

Songs of the Australian Landscape: The Art and Spirituality of Rosalie Gascoigne

Judith Keller

Abstract: This article focuses upon the central motifs and symbols of the Australian abstract artist Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999) in an attempt to uncover the spirituality in her work, and to connect this with Australian spirituality and with spirituality in the wider Christian tradition. The author proposes such a connection to be the fruit of bringing to bear the religious imagination upon Gascoigne's work, that is, a capacity to attend to the contemplative, creative and sacramental layers in it. Such a capacity invites a response to the artist's work that is ultimately religious. For Australia to be known as land of the spirit (*Terra spiritus*), theologians cannot neglect the work of artists such as Rosalie Gascoigne.

IN 1999 THE ART GALLERY OF NSW acquired a major work of art by the artist Rosalie Gascoigne titled, *Great Blond Paddocks*.¹ Purchased with funds donated by the Art Gallery of NSW Society, *Great Blond Paddocks* is a work of art constructed of long slim rectangular pieces of sawn wooden soft drink crates which are assembled on wood. *Great Blond Paddocks* is regarded as both a companion work and as significant a work of art as Gascoigne's earlier assemblage on the same theme to be found in the Gallery of Western Australia, *Monaro*. Both *Monaro* (1989) and *Great Blond Paddocks* (1999) are evocations of the undulating grassy plains and wheat fields of Canberra and its surrounding regions. There is a minimalist formality about these abstract and assembled works with which Gascoigne's art, overall, is associated. While Gascoigne's work is formal, assembled, constructed, sculptured, precise, it also features a

1. The title of the painting comes from a poem by David Campbell recalled by Gascoigne in which, "the great blond paddocks come down from the hill". The artist herself has described the grassy hills around Canberra, especially in the summer months and at night, as "bright with it – a kind of oat grass, silky, blond and beautiful". See Deborah Edwards, "Made From the Land", *Look* (Art Gallery Society of New South Wales, October 1999) 20-21, see p. 21.

lyrical beauty, an allusiveness as well as an elusiveness. In relation to Gascoigne's work in this regard, the curator Deborah Edwards has written that,

The sawn drink crate sections of *Great Blond Paddocks* reveal the effects of being weathered by heat, light, rain and wind through the subtleties of their surfaces, in ways which actively reinforce an evocation of place, of an abstracted essence of thin stripy grass, and of sun and wind on paddocks. The means by which material from the landscape, reconstituted by reference to it, can function metaphorically, allusively and elusively in relation to it, and at the same time exist simply as an object of beauty, is at the heart not only of *Great Blond Paddocks* but of Gascoigne's work as a whole.²

Feelings associated with the landscape in which she lived – the pastoral regions surrounding Canberra, the Monaro district, and Lake George – are transfigured into abstract works of art by Rosalie Gascoigne. Encountering her abstract works becomes an immeasurably more enriching experience when grounded in an appreciation of their associations with her "country". "Like the druids of old", Gascoigne is quoted as once saying, "artists should sing songs of their district".³ At some point, therefore, in appreciating the emotional, visual and spiritual power of Gascoigne's art one is drawn to respond with reference to the Australian landscape.

This article focuses upon the central motifs and symbols of Rosalie Gascoigne's abstract art with the aim of drawing out the spirituality contained in it, and connecting this with Australian spirituality and Christian spirituality more generally. Achieving these connections is the fruit of bringing the religious imagination to bear upon her work, that is, bringing to it a capacity to attend to the contemplative, creative and sacramental layers contained in it. Such a capacity invites a response to the artist's work that is ultimately religious.⁴

2. Edwards, "Made from the Land", 21.

3. Rosalie Gascoigne, cited in Deborah Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape* (Sydney NSW: The Art Gallery of NSW, 1998) 17.

4. For a discussion of the religious imagination and its contemplative, creative and sacramental aspects, see works of the U.S. writer and educator Maria Harris, such as *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) 16-22. Harris, whose writings on the topic are grounded in theology, education, philosophy, art and religious studies, reinterprets ways of defining the imagination to be found in the work of Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain* (Gloucester MA: Peter Smith, 1968) 32-55. Wheelwright identified four ways of imagination: confrontative; distancing; compositive; archetypal. Harris re-interprets these as: contemplative; ascetic; creative; sacramental, and proposes that the choice of religious language for naming the ways of the imagination enables us to see the "religious quality"

While critical commentary exists on Gascoigne's work within the modernist and landscape traditions within Australian art,⁵ an exploration of the spirituality in her work, or, more especially, the link between this and Australian spirituality, and with Christian spirituality, breaks new ground. With respect to spirituality and the visual arts in Australia, the work of Rosemary Crumlin (*Images of Religion in Australian Art* and *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and The Religious Imagination*), provides some points of departure, even if these books lack specific reference to Rosalie Gascoigne's work.⁶ In regard to connections between the spirituality in Gascoigne's work and Australian spirituality, the Australian writer David Ranson's book, *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*, is significant.⁷ Of particular interest in this text is Ranson's opening discussion of spirituality, including the recognition of the "intrinsic link between spirituality and art", and, later, his study of spirituality as the "study of contexts", thereby opening up the possibility of an "Australian spirituality". Central to Ranson's discussion of "spiritual voices in the Australian context" is his turn to Australian writers and poets. My aim is to add another voice to the discussion of the Australian experience of the spirit, that of the abstract artist, Rosalie Gascoigne.

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE AND HER WORK

At the conclusion to an *Australian Biography* interview conducted with Rosalie Gascoigne in November 1998 (a year before her death in 1999 aged 82) the artist expressed her view on the beauty of nature and the manner in which its randomness is to be found in the images in her work, but "under a sort of control", in the following words:

Anything can happen as long as you've got the strength to your elbow. And nature is a prototype. And so you become more aware. It's like going up a mountain, and you go up a little way and you see a bit. Go up, and you see more. And the older you get and the more experience you have, and the higher up your mountain, so to speak, you get, the more you can see. And you know that you are human and that you are finite. You are not going to see the lot

of the imagination, the dimension of depth within it, the "mystical elements" residing at the heart of it; see Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 19.

5. For example, Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*.

6. Rosemary Crumlin, *Images of Religion in Australian Art* (Kensington NSW: Bay Books, 1988) and Rosemary Crumlin, *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and The Religious Imagination* (Melbourne VIC: National Gallery of Victoria, 1998).

7. See David Ranson, *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today* (Strathfield NSW: St Paul's Publications, 2003).

anyway. Nature does, but you're not going to. And so you can always work towards it, you see. And sometimes you do reach a peak when you think, ah. Then you're quite amazed that you did it all. That sort of thing. It's a continuing adventure I think.⁸

Rosalie Gascoigne was in her fifties when her work as an artist began to achieve recognition and success.⁹ Although she had completed a Bachelor of Arts degree from Auckland University in 1937 and taught for four years at Auckland Girl's Grammar School, she had no formal art training, as such, in her early life.

It was at Mt Stromlo near Canberra that Gascoigne's love of the Australian landscape first began to grow.¹⁰ For some time, however, including through the period of the birth of her three children (1943-1949), Gascoigne's predominant experience at Mt Stromlo was one of social, domestic and creative isolation. Although she had escaped what she describes as the Presbyterian restrictions of her family life in New Zealand, Gascoigne experienced the demands of life as the partner of a scientist, in what was at the time an isolated community, as equally restrictive.¹¹ Her interest in making art from the discarded materials she found around her grew out of her desire for beauty in her life, and for a vision and a freedom beyond the stultifying demands of what was expected of her in marriage, in motherhood, and in living in a small community.¹²

8. <http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/gascoigne/scripttext.html>; *Australian Biography – Rosalie Gascoigne*, Internet; accessed 6 August 2006. This internet site and Deborah Edward's text, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, are among the chief sources consulted in the preparation of this article.

9. Gascoigne held her first solo exhibition at Macquarie Gallery, Canberra, in June 1974.

10. This landscape, its flora (pine trees, for example) and fauna (cockatoos and parrots, in particular), its sparseness and dryness, was utterly strange to her at first. It compared dramatically with Gascoigne's experience of the greener and moister landscape of Auckland, New Zealand, where she had been born (1917) and lived until she married (1943).

11. Gascoigne's partner was the New Zealand born astronomer Ben Gascoigne, who worked at the Observatory at Mt Stromlo. Rosalie once commented, "In my family as a young person, praise was out. There was a joyless Presbyterian work ethic; get an education, earn a living, and don't get above yourself. All faults were pointed out. This is still deeply ingrained. After seventeen years living on Mt Stromlo and later in suburban Deakin, I felt defenceless. On Stromlo, there was a feeling of emptiness. Nothing happens: only jobs about the house and good deeds. I was still hungry after I had been a mother and a good neighbour. Mothering and domesticity were not fulfilling." (Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 7)

12. Gascoigne speaks of the countryside around her at this time as "confirming and beautiful...and exciting". She refers to the "marvelous...and wonderful freedom" that she began to experience in her trips into the countryside. *Australian Biography*; Internet; accessed 6 August, 2006.

With her children as company Gascoigne initially took to exploring on foot the mountain on which she lived and the surrounding valley. Feeding her “visual hunger” and her “love of seeing accurately and intensely”, she began gathering what was to hand in the landscape – twigs and branches, bits of iron – and to make dried arrangements out of them.¹³ In time she became well known locally for these arrangements and was awarded prizes for her work. In 1960 the Gascoignes moved from Mt Stromlo to Deakin in suburban Canberra. This gave the artist access to Ikebana classes.¹⁴

As with the artistic development afforded by Ikebana classes, learning to drive a vehicle, and the access this gave to trips into the districts around Canberra, led to new phases in Gascoigne’s life and work. The wide, rolling, treeless plains beyond Canberra formed the backdrop for forays through the countryside. As a result of being able to drive she was able to go fossicking in the rubbish tips of the surrounding country towns for weathered and rusting objects, objects exposed to the weather, the sun, the rain, the wind, objects thereby imbued, in her view, with what she referred to as “vitality”.¹⁵ Discarded bits and pieces – enamel jugs, the faces of kewpie dolls and their legs, bird cages, parrots cut out of cardboard, painted timber pieces and timber boxes: these provided the materials and some of the motifs to be found in her work during this period. “Anything she could find to put things in to contain and define her patterns was collectible”.¹⁶

Following upon her first solo exhibition in Canberra in 1974, Gascoigne’s work was chosen for inclusion in The Artists Choice exhibition at Gallery A, Sydney in May 1975. It was at this point her

13. *Australian Biography*; Internet; accessed 6 August 2006.

14. As a result of these classes Gascoigne was developing her eye for shape and form, for pattern and for placing objects. Soon she began collecting abandoned farm machinery and fencing wire. These she used for vases but then for larger sculptural works, as the Ikebana and dried arrangements gave way to these larger works. Gascoigne also began to form friendships with local artists and key people who started to take a note of her work, among them James Mollison, who was soon to become the first Director of the National Gallery in Victoria.

15. Gascoigne describes her discoveries, her feelings and insights at this time in the following words, “And it wasn’t ‘till I’d driven around quite a lot looking at the countryside that I discovered the country dump.... So I got into things. But usually battered, weathered, old things. It’s got life in it, you see. And what you’re trying to get is vitality. It’s the source of life you’re trying to get in your things. This is what it’s about. And you get it home, and you try to give it shelter, if it needs shelter from the elements. And then when the time comes, you walk among it, and you think that’s nice, now I can do that with that and that with that.... You think of something that it reminds you of, or why you like it or whatever. And it is that Wordsworthian thing that past experiences get woven into the work. Things you’ve felt.” *Australian Biography*; Internet; accessed 6 August 2006.

16. *Australian Biography*; Internet; accessed 6 August 2006.

work became the object of scrutiny from both critics and the wider public. Major works and exhibitions followed almost yearly (1975-1998), whether in Australia or overseas, including her being chosen as the first woman to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1982.¹⁷

In 1997-1998 a collection of representative works was exhibited, first at the Art Gallery of NSW and then at the National Gallery of Victoria, under the title, *Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape*.¹⁸ The works included in this exhibition allude to the aspects of the outer landscape which inspired Gascoigne. They also allude to an inner landscape, the recollected feelings and emotions as she created her art: her love of the earth, its plains and pastures and scrubs; her intoxication with the air and sky and clouds; her appreciation of the beauty of a lakescape; her love of flowers, including sunflowers. Gascoigne's own words provide insight at this point:

My country is the eastern seaboard, Lake George and the Highlands. Land that is clean scoured by the sun and the frost. The record is in the roadside grass. I love to roam around to look and hear. Air with voices, an ungraspable thing of the landscape. The country is seasonal; I look forward to foaming seas of crops, singing songs of the place. I don't want to put it in words or spell it out as a literal picture, but rather, capture it in feelings. I want to see something else beyond the ordinary vision of roadside grass. I want to make air visible. Nature, light, can give you another vision of what might be too familiar. Love the country so you can read back the hill. See crops or white cockatoos. In finding form for your emotions reap in what is useful to you...from simplicity you get to profundity. The weathered grey look of the country gives me an emotional upsurge. I am not making pictures, I make feelings. I am not making things from objects in combination. I want to make art without telling a story: it must be allusive, lyrical.¹⁹

17. After her return from Venice, Gascoigne commented, "'Who needs that? Everything man-made [sic] and so decorated. Look at what we have: space, skies. You can never have too much of nothing. I don't live in the rest of the world: this is Terra Australia, the Great Southern Land. Use it and make something. I did what was natural, used what I had learned to love on Stromlo.'" Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 7.

18. Works in this exhibition included: *The Crop 1* (1976); *Pale Landscape* (1977); *Feathered Fence* (1979); *Piece to Walk Around* (1981); *Scrub Country* (1982); *Graven Image* (1983); *Wattle Strike* (1983); *Grove* (1984); *Set Up* (1984); *Swell* (1984); *Inland Sea* (1986); *Shoreline* (1986); *Roadside* (1987-1988); *Maculosa* (1988); *Monaro* (1989); *Far View* (1990); *Lake* (1991); *Sunflowers* (1991); *Clouds 1* (1992); *Cow Pasture* (1992); *Fool's Gold* (1992); *Age of Innocence* (1993); *Skylight* (1993); *White City* (1993-1994); *Eden* (1994); *But Mostly Air* (1994-1995); *Shabby Summer* (1994-1995); *Southerly Buster* (1995); *Suddenly the Lake* (1995); *White Garden* (1995). Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 61-62.

19. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 7.

Materials used for the works in the exhibition *Material as Landscape* include galvanised wire, white swans' feathers, sawn wood, sawn wooden soft drink crates, corrugated galvanised iron, torn linoleum on plywood, and sawn retro-reflective road signs. Repetition and the grid are central to the works, as is also an emphasis on line, form, balance and space.²⁰ In relation to the grid motif in particular, the artist "has consistently used the grid as a means of evoking boundless space, that is, the sense of the work as a part of a continuum, rather than invoking its qualities of enclosure".²¹ When gazing at some of Gascoigne's compositions what one experiences has been described as an "expanse", even an "ecstasy".²² The basic construction processes include slicing, tearing and sawing material into smaller units, which are then reconstituted as repetitions or series. Greys, blondes, whites and yellows are the predominant colours of Gascoigne's palette in the work of this period.²³

A description of some of the works included in the exhibition will illustrate the above features. In *The Crop 1* (1976), hundreds of dried salsify heads are bound and presented on a sheet of iron. This work alludes to the dividing of the land and its cultivation. The work is very stylised; it is the order and texture of the piece that appeal.²⁴ *Feathered Fence* is a floor composition in which "hundreds of white feathers from the black swans of Lake George are packed together". The feathers have then been "compartmentalized into sturdy wooden braces and stretched along the floor in varied units. The delicate alignments of the feathers alternate as if responding to air currents...yet they remain grounded, conceptually and physically, through the motif of the fence".²⁵ *Pale Landscape* is a "metaphor for the space of landscape". Thousands of swans' feathers have been threaded through sheets of newspaper "to form a great expanse which flows across the floor in simulated natural rhythms, as endless as landscape can be imagined".²⁶ *Piece to Walk Around* (1981) is a gridded work. "Its schematized, abstracted form has the capacity to recall neat parcels of felled trees on hillsides or the

20. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 12-13.

21. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 13.

22. Ian North, *Expanse: Aboriginalities, Spatialities and the Politics of Ecstasy – An Exhibition by Ian North* (Adelaide SA: The University of South Australia Art Museum, 1998) 1, 10.

23. When asked if her work *Sunflowers* (1991) was in some way a tribute to Van Gogh, Gascoigne indicated that this was not the case but simply related to the fact that she found the colour beautiful and "because yellow is a classical colour to me...and I had seen fields of sunflowers here and they were very tight packed. I love that tight packed, prolific look that nature has. So it's a cross-reference." *Rosalie Gascoigne – Interview With Stephen Feneley* <http://www.abc.net.au/express/stories/rose.html>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2006.

24. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 13.

25. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 13.

26. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 13.

undulating countryside as seen from the air".²⁷ *Graven Image* (1983) is a formal arrangement of bleached vertical sawn wooden slats. Of this piece one writer has stated that the artist has given "to the beauty of weathered wood the status of a religious icon".²⁸ *But Mostly Air* (1994-1995), on the other hand, is a large installation in which Gascoigne's "passions for native grasses, wood and weather...give way to the elemental energies of air and silence.... the installation is a contemplative enfolding space...experienced as the sounds of the clouds and the white noise of time...and flocks of white cockatoos filling the sky".²⁹ The evocation of a sense of place in *But Mostly Air* has been described as "both nowhere and everywhere at once".³⁰

SPIRITUALITY IN ROSALIE GASCOIGNE'S WORK

It is the allusiveness and the elusiveness of Gascoigne's work that hold the key to appreciating the spirituality emanating from it. The work is firmly rooted in the created and material world over which she walked and through which she drove, yet it is also imbued with a metaphysicality – beauty, vision, freedom, awe, passion, ecstasy, truth – the forms and shapes of which are glimpsed within her assemblages, albeit only fleetingly. One writer has referred, for example, to the "apprehensions of the sublime" to be found in the work of artists such as Rosalie Gascoigne and to "the transcendent sense" evoked in work such as hers.³¹

The earth, or creation, is the ground of being in Rosalie Gascoigne's art.³² More than once in interviews, Gascoigne commented that she felt

27. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 14.

28. Ewan McDonald, "Roadworks: An Intersection, a Crossing of Paths, a Point of Conjunction and Departure: The Artists Meet in Landscape for the First Time", in Louise Pether (ed.), *Rosalie Gascoigne – Colin McMahon, Sense of Place* (1990) 46-53, quoted in Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 15.

29. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 16.

30. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 16.

31. See North, *Expanse*, 10-11.

32. Gascoigne dealt with the four classical elements of earth, air, fire, water in her work – but particularly with air and atmosphere. The materials too with which she worked had at some point all been part of the landscape. Gascoigne's air works are illustrated by works such as *Plein Air* (1994) and *But Mostly Air* (1994-1995). In the autumn and early winter of 1999 (before her death in the October of 1999), Gascoigne completed a series comprised of ten panels of sawn builders form-board that she titled *Earth 1999*. In March 2004, at the opening of the exhibition featuring this series at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney, Martin Gascoigne, the artist's son, included the following comments in the notes to the exhibition: "From living in and roaming the country, the idea of Earth allowed scope for all sorts of recollections: ploughed fields, country roads, highway cuttings, cattle yards, muddy river banks, silted estuaries, mine tailings and quarries. There were the views from the air as she traveled to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, and when she got there the old buildings with their great foundations as well as the excavations for urban renewal.

befriended by nature, that it was “the unequivocally beautiful in the landscape” that she sought to capture, and that if she were “to make a list of the things that [she] admired in nature it would be grace, it would be acceptance, it would be beauty”.³³ To this extent the spirituality in Gascoigne’s work is centrally and profoundly sacramental. A sense of the beneficence and beauty of creation is sustained throughout, as well as a seeking to give expression to the deeper meaning and mystery of this beauty. Stones, wood, feathers, grain, earth, air, fire, water: all become for Gascoigne revelatory of ultimate grace and goodness.

The spirituality in Gascoigne’s work is also filled with light. At the time of her *Material as Landscape* exhibition, for example, Deborah Edwards stated that her work “exists wholly in light. There are few shadows, nor is there night.”³⁴ It was only in her final series, *Earth 1999*, that there is an absence of this light. The panels that make up this work are very physical: in contrast to the predominant yellows, bleached whites and greys characteristic of Gascoigne’s palette, there is something unexpected here. Apart from the most formal grid employed by Gascoigne, the colours are restrained, sombre even. Paradoxically, however, there is also what could be described as a soaring, yet earthed, freedom and the embrace of darkness/shadow which companions, as it were, the light characteristic of her previous work. While the grid is the predominant motif in this series, the motif of a cross is also to be seen.³⁵ One experiences a sadness that this is the last work that she completed, but there is also in *Earth 1999* a sense of her own physical and spiritual “homecoming”.

As I noted earlier, Rosalie Gascoigne expressed during her life a deep longing for something beyond the confines experienced in both her earlier upbringing and her later domestic and social life. Personal experiences of loneliness, isolation and inferiority were among the “limit” experiences which drew Gascoigne to seek a fuller purpose for her life through her art.³⁶ In many ways, Gascoigne’s work gives visual expression to a spiritual awakening to something that beckoned her,

Rounded river stones, pebbles on the beach and dry stone walls all had a part in her life. From her gardening and her farming sister she knew about soil types – loam, clay, sand – and its productivity – fecund or barren. And its role in the cycle of life, death and renewal.” Martin Gascoigne, *Rosalie Gascoigne: Earth 1999*, Notes for the exhibition, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, March 2004.

33. *Australian Biography*; Internet; accessed 6 August 2006.

34. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 14.

35. Go to http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/15/Rosalie_Gascoigne/298/ to view *Earth 1999* online.

36. See David Ranson, *Across the Great Divide*, 20-22 for a discussion of “the experience of limit” in its relationship to the personal sphere of spirituality.

haunted her, indeed, at times “burned” her.³⁷ Gascoigne sometimes named this something as a longing for “personal freedom”, for “vitality”. She also referred to her search for “the eternal verities” and for “truth”. In her work Gascoigne reached for the “infinite” but she knew that an ultimate grasp of this would always elude her as an artist.³⁸

There are echoes of the spirituality to be found in Rosalie Gascoigne’s work in the following description of spirituality offered by David Ranson:

Spirituality is a certain awakening to life that relates us more deeply to life. The imagination is opened to new possibility. Life can be seen and heard in a new way. There is the recognition that there are deeper currents operating in life. There are dimensions of life yet to be explored, all of which offer greater depth, connection, centredness and wholeness.³⁹

Australian theologian Denis Edwards also refers to the experience of “limit” in human life. Edwards speaks of this experience within an overall framework of what he describes as human “experience of grace”. Along with the experience of grace in life’s limit situations (vulnerability in various forms, death, failure, loneliness and alienation), Edwards also finds experience of grace in “the richness of life”, singling out interpersonal love, childbirth, creativity, forgiveness, and the beauty of nature, as “moments when we may be taken by a sense of excessive richness, of superabundance, and the awareness that all is given and that what is given cannot be attributed to ourselves”.⁴⁰ Creativity and the sensitivity to beauty of nature characterized Gascoigne’s life and work. Any discussion of the spirituality in her work has to refer to such experience.

37. In quoting from a telephone interview with Gascoigne in June 1998, the critic Ian North maintains that Gascoigne’s “works constitute ‘notes towards lyrical derailments’, thus containing echoes of the Romantic poets she studied as a university student. ‘It’s a Joan of Arc thing – out in a paddock and a bolt of light comes down’, she says, ‘and I am burned at the stake’ (the latter added jokingly, *sotto voce*)”. Quoted in North, *Expanse*, 12.

38. Gascoigne used the metaphor of an elusive butterfly in talking about this. She said, “And I think with art, you see...it’s always hovering just beyond your reach, just beyond your reach everytime, and if you stretched...you can net another butterfly that you know is out there, but you can’t quite get your net around”. *Australian Biography*, <http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/gascoigne/intertext1.html>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2006.

39. Ranson, *Across the Great Divide*, 17.

40. Denis Edwards, *Human Experience of God* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 29.

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE'S CONTRIBUTION TO AN AUSTRALIAN SPIRITUALITY

In general, the contribution that Gascoigne makes to the fashioning of an Australian spirituality resides in her work's non-discursive nature. The work of Australian artists such as Gascoigne reveals sources for spirituality, for apprehensions of the spirit in this place (earth, air, fire, water, silence, mystery, grace, beauty, communion, ecstasy, freedom) beyond those available through written words, codes, creeds and doctrines. It goes beyond such discursive forms of communication to sources revealed through visual images and symbols. What Australian visual artists such as Gascoigne ultimately offer Australian spirituality is a truth that "There is more to being human than language can explain. There is something hidden and yet revealed, transcending the world not only of objects but also of facts and even ideas, belonging instead to the territory of image and symbol".⁴¹

If Australia is to be revealed as *Terra spiritus*, then, we stand in as much need of the work of the nation's artists as of the writings of Australian theologians. Artists like Rosalie Gascoigne remind us of the crucial role imagination, creativity, intuition, feeling, wonder, awe, and the delight of the senses play in the discovery of an Australian spirituality. Through their work we come to appreciate that the Word is embodied in Australian stone, wood, water, air, earth, and feather, more tangibly and sacramentally than mind can conceive or words express.

There is an "axis" that exists in Gascoigne's work between the concrete and the metaphysical, that is, between the materials with which she worked and the feelings and longings to which she sought to give visual expression.⁴² This axis serves, again, to remind us of the relationship between materiality and mystery, the incarnate and the transcendent, the visible and the invisible, that is central to all spirituality, including Australian spirituality. Gascoigne, I believe, journeyed more deeply into the truth of this relationship as she journeyed deeper into her "country" – and vice versa. Her work as an artist thus speaks to the central role of landscape for an Australian spirituality.

Gascoigne's work ultimately rejoices in this land and gives expression to the sense of freedom, expansiveness and beauty to be found within it. Through the transformation of discarded objects and materials from the landscape into evocative and lyrical works expressing the

41. Karen Stone, *Image and Spirit: Finding Meaning in Visual Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2003) 27.

42. It is Ian North who speaks of this axis in Rosalie Gascoigne's work. See North, *Expanse*, 12.

beauty of the land, and her feelings in relation to it, Gascoigne's art invites a sense of relationship to the Australian landscape which is one of deep connection, of reverence, and of both physical and spiritual "homecoming". Her works give abstract expressions to insights such as those of David Tacey, who writes of the "mysteriously charged and magnificently alive archetypal presence" of the Australian landscape, and asserts that "The land is, or seems to be, the sacred which bursts in upon our lives, which demands to be recognized and valued."⁴³

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE'S WORK AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

In making connections between Gascoigne's work and Christian spirituality it is important to note from the outset that as far as subject matter is concerned her work is not explicitly Christian. However, in approaching Gascoigne's art works as if they are spiritual texts – as in the reading undertaken here – her visual images as well as some of her feelings and sensibilities in relation to the earth and creation are echoed in a number of written texts from both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. For example, psalms of thanksgiving honouring the beauty and bounty of creation come to mind when considering her art. One such psalm is Psalm 65. The psalmist rejoices in God's creation as follows (vv 12-13):

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

In addition, there are flickers of Gascoigne's love of the earth, water, air, and birds – black swans, parrots and white cockatoos in particular – and her sense of being befriended by the earth, in the images to which Jesus appeals in teaching about the providence of God:

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
(Matt 6:26, 29-30)(RSV)

43. David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* (Blackburn VIC: HarperCollins, 1995) 6-7.

Another text from the Christian scriptures that comes to mind in relation to Gascoigne's life and work is the episode of the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-13). Gascoigne once spoke about the powerful and disarming effects the light of the Australian landscape had upon her; her works frequently evoke the shifting diurnal or seasonal light of the landscape, and "the effects of processes of light are always retained as residues in Gascoigne's weathered materials".⁴⁴ The fact that Gascoigne first lived at Mt Stromlo when she came to Australia, and that it was here that she began the process of transforming her sense of isolation into a deeper capacity for contemplative and creative engagement with the world around her, also resonates with elements of the Transfiguration story. The motif of the cross appearing in her later series, *Earth* 1999, where it conveys an awareness of her own death, also embodies something of the meaning of the Transfiguration.⁴⁵

