

Ikebana to Contemporary Art: Rosalie Gascoigne

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Abstract

Although Japanese art influenced many Australian artists in 1960s, Rosalie Gascoigne is regarded as one of a few artists for whom Japanese art was “the gateway” to her own art. Gascoigne studied Ikebana from 1962 to 1972 but became frustrated with its limitations, and started making assemblages. This paper proposes that the order of composition in her assemblages is something she inherited from Ikebana, revealing a possible connection between Ikebana and contemporary art. It also regards her work as a case study of cultural transformation across borders, arguing that Ikebana was more than the gateway for her work.

Ikebana in the Expanded Field

Since the Meiji Restoration (1868) Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement has experienced various transformations with the influences of the Western art. The influence has been so strong that the distinction between some current Ikebana work and the broader arena of contemporary art has become blurred (Singer 1994: 46). At the centre of the transformations was the development of a free style Ikebana since 1920's, which went against the traditional design principles, sites and material combinations. In advocating the free style Ikebana, the modern and postmodern Ikebana artists have had to deal with two specific issues.

The one is related to seeing an Ikebana work as a three dimensional art form, which ultimately stimulated the investigation of Ikebana as installation. Hiroshi Teshigahara (1927 - 2001) was one of the artists who investigated this aspect of Ikebana. The other concern involves the fact that Ikebana artists now have to rely on their inner sense to organize their forms. This process has become similar to the larger processes of assemblage. This direction was explored in an extreme form by Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999). In this context the significance of Gascoigne's work lies not only in contemporary art but also in contemporary Ikebana.

Gascoigne and Ikebana

The Australian artist, Rosalie Gascoigne was not known as a sculptor until 1975, when she was aged 58. However, she was well known in Canberra for her floral skills which were further refined through her study of Ikebana between 1962 and 1970. In the investigation of connections between Ikebana and contemporary art, Gascoigne's work presents an important case study. While many critics agree that Ikebana played a significant part in her training and development as a sculptor (North 1982; MacDonald 1998), there are some disagreements about how much influence Ikebana had on her art work.

If her temporary immersion in the modern Sogetsu school of Ikebana was profoundly influential as her only art training, it suggests that her vision has a direct source in the principles of this meditative discipline, since in it the process of selection is as fundamental and as spiritually charged as that of contemplation and arrangement. (Edwards 1998, 11)

Although Edwards (1998) suggested the general and conditional influence of Ikebana as above, Gellatly (2008) pointed out, following Gascoigne's comments on Ikebana, more specific aspects that Ikebana provided her with:

- i. a sense of discipline
- ii. the importance upon line and form (over colour)
- iii. a sense of order and strong sculptural properties
- iv. an affinity to its immersion in and response to the natural world

More importantly, it is notable that many critics as well as Gascoigne herself regarded Ikebana as a passing point in her career. They seem to agree that she graduated from "the limited realm of flower arrangement and Ikebana" (Kirker 1989, 54) to enter the

larger art world. Jacobs (2006) noted that Gascoigne began to chafe at the restrictions of form in Ikebana, quoting the following comment.

I knew I had the awareness of nature that is inherent in ikebana. My eye was starting to travel — I was using found objects in my work. I made a piece out of blue devil weed and rusted reinforcing wire, but when it was exhibited it had been sprayed black. That was all wrong to me — as I'd made it, I spoke of the sun and wind and rain. Finally, there were more things that I wanted to explore about the Australian countryside than I could say with ikebana. It also troubled me that it was a foreign art. I thought that was too limiting. My work was becoming very Australian.

Similar perceptions of Ikebana by Gascoigne were also pointed out by, MacDonald (1998), Kirker (1989) and Gellatly (2008). MacDonald noted that Gascoigne found Ikebana limiting at a certain stage, quoting her comment, "It was going so far, but not far enough; the thing that I wanted to say was out in the middle of the grasslands" (1989, 21). Gellatly stated that Gascoigne eventually became disillusioned "with its hierarchical approach and deference to 'all things Japanese,' particularly with regard to the selection and use of materials" (2008, 11).

It has to be noted, however, that the dissatisfaction Gascoigne experienced with Ikebana was historically and culturally specific. Gascoigne's Ikebana teacher was Norman Sparnon (1913 - 1995), who was regarded as the best-qualified and leading master of Ikebana in the Western world (MacDonald 1998). It is thought to be Sparnon who sprayed Gascoigne's work black at the Ikebana exhibition. Sparnon started teaching Ikebana in Sydney in 1960 and Gascoigne became his student in 1962. Sparnon's attitudes to Ikebana at that time might have been limited in terms of the contemporary definitions of Ikebana, which have been extended by more recent Ikebana artists including Hiroshi Teshigahara. However judging from some of his last Ikebana works in 1990s' (Fig. 1), Sparnon was aware of the expanding nature of Ikebana and he contributed to such a trend rather than preserving the traditional forms of Ikebana.

