

In Memoriam: (Rita) Joan Brassil

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The Australian artist, Joan Brassil, died peacefully at the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney on the 19th April 2005. Her work was primarily concerned with ideas or questions. "Have you considered?" was her preferred interrogative form. She had an extraordinary capacity to translate philosophical questions about the nature of life into highly engaging, and often very moving, environments and sculptural forms. She used a range of materials both conventional and unconventional, including sound, video, drawing and even free verse. Her work was included in key survey exhibitions of contemporary art such as the Biennale of Sydney, the Australian Sculpture Triennale and Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria.

She was a late bloomer, only beginning her career as a full-time artist in her early 50s. This late start seemed to give her an enormous reserve of energy, so that even as an octogenarian she was still investigating new ideas and forms. Indeed, she completed two major works in the last few years of her life, including one of her very few permanent sculptural works a wind harp called *The Tether of Time* (2001) which is located in the sculpture garden at Campbelltown Arts Centre.

While she may have begun her exhibiting career late, Joan's art training began in her teens and twenties. She attended Sydney Teacher's College, East Sydney Technical College and Newcastle Technical College from 1937-1939. She then spent twenty years teaching art in high schools, mainly at Campbelltown High School.

It was only when her child-rearing responsibilities were over that she turned her attention from teaching art, to making it herself. In an interview in 1999, she explained the hiatus in her career with characteristic confidence and dry humour: "I spent a lifetime—a career—thinking about art. I just didn't have the time to practice."

At this turning point in her career she returned to further study. From 1969-71 she studied Art History at Sydney University. Her first recorded work from this period is *Trilogy: Twentieth Century Perception* (1969-74), now in the University of Western Sydney Collection. *Trilogy*, as the name suggests, has three components: *Sound beyond Hearing*, *Light Beyond Seeing* and *Memory Beyond Recall*. Unlike Joan's later works, these three components can be wall mounted. They are beautiful, highly finished, shallow black boxes; two of the three are electronic, indicating her early embrace of technology. *Memory Beyond Recall* has glowing lights veiled behind layers of paper, that appear and then dim down and disappear. *Light Beyond Seeing* has a central lit portion, which uses mirrors to suggest an infinitely deep space. The main themes of Joan's career--perception, sound, memory, and the transcendental realm--are all signalled in this early work.

Joan's early and late career is characterised by installation work concerned with the natural world and our place within it. She began exhibiting installations in 1976 at the Sculpture Centre in Sydney. One of her most striking works, *Gondwana and the Cosmos: Listening to Dead Stars Singing* (1999), occupied the entire space of the old observatory at Mount Stromlo, Canberra. The work included the sounds of pulsar registrations from the Parkes

Telescope: the pulses of energy emitted by the rotating core of a collapsed star or pulsar. In this work, as in many others, Joan worked with scientists, using the investigations of science to direct her investigation of existence. While many critics have seen her work as mystical, she completely rejected this understanding of her work—for her it was the physical and the metaphysical that were of interest. Her interests in the sciences ranged from geology to astronomy, when it came to biology, however, her range of interests were more restricted. She once told me that she wasn't interested in fauna it was "far too modern" for her.

Her mid-career work is concerned with the video image. Before embarking on this series of works in 1981, she completed a graduate diploma at Alexander Mackie College. From 1981 to 1995 she made fourteen videos with the technical collaboration of John Baird. She fabricated nearly as many perspex sculptural forms onto which different videos were projected. The resulting amalgam of video and sculpture, which Joan called "video sculptures," are some of her most elusive works, perhaps deliberately so, as they deal with different kinds of fleeting or invisible life processes: energy production and storage, growth, symbiosis, changing perception, magnetic fields, the gradual intertwining of land and bodies.

In 2000 she received the Order of Australia for her lifetime contributions to the Arts. A great character and raconteur, she will be sorely missed. She is survived by her son Greg and her grandchildren Liam, Owen, Pat and Tony.

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