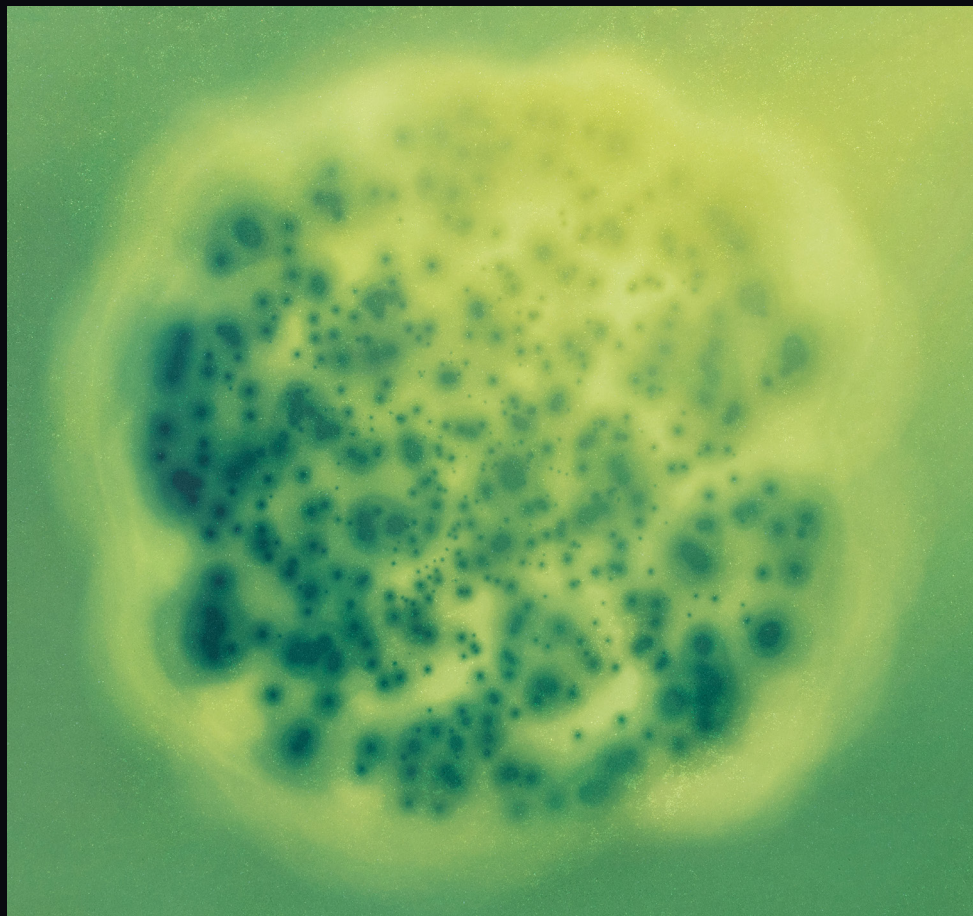


Waking Up Slowly: Elizabeth Thomson and Len Lye



Foreword

The instinct to place Len Lye (1901 - 1980) into company is one that often brings a new perspective or fresh challenge to the artist's work. It is fitting, for Lye was an artist who often worked in terms of counterparts and partnerships. His automatic 'old brain' thinking was the under-exercised flipside to the modern 'new brain' and his art frequently recognised the duality of male and female biology and psychology.

Walking through the exhibition *Waking Up Slowly* you encounter the work of two artists, on one hand the kinetic world of our 'maverick modernist', Len Lye, and on the other the contemporary practice of Elizabeth Thomson (1955 -) known for sculptural works with a foothold in the world of natural science.

The shared impulses are easy to see. Both introduce us to worlds unfamiliar to our eye, finding the aesthetic in the accidental, gazing up into the heavens at the sublime, and down into watery microscopic landscapes. Each can charm us with a vision that is inviting but with a hint of the sinister, a reflection of the natural order at the heart of both practices. From this common territory, *Waking Up Slowly* invites the audience to equally enjoy the divergence in Lye and Thomson's work.

Waking Up Slowly has been curated by Gregory O'Brien, a colleague well-versed in the work of both artists. I would like to acknowledge our colleagues from Aratoi, Wairarapa Museum of Art and History and their 2018 *Cellular Memory* exhibition, a survey of Thomson's work curated by O'Brien and the provocation for bringing together these two artists. Likewise, our gratitude to our colleagues at Ngā Taonga: Sound and Vision for their support with Len Lye's filmworks and Technix Ltd for providing facilities for fabricating new works by Thomson.

Paul Brobbel

Len Lye Curator



Len Lye *Night and Day*, 1978
Len Lye Foundation Collection

Cover image:
Elizabeth Thomson *Cellular Memory III*, 2019
Courtesy of the artist



There is not a moment in our waking life or dream life that's empty of kinetic experience. It is present when our heart beats, when our eardrums resonate, our pulse runs, our breathing inhales and exhales...

Len Lye

Len Lye at Cape Campbell, 1968
Len Lye Foundation Collection



My art is about exploration and supposition – knowledge, memory, instinct, projection, the state between sleeping / waking, the real and the hypothetical. It's about looking at the detail of life – microscopic / cosmic etc., but also looking back in time to the beginning...or a virtual state of being, uploaded into the conscious.

Elizabeth Thomson

Elizabeth Thomson Muriwai Beach, 2016
Courtesy of Australian Art Collector Magazine and Kallan MacLeod

Waking Up Slowly: Elizabeth Thomson and Len Lye - a conversation

Gregory O'Brien, exhibition curator

*'Molecules of water vapor become first a snowflake and then a raindrop.
The fertilized egg develops into a child whose form, in turn, grows into that of
a man. The patterns of structure are also patterns of action.'*

György Kepes



Lawn

In a series of photographs, c.1968, Len is wearing shorts and knee-high socks and lying flat on his back, close by the edge of a grassy field. Petals have been sprinkled over and around his body. On the occasion of the exhibition *Waking Up Slowly*, I imagine Len Lye emerging from this deep slumber, after a good period of sleep – maybe fifty years – and finding, beside him on the grass, the artist Elizabeth Thomson. She is also waking up, slowly, a short distance away. The works brought together for this exhibition are the conversation between these two artists as they gradually regain consciousness on that brightly lit field.

Len Lye with Flower Petals, c. 1968
Len Lye Foundation Collection



Waking

At the heart of the conversation is Liz's *Waking Up Slowly* (2019) a room-sized installation based upon an electron microscope view of a hybrid plant/animal life form. As if in a scientific experiment, pod-like 'bodies' made of glass leave trails of resin across the floor and walls of a clinical, white space. The work hints at the same processes of nature which obsessed Len Lye throughout his career and which surfaced as early as 1930 in his photogram *Self-Planting (Night Tree)*: adaptation, mutation, transformation... Mindful of the evolution of life forms from one state to another, Len concluded: 'The plant figures are learning to take either root or wing... They know a bit about it because...their far-back ancestors were sea-kelp.' We are reminded constantly – in the work of both artists – that nature is a process more than an end-product, that change is the only constant.

Elizabeth Thomson *Waking Up Slowly*, 2019
Courtesy of the artist Photography: Sam Hartnett



Dreamt

It was in the late 1970s that Liz first woke up to Len's work. They never met in person. He was at the end of his days – yet also at the beginning of something. New Plymouth was abuzz with conversations; in Auckland, a major Lye exhibition was in preproduction. And there was talk of making a permanent home for his life's work back here. By the time Len flew in to Aotearoa, however, Liz had dropped out of university and was leading a peripatetic life in Europe and the Americas. Upon her return, she enrolled at Elam School of Fine Arts where, like many of her peers, she came to know his work well.

Both artists were influenced by a dream-infused Surrealism. Len Lye, never a joiner, had been on the cusp of the movement during the 1930s; Liz's photo-engravings from the 1980s had absorbed a good amount of Surrealism, while also bearing traces of early Expressionist cinema and David Lynch – all reprocessed and relocated to an antipodean, black sand beach, off-season.

Yet wakefulness was always a part of their shared equation too. In fact, as Len insisted, being awake is a more mysterious state than sleeping could ever be. While admitting that the best Surrealist images had 'an uncanny, hypnotic misterioso', he far preferred 'the kinetic of the body's rhythms to the look of the dream image'.

Elizabeth Thomson *Manukau Heads*, 1987
Courtesy of the artist



Nature

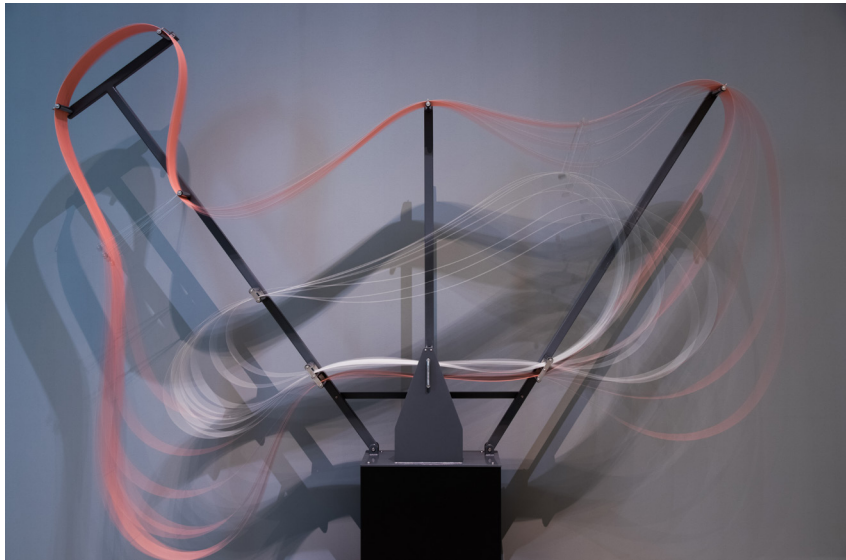
Just like Nature – with its cloud-machines, thunderous outbursts and biospheric hijinks – Art can be simultaneously beautiful and unsettling. That was a lesson Elizabeth Thomson says she learnt from Len Lye – that a work can be, in her words, 'hypnotic and mesmerizing, sometimes thunderous and crashing ... but also tender and almost fanciful'.

An education in such matters involved – for both of them – not only cloud-gazing and scanning the horizon, but also interrogating what was close at hand and even, on occasion, underfoot. From an early age, Len practiced drawing 'shapes formed by cracks in pavements, stone, cement, or the ends of logs... The crackings and fissures and strains and stretchings were due to some kind of energy. I was tuning in to this atomic, molecular world, getting a feel for its inner happenings.' Liz's 2019 series *Relativity and the Structure of Things* is inspired by the exact same view.

There were other youthful epiphanies: Len on his bicycle, delivering newspapers around the hilly suburbs of Wellington as cloud forms whirled overhead. And Elizabeth Thomson as Opunake High School cross-country champion, on lengthy training runs across the undulating, lahar-strewn land north of the town. And having the rhythm of the landforms impressed into her muscle-memory. (Decades later, when she began making three-dimensional wall-works, the undulations on those works harked back to this earlier experience and also to the surface of a human body, well trained.)

Elizabeth Thomson *Relativity and the Structure of things (Cracks IV)*, 2019
Courtesy of the artist



