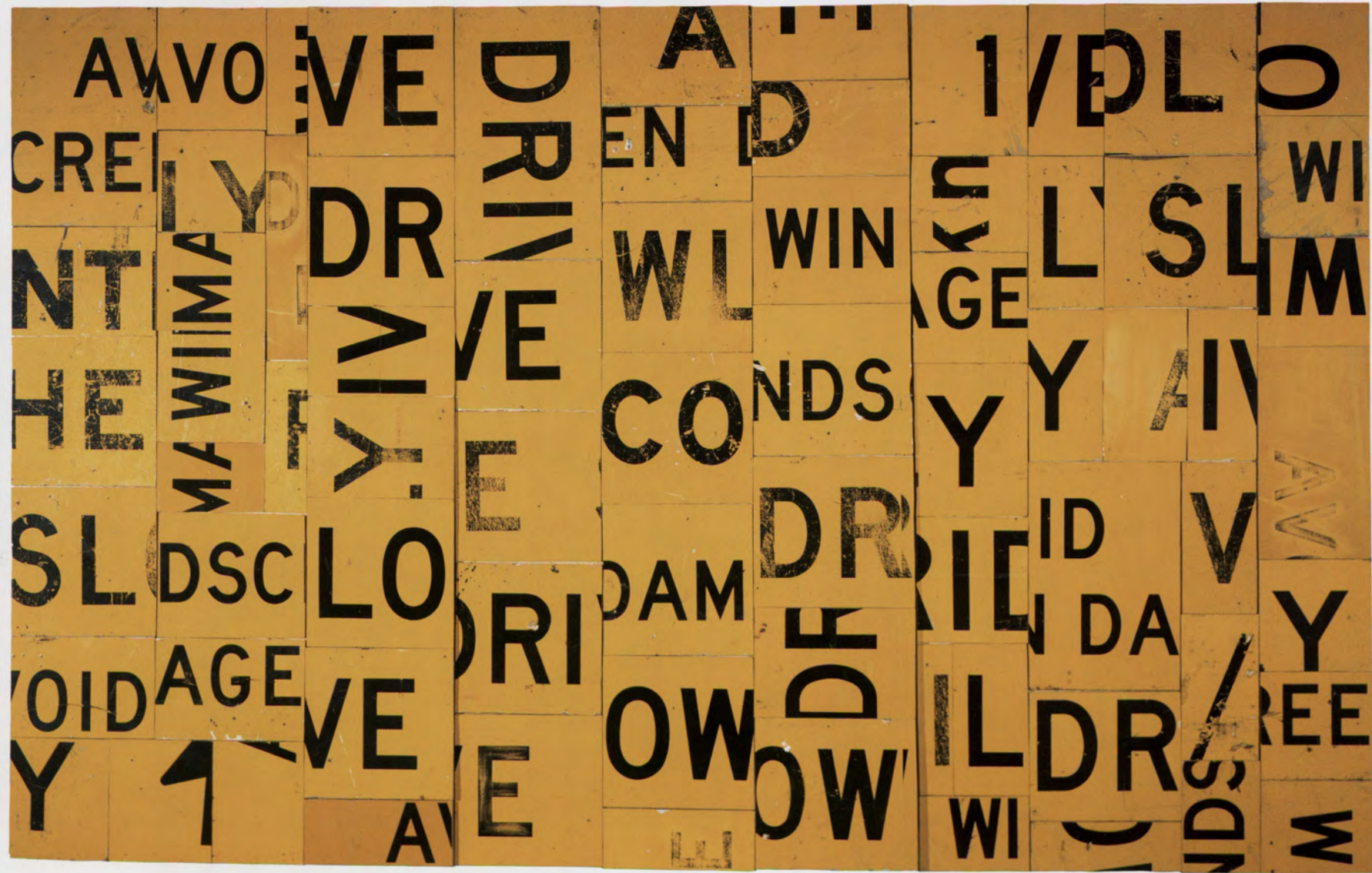


PLATE 13 **Hill Station** 1989 builders' formboard and galvanised iron mounted on plywood and aluminium 1300 x 980 mm GASCOIGNE FAMILY COLLECTION

PLATE 14 **Apricot Letters** 1990 sawn-up sign from fruit stall 1120 x 800 mm PRIVATE COLLECTION, AUCKLAND COURTESY OF GOW LANGSFORD GALLERY, AUCKLAND/SYDNEY





