

Front cover:
7 Red Beach, X'mas, 1984
92 x 69.4cm
Wood, nails, shells, paint.

Fine Arts Gallery, The University of Tasmania
6-28 September, 1985

Rosalie Gascoigne, 1985

James Mollison was a friend when, in the early 1970s, Rosalie Gascoigne entered the art world. She remembers his responses to her work. "Your work is lyrical", he said after watching for a few years. And so it is. Poetic, at times song-like, and invariably expressing the artist's own thoughts and feelings.

Poets have written about the celebration of Nature best, especially when they write from an independent position, paralleling it.

"White, yes, pale with the pallor of old timbers

Thistle-stalks, shells, the extreme pallor of starlight –"

Rosemary Dobson wrote the magnificent poem which begins with these lines in July this year, after spending a day with Rosalie in the countryside near Canberra. Rosalie was harvesting the pale, dry thistle-stalks which appear in the work called *Flight*. Denise Levertov, an American poet, wrote a poem after visiting the artist's home in 1981 and seeing

"...slabs of old wood, weathered, residual,

formed by the absence of what was cut

for forgotten purpose, out of their past:

they meet now, austere, graceful,

transfigured by being placed,

being seen."

Rosalie's university courses, fifty years ago in Auckland, New Zealand, in the classics and the Romantic poets, remain her professional training in a very real sense.

She is not trained in the visual arts: "It is no use pretending I am – I can come in late and careless because it is so unlikely and silly that I should". Art and one or two artists had been around for years but for Rosalie the watershed was in the late 1960s when, within her family and in a small circle of Canberra friends, there had developed a lively interest in art, especially new art. Her son Martin was buying works by Dick Watkins, Robert Hunter, Guy Stuart, Roy Lichtenstein. Going off to Manila in 1971 he left them with her: one especially, a splendid, ugly collage by Dick Watkins, teased her. Leaving the arranging of flowers, her disciplined outlet till then, and never enough, she went for the bigger game.

Not only was she not trained professionally but there was no long-standing tradition for her kind of work. It posed a problem of identification for the artist first and then for her audience. She wrote in December 1971, "I am thinking... that we call my things 'bush sculpture' – 'bush' partly because of their content and partly in the context of 'bush lawyer', 'bush carpenter'".