Despite Gascoigne's departure from Ikebana, some critics have noted that there is a certain Japanese taste in her art work (Eagle 2007; MacDonald 1998). There might have been some lasting influence of Ikebana throughout her aesthetic development.

Gascoigne's art practice moved through several phases: iron assemblages (1964 - 74), bone works (1971 - 72), boxed works (early 1970s' - early 1980s'), and assemblages using segmented found objects (since early 1980s). It is the last category of her works that are often pointed out as containing references to Ikebana or Japanese aesthetics. Gascoigne's earlier assemblages were made of recognizable objects that retain their associations with their earlier lives including Australian icons (beer cans, dolls, etc.). Since 1984, however, she started to use drink-crate wood, road signs and building materials. Generally pictorial imagery ceased in these late works and Gascoigne described her shift as a switch from "things to materials" (MacDonald 1998, 32).

Assemblage

Before further looking into the assemblage works by Gascoigne, it is necessary to clarify the general nature of assemblage. Seitz (1961) pointed out a couple of simple characteristics of the collages, objects and constructions that comprised his book, “The Art of Assemblage” and the exhibition he curated at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1961.

- i. They are predominantly assembled rather than painted, drawn, modeled, or carved.
- ii. Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials (Seitz 1961, 6).

Another simple definition is given by Waldman (1992). While collage involves “the pasting together of various materials on a flat surface,” assemblage involves “the process of joining two- and three-dimensional organic or prefabricated materials that project out from the surface plane” (Waldman 1992, 8). Obviously one of the most important concerns is what happens when two conflicting items are juxtaposed in a work of assemblage. These technical definitions, however, do not provide us with sufficient insights into those crucial issues of assemblage as art work.

Focusing on how collage can produce meanings, Waldman (1992) pointed out that collage makes it possible to layer into a work of art several levels of meaning: “the original identity of the fragment or objects and all of the history it brings with it; the new meaning it gains in association with other objects or elements; and the meaning it acquires as the result of its metamorphosis into a new entity” (Waldman 1992, 11).

Based on the three levels specified by Waldman, Gascoigne’s works will be looked at to analyze how found materials gained context and became fine art objects. As the following discussion reveals, however, it is impossible to discuss these layers separately. When we focus on one layer, our discussion often involves other layers at the same time. Therefore, the distinction of the three layers is tentative in nature.

The First Layer: The Original Identity of the Fragments

One aspect of Gascoigne’s assemblages as well as in general arts and science involves the systematic division of a subject into units. Breaking down of material into units has the effect of “reconfiguring older relations of subject and object, time and place, inspiration from inside and refraction from outside” (Eagle 2007, 201). In this process, new poetic conjectures were sought.

In addition, Edward precisely described Gascoigne’s process of slicing, tearing and sawing material into almost identical units as “a means of intensifying a quality or an essence, of referencing the recurring rhythms of nature, of creating new form” (Edward 1998, 13).

Interestingly, this aspect of assemblage resembles Hiroshi Teshigahara’s creative processing of natural materials, in particular bamboo. He noted that the initial breaking down of bamboo was to remove its familiar notions and to gain its essence.

The divided units are free from their old meanings and contexts and so can be more easily assembled into new configurations.

Another aspect of Gascoigne's works that requires special attention is that from early in her career she preferred using weathered materials such as wooden boxes rather than fresh materials. Materials lose their original color and their usage over time. When they became obsolete, they were matured and were ready for Gascoigne's creative process.

Her preference for aged materials can be seen as similar to the Japanese aesthetics of *Wabi*. It is one of the most important aesthetic principles in Japanese culture, but its characteristics have developed and changed throughout history. Consequently, it is not easy to define it concisely. In relation to Gascoigne's works, however, it would be beneficial to look at the most influential notion of *Wabi* proposed by the greatest tea master, Rikyu (1522 - 1591), who developed it under the influence of Zen Buddhism and incorporated it into the tea ceremony.

Haga (1995) pointed out three characteristics of *Wabi* as simple, unpretentious beauty, imperfect, irregular beauty and austere, stark beauty. He argues that these three characteristics mutually blended to create a single aesthetic sensibility. Regarding Rikyu's idea of *Wabi*, Haga concludes as follow:

Rikyu's wabi, viewed externally, is impoverished, cold, and withered. At the same time, internally, it has a beauty which brims with vitality. While it may appear to be the faded beauty of the passive recluse, or the remnant beauty of old age, it has within it the beauty of non-being, latent with unlimited energy and change. (Haga 1995, 250)

Wabi sensibility allows viewers to recognize aesthetic qualities beyond the weathered surface of objects. Gascoigne's late works such as *Earth* (1999) consist of segments of such materials (Fig. 2). Each segment potentially has not only the external but also, beyond surface, the internal aspects of *Wabi*. This effect seems to be further emphasized by her compositions, which will be looked into in the following sections.