PLATE 15 **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

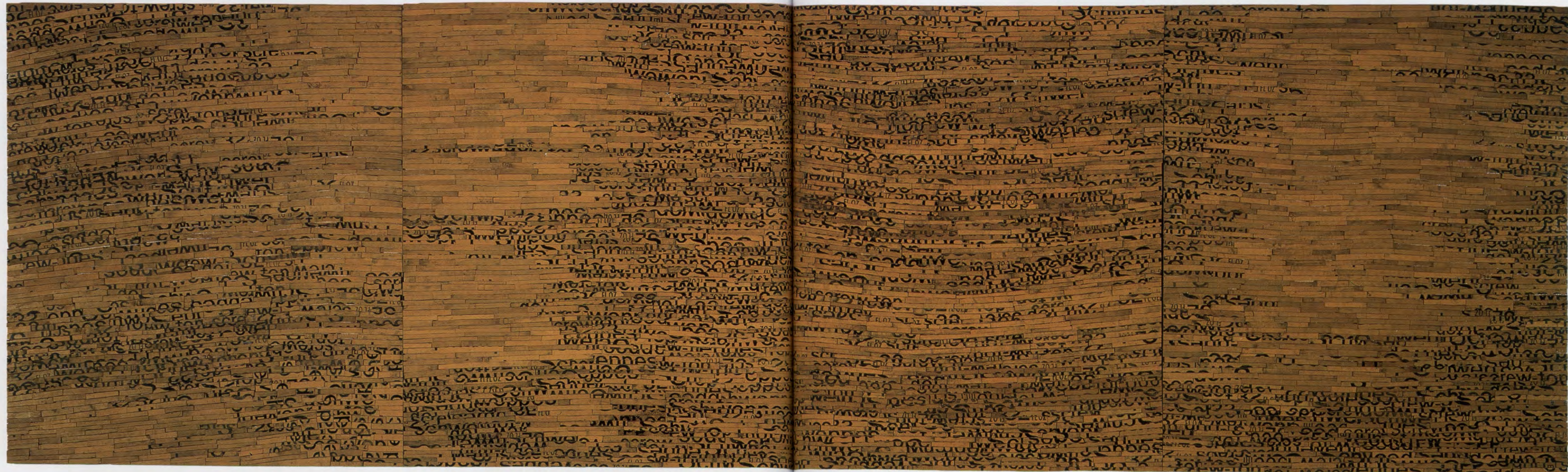




PLATE 16 *Apothecary* 1992 split and sawn soft-drink crates 1310 x 1000 mm PRIVATE COLLECTION, AUCKLAND COURTESY OF GOW LANGSFORD GALLERY, AUCKLAND/SYDNEY



PLATE 17 *Clouds I* 1992 hardboard on plywood, five panels, approximately 1240 x 3910 mm overall  
COLLECTION: ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES. PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE RUDY KOMON MEMORIAL FUND 1992





PLATE 18 *All That Jazz* 1989 sawn and split soft-drink crates on plywood 1310 x 1000 mm THE CORRIGAN FAMILY COLLECTION



PLATE 19 *Honeybunch* 1993 sawn timber rectangles 1090 x 820 mm GASCOIGNE FAMILY COLLECTION





PLATE 20 *Steel Magnolias* 1994 corrugated iron strips on plywood 1045 x 985 mm COLLECTION OF AMANDA AND ANDREW LOVE, SYDNEY



PLATE 21 *Foreign Affairs* 1994 sawn wood on craftboard 778 x 772 mm CHARTWELL COLLECTION, AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI

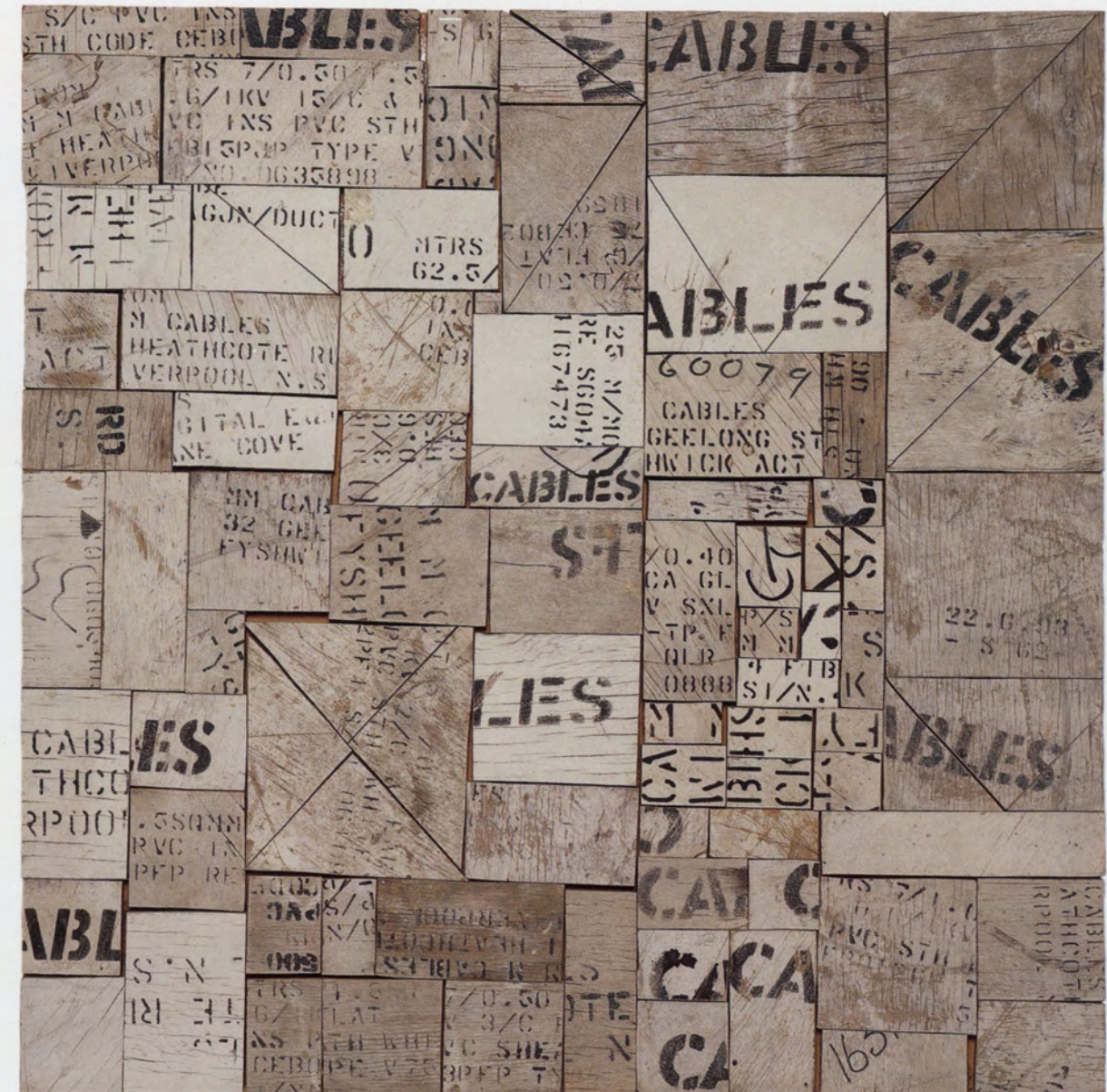
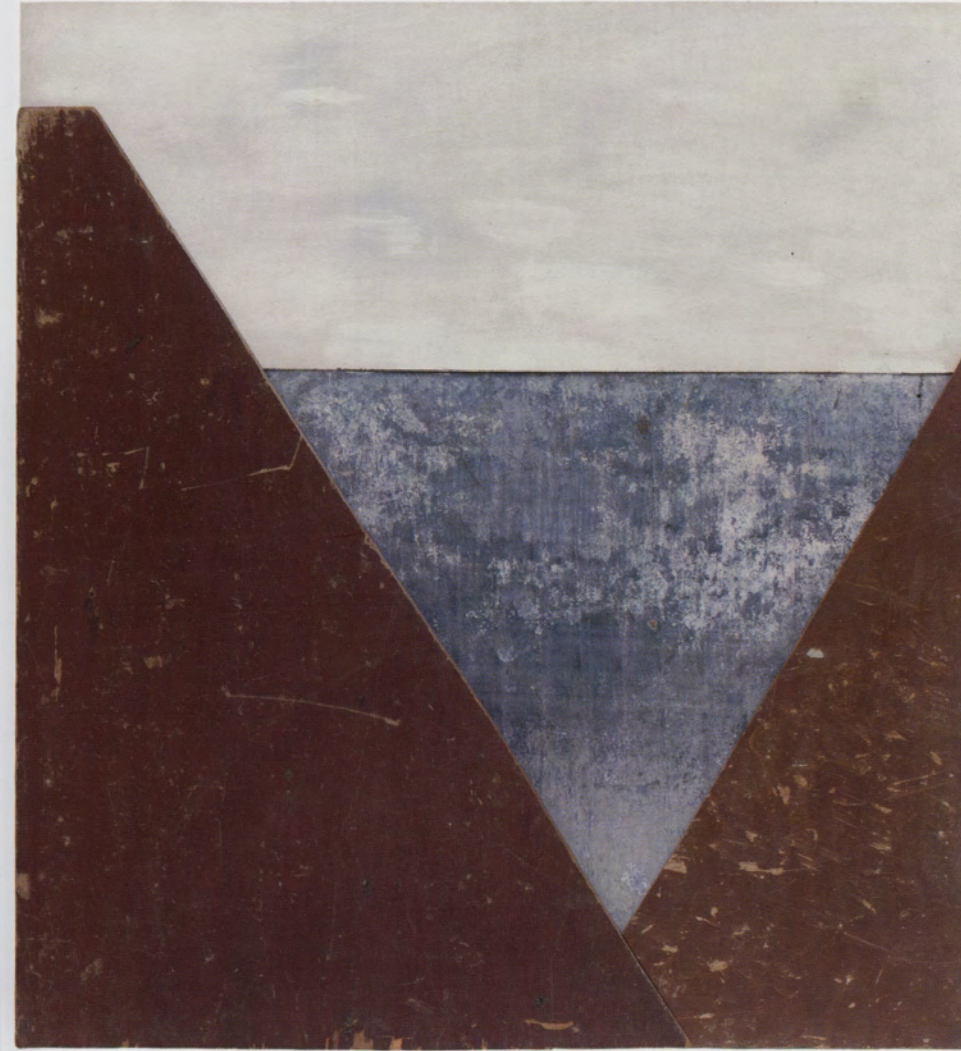




PLATE 22 *Suddenly the Lake* 1995 formboard, plywood, galvanised iron sheeting, paint on composition board, four panels, approximately 5200 x 1190 mm overall  
NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA. GIVEN BY THE ARTIST IN MEMORY OF MICHAEL LLOYD 1996.





PLATES 23 & 24 *Plein Air* 1994 masonite, white wood, box, wire netting, soft-drink crates, craftboard, approximately 12000 x 4000 mm COLLECTION OF SUE AND IAN BERNADT, PERTH

