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Gascoigne, Rosalie Norah King

(1917 - 1999)

Born	25 January, 1917, Auckland New Zealand
Died	25 October, 1999, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Artist

Summary

New Zealand-born Australian artist Rosalie Gascoigne, is acclaimed as one of Australasia's most significant artists. She moved to the Australian Capital Territory in 1943 and remained there for the rest of her life. With no formal art training apart from studying sogetsu ikebana, Gascoigne held her first solo exhibition in Canberra in 1974 aged 57 and four years later was the first Australian woman to be invited to the Venice Biennale. By the time of her death in 1999 she boasted work in the collections of all Australian and New Zealand major galleries, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; she has been shown in public exhibitions in Europe and Asia. Gascoigne's work, made with found objects, was inspired by her feelings for the Monaro region in which she lived.

Details

Rosalie Norah King Walker was born on 25 January 1917 in her parents' home in Remuera, an affluent suburb in Auckland, New Zealand. She was the second of three children. Gascoigne's mother, Australian-born Marion Hamilton (Sarah) Walker (born Metcalfe) (1882-1969), was a university graduate and high school teacher from a well-to-do professional family which had emigrated to New Zealand from England via Australia. Her New Zealand-born father, Stanley King Walker (1883-1960), was an automotive engineer who spent time in San Francisco learning his trade and experienced the 1906 earthquake.

When Gascoigne was 5 her parents separated and Marion Walker took her children to live with her mother, Jessie Metcalfe in the same suburb. During Gascoigne's childhood Marion Walker taught at Epsom Girls' Grammar, a local public school. Gascoigne often referred to her feeling that the adults in her childhood had little time for her: "you were seen and not heard a lot, because people didn't have time for you." (*Australian Biography*, 1999, tape 1) There is a strong outsider narrative in the stories Gascoigne later told of her life. As a child she felt different from the others in her family because she was outgoing, enjoyed the outdoors and liked making things whereas the others tended to be more solitary and enjoy reading. Her later self and public identification as an artist apparently eased the sense of being out-of-step or different and she often quoted Picasso who said an artist is born, not made.

During summer holidays on Waiheke Island in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, the young Rosalie collected seashells – the beginning of her lifelong habit of collecting multiples of things she found in nature. At Remuera Primary School she won a flower arranging competition with buttercups in a brass vase – a harbinger of her later love for flowers and composition that led to her art making. At Epsom Girls' Grammar School she made friends who remained with her throughout her life through regular letters and trans Tasman visits.

Gascoigne majored in English literature at Auckland University, graduating with a BA in 1939 and after a further year at Auckland Teachers' College she taught at Auckland Girls' Grammar School. Her love of English literature, in particular poetry, influenced her later art which she frequently referred to as 'stammering concrete poetry.' It was at Auckland University that she met Sydney Charles Bartholomew 'Ben' Gascoigne (1915-2010) whom she later married.

Ben Gascoigne had moved to Australia in 1942 where he was engaged in wartime optics work at the Commonwealth Solar Observatory, Mt Stromlo on the Monaro plain near Canberra. Rosalie proposed to him by letter and on 9 January 1943 they married at St John's Church, Reid, on 9 January 1943.

Accustomed to Auckland's cityscape, its lush green volcanic hills, blue harbours and sober coloured, melodious birds, the Monaro's crisp dry landscape, intense summer heat, great blonde paddocks, and bright screeching birds stunned Gascoigne. For some years she felt dislocated and isolated in this radically different environment and she felt an outsider in the small Stromlo community:

I think being a New Zealander made me an outsider. ... We're different people you know. We were, especially in those times, and you wanted your own people around you. (*Australian Biography*, 1999, tape 2)

I was fairly desperate for something that I could associate with. And ... nature was my friend. (*Australian Biography*, 1999, tape 1) ... I looked long and hard at a very ordinary piece of Australian countryside, and tried to wring visual interest and variety out of what I saw there. It was mostly grass, weeds, dead wood, rocks and pine trees ... It was a good apprenticeship (Wesley, 1972, p. 39).

Gascoigne eventually came to love the freedom of the Monaro landscape – "the width and the rock under your feet and the high sky" (Ibid, tape 3) and it was the inspiration for her art. She described nature as her friend.

The Gascoigne children – Martin, Thomas ('Toss') and Hester were all born at the Canberra Hospital during Gascoigne's first 6 years in Australia. Gascoigne grew flowers on Stromlo to meet her need for colour and beauty. She collected stones and grass and old pieces of iron and displayed them on her mantelpiece because she "needed things to look at". Her flower-arranging skills became known in Canberra and she was sought after to make civic arrangements, lecture and teach flower arranging; Dame Patty Menzies was once one of her pupils in Canberra.

From 1962 to 1969 Gascoigne studied the formal Japanese art of sogetsu ikebana with Japanese-trained Australian master Norman Sparnon. She found that ikebana "gave form. From practising ikebana", she said, "I got the vision of how to use the things I liked." (Eagle, p. 132 in *Rosalie Gascoigne: plain air*, 2004, p. 38).