The Second Layer: In Association with Other Materials

A fragment within an assemblage work gains new meaning in association with other objects or elements in the work. This aspect of assemblage was well exemplified in one of Gascoigne's earlier assemblage works, *Pink window* (1975)(Fig. 3). It combined painted wood and corrugated iron. The weathered iron was transformed into a curtain attached to the window frame. The blown curtain evokes a strong drying wind due to the red surface and rough edges forcefully cut off. The work suggests the harsh natural environment of the Australian countryside.

Piece to walk around (1981) (Fig. 4), *Crop 2* (1982) (Fig. 5), *Turn of the tide* (1983) (Fig. 6) and *Red beach* (1984) (Fig. 7) are situated in her transition from "things to materials." These works, in essence, all consist of massed natural materials and geometrical grid like forms. The contrast is closely related to the major characteristics

of her assemblages including order and randomness (Gellatly 2008, 20) and massing and repetition (Gellatly 2008, 15).

In *Turn of the tide* (1983) (Fig. 6) and *Red beach* (1984) (Fig. 7), she used shells that she had found. Almost identical organic segments were gathered and arranged in a grid or near grid format. In both works, Gascoigne created empty spaces and frame-like lines outside the rectangular forms consisting of the massed shells, suggesting the significance of the contrast between newly emerged patterns on the shells and weathered geometrical orders. In *Turn of the tide* (1983) putting the shells together in the grid structure makes clear the subtle differences between them. The random pattern on the surface of the shells, when seen together, looks like a part of a larger whole. This may be Gascoigne's interpretation of the Ikebana concept of a second nature, a purified or idealized representation of nature using natural materials.

Her assemblages after this period gained greater abstract strength. Grid or geometrical compositions were frequently used, and Gascoigne started to work with segmented weathered materials instead of natural materials. Due to their weathered nature, however, those materials reveal their sense of passing time, in this way Gascoigne treated weathered objects as if they were natural materials. The contrast between organic disorder and artificial order that was apparent in her assemblages in early 1980s became the most profound theme in Gascoigne's works.

The Third Layer: As the Result of Metamorphosis

The other aspect of Gascoigne's works that needs to be discussed is that of unexpected associations. Eagle referred to the fact that for the Cubists, Futurists, Dadaists and others, collage and assemblage were devices for disrupting the logic of picture making (2007, 201). It is this aspect of assemblage or collage that fascinated Picasso. He used the fragments of collage paradoxically, turning one substance into another and extracting unexpected meaning out of forms by combining them in new ways (Golding 1994, 63). Golding quoted the following comment by Picasso regarding collage.

If a piece of newspaper can become a bottle that gives us something to think about in connection with both newspapers and bottles, too. This displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring (Gilot and Carlton, 1965, 70).

Also, Eagle (2007) in discussing the third layer of assemblage refers to Saussure's dualistic analysis of signs. Saussure states that the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image (1959, 66). Then, he replaced concept and sound-image respectively by signified and signifier. By this renaming he was able to clearly indicate the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole (sign) of which they are parts. What appears to happen in assemblage is that a signifier is transposed from its original context to another but still retains its original features. Eagle describes a feature of Gascoigne's assemblages as 'the jostling together of displaced signifiers' (2007, 203).

It is in this aspect that both Lipsey (1988) and O'Brien (2004) recognized the affinity between assemblage and Ikebana. Noting that Gascoigne made a number of collages between 1972 and 74, O'Brien (2004) sees the significance of the association between assemblage and Ikebana. Her collage works can be located between her Ikebana study and her assemblages.

Collage is a Western ikebana, an art of arrangement, and like Japanese flower arrangement its aesthetic impact can go far beyond the separate impacts of the materials it employs (Lipsey 1988, 358).

Ikebana generally consists of various plant materials and display containers to hold them. Modern Ikebana artists such as Sofu Teshigahara (1900 - 79) started to incorporate artificial materials such as metal and paper into Ikebana (Fig. 8). He also made Ikebana works without containers or with containers hidden from the viewers' gaze. Combinations of different types of natural materials as well as combinations of natural and artificial materials, including their containers, can be seen as juxtapositions of displaced objects, or as assemblages. Further, regarding a flower for Ikebana as a displaced object played an important role for some contemporary Ikebana artists in developing their practices. In particular, Hiroshi Teshigahara emphasized the difference between a cut flower in Ikebana and a flower in the field, as a part of nature (Teshigahara, 1992). That difference is similar to that between a piece of newspaper in a collage and newspapers.