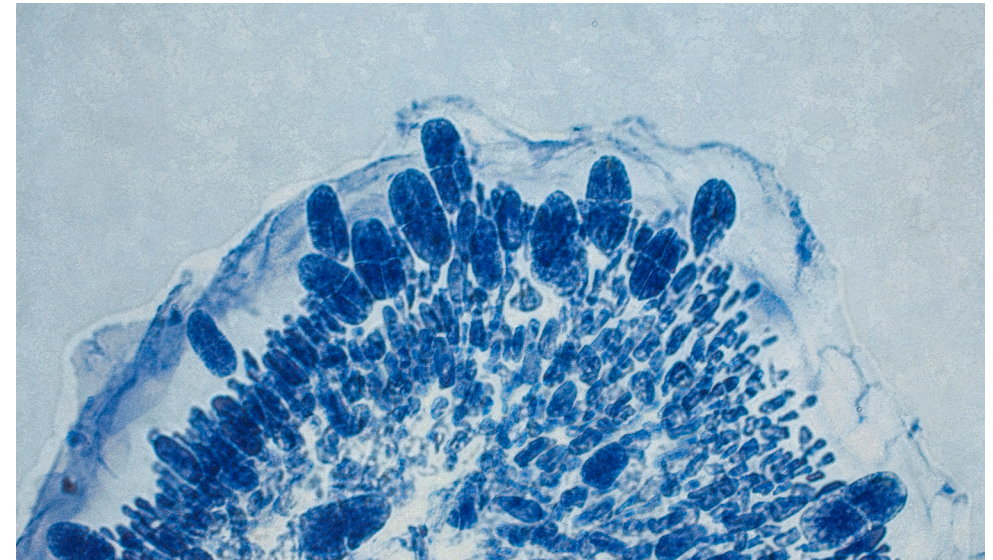


Charmer

A bright day on a lawn in a public park. In Liz's *Lady North Star Parterre* (2010) (the shape of which is based on Wellington's Lady Norwood Rose Garden), a formal garden design is hoisted overhead and left to hover like a well-tended, verdant/roseate satellite station. There is a brightness, as evidenced here, to which both Len and Liz are accustomed – yet there is also an unsettling nocturnal aspect to their shared terrain. Len's photograms are night visions, and his serpentine *Convolution* (1965) has an almost nightmarish quality. Less diabolical but not unrelated, Liz's *Snake River* (2004/2019) is an unfurling, wall-mounted arabesque made up of hundreds of oil-painted bronze leaves. Between the two works – *Convolution* and *Snake River* – we behold the artist as conjuror or snake charmer. With such entranced serpents in clear view – and also mindful of a guitar string – Len once surmised: 'The magic of art is hypnosis, when all the genes twang!'

Len Lye *Convolution (Ribbon Snake)*, 1965 (2008 reconstruction)
Len Lye Foundation Collection

Previous page: Elizabeth Thomson *Waking up Slowly*, 2019
Courtesy of the artist. Photography: Bryan James



Twang

There were plenty of moments along the way that went 'twang'. Separated by half a century, Len and Liz visited the same museums in Auckland and Wellington during their formative years, and stood dumbfounded in front of the same artefacts. Both were inspired by natural history as well as ethnographic displays. Later, Liz went so far as getting a job constructing museum dioramas. Both would set up and then photograph surrealistically-inclined arrangements of found objects – Len for a series of Seizin Press book covers in the 1930s; Liz for use in numerous photo-engravings.

Early in their careers, both artists spent formative, galvanising months on Pacific islands: Len in Samoa during the 1920s, and Liz in the village of London, not far from Banana, on remote Christmas Island in 1979. *Twang*. Their ensuing works looked beyond the obvious catchment of Western tradition to take on board new concepts of being and art-making. Their shared response to Oceanic culture was, crucially, a euphoric embrace rather than a scholarly examination or opportunistic sampling.

Elizabeth Thomson *Ocean of Eden I*, 2012
Pataka Museum of Arts and Culture

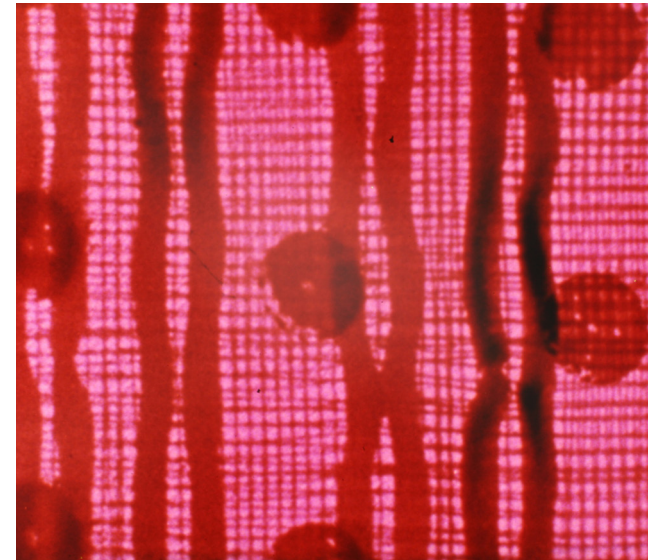


Leaf

Like the bronze leaf forms in Liz's *Snake River*, which are carefully positioned along the gallery wall, actual leaves are placed directly onto the bodies of the actors in Len's short film *N or NW* (1937). Elsewhere, in his portraits of *Georgia O'Keeffe* (1947) and *Jean Dalrymple* (1947), leaves are placed directly onto the film. The result, in the case of both artists' work, is a visual shimmer or tremor, a sensory awakening.

Both Liz and Len have explored rhythmical patterns and musical forms, reflecting a shared interest in jazz and non-Western music. *Snake River* is a musical cadence, a sweeping, swooning configuration of musical notes along a staff. An altogether gentler, soporific movement is embodied in Len's sculpture *Grass* (1961-1965) which he once described as having the same 'lethargic quality you get when grass stalks slope down to one side, dance back a little, then fall back again. It creates a kind of serenity.' Len's art is, by his own reckoning, a call to various kinds of attention – but it can also be calming and cajoling, a manner of seduction even.

