

From Vera Rudner: A Study:

Biography

Essay

Be Back in the Morning

Sacrilege

Tree of Life

Still Life



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, from what she had learned at the progressive leaning Reimann School to conservative night classes at East Sydney Technical College in 1939, held in a



former gaol, to enhancing her work at the privately run Julian Ashton Art School at Miller's Point, thriving under the Cubist, Realist influence of the artist Eric Wilson, and that of Henry Gibbons.



In 1944, Vera Rudner married Albert Rudner, who was an American visiting Australia, and who by coincidence shared her surname.

She travelled to America with him briefly, and whilst there sold or gave away some of her artwork, but they returned to Australia the next year. Albert was supportive of her painting and they constructed picture frames together to compensate for the scarcity of full wooden frames in wartime. Quemar has chosen to present *Suburbia* and *Tree of Life* in these frames, as they are still displayed on the paintings. Because of the wartime shortage of canvas, her works are on treated cardboard. She continued painting and exhibited at the Contemporary Art Society in 1949. By then, however, her actual painting had ceased, as her final work *Sacrilege* in 1948 had produced severe symptoms of stress, including a painful ulcer. She has explained to Jennifer Maiden that this was because Surrealist painting comes directly from inside the person rather than being an external process like representational

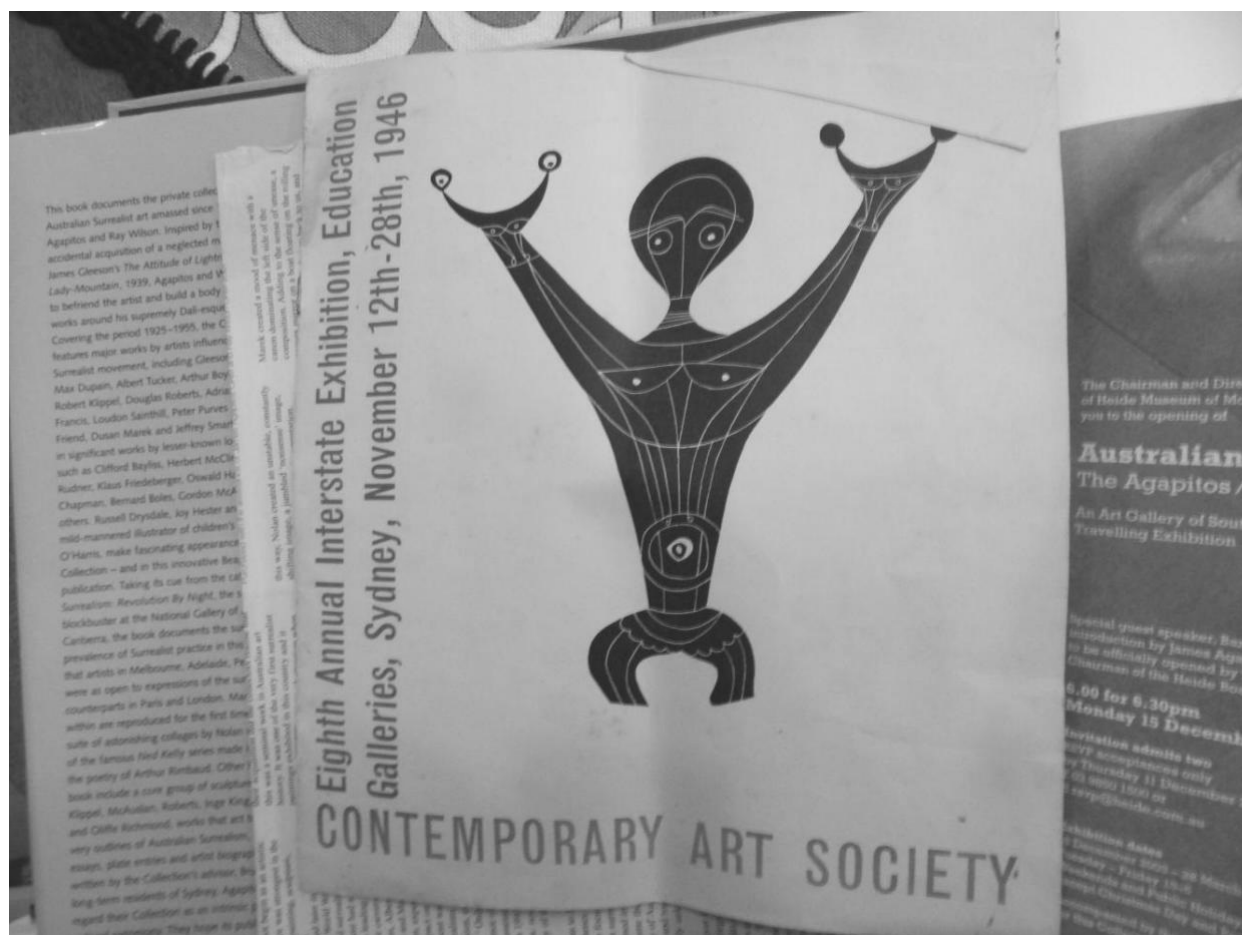


art. She also revealed that as well as intense suffering, a process of 'drying up' was involved.

In conversation with Jennifer Maiden and Katharine Margot Toohey, Rudner pointed out that her final painting *Sacrilege* no longer contains 'my bricks' - the brick walls that are a feature of some of her earlier paintings and perhaps represent both safety and its apparently safe deconstruction.

Contemporary Art Society Exhibition, Sydney, 1946.

