

LANDSCAPE – PLACE, MEMORY, EXPERIENCE

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

Vici MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, Regaro Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1998, p. 37

I look for the eternal truths in nature, the rhythms, cycles, seasons, shapes, regeneration, restorative powers, spirit. I'm showing what I believe to be interesting and beautiful.

Janet Hawley 'A late developer', *Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend*, 15 November 1997, p. 44

The art of Rosalie Gascoigne has a unique place in the rich landscape tradition in Australian art. While painting has been the dominant artform in this tradition, Gascoigne worked in assemblage and installation, using natural and man-made materials collected from the landscape. Unlike many earlier artists, she was not interested in describing the visual reality, picturesque beauty or stories of the Australian landscape. Gascoigne's artworks capture the essence of the landscape's topography, space, air, vegetation; and the daily and seasonal natural rhythms of nature, in compositions that are often startling in their refined simplicity.

Some of Gascoigne's artworks, including *Feathered fence*, 1979, can be linked to particular locations, and others more generally to the Monaro district and country outside Canberra. However, her art transcends the specifics of place and time to convey moods, feelings or sensations of the landscape inspired by memory and experience.

Feathered fence was inspired by the vista across Lake George, north-east of Canberra. Gascoigne loved the way a long horizontal line of fence stretching out across the shallow expanse of the lake appeared to hover between air and water, and disappear into the distance. The tall, glossy white swan feathers that feature in *Feathered fence* are some of thousands that Gascoigne collected on a visit to Lake George. They are massed together, grouped and their stems clamped between wooden presses. Each unit is held aloft a light wire structure. The placement of each of these separate 'arrangements' and the regular intervals between them traces a line along the floor that alludes to the horizontal reach of the fence across the vast flat surface of the lake. The delicate pale colour and the fragile materials evoke tranquillity, space, air and flight.

The man-made materials often used in Gascoigne's artworks, including corrugated tin and enamel ware, have a strong association with Australian rural life. They highlight the fact that it was a 'settled' landscape from which Gascoigne drew her inspiration. The evidence of wear and weathering on the materials in her artworks, further highlights the interaction between culture and nature in the landscape.

In *Scrub country*, 1982 wooden slats from old soft-drink crates are arranged methodically in rows and columns, but their faded colours, worn surfaces and uneven edges reveal the impact of prolonged use and many hot summers. The medley of faded yellows and greens, and nearly naked wooden surfaces in *Scrub country* is punctuated by flashes of turquoise blues, evoking the patterns of dappled light and colour often found in the Australian bush.

I called it Scrub country because to me it had the randomness and relaxed air and the quality of colour which I think is much more typical of the Australia I know than any of those ochres and oranges so often used. I have let air through because we see a lot of filtered light, random pattern and carelessness in the Australian landscape.

Public Programs Department, Art Gallery of New South Wales Education Kit, *Material as Landscape – Rosalie Gascoigne Education Kit*, 1997

While a palette of 'blue and gold' colours was strongly associated with the paintings of the famous Australian landscape painter Arthur Streeton (1867–1943), *Scrub country* clearly breaks with the landscape conventions associated with Streeton and his generation. The repetition and ordering of elements in distinct rows and columns creates a strong formal structure and a flattened space that avoids literal landscape references. Sensations and moods more associated with memory and experience of the landscape are emphasised. Gascoigne's focus on the formal qualities suggests some affinity between her landscape inspired artworks and those of her contemporary, Australian artist Fred Williams (1927–1982), who also broke with convention in representing the landscape.

Questions and Activities

Select an artwork by Rosalie Gascoigne that reflects or resonates with your own experiences or memories of the Australian landscape.

- How is the landscape suggested or evoked in this artwork (consider art elements such as colour, line or texture, materials, composition)?
- What personal experiences or memories of the landscape does this artwork recall for you?

Compare and contrast the work of Gascoigne with the work of at least two other Australian artists for whom the landscape has been important (e.g. Eugène von Guérard, Arthur Streeton, Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan, Fred Williams, Phillip Hunter).

- Consider each artist's materials and working method, and subject matter and style. Make reference to at least one artwork by each artist.

Kelly Gellatly has written of Gascoigne's art that it is 'of the environment, but decidedly not "Environmental", the potentially heavy hand of politics had no place in Gascoigne's open-ended evocation of the natural environment'.

(Kelly Gellatly, 'Rosalie Gascoigne: Making poetry of the commonplace', *Rosalie Gascoigne* (exh. cat.), NGV, Melbourne, 2008, p. 18)

- Based on your understanding of Gascoigne's work and art practice discuss these ideas.

(clock wise from top left)
Feathered fence 1979
swan feathers, galvanized wire, synthetic polymer paint on wood
(A–R) 64.0 x 750.0 x 45.0 cm (installation)
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of the artist, 1994 (94.256.A-R)
Photo: Courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Old fenceline running across Lake George, north east of Canberra in NSW 1989
Image courtesy of CSIRO

Arthur STREETON
Australia 1867-1943
Golden summer, Eaglemont 1889
oil on canvas
81.3 x 152.6 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Scrub country 1982
weathered painted wood
(1–9) 144.0 x 376.0 cm (overall)
Private collection, Brisbane
Photo: Courtesy City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand

