

POETRY AND WORDS

I was hopeless at painting and drawing, and had no skills at making craftwork. At school, I envied people who could draw a perfect basket of apples. I regarded myself as totally non-artistic. My big love was, and remains, poetry; I always visualised every line of a poem as I read it.

Janet Hawley 'A late developer', *Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend*, 15 November 1997, p. 42

Poetry and art move us from where one is to somewhere else.

Gail McCallum (ed.), *A Return to Poetry*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1998, p. 28, quoted in Gregory O'Brien, 'Plain air / plain song', in Gregory O'Brien (ed.), *Rosalie Gascoigne: Plain air* (exh. cat.), City Gallery Wellington and Victoria University Press, Wellington, New Zealand, 2004, p. 22

Rosalie Gascoigne's work is often referred to as visual poetry. Her training in literature and fascination for words infuse her work. She had a particular love of poetry. This included the modern Australian poets such as Peter Porter and David Campbell, who also evoked in his writing the landscape around Canberra. Just as a poet distils the essence of their subject with carefully chosen evocative words and phrases, so Gascoigne captures the spirit of a place, or the core of an idea with sensitive arrangements of visual elements. Instead of literary allusions, Gascoigne creates visual metaphors with materials such as corrugated iron in *Inland sea*, 1986, which evokes movement of air, while slivers of discarded, weathered timber in *Monaro*, 1989 suggest dried grassland. Repetition, ordering, fragmenting and editing out unnecessary materials are also part of her practice which echo the creation of poetry.

Gascoigne admired the English Romantic poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and often quoted William Wordsworth's idea that: 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.' She believed passionately that her work was intricately woven with glimpses of her past feelings and experiences.

Sweet sorrow, 1990, inspired by the famous lines in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*: 'Parting is such sweet sorrow', shows Gascoigne's relish for word games and cryptic crossword puzzles. The words 'Wed' and 'Sad' may be clues suggesting the bittersweet nature of marriage.

Other works studded with random words are more elusive and hark back to the poetry of Andre Bréton and the Surrealists, who scattered and re-arranged words cut from a newspaper.

Gascoigne frequently described her works as 'stammering concrete poetry' (Gregory O'Brien, 2004, p. 42), a reference to a style of poetry originating in the 1950s where the visual arrangement of words or letters suggests something about the subject of the poem. In *All that jazz*, 1989, for example, the artist has conjured up the pulsating chopped up rhythms of jazz with wooden strips of dazzling colour highlighted by splinters of black lettering. In contrast, the broken and fractured nature of the yellow and black road signs in *Skylight*, 1993, interspersed with ill-fitting patches of well-worn linoleum, sets up a tension that hints at both the tragedy of drought and the beauty of the Australian light in summer.

The evocative titles of Gascoigne's works, which are selected after their completion and only after much contemplation, are chosen to be allusive and poetic rather than descriptive. They reveal an entry point but allow the viewer to experience their own intuitive response to the work.



All that jazz 1989, weathered painted wood on plywood, 131.0 x 100.0 cm. Collection of Graeme Uthmeyer, Melbourne. Photo: Courtesy City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand

Questions and Activities

In describing the colours in her own artworks, Gascoigne used evocative words such as ‘glancing greys, beach greys, faded “Italian” pinks and blues’. Commentators have used descriptive phrases such as: ‘found materials that dance, shimmer, jostle and flash’, (Kelly Gellatly, ‘Rosalie Gascoigne: Making poetry of the commonplace’, *Rosalie Gascoigne* (exh. cat.), NGV, Melbourne, 2008) and ‘a jigsaw of ill-matching retro-reflective road signs’, (Sasha Grishin, ‘Looking at the edges of our society’, *Canberra Times*, 6 December, 1997, p.16).

Extend your descriptive powers by elaborating on an aspect of one of Gascoigne’s artworks (i.e. the colour, shapes, lines, composition, material or mood).

- Working in small groups, one student should choose an aspect of the artwork and describe it in detail.
- Other students then build upon the description, adding new material.
- When this aspect is exhausted, continue the same process with another part of the artwork.
- Discuss how this group description may have contributed to your enjoyment and understanding of the work.

‘A poem is a painting that is not seen. A painting is a poem that is not heard’

Phoebe Hesketh in *Picture Poems*, Michael & Peter Benton, Hodder and Staughton, 1997, p. 7

- In what ways might art and poetry be similar? Discuss this quotation and make a list of the similarities and differences between these artforms.
 - Discuss an artwork by Gascoigne that you believe demonstrates some link between poetry and art, explaining what you believe this link to be.

Choose a title of one of Gascoigne’s works, for example: *Flora Galop, Turn of the tide, Inland sea, A rose is a rose, Scrub country, All that jazz, Sweet sorrow, Steel magnolias, Suddenly the lake, Grassfest.*

- Create a poem of your own which uses the title as your first line.

Research the work of contemporary Australian poet Lorin Ford, such as the poems below.

- Create a short poem in her style which captures the essence of a work by Gascoigne.

a raga
in the junkyard –
summer rain

1st published ‘Haiku Harvest’ (USA), 2006

long drought –
boulder lichen
holds on

1st published ‘Stylus Poetry Journal’ (Aust), 2007

sheep country
passing clouds graze
the hilltop

1st prize Shiki Salon Annual Kukui, June 2005 ‘free format section’; 1st published ‘Haiku Harvest’ (USA), 2005

A Book of Haiku by Lorin Ford entitled *a wattle seedpod*, was published by Post Pressed, 2008

Gascoigne liked the style of the Romantic poets who drew inspiration from the elements and the seasons that were suggested rather than described in their poetry.

- Locate and read the poem, *The Daffodils*, written by William Wordsworth, an English Romantic poet, in 1804.
- Create an abstract artwork which suggests the mood of the poem.
- Consider how you can use art elements such as colour, shape and texture, and appropriate materials to evoke the mood of the poem.

(left to right)
Sweet sorrow 1990
reflective synthetic polymer film
on plywood
120.0 x 80.0 cm
State Art Collection, Art Gallery
of Western Australia, Perth
Gift of Sue and Ian Bernadt, 2006 (2006/61)
Photo: Courtesy Art Gallery
of Western Australia, Perth

Skylight 1993
linoleum and reflective synthetic
polymer film on painted plywood
122.0 x 91.0 cm
Private collection, Melbourne
Photo: Christian Markel

