



Thumbnails of the 6 Rudner paintings studied in the book

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

Beginning of biography

Beginning of essay

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 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...



Sacrilege

(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 solid 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