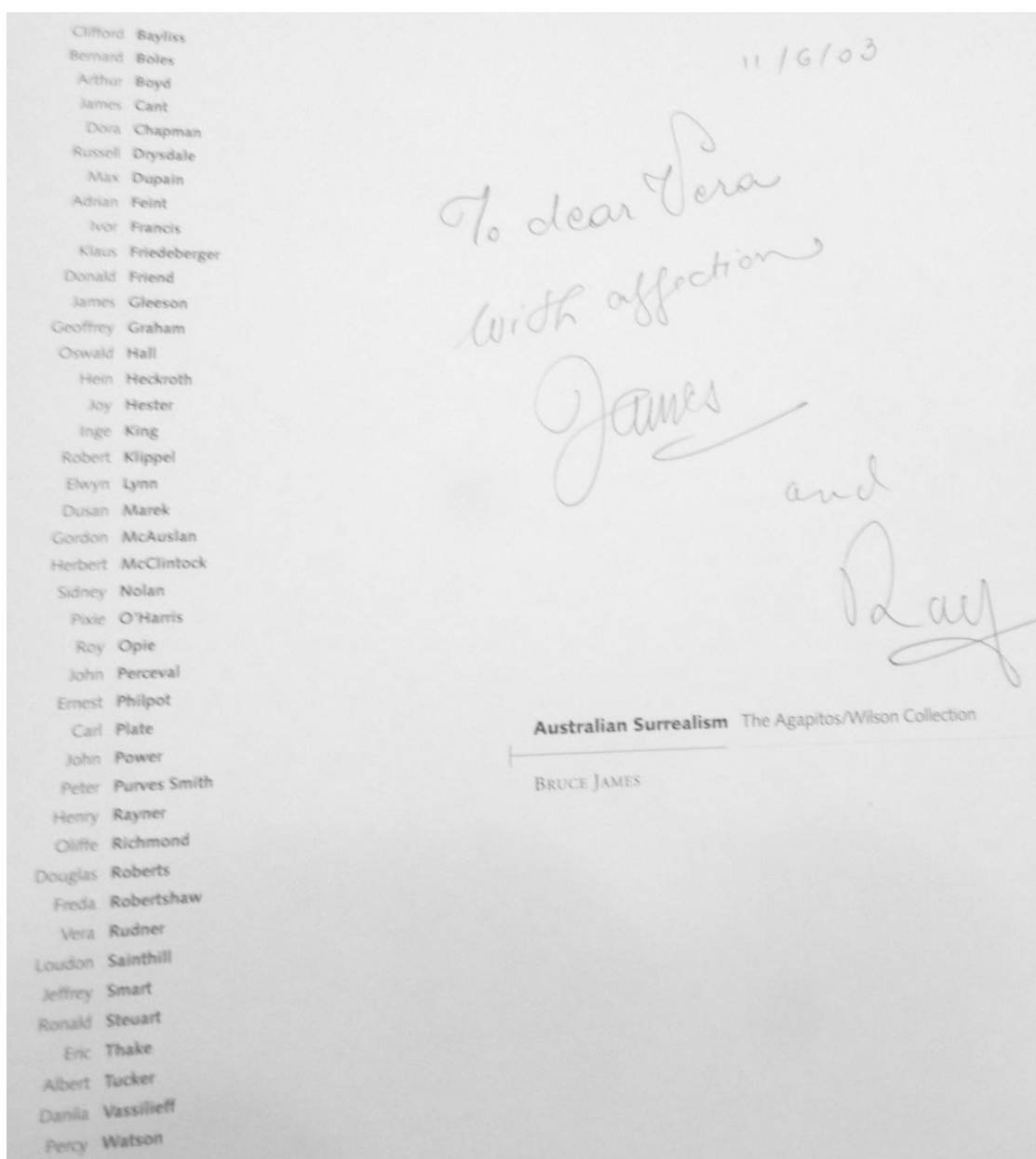
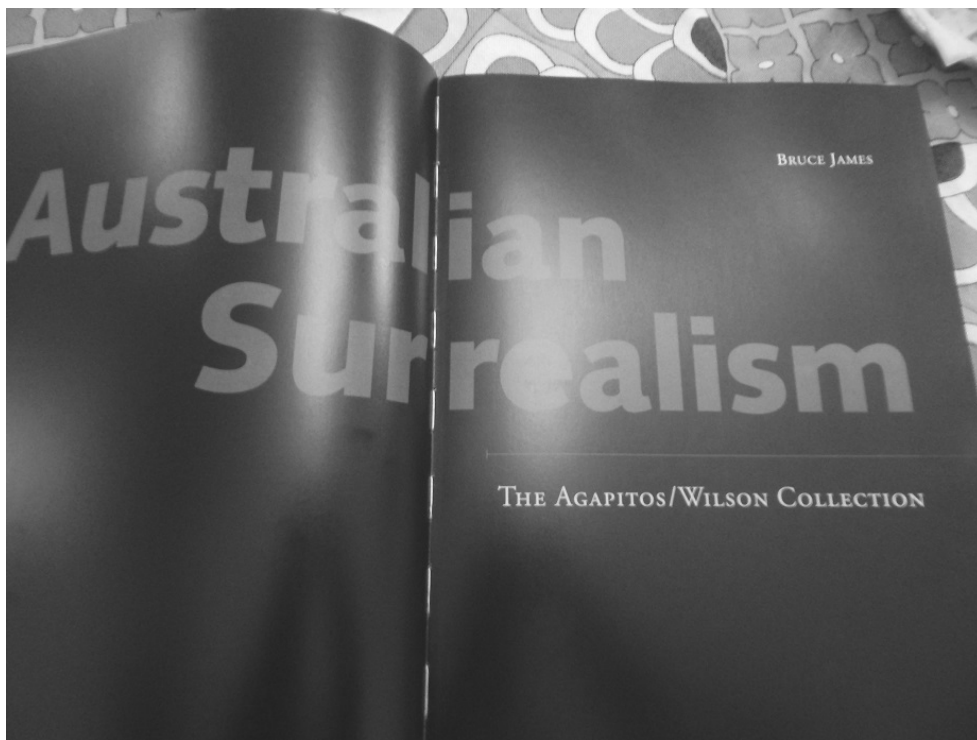
Item 163 is Vera Rudner's painting Enigma of Life, selling for 25 guineas. The painting's whereabouts are now unknown.



151	ARTHUR EVAN READ	14 gns.
	Riverside, Mascot	
152	Old Stable, Gore Hill	7 gns.
	ALISON REHFISCH	
153	Kurrajong Slopes in the Spring	25 gns.
154	Daffodils with Fruit	15 gns.
	JOHN RICHARDS	
155	The Yellow River	30 gns.
156	Ville	20 gns.
157	Marine	10 gns.
	JOCELYN RICKARDS	
158	Girl with a Flower	8 gns.
159	Girl with a Red Shawl	12 gns.
	F. ROBERTSHAW	
161	Early Morning Mists, Meryla	30 gns.
162	Green Valley	12 gns.
	VERA RUDNER	
163	Enigma of Life	16 gns.
	JOAN SANDS	
164	Farm Cottage, Dee Why	8 gns.
	M. J. SIMONETT	
166	Harbour View	25 gns.
	C. S. SMITH	
167	John	5 gns.