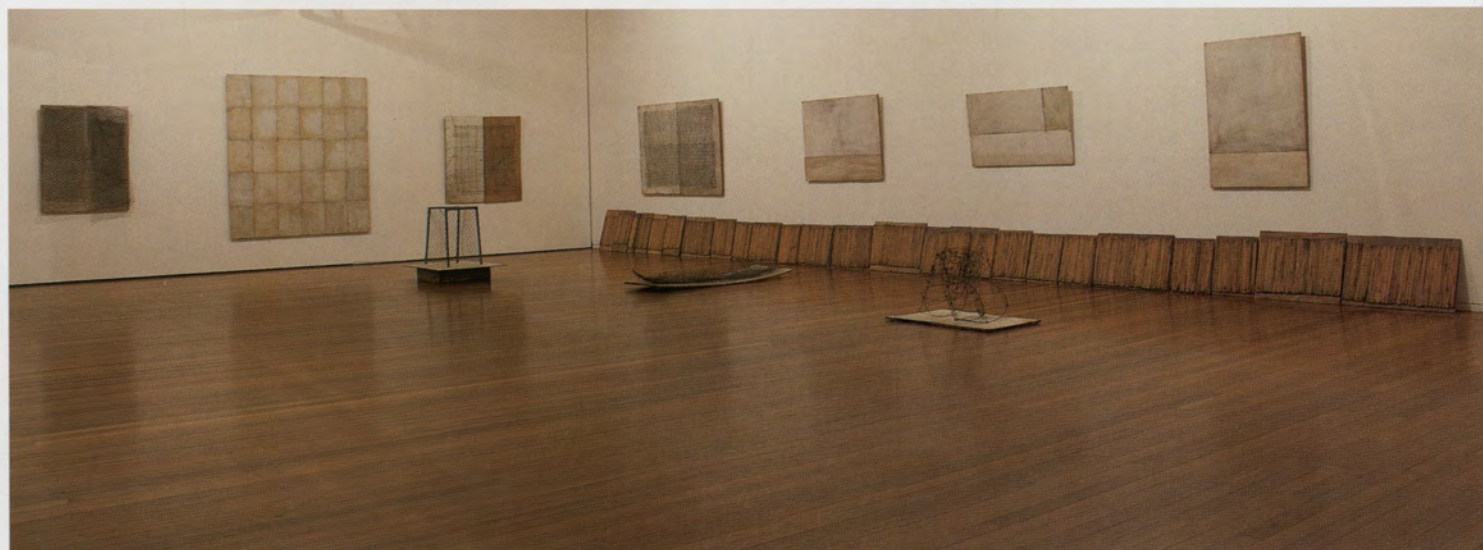


PLATE 25 *White Garden* 1995 white painted corrugated iron on wood 1770 x 1840 mm PRIVATE COLLECTION, SYDNEY





PLATE 26 *Checkerboard* 1996 sawn-up retro-reflective road signs on plywood 1230 x 1020 mm PRIVATE COLLECTION, CANBERRA



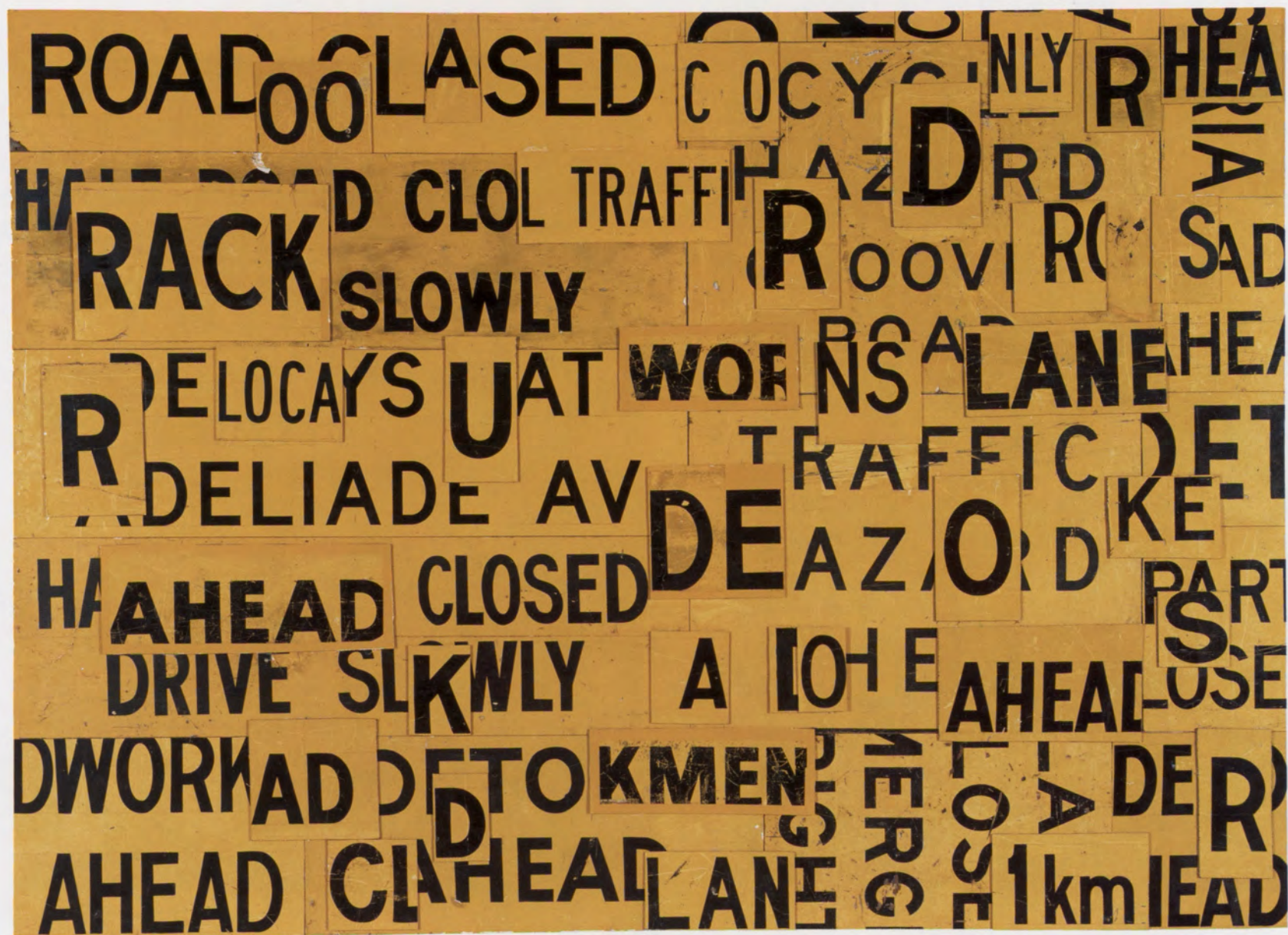
PLATE 27 *Flagged Down* 1998 sawn wood on wood 1200 x 1150 mm PRIVATE COLLECTION, AUCKLAND











## Chronology Compiled by Courtney Johnston.

### 1917

Rosalie Norah King Walker born 25 January, in Auckland, the second of three children of Marion (née Metcalfe) and Stanley Walker. She lives in Remuera until January 1943.