The first solo exhibition was in 1974 when Rosalie was aged 57. She



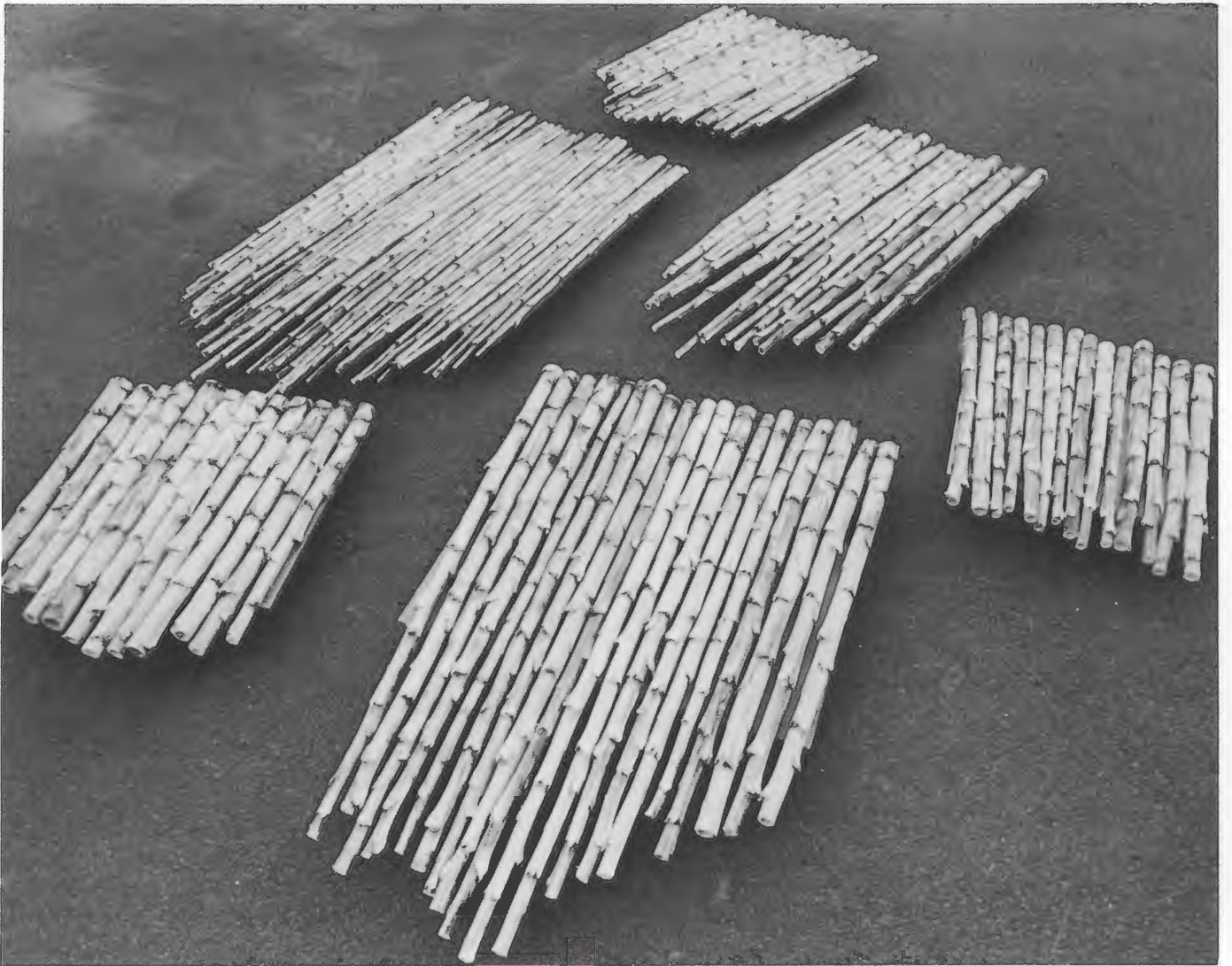
Last Stand, 1972/1985

Nine pieces, tallest 3 metres. Bones, iron, steel.

came into the art world, like Athena from the head of Zeus, full-grown and artistically fully-armed. *Last Stand* is a work of 1972, two years before her debut. It has seen a number of forms. The first work was eighteen metres of bones threaded on fencing wire prancing and looping through the garden. In an early letter she described this work as 'harsh weeds'. Whatever went into making Rosalie an artist had already done its job by the time she went gathering bones in 1971 but, entering the art community, she responded to new influences. The art community and its gossip, its expectations, and ups and downs, became another of her field trips. Looking at her work people talked about Joseph Cornell, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, "collage" and "assemblage". In Australia there was the work of John Armstrong and a few others. So naturally she looked. In January 1974 James Mollison showed her Duchamp's "cage of marble sugar lumps" and "bicycle wheel on stool" and Man Ray's "mysterious object, wrapped sewing-machine or whatever", in storage with the rest of the Australian National Gallery collection. She saw John Armstrong's exhibition at Watters, Sydney in 1973. Her son Martin sent a book on collage and Cornell for Christmas 1973. She responded to their suggestions from her own clear position, already more critical of this kind of work that was close to her own than she was of other, different work. "I think a windmill like the one at Michael [Taylor]'s farm would be a much better Ready Made."

In January 1974 she wrote with friendly irony to Martin about "another box" she was working on. "I worked abortively all day yesterday. What with your book and large Marcel Duchamp I have taken on influences. Rewarding in end but clouding my own vision at moment. I assessed position last night, "False, false" and this a.m. returned to my true loves and think I have pulled it off." The twenty-two boxes from an old, discarded apiary, and Rosalie's work on them, date from the day she found the boxes seven months before she looked at Cornell. (Letter of May 1973).