She retired from painting but was still active in supporting the arts and opera, and had a beloved son and daughter, Charles and Ava, with Albert.





Her last two paintings *Kaleidoscopia* and *Sacrilege* are in the National Gallery of Australia as part of the Agapitos/Wilson Surrealism collection, with artists such as Smart, Friend, Nolan, Boyd, Klippel and Gleeson. These two paintings were featured in a major work on this collection in 2003: Bruce James' *Australian surrealism : the Agapitos/Wilson Collection*, Beagle Press, summarised in the National Library listing as: *Documents the private collection of Australian Surrealist art amassed since 1990 by James Agapitos and Ray Wilson. Covering the period 1925-1995, the collection features major works by the artists influenced by the Surrealist movement, and documents the surprising prevalence of Surrealist practice in Australian art.*



The Agapitos/Wilson collection was a 25th Anniversary acquisition of the National Gallery of Australia in 2007 and unveiled by it at an exhibition on 16th February, 2008.

Sydney art lovers and philanthropists James Agapitos OAM and Ray Wilson also wished to purchase *Suburbia* from Rudner, but she decided to retain it. This Quemar Press reproduction is the first time it has been presented to a general contemporary audience.

There was originally a much larger, slightly later version of *Sacrilege*, kept by Rudner at her mother's house on Norfolk Island. When her mother died, the painting was entrusted to a family friend who took over the house. Having been approached by Agapitos and Wilson, who wished to purchase this larger painting as well, Rudner contacted the family friend but was told by her that

the painting no longer existed. The friend said she had burnt it, as it ‘scared her grandchildren.’



In 2017, the poet and novelist Jennifer Maiden wrote a poem on *Sacrilege* about which Rudner wrote she was ‘honoured’, adding ‘You saw what in my mind’s eye I was seeing’. The poem is in Maiden’s 2018 *Appalachian Fall* collection, held by Rudner in the picture, whilst Maiden

holds the volume *Surrealism*. Maiden has also recently written a *Be Back in the Morning* poem, which Rudner regards as detailed and insightful. Both poems are reproduced in this Quemar study of Rudner’s work.

As a result of this new communication, Quemar Press’ publisher Katharine Margot Toohey approached Rudner about a study of her work, and Rudner - who is now 95 - has been very supportive and informative.



As it is not possible to locate more of Rudner's paintings easily, Quemar's study will concentrate on the four paintings still in Vera's possession - the initial still life, *Suburbia*, *Tree of Life* and *Be Back in the Morning* - and the two in the National Gallery of Australia, *Kaleidoscopia* and *Sacrilege*. Other paintings currently suggested on the Internet to be by Rudner are not by her, as she did not paint landscapes.

A focus on each of the six works individually is also appropriate, as Rudner says that she regarded each work as separate, taking months to create, and not being part of a sequence with the others. Quemar's reproductions of paintings still owned by Rudner were photographed in their frames and at normal sight angles, to reflect their usual situation and safeguard Rudner's copyright.

We have done our best to approximate Rudner's use of colour, which - although rich - is subdued and subtle, a feature which she appreciated in the work and teaching of Eric Wilson. Where a detail might have reproduced too brightly, we have presented it in black and white, to allow the reader to concentrate on its conceptual elements.

In general, it is useful to remember that Rudner's blues are more often delicate greys and her reds russet browns, although the effect is powerfully and sumptuously vivid.



Publisher's essay:

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

Katharine Margot Toohey

There seems 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.

In contrast to some other Surrealism, such as that of Friend or Smart, Rudner does not portray a living human form representationally. Instead, for example, in *Suburbia*, a deep blue silhouette shape, with the appearance of a chest, head and neck seems to hold a bird near, relating closely to it. Here, something distorted, unusual or otherworldly can address a representational being, unhindered. Her work mirrors communication between the knowable and the unknowable, an aspect running ceaselessly through reality.