### 1930–1934

Attends Epsom Girls' Grammar.

### 1935–1939

Studies English, French, Latin, Greek and Mathematics at the University of Auckland, where she meets her future husband Ben Gascoigne, and graduates in 1939 with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

### 1938–39

Ben Gascoigne undertakes a PhD at Bristol University. He returns to New Zealand on the same ship as Carl Plate, an artist and gallery proprietor with whom the family would maintain contact until his death in 1977.

### 1939–1942

Embarks on a teaching career, her final appointment being at Auckland Girls' Grammar School. Ben Gascoigne leaves Auckland in 1941 to take up a war-related position at Mount Stromlo Observatory, Canberra.



FAR LEFT:  
Rosalie Gascoigne  
on her graduation  
day, 1939

LEFT:  
Ben and Rosalie  
Gascoigne on their  
wedding day at  
Mount Stromlo,  
9 January 1943

### 1943

Moves to Australia in early January. Rosalie and Ben marry later that month, and set up house at Mount Stromlo. Their first son, Martin, is born in November.

### 1945

Second son, Thomas, is born in June.

### 1948

The Gascoigne family visits New Zealand.

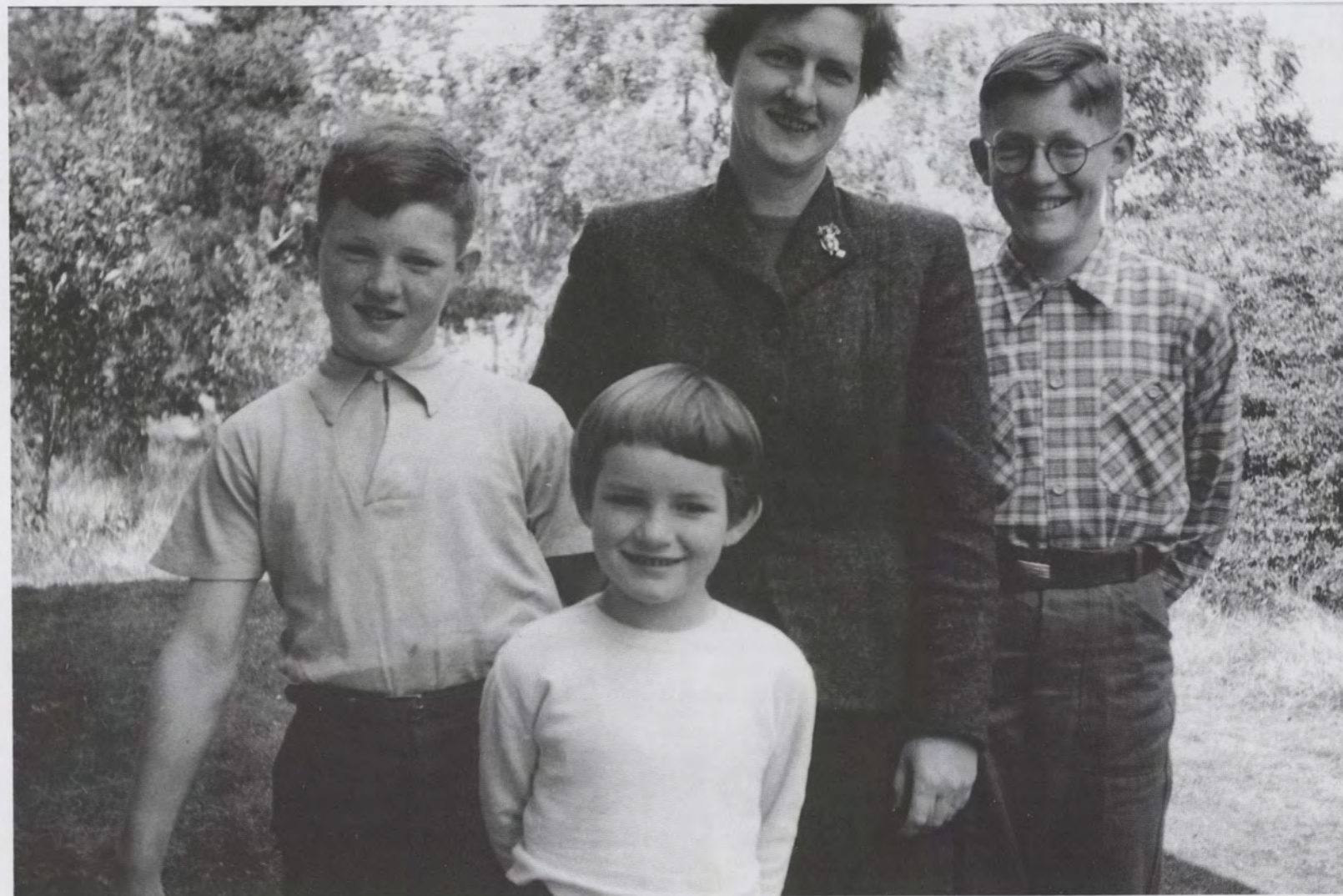
### 1949

Third child, Hester, is born in December.

### 1950s

Takes part in the Canberra Horticultural Society's exhibitions and gains a reputation as a flower arranger, noted for her arrangements of dried materials, which would later feature in her sculptural works. Her knowledge of modern art grows during this decade, through the local art society and Ben's friendship with Carl Plate. She buys her first work, a linocut by Georges Braque.





### 1957

Visits Auckland with daughter Hester.