But ikebana's limitations eventually impelled Gascoigne to experiment with sculpture and installations. Her friendship with nature, growing love of the Monaro and passion for collecting led her to work with any discarded materials that she found and liked – materials such as old bits of iron, animal bones, sticks, dollies found in local dumps, formboard plywood from building sites, discarded reflective road signs and the signature theme parrots cut from Arnott's biscuit packets. The materials were all scavenged, as was Gascoigne's preference, – she said "I like getting things in from the paddock. They've had the sun, they've had the rain, it's real stuff" (Fenneley, 1998).

To find this 'real stuff', Gascoigne roamed the Monaro paddocks, rubbish tips and roadsides in her hunt for materials. Accompanying friends included poet Rosemary Dobson, artist Ingo Kleinert, writer Mildred Kirk.

During the 1960s her elder son, Martin Gascoigne, who had begun collecting art, introduced his mother to James Mollison who was to become the first director of the National Gallery of Australia. Mollison became an important mentor and guide for Gascoigne in her art making.

In 1969 the Gascoignes moved to a house in Pearce designed for them by leading Canberra architect, Theo Bischof. The new house, with its freedom of space and light, freed her art making and Gascoigne's art took off in a new way.

During 1970-1971 she made large installations from animal bones, one of which was exhibited at the Academy of Science, Canberra in 1972; in the early 1970s, after discovering a treasure trove of "30 beautiful old weathered bee boxes" (Gellatly, 2008, p.14) she found at an abandoned apiary, Gascoigne adopted box constructions as practical means of anchoring the objects in her assemblages.

After her first solo exhibition – at Macquarie Galleries, Canberra in 1974 – James Mollison requested four pieces for the Philip Morris Arts Grant touring collection and in 1975 painter Michael Taylor who had been teaching at the Canberra School of Art (now the ANU School of Art) nominated her for the 'Artists' Choice', a group show in Sydney. Critics praised her work and over the following years there were further solo exhibitions around Australia including a survey of her work at the National Gallery of Victoria.

By the 1980s Gascoigne made fewer three dimensional objects. Moving into 2-dimensions, she pared her work right back, stripping away anything extraneous. Her art moved towards abstraction (O'Brien in *Rosalie Gascoigne: plain air*, 2004, p. 11) and grid patterns likened by Mildred Kirk to Agnes Martin's grids of colour, texture and shape (Ibid, p. 11).

Awarded an Order of Australia in 1994 for services to art, Gascoigne was an integral part of the Canberra art community. Painter Marie Hagerty and sculptor Jan Brown numbered among close friends. Artist Peter Vandermark was her studio assistant and friend. She was invited to speak to students at the ANU School of Art on numerous occasions and entertained the art community at her home prior to exhibitions of her work.

Feeling was a central part of Gascoigne's work. She often referred to Wordsworth's notion " 'about emotion remembered in tranquillity.' ... it's not a question of just making pictures ... it's expressing something." (Gascoigne pp. 35-44, in *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 2008, p. 47). Gascoigne's art expressed her feelings about the Monaro and sometimes echoed her feelings about the Auckland volcanic hills, harbours and beaches of her childhood and early adulthood. As art historian Deborah Clark writes, "Literally drawn from the landscape Gascoigne observed and travelled, her materials gave shape to her art which in turn gave shape to her experience, remade as landscape. ... over time she realised a way of seeing and the vivid means to express it." (Clark in *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 2008, p. 33). With her fresh eyes Gascoigne presented Australians with a new way of experiencing the Monaro landscape.

Rosalie Gascoigne died on 25 October 1999 at the John James Hospital in Canberra. She was diagnosed with cancer shortly after a visit to Auckland where she was a guest of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki as speaker at the "Home and Away – Contemporary Australian and New Zealand Art from the Chartwell Collection" exhibition in which her work "Big Yellow" (1988) featured; she died just three months later.

Gascoigne brought a seasoned *savoir-faire* to her art. Light and shadow coloured her Auckland childhood. The shock of migration and the years of isolation on Stromlo, marriage and motherhood, her friendship with nature and love of found objects, and the rigour of *sogetsu ikebana* are all pieces of who Gascoigne became.

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Market profile - Rosalie Gascoigne, Dedman, Roger, 2004

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Colin McCahon: Victory over death, Gascoigne, Rosalie, 1984

Rosalie Gascoigne, Jacobs, Genevieve, 2006

Different means to similar ends: Rosalie Gascoigne and Agnes Martin, Kirk, Mildred, 1986

Two Artists: Rosalie Gascoigne II Memphis Wood, Levertov, Denise, 1981

Roadrunner - Rosalie Gascoigne, City Gallery, Wellington (to May 16), McAloon, William, 2004

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Rosalie Gascoigne: Great blond paddocks, Oliver, Bronwyn, 2000

Artist's choice: Rosalie Gascoigne, Earth 9, Sages, Jenny, 1996

Gascoigne's collected works, Sands, Kate, 2001

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What is Contemporary Art?, Cameron, Dan; Palmquist, Anna; Edstrom, Peter; Mohlin, Helene and Rooseum

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Survey 2, Rosalie Gascoigne, Survey 2, Rosalie Gascoigne; National Gallery of Victoria, 1978

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Rosalie Gascoigne, Bottrell, Fay and Stacey, Wes, 1977

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[Rosalie Gascoigne interviewed by Helen Topliss \[sound recording\]](#)

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[Papers of Rosalie Gascoigne, 1930-2011 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers of Ben Gascoigne, 1938-2007 \[manuscript\]](#)

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