

From Vera Rudner: A Study (Forthcoming Quemar Press 2018):

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Be Back in the Morning

Sacrilege

Tree of Life



From beginning of biography:

Vera Rudner was born in Berlin, on the 1st of December, 1922. She grew up there with her Dutch mother and Austrian father, working as a child actor in cinema, and later studying Art at Berlin's Reimann School. Her father took her regularly to see the artworks on Berlin's Museum Island. She describes how her mother 'schlepped' her into silent movies, being proud of Vera's appearance and talent. She appeared in several films, but these were all destroyed later by the Nazis, as they had been produced by Jews.



*Vera as a young actor
in Germany*





In one movie, she played the daughter of the actor Ernst Deutsch, later seen in English language films such as *The Third Man*.

She lived in Germany until she was a teenager.





Escaping Germany's National Socialist Government, she and her Jewish family reached Holland, then Australia in 1938. They came to Sydney, as her mother's cousin was living there. Still devoted to painting, Rudner studied in different methods...

Beginning of Publisher's essay:

Deconstruction and Utterance: a short essay on the work of Vera Rudner

Katharine Margot Toohey

There seem to be two interconnected elements in Rudner's Surrealism. In one sense, it tries to express reality honestly by deconstructing it intricately and internally, in objects, shapes and vivid images. In another sense, it focuses on an individual utterance from the self, without being confined to physical concepts of reality. Unlike Expressionism, unknown, undefinable objects in her work seem to have their own agency, their

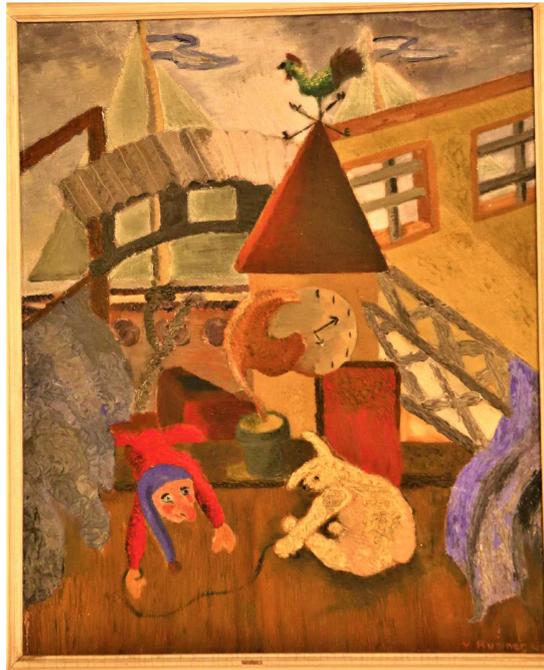


own ability to interact with other elements. A blue shape can twist, turn and animate towards another shape. In Expressionist work, such as Max Beckmann's portraits, the agency might rest with something expected to be animate, a human or animal: paintings in which a man lifts a champagne glass, a woman touches her face or a cat sits, interacting with a woman. Rudner, on the other hand, gives the unreal an ability to act, giving it a way to communicate. Rudner began by deconstructing still life, and she often brings the same purpose, the same ability to act, to recognisable, motionless, usual objects. In her still life, a dining cup appears to cower or hide behind a golden square, as if aware of another object's anguish...