### 1960

The Gascoigne family moves from Mount Stromlo to the Canberra suburb of Deakin.

### 1962

Joins Norman Sparnon's classes (which she continues to attend until 1972) to learn the classical Japanese art of flower arranging, Ikebana.

### 1963

Travels with Ben by sea to England, where Ben takes up a six-month exchange position at the Royal Greenwich Observatory. While living in Sussex they visit exhibitions in London, seeing work by Francis Bacon, contemporary American art and Henry Moore's sculpture in Battersea Park.

### 1964

Starts to make small metal sculptures using rusty pieces of discarded farm machinery found in the paddocks surrounding her home.

### Mid-1960s

During the 1960s the Canberra art scene continues to develop and Gascoigne's interest in art grows with it. Son Martin begins to collect work by young Sydney- and Melbourne-based artists, and becomes acquainted with James Mollison when he moves to Canberra to work with the Australian national art collection. Mollison is subsequently appointed the inaugural Director of the National Gallery of Australia.

### 1969

The family moves to another Canberra suburb, Pearce, and build an architecturally designed house with, as Gascoigne put it, 'room for pictures and places for my constructions'. Over the next few years Gascoigne is commissioned to make large Ikebana pieces for the Academy of Sciences building, the National Library and the Japanese Embassy.

### 1970

Accompanies Ben on a trip to Europe for astronomical conferences, visiting Japan, Denmark, Sweden, England, France (to see Carl Plate and other Australian artists in Paris) and Portugal.

### 1971-72

Makes several large-scale constructions out of animal bones, one of which (*Last Stand*) is shown at Canberra's Academy of Science.

### 1971-74

Looks after son Martin's art collection while he lives in Manila. Her friendship with James Mollison grows, and this is an important relationship for Gascoigne, both personally and professionally. Mollison ushers Gascoigne into the art world, introduces her to stimulating people and shows her contemporary works from the national collection.

### 1972

Meets artist Michael Taylor, who encourages her to think of herself as an artist and engineers her first opportunity to exhibit in Sydney. Gascoigne and her metal constructions are profiled in the book *Aspects of Sensibility - The Artist Craftsman in Australia*, and *Vogue Living* features an article on her constructions. Starts to buy artworks, including pieces by Australian artists Taylor, Ken Whisson and John Armstrong.

OPPOSITE:

Rosalie Gascoigne at Mount Stromlo, 1955, with her children (from left) Toss (12), Hester (8) and Martin (14).



Rosalie Gascoigne, c.1983,  
MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND  
TE PAPA TONGAREWA,  
NEGATIVE NUMBER B032284



### 1973

Begins making assemblages out of old boxes, including weathered apiary boxes. About this time she starts regularly reading art periodicals including *Artforum*, *Art International* and *Art in America*.

### 1974

Has her first solo exhibition (at the age of 57) at Macquarie Galleries, Canberra.

### 1975

In March four of Gascoigne's works are included in the second touring exhibition of the Phillip Morris Arts Grant collection for 'bold and innovative artists'. The exhibition is selected by James Mollison, and Gascoigne's work attracts favourable critical notice. Michael Taylor nominates Gascoigne for 'The Artist's Choice' at Gallery A, Sydney, in May, where her work is enthusiastically received by critics and acquired for several public collections.

### 1976

Gascoigne begins to work on a larger scale using galvanised iron. Has her second solo show, 'Assemblage', at Gallery A; consisting of more than 50 works, the show includes *The Colonel's Lady*.

### 1977

A large floor-based work (*Pale Landscape*) is shown for the first time in 'New Work: Rosalie Gascoigne' at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. In Canberra Gascoigne becomes friendly with James Gleeson, surrealist painter, art critic, art historian and advisory curator for the national collection. His poetic appreciation of art is an alternative to Mollison's formalist aesthetic.

### 1978

Only four years after her first solo show, Gascoigne is given a survey exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, 'Survey 2: Rosalie Gascoigne'. Bruce Pollard of Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne, invites Gascoigne to join his stable of artists.

### 1979

*March Past* (1978) is included in an exhibition at the Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane; this is the first time Gascoigne shows a work made from soft-drink crates. The show also includes *Feathered Chairs*.

### 1980

Encouraged by Mollison, Gascoigne travels to New York on her own 'art pilgrimage'. Highlights include a Pablo Picasso retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and seeing the work of Arshile Gorky at the National Gallery, Washington. Ben Gascoigne retires and becomes Rosalie's assistant and archivist – her 'memory'. Makes *Step Through*, the first work constructed from linoleum.



### 1982

Gascoigne is selected (along with Peter Booth) to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale: this is the first time a female artist represents Australia at the event. (A number of works shown at the Biennale, including *Pink Window*, and *Scrub Country* are included in the 2004 City Gallery exhibition.)

### 1983

A major exhibition, 'Rosalie Gascoigne: Sculpture 1975-82', including *Piece to Walk Around*, is organised by the National Art Gallery, Wellington, and tours the North Island. Gascoigne visits New Zealand for the opening, gifting *Pale Landscape* to the National Gallery and buying one of Colin McCahon's 'Gate' series paintings. This year marks a turning point in Gascoigne's practice: the addition of a studio to the family's home means Gascoigne has more space to work in, encouraging an increase in scale and allowing her to compare works as she makes them.

### 1984

*Set Up*, *The Colonel's Lady* and *Graven Image* are included in 'Australian Sculpture Now: The Second Australian Sculpture Triennial'. A solo show at the Pinacotheca Gallery includes *Turn of the Tide*.

### 1985

Makes *Highway Code*, the first work using cut-up retro-reflective road signs.

