



**Govett-Brewster
Art Gallery/Len Lye
Centre**
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Principal Funder



Organisational Partner



Len Lye: Heaven and Earth



Open seven days
Closed Christmas Day
10 am – 5 pm

govettbrewster.com



Large text

- 1 *Self Planting at Night (Night Tree)*, 1930
gelatin silver photograph (photogram)

Self Planting at Night is a 'photogram' or cameraless photograph, a work made in the dark by placing objects onto light-sensitive paper and exposing the arrangement to light to capture the image. *Self Planting at Night* is one of many works by Lye that carries a story or an element of myth. In this case, Lye depicts a plant-like creature sprinkling seeds into the ground, suggesting a self-generating cycle of life. Like many of Lye's works, *Self Planting at Night* has a literary counterpart, the poem *Night Tree*:

THE TREE THAT WORKS AT NIGHT TAKES IN LIGHT BY DAY.
AT NIGHT THE TREE IS A LIGHTHOUSE AND SMALL LAND
ANIMALS COME TO IT FOR THE SALT CRYSTALS SHE CAN
GIVE. SHE CHANGES THE SALT SHE TAKES FROM THE
GROUND INTO SHAPES FOR SEEDS.

Cover: Len Lye *Fire Bush* 1961
(2007 reconstruction)

Unless otherwise stated, all works courtesy
Len Lye Foundation Collection

- 16 *Fire Bush*, 1964, 2008 reconstruction
stainless steel, motorised base

Fire Bush is one of many variations of Len Lye's kinetic sculpture *Fountain*. Most variants differ from each other in size; however, *Fire Bush* was conceived by Lye under the original title *Dancing Fountain*. Instead of a gentle turning motion, *Fire Bush* rocks back and forward at its base producing a much more energetic and frenzied performance.

***Fire Bush* performs regularly in this exhibition with mandatory rest periods.**

- 17 *Moonbead*, 1968, 2009 reconstruction
crystal bead, steel rod, motorised base

Moonbead is one of Lye's lesser known works and one of his most delicate. It is one of a series of Lye's sculptures based on the principle of harmonic motion, similar in practice to works such as *Rotating Harmonic*, *Bell Wand*, *Zebra* and the much larger *Water Whirler* in Wellington. In each of these works a rod (of fibreglass or steel) is vibrated to achieve a 'figure of motion' at particular frequencies. Lye's innovation with this work was to introduce a crystal bead to the wire which rises from its resting spot as it gets excited through the performance.

***Moonbead* performs regularly in this exhibition with mandatory rest periods.**

15 *Particles in Space*, 1979

4 min., digital video (16 mm. original) , b&w , sound

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision. Digital version by Park Road Post Production and Weta Digital Ltd.

Particles in Space is one of Lye's acclaimed 'scratch' films. Lye used a variety of tools to make marks on black film leader. The black coating on the film could be scratched away to reveal the clear celluloid beneath. This experimental technique of filmmaking captured the motion of Lye's hand on film, suggesting to many that it was a counterpart to the 'action painting' or 'gestural' painting of artists like Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. The jerky movements are accompanied by a soundtrack of African drumming and recordings of *Storm King* in action.

For Lye, the 'scratch film' distilled the idea of what cinema could be down to its most basic elements of light and movement. Lye came to the imagery in this film with a free, uninhibited approach saying he didn't have the 'foggiest idea what they were all about', simply calling them 'particles of energy in space'. Produced around the same time, *Particles in Space* captures a similar impression of motion and energy as the painting *Rain Tree* in this exhibition.