One of Rosalie's strengths is clarity. She responds directly to people, to art, to nature, and bounces back as directly. She's not introverted or contemplative. She's responsive. It has been of great benefit to her art, enabling her to see her own work clearly, what it is and how it comes across, and to judge influences as benign, when they are 'true'. In that same letter of January 1974 she wrote, "Interesting to find that the finishing (conclusive) touch was something I got from your book... The base [a double layer of wood] and top piece of wood [curved] are really due to Cornell influence".



Flight, 1985

Seven pieces, varying widths and lengths. Thistle stalks.

As an outsider, untrained, non-professional, older and a woman – classified 'housewife' to boot – Rosalie had one way of proving that her work was art, and that, the best way. If her works had presence, if they came across and continued to come across, for other people as well as herself, and in other environments than the one in which they were made, then they were art, good art. Encountering her work at Gallery A, Sydney in 1975 Daniel Thomas found it "quite unlike anybody else's in Australia". The assemblages he saw, such as "a neat horizontal stack of dried stalks in a piece of convex metal", were organised "with a marvellously sure and fully sculptural taste in setting up contrasts of texture, colour, direction and weight". He too, used the word "poetic". (Sydney Morning Herald 8 May 1975). Coming away from her exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1978 I wrote of "an artist who works at a level concentrated on the ways things look, down to the most minute details, and so makes other assemblages look clumsy". (The Age 2 May 1978).

Rosalie has written about other artists' work in ways that are appropriate to her own. "Ken Whisson's paintings are full of the look and feel of nature. He is good at clouds. He can paint the quality of air. He knows the sea. He is a passionate student of the human condition. He paints like a man who needs space both to move in and to think in". (mid 1970's) In 1973 she wrote, "Re John Armstrong, the one I liked, with key rings or similar, has a quality some of the others haven't. Definite presence. Nothing to be added and nothing to be taken away. Also neatness and lasting qualities. Disciplined. Not full of romping fun. Strangely spiritual – ecclesiastical, classical..." Of Colin McCahon's *Victory over Death 2* she wrote in 1984, "a banner of great presence... monumental and absolute".

'Classical' is one of her words, so is 'presence'.

Her art hasn't altered all that much over thirteen years, not in the way it would have if she had been discovering everything in that time. "Art confirmed me", says Rosalie, her work is "unlike anybody else's in Australia", wrote Daniel Thomas in 1975. So where did she begin if not in the so-called informal sculpture of the 1970s? My guess is that the decisive moment was in 1963 or 1964 on the steps of Mark Foy's, Sydney, drinking coffee and reading a big new book about Ikebana. "I read on, feeling that I knew for myself everything it was saying".

The first lesson in Ikebana, awareness of nature, she had. "I was already bringing back the hill-tops and rivers in the form of dried native flowers, river stones and grasses. I was all wild surmise. I saw Norman Sparmon using materials such as tree-roots which I'd already lugged into my house and not known how to use. Ikebana gave an



Honey Flow, 1985

108 x 84cm. Wood, paint, nails.

absolute. It gave form. To do things exactly steadied you down. From practicing Ikebana I got the vision of how to use the things I liked."

It sounds like Plato, this vision or precious intimation of a perfect form or absolute, which is the unrealisable aspiration of art. Michelangelo was a neoplatonist. Rosalie is too, though not literally: she doesn't know the term. The vital step for her between a wild surmise and knowing how to realise a work of art was the Ikebana *exercises*. Like practicing scales in music, in Ikebana one year was spent following a few rigid rules. There were upright arrangements and open arrangements. The rules were to maintain the angles, 90°, 5° or whatever, absolutely, and to keep the base firm. After that first stage the strictures cease because by then if you're good, you have absorbed the principles. Rosalie abandoned the classes when, their purpose served, she wanted more freedom, but not before Ikebana, like Plato's abstract form, had provided her with an internalised sense of perfect order. She now had her original, passionate acquisitiveness plus the rare sculptural sense which the art community noticed.