Giving agency to the inanimate also enhances its reality. Rudner's deconstructions, however, do not seem to deliberately create a concept of anthropomorphism for a viewer, perhaps because they stem internally from the self, without a sense of anthropomorphic displacement.

Ultimately, in her final painting, the levels of communication appear to suddenly change focus. The most prominent element is a strong mouth on a shape appearing to be its face, with an eye attached by unraveling barbed wire to a cross. This deconstructed face stares directly outwards in open intensity. In the historical context of Surrealism, with its influences from early European anti-war movements, the image could have persuasive connotations. Such an impression might be heightened if the viewer knew of the Artist's experience in Germany under National Socialism. On a different level, Surrealism such as this may also exist in another humane way, with the artist illuminating reality by deconstructing her own self and emotions - distinct from therapy, and



even opposite to it - to shock carefully, in deliberate skill and technique, beyond the highest aspirations of propaganda, and at a high summit of Surrealism itself.



Be Back in the Morning

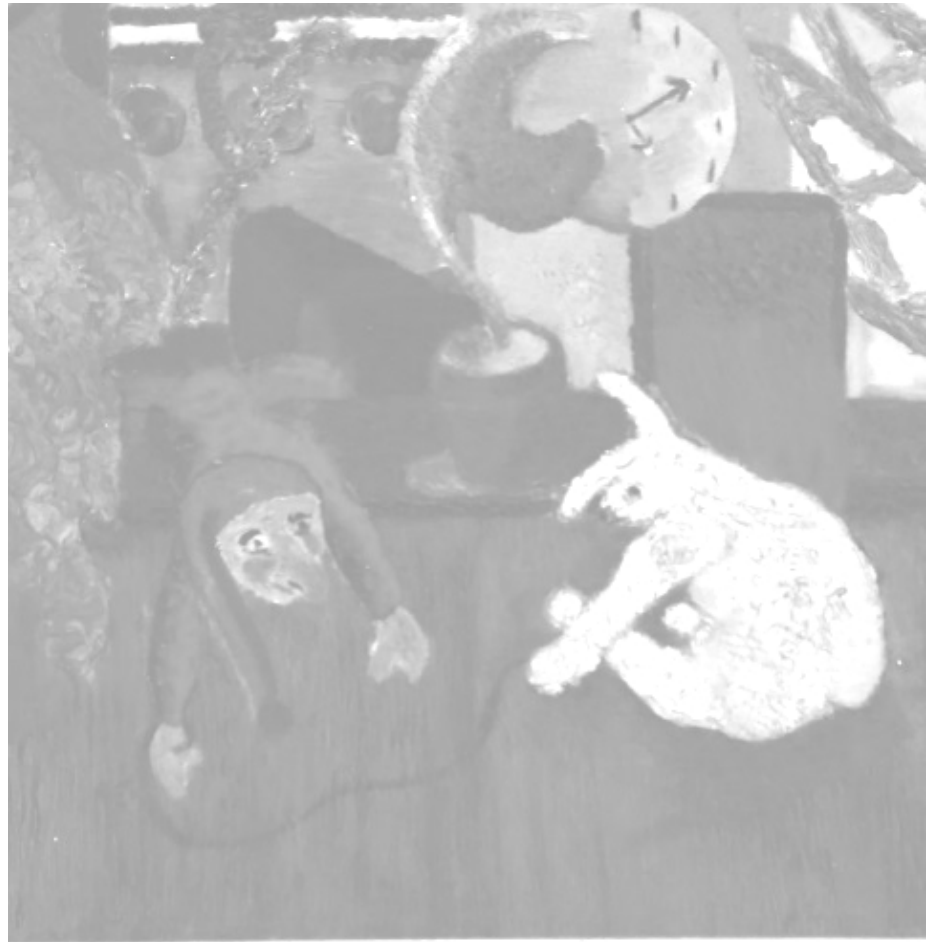
Oil on treated cardboard, 1947



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

Oil on treated cardboard, 1948

*(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)*



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.