2 *Earth Goddess*, 1930

gelatin silver photograph

Decades before he made his mark as a kinetic sculptor, Lye produced sculptural works in a very different fashion. *Earth Goddess* is one example and was made while Lye and his first wife, Jane, were visiting the poets Robert Graves and Laura Riding in Mallorca in 1930. During his stay, Lye created a number of 'constructions', works made from a mix of natural materials like earth and wood with wire and cement. *Earth Goddess* is the most well-known of these as it was photographed and used on the cover of Laura Riding's collection of poems, *Twenty Poems Less*. Writing to a friend, the painter Ben Nicholson, Lye explained the process:

I've just made a Construction of rock, cement, bark, tree, twigs, wire, set in 4 unplanned boards which is good but useless but it's all really stuff for movement I want to do in a film arrangement.

3 *Earth Magnetic*, 1930

gelatin silver photograph (photogram)

During the early 1930s, Lye produced many covers and illustrations for a number of literary presses. Robert Graves and Laura Riding's Seizin Press was the most notable to regularly use Lye's services. *Earth Magnetic* is a 'photogram' produced by Lye during his visit to Mallorca in 1930. Like other works of this period, *Earth Magnetic* expressed Lye's interest in natural forces and energies. A photograph of *Earth Magnetic* became the cover of Laura Riding's collection of poems, *Though Gently* (1931).

- 4 *King and Queen of Metzoas Kelpy Seaweed*, 1930s
gouache on paper

Lye's paintings and drawings often involve aquatic environments, a reflection of his familiarity with the energy and flora and fauna of coastal living. Spending time as a child living in the lighthouse at Cape Campbell (which he dubbed 'the great flasher'), Lye absorbed life in a wild environment where the waves crashed nearby and his stepfather taught Lye 'what it felt to live in the sea'. Lye perhaps had this very work in mind when he reflected on his 'old brain' process:

When I'm in the mood to draw, I cultivate a vacuous, seaweed-pod state of kelp in my skull. Attached to a pencil, I doodle in a bemused attitude. I try to create shapes that seem significant.

- 5 *Untitled Painting (Animal Painting)*, circa 1934
gouache on paper

This painting resembles an ancient cave painting and illustrates Lye's idea of the 'old brain' and 'new brain' theory. The 'old brain' is the part of our mind that expresses ancient or primordial knowledge, passed along genetically from one generation to the next. The 'new brain' is the part of our mind expressing the modern or civilised intellect. Lye often looked towards the art of ancient cultures for ways of accessing the truths hidden in our 'old-brain'.

- 14 *Storm King*, 1964, 1997 reconstruction
stainless steel and motor

Storm King is one of the most vigorous of Lye's 'tangible motion sculpture'. Like well known works such as *Blade*, it was born from Lye's experiments shaking steel by hand, finding 'figures of motion' and harmonic resonances and automating these findings into a performance. *Storm King* has anthropomorphic qualities with male and female elements that reflect the sexual dualities of interest to Lye (such as with *Unit* in this exhibition). The cacophonous sounds of *Storm King* mark it as one of Lye's most vibrant and remarkable works, one that captures something of his childhood memory of thrillingly kicking a steel can around his back yard:

The very first thing I remember is also the most vivid. I am kicking a large shiny square-sided kerosene can. Not quite four and in a trantrum I am turfed out of the house into a sunny backyard with its apple trees and a large asphalt area under the clothes lines. I kicked that can around to make the most god-awful racket my lungs and kicks on that can could.

***Storm King* performs regularly in this exhibition with mandatory rest periods.**

12 *Unit*, circa 1925
marble

Like the slightly earlier *Tiki*, *Unit* is one of Lye's great fusions of forms. *Unit* depicts two lovers locked in a sexual embrace. The model for *Unit* is Constantin Brancusi's famous sculpture *The Kiss* but Lye locks his lovers in a more intimate union inspired by a Māori wharenuī carving where male and female legs were intertwined. Carved in Sydney where Lye was getting ever closer to European modernism, *Unit* also takes inspiration from the mechanical and futuristic urges of the Futurism and Vorticism movements – adopting a mechanical figuration in contrast to the organic body of *Tiki*.