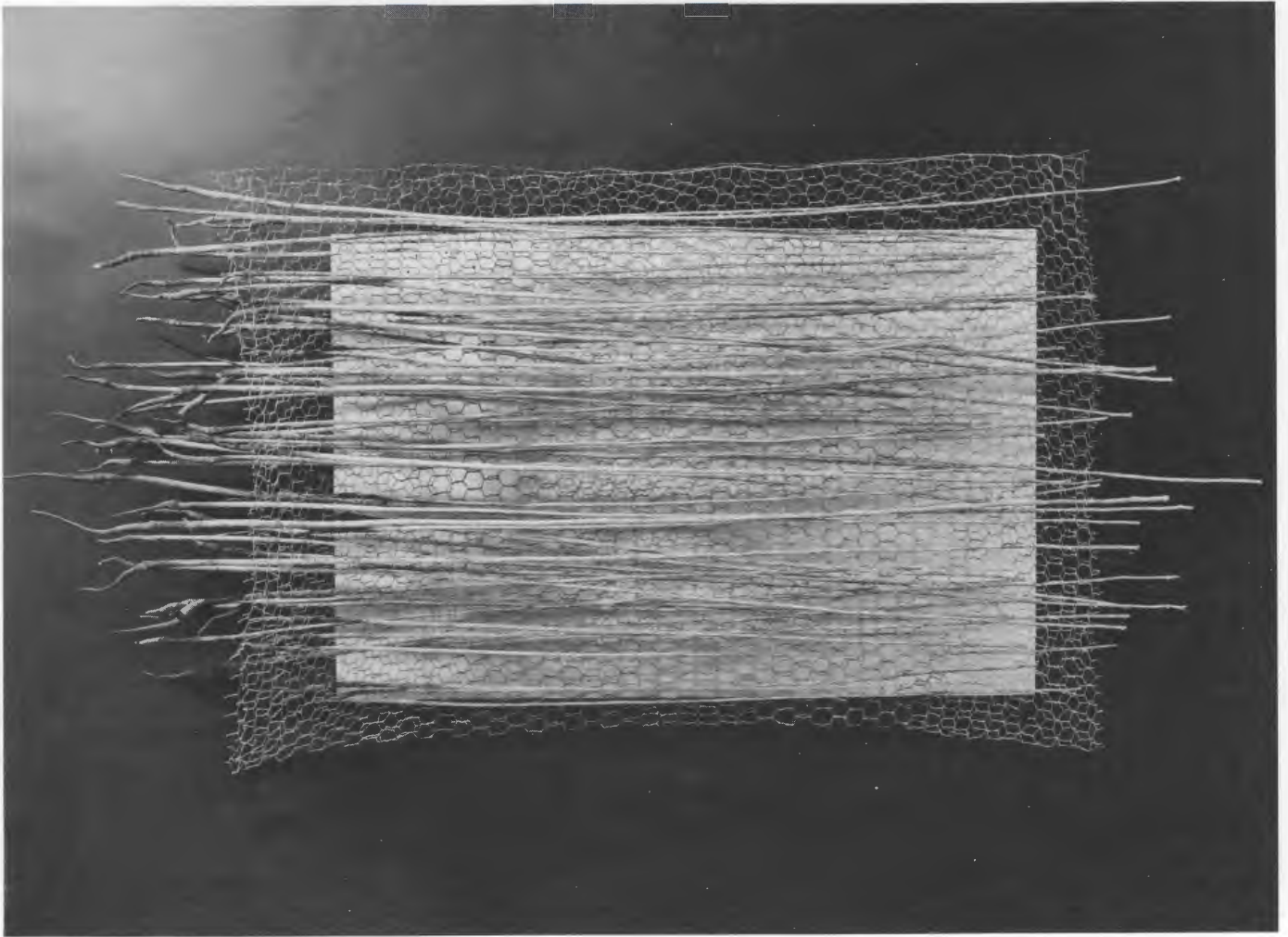
"This is a piece for walking around and contemplating. It is about being in the country with its shifting light and shades of grey, its casualness and its prodigality. The viewer's response to the landscape may differ from mine but I hope this piece will convey some sense of the countryside that produced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

To see Rosalie Gascoigne's work is properly to feel something bigger. Nature. She respects her materials. She dismantles boxes to get the planks or to cut out images – that is where the pineapples come from. She removes nails. She saws. She scrubs. But she won't alter the thing that first drew her. There is no painting, no manipulating of the material to its detriment.