The Grid in Gascoigne

Gascoigne's works such as *Flash art* (1987) (Fig. 9) and *Party piece* (1988) (Fig. 10) reveal strong contrasts between the order of the grid and the disorder of the found and processed materials, the segmented reflective traffic signs. Eagle relates the contrast to the aesthetic impact of Gascoigne's works, stating, "an underlying grid or cell-like structure serves as a ground for deviations" (Eagle 2007, 200).

It is notable, however, that the deviations in these works using letters or words are so much greater than her previous works using natural materials such as shells (e.g. *Turn of tide*, 1983; *Red beach*, 1984, Fig. 6 and 7) and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the grid.

Party piece (1988) (Fig. 10), for instance, consists of about fourteen square or rectangular units, many of which contain some recognizable parts of letters. Each segment has a different visual weight and strength, although their colors are unified, yellow and black. When they are united into a single piece of work, however, there is a kind of dynamic harmony that emerges out of such chaotic unbalance.

Assuming that this harmony, which is the manifestation of what Edward called "will to order" (1998, 13), is similar to the harmony that contemporary Ikebana artists often seek through using several different flower materials, it is worth considering how it is actualized in the art work. Although we have already noted the affinity between assemblage and Ikebana, there might be more fundamental similarities between them in Gascoigne's works.

The harmony in Gascoigne's assemblages seems to be heavily dependent on the function of the grid. It functions not just as a contrast to the haphazardness that segmented units bring, but also as an allusion for more profound contradictions. Krauss argued the mythic power of the grid that could deal with and repress a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism (1985, 13).

In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as emblem but also as myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction). (Krauss 1985, 12)

If it is possible to see something similar to the grid in Ikebana, which was defined as the symbolic representation of nature in the 16th century (Shimbo 2013), it would be certain guiding principles including the basic golden ratio. For instance, the three main branches used to form a basic style are set in the ratio of 7: 5: 3. The Sogetsu School starts teaching beginners with these principles. Following these principles, Ikebana artists seek to actualize in their works an internally perceived natural harmony or sense of order. Like the grid, these principles would have a mythic function to symbolically deal with contradictions, in this case, between the transient natural materials and the permanent, the order of nature.

As to Gascoigne's last series of works, *Earth* (1999) (Fig. 2), Gellatly noted the contrast between deviations (the scratches, accretions, pockmarks, wood grain and nail holes) and their grounds (rough-hewn, irregular grids), and interpreted each deviation as "a meditative reflection of an artist in possession of an innate knowledge of the country in which she travelled and fossicked, developed over a period of some fifty years" (2008, 23). Considering the potential function of the grid, Gascoigne's meditative reflections in this work may have involved an awareness of more fundamental contradictions of being and the order of universe. It is, for Edward, the contradiction between ephemeral and permanent.

In her 'will to order' she uses the techniques of accentuation, compression, and repetition (the process of mass production and of nature) with an almost unerring eye, to draw out the allusive potential of materials. The process is one of exactitude, of refining and distilling both ephemeral experience and actively decaying material, into an essential permanent form which Gascoigne has described in terms of an aesthetic 're-possession' of the land. (Edward 1998, 13)

It is evident that Gascoigne inherited some qualities from Ikebana particularly in her attitudes toward segmented found objects, which she treated as quasi organic materials. Eagle makes this point powerfully.

The weight Gascoigne gave to the found materials was uncharacteristic of Western art. She found the endorsement she needed in *ikebana*. Japanese art (including *ikebana*) featured strongly in exhibitions and art reviews in Australia in the 1960s' and influenced a number of artists, though Gascoigne was, I think, the only one for

whom Japanese art was the gateway to her own art. She studied the Sogetsu school of *ikebana* for its formal grammar, after she recognized an appreciation of the visual and a sustained quality of metaphor that were congruent with her own deeply felt delight. (Eagle 2007, 205)

The visual and sustained metaphor Gascoigne recognized in Ikebana places her assemblages at an extreme end of the expanded field of contemporary Ikebana.

Conclusion

Through indirect collaboration with nature, Rosalie Gascoigne pursued its essence symbolically in her works. Although the influence of Ikebana on Gascoigne's works is generally regarded as limited, this study suggests that it is crucial for her art work. Unlike factors such as perspective that Monet and other impressionists learned from Japanese prints (Spate 2001), the sense of order that she inherited from Ikebana is harder to recognize. Seeking an order in her works, Gascoigne investigated the mythic function of grids that could deal with the contradiction between ephemeral and permanent. This attitude is parallel to that of modern Ikebana artists seeking harmony in their free style works through challenging the restrictions of traditional rules.

While Gascoigne's works reveal that some common attitudes exist between the current practice of Ikebana and contemporary art, in terms of a historical perspective of Ikebana it can be seen as extreme example of the investigation of contemporary Ikebana as assemblage. In addition, her work can be regarded as a unique example of cross-cultural transformation.

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