13 *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine*, 1930
Published by Hours Press, Mallorca

During the period that Lye was making cover designs for the Seizin Press, he was producing similar for the Parisian publisher Hours Press. This collection of letters by Laura Riding and composed for Robert Graves' daughter Catherine, was dedicated to the famed writer Gertrude Stein. Lye designed the cover of the book with biomorphic figures similar to his imagery in his recent *Tusalava* film.

6 *Cave Mine Cards*, circa 1920-30s
pencil and paint on paper

These drawings were dubbed 'doodles' by Lye and are a type of *automatic* sketching revealing Lye's 'old brain' or pre-cognitive impulses. Lye spent time deciphering his drawings, assessing whether they were the work of his modern mind or deeper, 'old brain' images. He developed a system of classifying his work as either 'mine' (signifying the 'new brain') or from the 'cave' (the 'old brain') and would often mark his conclusion on the works themselves.

7 *Pond People*, 1930
batik on silk

Pond People is one of the best examples of Lye's interest in biomorphic abstraction. The term biomorphic is used in art to recognise abstract forms that refer to living entities such as the human body, plants or other life forms. It is one of the defining characteristics of Lye's work and was a common trait among his peers such as Joan Miró and Henry Moore. Lye's use of biomorphic forms was particularly driven by his theory of the 'old brain' which inspired Lye's often primordial imagery.

This work was originally titled *Fresh Water Things* and Lye's aquatic landscape featured organisms with watery membranes and cellular walls. Lye made several versions of *Pond People* in different media, including drawings and photograms. This version is a *batik* (a wax resist dyeing technique) on silk left over from World War I. Lye produced several batiks like this on silk as scarves for friends.

8 *Rain Tree and Earth*, 1978
acrylic on canvas

Throughout his career, Lye's paintings typically had mythical themes, divined by Lye from his 'old brain'. These myths were ancient knowledge and visions resident in our DNA. Towards the end of his life, Lye returned to many of these myth paintings, repeating many of his earlier works in a series of large canvases. *Rain Tree and Earth* were part of this series.

The larger of these two paintings depicts a tall tree floating in the sky above the horizontal line that represents the earth in the smaller painting. According to Lye the diagonal lines on *Earth* are:

...a rendering of earth and particles of energy and the particles of energy are going in the opposite direction from (to) the particles of energy coming from Rain Tree just to signify that it can go both ways if necessary – the cosmic forces of life and energy going through the earth from on high.

9 *Fountain I*, 1960, 2007 reconstruction
stainless steel wire, motorised base

Fountain is one of Len Lye's most recognisable kinetic sculptures. Lye's terminology for these works was 'tangible motion sculpture', expressing the intention of making motion visible. The elegance of *Fountain's* action is an example of the influence of natural elements on Lye's kinetics — the cluster of wires rotate with only the most subtle influence of a motor to turn it. *Fountain* demonstrates well that Lye was not so much interested in making motion, but the motion itself.

***Fountain* performs continuously in this exhibition.**

10 *Tiki*, circa 1922
wood, leather

Tiki is one of the very few examples of works made by Lye in his homeland of New Zealand. Carved around 1922 when Lye was on the verge of leaving New Zealand for the rest of his life, *Tiki* takes the traditional Māori hei-tiki form but with a more relaxed and sensual pose, referencing modern European sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. This blending of styles was typical of Lye's early years where imagery of Oceania and Australia had a defining influence on his development as a painter and filmmaker.

11 *Laura and Francisca*, 1931
Published by The Seizin Press, Mallorca

Laura and Francisca was one of several books published by Robert Graves and Laura Riding's Seizin Press on the island of Mallorca. This issue was a collection of poems by Riding and was their last to have a handmade cover design by Lye. In this instance the cover is a cyanotype or 'blueprint' design. Lye's drawing of a coral-like landscape was most likely made onto a transparent surface and placed over paper coated in iron salts. When exposed to light, the image was captured like a photograph in blue monochrome.