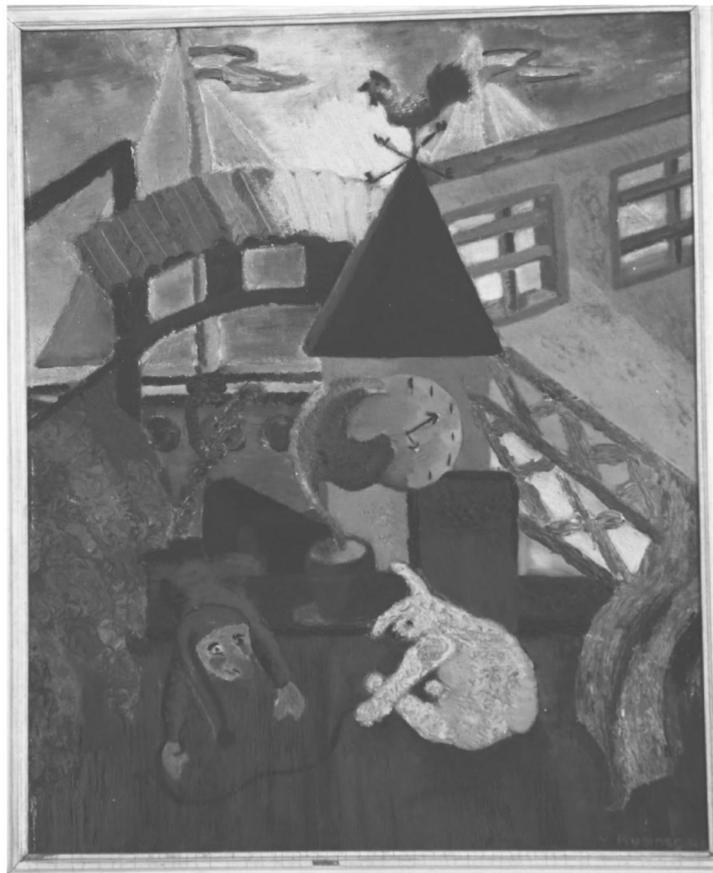


Be Back in the Morning

Oil on treated cardboard, 1947



In the background of *Be Back in the Morning*, there are ships with sails, by a sky in silver and white, suggesting a storm. A clock reads ten past five on one side of its face, the other has no strokes to signify numbers. In close proximity to the numberless side is an orange toned crescent shape which seems to emerge from a pot. The crescent has the impression of something animate, consuming or overtaking the clock. In the foreground, there is a sitting white-cream toy rabbit, with its ear



cocked, looking at a red puppet as they both hold the ends of a black rope or string, like a skipping rope. The puppet is looking to the rope, but still seems to be relating to the rabbit toy. The puppet has pink hands and face, with an extended nose in darker pink and dark pink cheeks. It seems to be crawling up



from the side of the wooden surface, on which the rabbit and the rope are resting. The puppet's position could also suggest someone or something crawling injured,



in need of help or escape. The puppet would be crawling from a space where a yellow and orange wall with barred windows stands, and a grey and silver arch with a roof and cut-out squares. There are dark grey spherical objects under the arch, like play balls. In this area, there is a yellow block with a

red, shaded triangular roof. On it, there is a weathervane with a rooster pointing South West. The blue and white flags upon the sails blow from that direction, as does an object similar to a blue curtain. It seems to hang torn, through an open window on the left of the painting.

This blue is balanced by a blue, black and grey

curved shape on the right. Behind it is a silver structure that reaches the building with the weathervane. The structure has the impression of



something that could be climbed. In another interpretation, the puppet, rabbit toy and ships could all be motionless, limp or abandoned, with nothing but the wind from the South West affecting them - or a person abandoning them could be leaving with the ships. The painting could suggest two different senses of returning, with both being valid actions. In one sense, it seems that someone here, toy or person,

could escape, climbing, sailing or crawling and choose to return. In another sense, the toys can be 'back in the morning' for someone by remaining. The phrase 'Be Back in the Morning' could be a request or a reassurance.

The poet and novelist, Jennifer Maiden, has written a poem about this painting. In it, the toys seem abandoned and 'Be Back in the Morning', is 'a promise. Forever kept, never kept, and both' by the toys and their owner:

Be Back in the Morning or Diary Poem: Uses of Toys

Recently visiting Vera Rudner, I saw for the first time *Be Back in the Morning*, another of her profound postwar paintings, saw then how it related to her *Sacrilege*, but less shocking at first, more sinister in its grim, simple reassurances, even if it also was, however,



strangely solid on its subject toys, its ostensible subject of playthings.