There are resonances between Gascoigne's work and two Christian women mystics. Her attentive handling and assembling of discarded materials that for her contained the incarnational essence of the earth, the sun, wind and rain, calls to mind Julian of Norwich's image of the hazelnut in her hand speaking to her of the beauty of creation, even in its humblest and seemingly most overlooked aspects. With reference to the hazelnut image Julian wrote in her *Showings*:

And in this [the good Lord] showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it: and thus everything has being through the love of God.⁴⁶

Likewise, the motif of the grid, through which Gascoigne expressed a sense of the abundance of the earth and of the sky, recalls Hildegard of Bingen's use of the mandala form, a circular form which she sometimes painted within a square or rectangle in order to record her spiritual

44. Edwards, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, 14.

45. For a helpful theological reflection on the Transfiguration see Karl Rahner, "The Transfiguration of the Lord" in Albert Raffelt (ed.), *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons and Meditations*, (transl. Harvey D. Egan; New York: Crossroad, 1999) 340-42. In this reflection, Rahner situates the Transfiguration of Jesus within the context of the prediction of Jesus, six days before the Transfiguration, of his passion and death.

46. See Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, translated by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Mahwah/New Jersey: Paulist, 1978) 183-84.

visions. One example is Hildegard's mandala of creation in which heavenly and earthly beings celebrate creation and the Creator.⁴⁷ And Gascoigne's assemblages incorporating feathers recall Hildegard's metaphor of herself as a feather on the breath of God "which has no weight from its own strength, and lets itself be carried by the wind".⁴⁸

In 1999 Pope John Paul II wrote a letter addressed to all artists "who are passionately dedicated to the search for new 'epiphanies' of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world".⁴⁹ When one approaches the abstract works of Rosalie Gascoigne as objects of beauty, these works may be associated with the pope's words. If one sought to further associate Gascoigne's works as objects of beauty with a particular style of theology and its associated spirituality, there are resonances with the theology identified by the Jesuit theologian Gerald O'Collins as one where the emphasis is on "divine beauty" and on prayer, liturgy and worship, and the anticipation in and through these of the "final glory of heaven".⁵⁰ In relation to this theme of beauty there are also integrative possibilities between Gascoigne's works and the theology and spirituality of the Irish writer, John O'Donohue, who sees the awakening to beauty as a spiritual awakening to the "embrace" of God.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

This article has explored connections between the work of the Australian artist, Rosalie Gascoigne and Christian spirituality in the hope of highlighting her possible contribution to the development of a distinctively Australian spirituality. Just as David Ranson associated intimations of the spirit in this land with the voices of Australian writers and poets, an appreciation of an "Australian spirituality" is the richer for the work of an abstract artist such as Rosalie Gascoigne. In the context of David Ranson's recognition of the intrinsic link between

47. For Hildegard of Bingen's mandala, "All Beings Celebrate Creation", see *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen – Texts by Hildegard of Bingen with Commentary by Matthew Fox* (Santa Fe NM: Bear and Company, 1985) 74-77.

48. The reference to Hildegard as a feather on the breath of God and to the source of this metaphor in Hildegard's writings is to be found in Gloria Durka, *Praying with Hildegard of Bingen* (Winona MN: St Mary's Press, 1991) 32-33. Durka is quoting from Matthew Fox (ed.), *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs* (Santa Fe NM: Bear and Company, 1987) 348.

49. John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Artists 1999*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp_ii_let_23041999_artists_en.h; Internet; accessed 7 August 2006.

50. Gerald O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1993) 10-11.

51. John O'Donohue, *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (London: Transworld, 2003).

spirituality and art and the prophetic role of artists in “giving expression to a whole society’s emergent sense of the way in which its particular relationship with ultimate meaning might be conceived” the work of Rosalie Gascoigne is worthy of attention.⁵² Gascoigne sensed the mystery and beauty in the land around her. In all its tangible yet ultimately elusive hold on her she allowed herself to be drawn to it. Gascoigne invites all – Australians in particular – to look and see what is before us in this place. We may come home spiritually to ourselves in reference to the luminous beauty that she discloses in it.

52. Ranson, *Across the Great Divide*, 23.