

Canberra Times, 28 July 1985

MY SUNDAY

VIRGINIA SPATE

By MEG STEWART

VIRGINIA SPATE is softly spoken for a professor. Her fair skin and haze of blonde hair look like a Monet painting. She is the Power professor of contemporary art, in the Power Department of Fine Arts, University of Sydney. She's also the director of the Power Institute of Fine Arts.

After a week of lectures (19th and 20th century French art and contemporary Australian), informal study groups and compulsory socialising, her Sundays are spent at home, alone.

"Sundays I slope around. I start off thinking I'll have this amazing day filling up on what didn't fit into the week - paying bills, writing letters, doing my income tax, gardening, writing another chapter of my book on Monet. And then I just slope around.

"The Monet book has very much been written on Sundays and the odd fortnights I've managed to have off."

Virginia Spate's book about the French Impressionist Claude Monet will be published by Thames and Hudson in England. It began seven years ago as a small commission of 40,000 words and, 120,000 words later, it's become a mammoth labour of love. She admits to being mesmerised by Monet's infinite number of brush strokes.

"You can actually see each brush stroke," she says with passion. "The brush strokes create the image. You can see the layers of brush strokes building up. In a very green painting, Monet will suddenly put a line of pink at the end which lifts the painting right up."

She is now revising the third of her book's four chapters about "the 1880s and 1890s, when he had ceased painting people and was more concerned with nature and light, painting a single subject under the effect of different lights. It's the period of the exhibition that is on at the Art Gallery of NSW now." (There's an essay by Virginia Spate in the exhibition catalogue.)

Virginia, as she prefers to be called, lives alone in a narrow terrace perched on the ridge of a hill in Pymont. The house is built on the edge of a convict sandstone quarry which provided much of the stone for early Sydney. The front of the house has a bird's-eye view of industrial landscapes and the City.

"You can hear the City humming away, yet it's so peaceful here," she says. "At night sometimes, too, you can hear the ships' sirens, such a romantic sound. I suppose because it reminds one of the time when Sydney was linked to the world only by sea."

Virginia, like Monet, is a gardener. But unlike the artist she doesn't have six gardeners to help her. "When I moved in four years ago, the backyard was concrete except for one gum tree. First it was going to be a white and green garden. Then it changed to white and blue. Now it's white, blue and pink, although I do have one beautiful bush of yellow daisies which I can't bear to pull out," she says.

Her study on the second floor opens out on to a deck. Views stretch from Sydney University and beyond to Redfern, across Blackwattle Bay and around to Balmain. You can see fishing boats moored outside the markets.

"Occasionally I have Sunday breakfast out on the terrace. I don't dress like this on Sundays," she says, glancing at her weekday outfit. "Sundays I wear jeans. After breakfast I read the papers, pick up things, do the laundry, read novels. I love reading Australian novels. I read French novelists such as Zola to help me with the feeling for the Monet book. Zola wrote a book about artists of which Monet is possibly the hero. Often it's a quarter to five before I start writing. I'm not a morning person."

Once she does get started, Virginia works through to midnight or later. The Power Gallery for Contemporary Art, to be set up in the Maritime Services Board of NSW's building at Circular Quay, is a new preoccupation for Sunday nights. The MSB will be out of this building by December 1987. Virginia hopes the gallery will be open to the public in 1988. The MSB building went up in the late 1940s and early 1950s but the design is of the 1930s. Virginia is eager to preserve its wedge-shaped rooms, like those on a trans-Atlantic liner, and nautical, eccentricities such as the sea horses worked into ventilator grilles.

"A sculpture garden on the roof, film and video spaces - the gallery should be buzzing with excitement, open all day and well into the night. It's even more important to me than Monet."