### 1988

Three works by Gascoigne are included in the 1988 Australian Biennale, where they are shown opposite Colin McCahon's paintings and next to the work of Georges Braque. Her work is singled out by visiting New York curator and critic Dan Cameron. In November Gascoigne begins to use a bandsaw to slice the wooden panels she cuts from soft-drink boxes, creating the slightly curved, fine-cut slats that animate works such as *Monaro*. She visits Auckland for the opening of the exhibition 'Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys', and has a successful reunion with her sister, Daintry; *Hill Station* refers to her sister's farm outside Putaruru, near Hamilton.

### 1989

Has her first show at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, the beginning of an ongoing relationship. The show includes *Monaro* and *All That Jazz*.

### 1990

Gascoigne is paired with New Zealand's most famous painter, Colin McCahon, for 'Rosalie Gascoigne-Colin McCahon: Sense of Place' at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, and Ian Potter Gallery, Melbourne.

### 1992

*Clouds I* is awarded the John McCaughey Prize by the Art Gallery of New South Wales Trust

### 1994

Gascoigne is made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to art. *Big Yellow* and *Skewbald* are included in 'Assemblage' at the Auckland City Art Gallery and the Wellington City Gallery. Dan Cameron includes Gascoigne (alongside Jeff Koons, Rebecca Horn, Sherrie Levine and other artists) in his group show 'What is Contemporary Art?' in Malmo, Sweden. *Steel Magnolias* is shown in '100% Tracy', an exhibition of works on the theme of corrugated iron, staged in Darwin to commemorate the devastation caused by Cyclone Tracy. *Foreign Affairs* is shown at the Fourth Australian Art Fair.

### 1996

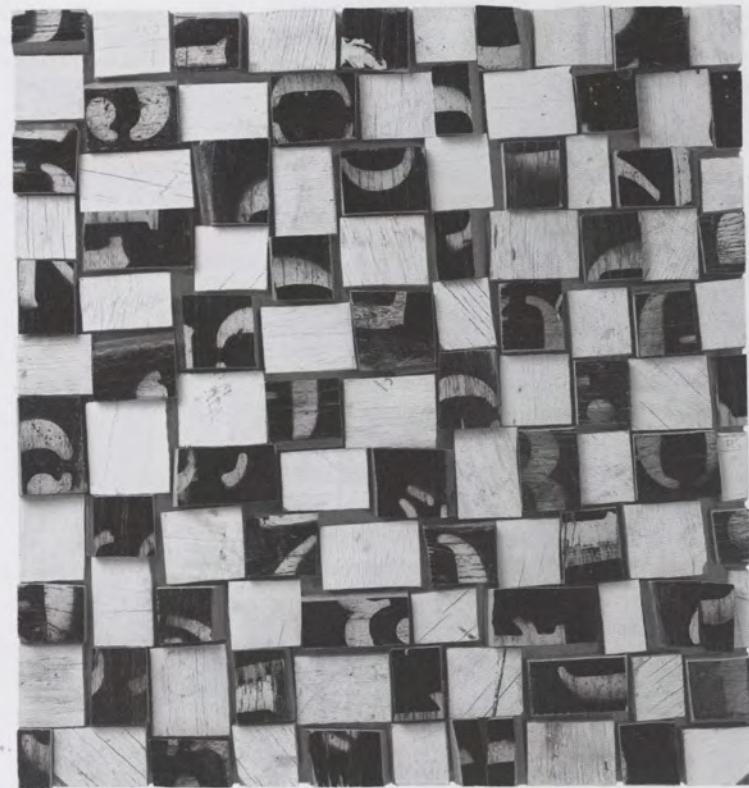
Gifts *Suddenly the Lake* to the National Gallery of Australia, in memory of Michael Lloyd, a long-serving curator at the Gallery.

### 1997

The Art Gallery of New South Wales stages a major survey of landscape-based works, 'Rosalie Gascoigne – Material as Landscape'.

*Step Through*  
linoleum pieces  
mounted on wooden  
blocks approximately  
3700 x 930 x 280 mm  
overall  
COLLECTION, NATIONAL  
GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA,  
CANBERRA, GIFT OF THE  
PHILIP MORRIS ARTS  
GRANT





**Checkers** 1996  
wood, 520 x 490 mm  
GASCOIGNE FAMILY  
COLLECTION

### 1998

Publication of a major monograph, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, by Vici MacDonald.

### 1999

Gascoigne's work is included in three large exhibitions in New Zealand. She travels to Auckland for 'Home and Away: Contemporary New Zealand and Australian Art from the Chartwell Collection', which includes her retro-reflective work *Big Yellow*. In the major exhibition 'Toi Toi Toi' (shown in Kassel, Germany, and Auckland) Gascoigne is aligned with Len Lye and Colin McCahon as a significant first-generation modern New Zealand artist. *White Garden* and *Cockatoos* are included in this exhibition. Her work also features in 'Drive' at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Makes *Metropolis* and *Birdsong*, the most recent works in the 2004 City Gallery exhibition. Rosalie Gascoigne dies in Canberra on 23 October.

### 2000

'From the studio of Rosalie Gascoigne' is held at the Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra.

### 2001

Gascoigne's work features in 'MCA Unpacked', at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, and 'The Art of Transformation', at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

### 2002

Two of Gascoigne's works are included in the opening survey show of the new Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia at Federation Square, Melbourne.

### 2003

Gow Langsford Gallery, Sydney, shows the large-scale installation *Plein Air*. Gascoigne's work is shown in 'MCA Unpacked II' at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. *Set Up* is included in 'Image and Object – Still Life in New Zealand' at Pataka; Porirua Museum of Arts & Cultures. Four of Gascoigne's assemblages are included in 'Home Sweet Home: the Peter Fay Collection' at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

### 2004

'Rosalie Gascoigne' is staged at City Gallery Wellington, the first overview of Gascoigne's work to be presented in New Zealand.