The titles are allusive, not meant to lead the viewer or to be clever but to signify something the work might suggest. They aren't always the same as the subjects or materials. *Honey Flow* is an example. Whereas the title *Flight* refers to what the work is about – birds raking the sky in flight. *Highway code* fits both the material and its cryptic lettering. It is made of yellow road signs the artist found in a tip. They had been purposely scrambled by being cut up and painted with slashes of white. From this deconstruction Rosalie made one of her best wall panels. Moreover, since the yellow is retro-reflective, the panel takes on another, spectral, presence after dark.

Mary Eagle, August 1985.

(Mary Eagle is a curator of Australian Art, at the Australian National Gallery).



Clean Country, 1985

Four pieces, 46 x 110cm. Wire, wood, thistle sticks.

Rosalie Gascoigne

Born Auckland, New Zealand, 1917.

Arrived in Australia 1943. Lived in Canberra ever since.

Married an astronomer. Three children.

No formal art training.

Solo Exhibitions

- 1974 Macquarie Galleries, Canberra
- 1976 Gallery A, Sydney
- 1977 Installation, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
- 1978 Survey 2, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- 1979 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1981 Pinacotheca, Melbourne
- 1983 National Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand ("Sculpture Australia" series).
Toured to several other centres in New Zealand.
- 1984 Pinacotheca, Melbourne

Group Exhibitions

- 1975 Artists' Choice, Gallery A, Sydney
- 1977 Objects, Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1979 Third Biennale of Sydney: European Dialogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1980 Drawn and Quartered – Australian Contemporary Paperworks, [Adelaide Festival Exhibition], Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
- 1981 First Australian Sculpture Triennial, Preston Institute of Technology and Latrobe University, Melbourne
Australian Perspecta 1981 – A Biennial Survey of Contemporary Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1982 Fortieth Venice Biennale [with Peter Booth]. Later exhibited as part of Project 40, in the National Gallery of Victoria and in the Art Gallery of New South Wales
- 1983 Continuum 83, Tokyo
- 1984 Second Sculpture Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Collections

- Australian National Gallery, Canberra
- Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- Mitchell Endowment, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston
- Newcastle Regional Art Gallery, Newcastle
- Burnie Art Gallery, Burnie
- Wollongong City Gallery, Wollongong
- Philip Morris Collection
- Ballarat Art Gallery, Ballarat
- Preston Institute of Technology, Melbourne
- Queensland University Art Gallery, Brisbane
- National Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

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- 1984 Rosalie Gascoigne, Artist's Choice: Colin McCahon, Victory Over Death 11, Art and Australia 21 no 4, p 490

List of Works

- 1 **Last Stand, 1972/1985**
Nine pieces, tallest 3 metres
Bones, iron, steel
- 2 **Flight, 1985**
Seven pieces, varying widths
and lengths
Thistle stalks
- 3 **Honey Flow, 1985**
108 x 84cm
Wood, paint, nails
- 4 **Clean Country, 1985**
Four pieces, 46 x 110cm
Wire, wood, thistle sticks
- 5 **Highway Code, 1985**
166.5 x 130.5cm
Retro-reflective material,
polymer, paint, composition
board
- 6 **Piece to Walk on, 1984**
315 x 192.5cm
Wood, nails, paint
- 7 **Red Beach, X'mas, 1984**
92 x 69.4cm
Wood, nails, shells, paint
- 8 **Pineapple Piece, 1985**
(not illustrated)
Wood, retro-reflective
material, paper

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Piece to Walk on, 1984

315 x 192.5cm. Wood, nails, paint.