Who will be back in the morning? The toys like the sled in *Citizen*

Kane, imprisoning memory in simplicity, or the child owner

of the objects? That are either: solid parts of small buildings

crowded under their blue rampant pendants, high sail flags,

confronted from a silo by a puny weathervane rooster.

Or a puppet with a long red nose and plump rabbit on a leash,

a clock in the toy silo showing ten past five, half its face smoothed out,

squeezed off by a handlike cloud from a pot. And grey-blue wisps

in insubstantial material. The puppet sprawled down limp in red

suit, blue nightcap has a grotesque look at first that seen closer

aches from abandoned despair, a grief-stunned stare, a caricature

of a Jewish caricature perhaps. The sudden chaos the toys depict

will need to be solved in the morning, but the title also suggests

the opposite: the criminally careless or just, if you will, the childish

careless. Or a promise. Forever kept, never kept, and both. The rabbit

is pale as skin and looks more tranquil, with its bulky bottom squat

and reassuring, unlike the puppet's, which is sprawled up too wide

in trapped red subjection, an inhuman posture that stained wood bisects.



And all thrusts forward, urgently unperspectived, as if all toys

linger

inherently surreal, eternal as a promise never kept. Solid as horror,

solid as disappointment in the throat, chaotic as the punctual

threats

that leash the lonely child to the clock, these toys alone expressing its

defacing separation. And who then in the morning can be back

a lost toy to survive their situation?



Sacrilege

Tree of Life

(We cannot show additional black and white details of Sacrilege from the National Gallery of Australia, as we have with the paintings still belonging to Vera Rudner, but we have reproduced it by permission in its entirety in full colour)



Sacrilege

Oil on treated cardboard, 1948

The version of *Sacrilege* hanging in the National Gallery and studied in this book is the only extant one.

In *Sacrilege*, a large wooden cross topples or slants with a line of barbed wire running over it, giving the impression of existing in 

a current or former warzone. Against the cross, there is a mouth open directly to the viewer, in speech, or death, or snarl, or non-linguistic anguish, or in warning. Above the clear mouth, there is a rounded shape in dark greys and shades of green, resembling a face. In this shape, there is a single yellow circle suggesting an eye. The skull may be empty and shaped like a traditional round German helmet or jester's cap. The barbed wire has been threaded through the circle or eye, pulling it to the cross. Before the face, the wire is unraveling - hanging limp and unconnected. Behind it, the cross falls or reclines back. There could be a suggestion that the action of the mouth in speaking is causing the wire to come undone, separating the mouth and face from the cross. In that interpretation, this communicating mouth is emancipatory, and something that can survive animate in a war-field - something it could be possible to look in the eye and address calmly, unafraid. This would contrast with other responses that the painting is scarifying.

In regard to spaces of colour, teal blue or yellow underneath the mouth seem to have the same sense of solidity as the textured grey sky or grass.

Under the mouth, a deep blue and golden brown object twists, like a whip - a possible symbol of torture by or towards the face.



On another level, it could be twisting towards the viewer in protection of the face and mouth. If the scene is interpreted in that way, an unknown object without a clear definition can protect something clear and identifiable in a Surrealistic process.

In 2017, Jennifer Maiden wrote a poem on *Sacrilege*. In her interpretation, the mouth seems to ‘sing’, with ‘disbelieving pain’ of an autonomous existential nature. She wrote, ‘the face on the cross sings helpless with agony, anger, but never demands that the eyes return.’

Maiden says the Butler-Donaldson book in the poem is *Journal of Art Historiography*, issue 9, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the University of Birmingham, which has Rex Butler and A.D.S Donaldson’s ‘Surrealism and Australia: towards a world history of Surrealism’ on pages 1-15.