## Further reading

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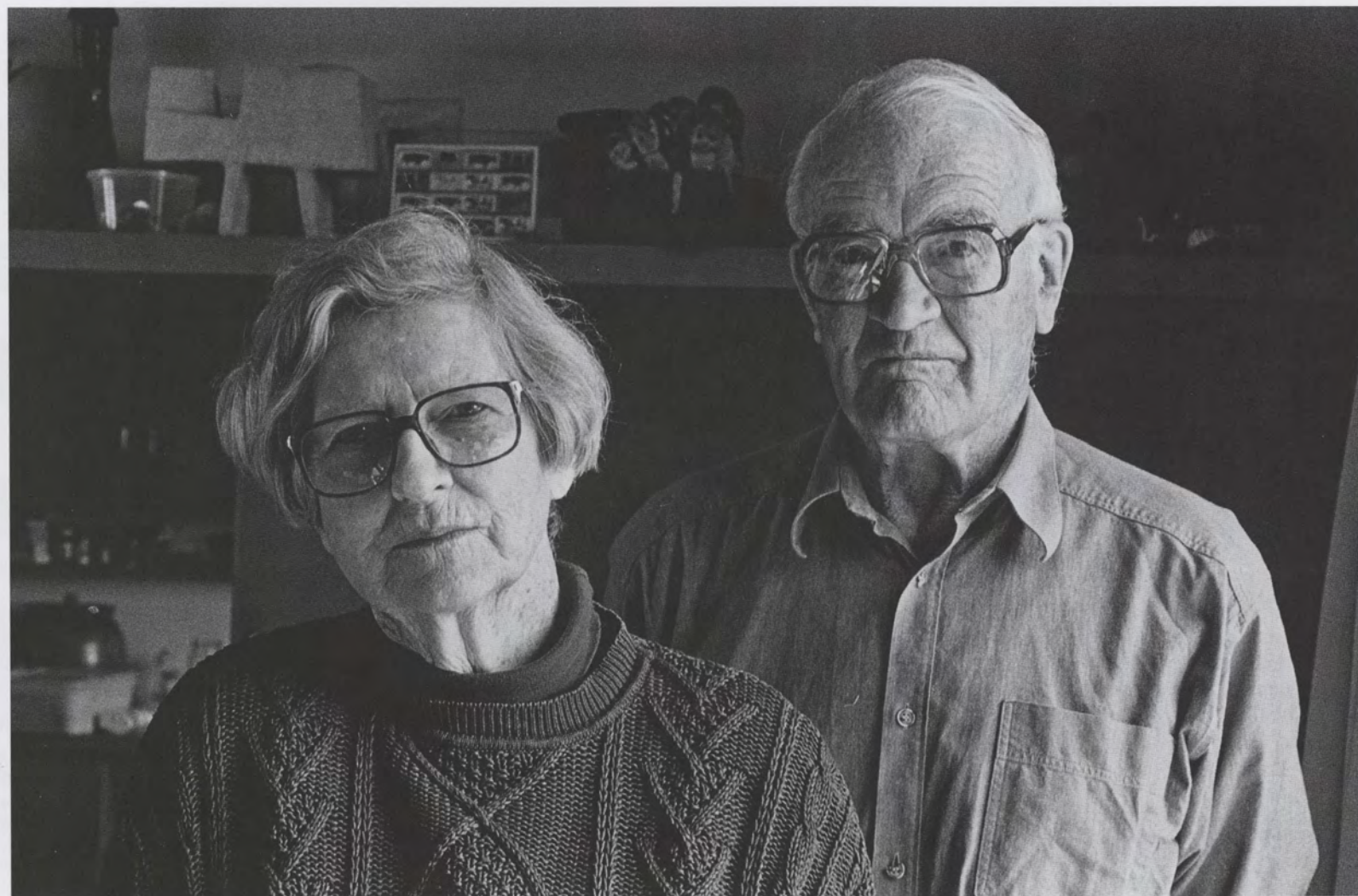
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Ben and Rosalie Gascoigne, 1997 PHOTO: WILLIAM YANG



**GREGORY O'BRIEN**

is a senior curator at the City Gallery Wellington where he has worked on such exhibitions as 'Hotere – out the black window' (1998), 'Parihaka – the art of passive resistance' (2000) and 'Drawbridge – Wide Open Interior' (2001). With Mark Williams and Jenny Bornholdt, he co-edited *An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry (in English)*, published by Oxford University Press in 1996, and a collection of his essays about art and literature, *After Bathing at Baxter's*, appeared in 2002.

**PAULA SAVAGE**

has been Director of the City Gallery Wellington since 1990. She was New Zealand Project Director of 'The World Over: Art in the Age of Globalisation' (1996), a joint venture between the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and City Gallery Wellington. With Elizabeth Kerr, CEO Creative New Zealand, she was project director of Michael Stevenson's New Zealand Venice Biennale project 2003. With Lara Strongman, she co-edited *Tracey Moffatt* (City Gallery Wellington, 2002).

**DANIEL THOMAS**

has played a significant role in the development of Australian art for over three decades. He first admired works by Gascoigne in 1975 when he was curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. From 1978, at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, then as Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, he knew her well. He now 'lives on the Tasmanian Riviera and writes occasionally'.

**BARBARA ANDERSON**

is one of New Zealand's leading novelists. Her books include *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, which won the Wattie Book of the Year Award in 1992, and more recently *Long Hot Summer* (1999) and *Change of Heart* (2003).



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