



# CROSS- CONNECTIONS

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with prints by Helga Michie

Robert  
Cripps  
Gallery



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The Robert Cripps Gallery  
The New Library  
Magdalene College, Cambridge  
1 February - 28 March 2023

## Hugh Rix: RUTH RIX AND HELGA MICHIE

RUTH RIX WAS BORN in Leamington Spa in 1942 and went to school in Gloucestershire, Berkshire and London. Her mother Helga escaped on one of the last Kindertransporte from Vienna in 1939, and her father fled Vienna in 1938. Her early years were spent in emigré circles including many people from the arts.

Ruth studied Art and Theatre Design at Chelsea School of Art and The Central School of Art and Design 1960–63, and Fine Art at Leeds College of Art 1969–71. From 1972–74 she studied for 2 years at Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna under Fritz Wotruba, before returning to live in England, in York, East Sussex and finally in Brighton.

She has painted for over six decades, and a selection of her more recent work is shown here in the Robert Cripps Gallery at Magdalene College.



↗ Ruth Rix (left, in striped top) in the studio with Fritz Wotruba (second from right) and fellow-students, Vienna, 1974

← OVERLEAF: Ruth Rix in the studio, Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna, 1974

Helga Michie (1921–2018) was born in Linz, the twin sister of the writer Ilse Aichinger, and spent most of her school years in Vienna. When the Nazi persecutions began, the family tried to leave Austria, but only Helga's aunt Klara Kremer, and Helga, were able to escape to England. Helga's twin sister Ilse was left behind with their mother Berta, but managed to survive the Nazi occupation. The other close family members were deported to Minsk and murdered. The twins' separation in 1939 was a thread which ran through their adult lives and work. It was ten years after this separation that the twins were reunited first in England and then in Austria. Ilse and Berta continued to live in Austria and Germany, while Helga returned to England, living and working mainly in London from then on near aunt Klara.

Helga began to draw using ball-point pen in the late 1960s, and then studied printing at The City Lit. Her work mainly spans the two decades 1968 to 1988. This exhibition shows a small selection of her etchings and lithographs from the late 1970s and the 1980s.



← Helga's Czech passport, 1941



### Topographies of self

ROBERT MACFARLANE WRITES of walkers creating 'topographies of self' (*The Old Ways*, Penguin 2012, p.26), and later that 'landscape has long offered us keen ways of figuring ourselves to ourselves, strong means of shaping memories and giving form to thought.' (Ibid p.193)

That first return to Austria in 1948–49 took Helga and Ruth not only to Vienna, but also to the Attersee and the Lichtenberg, the area of mountainous Upper Austria where three generations of the family had regularly taken their holidays during the twins' childhood and which had already become a talisman for Helga and Ilse, speaking to the wish for an escape from the struggles of everyday life. Ilse and other members of the family sent Helga many postcards of the Attersee which are now at home with Ruth.

Helga's landscapes, or the landscape that lies behind her drawings and printing, are almost wholly those of her childhood in Austria: those of the mountains and forests of the Lichtenberg above the Attersee, the Mondsee and the Vienna woods. This is displayed in her ball-point pen drawings, such as *The Mountains of Childhood*, 1971 (*I Am Beginning to Want What I Am*. Helga Michie, *Werke/*

↗ Ruth Rix, *Attersee*, 2020



*Works 1968–1985*, ed. Christine Ivanovich, Vienna: Schlebrügge.Editor, 2018, p.37) or *The Magi* (ibid.). This is also the landscape of the brothers Grimm and Austrian Christmas cards. It is there in her linocut *Winter Night*, 1975, where 'consistent cuts in the surface of the print make no distinction between forms of house and forest, one merges into the other' (Rachel Dickson, 'In and Out of Each Other's Worlds. The Art of Helga Michie and Ruth Rix', in *Displacement, Memory and the Visual Arts: Second-Generation (Jewish) Artists*, ed. Imogen Wiltshire and Fransiska Louwagie, *European Judaism* (special issue, 56.1), forthcoming 2023).

The skeleton of this landscape is also to be seen in *Three Ways through our House*, 1977. Helga however never really adopts the English landscape in the way she adopted, almost exclusively, the English language for her poetry.

↗ Helga Michie, *Winter Night*, 1975

↗ Helga Michie, *Three Ways through our House*, 1977

Ruth's landscape is also partly that of her childhood, which powerfully included early family holidays on the Lichtenberg and Attersee and later mountain walks with her uncle Günter Eich when staying with Ilse in Lenggries, but also some more secure schooldays in Gloucestershire.

Equally important are the Yorkshire moors and dales visited during her years in York, the high weald of Sussex and the South Downs, and the north and west of Scotland where many later holidays were taken, as well as in Achill, in Ireland, where she had a residency in the Böll cottage in 2013. But even in her Achill paintings, like *Figures on the Moor*, 2013, she tends not to paint a specific landscape but to use the elements of that landscape as signposts towards a feeling or an understanding or a significance.

So when she titles her painting *Attersee*, 2020, she is not just recalling the formative experience of her childhood visits to the district during summer family holidays – or referring to the family history of it, though that experience is important – but using elements of that remembered landscape to occupy a position between the real and the imagined.



↖ Ruth Rix, *Figures on the Moor*, 2013

Simon Schama has written about mountains in the paintings of Hercules Seghers and de Momper 'as actors in the drama of battles' and that 'figures are dwarfed by the colossal drama played out by the geology itself' (*Landscape and Memory*, London: HarperCollins, 1995, p.433). In a similar way the elements of landscape, the huts, the hills, trees, clouds, the water of rivers, lakes and seas, are participants, actors in the drama of Ruth's paintings, and the figures, when they are obvious, are almost just another element.

While living in the high weald of Sussex, Ruth did a pencil drawing of a figure in a woodland clearing: *Figure in the Wood*, 1985.

This figure reappears in several paintings almost a decade later, in an interior setting, like *Dog*, 2003, and reversed in *Storeys*, 2005. In *Crossing the Clearing II*, 2015, the figure is there again, almost absorbed in the changing dynamic of house or hut, landscape, and staircase.



← Ruth Rix, *Figure in the Wood*, 1985



In much of Ruth's painting since the early 2000s, the figure is only suggested, another element of the landscape which may be just emerging from, or just dissolving into the scene. In *Secret Ground III*, 2018, the figure is there also, barely indicated in a clearing in the centre-right of the painting, but you might well miss it. That is part of the point. In Ruth's later paintings, the figure is an element of the painting as much in its absence as in its presence. In the construction of the secret ground any of the elements of Ruth's landscape – hut, structure, staircase, figure, the details of topography – are themselves characters in the emotional resonances of the paintings.

### The fluidity of structure

ONE IMAGE WHICH recurs frequently in this selection of Ruth's paintings and Helga's prints is the image of the house or hut. Helga's huts can seem to be losing the competition with the landscape, as in *Three Ways through our House*, 1977, or to have succumbed already to decay or destruction, as in the woodcut *Where the House Had Been*, 1980.



↗ Helga Michie, *Where the House Had Been*, 1980

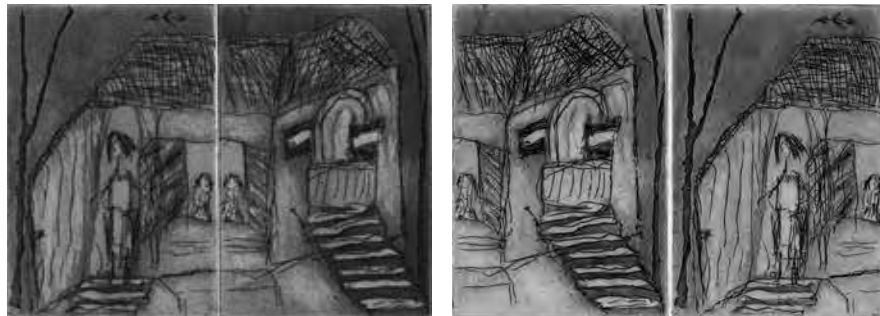
← Ruth Rix, *Dog*, 2003

Ruth Rix, *Crossing the Clearing II*, 2015

The etching *Concord*, 1979, gives an impression of greater solidity of structure, but the two childlike figures which appear to be standing next to each other at one large window with open shutters are separated by the line dividing the two plates used. How close are they? One of the children is in the half where the adult figure stands outside on the steps; the other seems more on her own.

In *Concord Reversed*, 1979, the plates have swapped places, so the child and adult seem to be closer than before, but the other child is very much alone on the extreme left-hand margin of the etching. The separation is reinforced. There is just a suggestion of hope in the future, as the two sets of steps now point in the same direction, perhaps leading to a future meeting.

Rüdiger Görner comments on a feature of Helga Michie's houses, here and elsewhere, that the home space is opened up 'one might even say, split open' (*Helga Michie Werke/Works*, p.177). Conversely, in the lithograph *Fallada 1*, 1978, the building is closed and enclosed, the steps to the door, the roof, the window are all contained in the rock of the landscape which itself is shaped like the skull of the horse whose head was nailed above the door in *The Goose Girl*, by the brothers Grimm, from which the title of the print derives.



↗ Helga Michie, *Concord*, 1979;  
*Concord Reversed*, 1979

↖ Helga Michie, *Fallada I*, 1978



The structures in Ruth Rix's paintings are often equally ambiguous. In *House, House*, 1974, we might be looking at a stage set within a dark proscenium arch. Ruth's study of stage design in the early 1960s shows through in many of her paintings. Here the proscenium itself is punctuated by what appears to be a window, high up to the left, lit from within by yellow light as if the proscenium is itself part of the front elevation of a house. But that possibility is also thrown into doubt by the suggested outline of a house in the foreground that crosses both that arch and what appears to be the scene as yet still forming in the life of colour centre stage and spilling out towards the viewer.



↗ Ruth Rix, *House, House*, 1974



Similarly, in *The Place Seen*, 2019, there is the suggested proscenium, and within it vivid colours seem to be the partly-formed but complex feelings and interactions of a play, but these are countered by the uncomfortable intrusion of a white cuboid which appears as if beamed in from elsewhere on to the apron, the absolute foreground, claiming the scene.

One of the earliest of Ruth's paintings shown here, *Dog*, 2003, a mixture of oil and collage, also uses skeletal structure to present a confusing image of the space the painting inhabits. This suggests an interior, with a shadowy figure staring towards a glowing fire. But it also contains the external skeleton of another structure, which might even be of itself, which intrudes on expectation and suggests the interior with the fireplace may actually be outside. And then, on the very bottom corner of the work, is the collage image of the dog stepping through water, very definitely outdoors. The dog is more precise, more delineated, more real than anything else in the work, almost as if the outline structure, the shadowy human figure and even the warm fire are thoughts or memories in the head of the dog.

The dog appears again in *Traces II*, 2010, travelling through stormy landscape as if it carries an urgent message and is an important link with the past or to the future, but the whole scene is like an episode torn out of context.

↕ Ruth Rix, *The Place Seen*, 2019



It is the context which is disrupted in *Echo*, 2020, where what might be the image of a cheering fire appearing through a white mist is subverted by an echo, almost a reflection, which has slipped to one side and seems to be re-arranging colours and forms in contradiction. Which is more real, the image above or below the centre line? *Light and Reflection*, 2022, has a similar ambiguity.

Ruth Rix's earliest painting in this selection is *Staircase*, 2000, a glimpse though a window in a semi-ruined building. This image became fused with the memory of the staircase in a London boarding-house where her great aunt Klara lived and which Ruth played on as a child and that of the flat in Vienna which the family lived in before the war and which Ruth and her mother saw amid the post-war ruins of the city. The image appears again in *Staircase II*, 2015, where the window through which it is viewed seems to be losing definite form and the staircase losing definition. Plants are already invading the building, their roots penetrating the structure.

We have already seen the staircase in *Crossing the Clearing II*, where it has become detached from the house and is sliding into the landscape, and it appears again in *Elements*, 2019, where it is just that, an element in the work which is both separated from its original context but carries with it an emotional charge.

↕ Ruth Rix, *Traces II*, 2010





↑ Ruth Rix, *Staircase*, 2000;  
*Staircase II*, 2015



### The elements of topography

CHRISTINE IVANOVIC WRITES of Ruth's paintings that she "'inherits" fragments of memories that echo in her own experiences and impressions.' ('Turning Herod's Children into Jakob's Children. Cross-generational perspectives in conceptualizing memory and history through the perspective of "being a child"'. *Sprachkunst*, Jg XLIX (2018), Wien p.108). These fragments of family history and story are elements that 'dwell' in Ruth's paintings just as do the huts, houses and cuboid structures and other architectural features like the staircase. The lines that often bisect spaces, reminiscent of some of Hercules Seghers engravings with lines of rigging stretching across the landscape, and the beams of light reminiscent of Lyonel Feiniger's work – both artists who have been an influence – are also elements which make up part of the moving topography of Ruth's paintings. They seem to delineate but they also subvert the stability that appears temporarily in the space of the canvas.

In *Green Thought*, 2018, we seem to have found an island of stability in the gathering near the centre of the painting, and there is a suggestion of a



↑ Ruth Rix, *Green Thought*, 2018

protective series of scaffolding arches, trellis-like round it. The light the group sits in, whether shining on them or emanating from them, provides an air of certainty. But is the deep green surround lightening, or darkening? Is the moment passing, or already a memory? There is an element of doubt.

In *Green Haze*, 2021, the bright green landscape may be being viewed through a square wiped in the condensation on a window, but it suggests a moment of clarity that is about to disappear, leaving the viewer isolated and staring at a white mist. In *Snow Storm*, 2018, the vital forms of colour in the deep space of the painting could be in danger of obliteration in the snow storm or soon to emerge more strongly from it. We don't know.

Boundaries are blurred. Line, form and structure cohere and incohere. The ambiguities we have seen in Helga's work are here too, in the shifting drama of the topography of Ruth Rix's paintings.

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↑ Ruth Rix, *Green Haze*, 2021



"An image of the uncertainty of boundaries, partly arising from the short story 'Wo ich wohne' by Ilse Aichinger, rather than from an individual word, but it contains something of the way the vocabulary of the family's story flowed back and forth between the twins, and down to me, from my early years. When I visited Vienna for the first time in 1948 following on from the post-war reunion visit of Ilse and my grandmother Berta to England, Ilse and my mother took me, aged 6, to the flat in 1 Hohlweggasse, and I remember standing in the main room several floors up peering into the hole that a bomb had made right down to the cellar; my sense of it in retrospect was as if there was no guaranteed solidity beneath my feet. The painting holds this resonance too."

First published in *Ilse Aichinger Wörterbuch*, ed. Birgit R. Erdle and Annegret Pelz, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021. Reproduced by kind permission.

↑ Ruth Rix, *Storeys*, 2005

## Ruth Rix

PAINTER, BORN IN 1942 in Leamington Spa (United Kingdom) as the only child of her parents. Her mother Helga (née Aichinger) was the twin sister of the Austrian writer Ilse Aichinger and came to England in July 1939 with one of the last Kindertransporte from Vienna. Her father, of Czech-Austrian descent, also fled Vienna for the UK in 1938.

Her childhood and youth were shaped by the experience of emigration, frequent moves of house, and encounters with friends of her mother's from the Austrian exile circles in London such as Veza and Elias Canetti, Günther and Bettina Adler, Erich Fried, Anna Mahler and the family of the poet Michael Hamburger. Frequent visits to Vienna as well as to art exhibitions nurtured her early talent as an artist and led to her decision to pursue painting as a career.

On leaving school, Ruth studied at the Chelsea School of Art in London, going on to the Central School of Arts and Crafts to extend her knowledge and perfect her techniques in stage set and costume design. Later she studied at the College of Arts in Leeds. On graduation, she was awarded a scholarship from the Austrian state to continue her education in the studio of the sculptor Fritz Wotruba in Vienna (to 1974). These years enabled her personal breakthrough in her painting (as she herself found) since in Vienna she "found an unimpeded access to her creativity".



↑ Ruth in Vienna, 1973

While her pre-Vienna works show an Expressionist tendency, her work from that point displays an intriguing mixture of the abstract and the figural: she draws the human body in movement. The materials of her painting change too: she deploys sculptural materials and experiments with the 'pentimento' technique, i.e. she partially paints over earlier pictures. The appearance of the older paintings shining through the overpainting is to make clear the transition from past to present.

After her return from Vienna Ruth Rix set up home with her second husband Hugh Rix and children Rebecca and Datlen in York, moving in 1988 to Brighton in Sussex. Here she works in her studio and regularly participates in exhibitions in Brighton and London. Alongside her intensive focus on painting, the artist worked for the education department of the Whitechapel Gallery in London and completed training as an art therapist.

Notwithstanding changes in technique, her style remains consistent. In her pictures, the main role is played by light: often the canvas remains unpainted in order to emphasise light. White paint and the use of intensive colour tones aim at creating a contrasting effect between light and darkness and a balance between the manifest image and its disappearance.

The themes of her works are often stairs, steps and rooms, motifs also to be found in her mother's prints, so that a continuity is to be observed across the two generations. In 2000 she created a staircase installation together with her daughter Rebecca Swift for the Brighton Jewish Festival entitled 'Staircase. A Multimedia Installation', thematising a recurring theme in the family.

Between 1974 and 2002, Ruth Rix had exhibitions at the Wiener Akademie, in Oxford, York, as well as at the Brighton Festival; Star Brewery, Lewes; Lewes Art Wave; Atrium Gallery London; Phoenix Gallery Brighton; Thebes Gallery Lewes. Ruth Rix lives and works in Brighton, England.

Article by Dr Ursula Hudson, from: Hedwig Brenner, *Jüdische Frauen in der bildenden Kunst II*, ed. Erhard Roy Wiehn, Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2004; translated from the German by Georgina Paul (with slight modifications). Reproduced by kind permission of the Hartung-Gorre Verlag and Guy Hudson.

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