Maiden’s poem delighted Rudner, and she felt it was accurate about her work. The full poem is included here:

Sacrilege

I fear not doing her justice: however,
for a long time I've wanted to write a poem about Vera
Rudner. We'd meet at many opera matinees. She'd



a wicked sense of humour, a shrewd, warm manner and a witty pretty daughter. After a few decades Vera's end-of-year card was her painting *Sacrilege*, the first I'd heard of her as a painter. It transpired *Sacrilege* is in the National Gallery, she'd studied in her early twenties with Eric Wilson, and she'd painted it after the Second World War, having come here with her Austrian-Dutch mother and father at seventeen, and exhibited with painters like Nolan at the Contemporary Art Society. The *Monthly* magazine recently said *Sacrilege* was 'scarifying' when they described earlier Australian surrealists, echoing the Butler-Donaldson book on Surrealism, but I'm not really sure if I see it that plain, or the book's idea that she 'abandoned painting haunted by her European experiences.' My Vera is, underneath her charm, as powerful as



Sacrilege, certainly, but maybe not neatly haunted.

Painting things like *Sacrilege* might make one daunted

about art's costs to the psyche. I'd call it maybe

'uncompromising'. The violent nature

of any satisfied concept could be enough if one

wanted

a solidier reason. *Sacrilege* shows a distorted head

perhaps

in physical and mental anguish on a tilted cross,

barbed wire at back trenchlike and also protrudes from

its only eye above a green crooked snout and sidelong

teeth in that open mouth of disbelieving pain. It

remains

for me again as a transfixed outsider

the most sudden uncompromising horror depiction

I may ever see. After it, any operatic world might be

a daily dallying relief for the painter. Like Plath

on related stark themes, it's as technically skilled



as a polished aria. I don't know if my instinctive

memory

that they played Viennese operetta to reassure
those entering the gas chambers is here in any way
appropriate. It's probably another needed wedge
of continuous information, but there is enough
of that, then there's *Sacrilege*, which in its way fits
as an end-of-year card, being in Christmassy primary
colours: blood rust, linden green, at two blues: sky
and sea on the wrinkled grey air. The yellow eye
is darker than the bits like tainted cream, the face on
the cross sings helpless with agony, anger, but never
demands that the eyes return. For a long time
I have wanted to write the right poem about Rudner.





Tree of Life

Oil on treated cardboard, 1946

In Rudner's enigmatic *Tree of Life*, a tree is tilted to the right in the background, either growing at



an angle, forced sideways or in the process of falling.

There is red-gold colouring to the left of the trunk, perhaps suggesting fire or the force from the impact of a



hot object or hot objects, like ammunition. On two sides of the tree there is a brick wall, in life-blood red bricks. Before the wall, there is a light grey shape, resembling a head turned to the right. Where its eyes and nose would be, there is the appearance of three dark stitches or a substance wrapped around three times. Where its ear would be,

there seems to be a long, silver toned pipe, giving an impression of draining a liquid from the head, perhaps into



a black oval vessel. Underneath, a brown root or pliable object appears to circle and move behind a spool wound with green thread, of a colour and texture similar to the leaves on the tree in the background. Inside the spool,



flames could be rising with white smoke. Behind the spool, there is a space with the appearance of an



overturning brown and white-cream bowl. Behind, there is an object with two stems, like a plant creature with sharp teeth and jaws or a claw that is touching or close to the head. This sharp object is open with a twisting line between it, perhaps giving the impression of scissors cutting a thread. Where the head's mouth and chin would be, there is a rounded shape in red tones, looking as if it is fastened to the head. This red shape has a bent yellow reed, rod or straw coming from it, with a red line circling the straw. In this space, something unrecognisable has the same solidity as something clearly identifiable. The unknown, rounded object around the mouth area has lines as clear as the tree.



Overall, the painting moves quickly from red to brown to grey to the vibrant green of the thread and the tree. As there is a similarity between the spool's thread and the living tree outside the shape resembling a head, there might be a suggestion here that a tree-of-life, life-force, exists outside a physical body or state as a thread with ardent fire inside it. The physical is separate and can be gagged, deprived of seeing or hearing. The painting could also have a connotation of God speaking from within a burning bush in the Old Testament. The Life Force's thread could be something alight and independent.

Katharine Margot Toohey