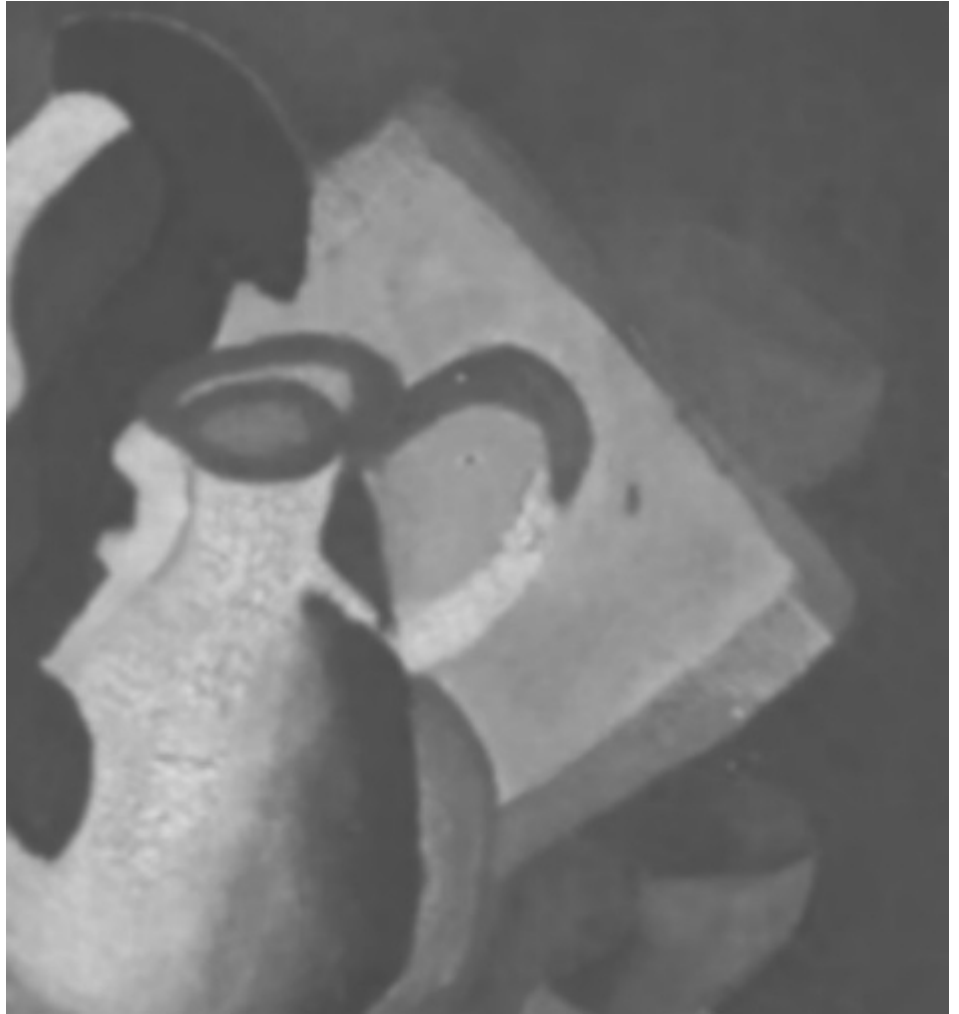
**Her first
painting, a
still life.**

*Oil on treated
cardboard,
1943*

Rudner's first
deconstructed
piece was a still
life. The element
at the centre



appears to be a white and grey pouring jug in dark shadow on its right, suggesting the source of light is on the left. On the right of the jug, away from the light, rounded cup-like objects in red tones have the positions of small animate figures hiding or cowering behind



a golden coloured square. The jug's spout is facing the source of light to the left. The spout resembles a mouth in disbelief, pain or anguish. The jug is partly doubled, enlarged and distorted in a shape next to it. Liquid flowing from the jug's spout turns into a flow of red fluid, perhaps giving the appearance of blood.

In this painting, there never seems to be any technical conflict between a still life representation of reality and deconstruction. Rudner describes how deconstruction is an individual, internal



process, coming directly from the self. Here deconstruction focuses on different facets of reality. In this space, the larger doubled, distorted version of the jug can stand forward prominent, while the other seems smaller or injured in dismay. Something injured is given a powerful self, depth and made closer to any fluid reality.

Here, Rudner's technical deconstruction reveals the nature of physical objects and their impact on each other, bringing animate emotions - anguish, fear and power - to the inanimate.

Katharine Margot Toohey