Len Lye with *Grass*, 1961
Len Lye Foundation Collection



Cellular

Of his short film *Colour Cry* (1952-1953) Len Lye wrote: 'The abstract designs can also be seen to represent organic components such as blood cells, nerves, bone and marrow, ribcage and sinews.' Human blood is also the 'subject' of Liz's *Caldera I-IV* (2011), which, despite the volcanism of its title, incorporates microscopic photographs of blood cells. On one occasion, Len proposed this kind of genetic/cellular imagery as a possible 'source of a shared one-world symbolism, a universal myth'. With a comparable end in mind, *Cellular Memory III* (2017-2019) brings us into intimate engagement with the microscopic details that are the basis for life. Elsewhere in the exhibition, similar forms are enlisted to suggest broader forces and patterns of life on earth and beyond. *La Planète Sauvage-Lavinia* (2009) and other of Liz's tondi – in their transfixed orbit above Len's *Roundhead* (1961) – present a constellation of inner and outer possibilities, not only as planets or moons but as cellular structures, oxygen bubbles, eyes, orbs, spheres and notes of a spherical music.

Len Lye *Colour Cry*, 1952-1953 Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation from materials preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision

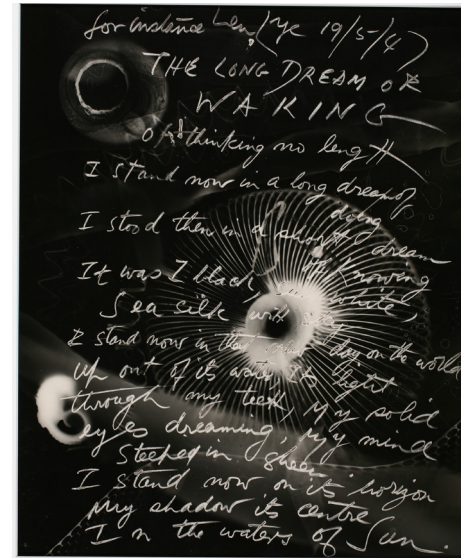


Undersea

As a child, Len Lye observed pods of whales passing Cape Campbell, where his stepfather was a lighthouse keeper. By way of the anemones, starfish and life forms in nearby rock pools, he received a proto-Surrealistic education – the tides and wind patterns also offering an extracurricular tutorial on kineticism and pattern recognition. Similarly, Liz has done much nature-watching, not only along the coastline but also in deeper oceanic territories – as is the case with *The Fearless Five Hundred* (1989) and, more recently, a series of works that resulted from a voyage to the Kermadec region in 2011 – among them *Ocean of Eden 1* (2012) and *The Greening of New Blueland* (2014).

Len also explores the undersea as the cradle of physical life on the planet and as a region of the subconscious mind. The ‘abstract colour effects’ he designed for Ian Hugo’s *Bells of Atlantis* – a 1952 film starring writer Anaïs Nin – offer a full immersion not only in salt water but also in Freudian/Jungian atmospherics, with pulsating rhythms and quivering, primeval languor. Also aquatically-inspired, Len’s *Sun Fish and Sea Slugs* (1937) and numerous drawings and paintings of undersea life are, by comparison, angst-free, life-infused and wide awake. ‘Len Lye felt the first sign of life in the oceans in his shoulder blades,’ eulogised Max Gimblett upon the death of his friend in 1980. ‘Len Lye is the First Man. He is our ancestor.’

Elizabeth Thomson *The Fearless Five Hundred*, 1989
Private Collection



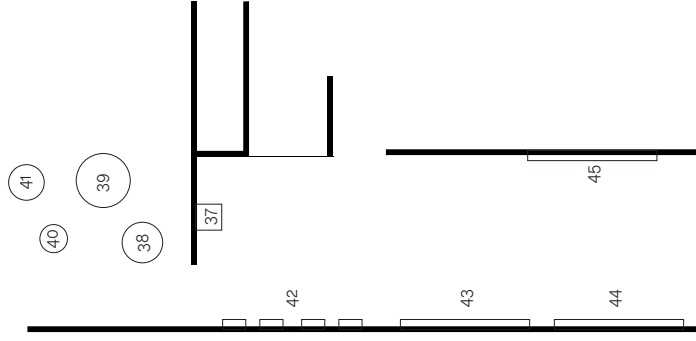
Waking Up Slowly

The eye is its own motor – its gaze is never stationary. Both artists follow its lead. Curiosity is at the core of their creativity – as is a state of attentiveness. Yet, at the heart of ‘walking up slowly’ is the realisation that none of us are ever completely awake. Our eyes are never fully open. ‘Wakefulness’ is a hope rather than a fact.

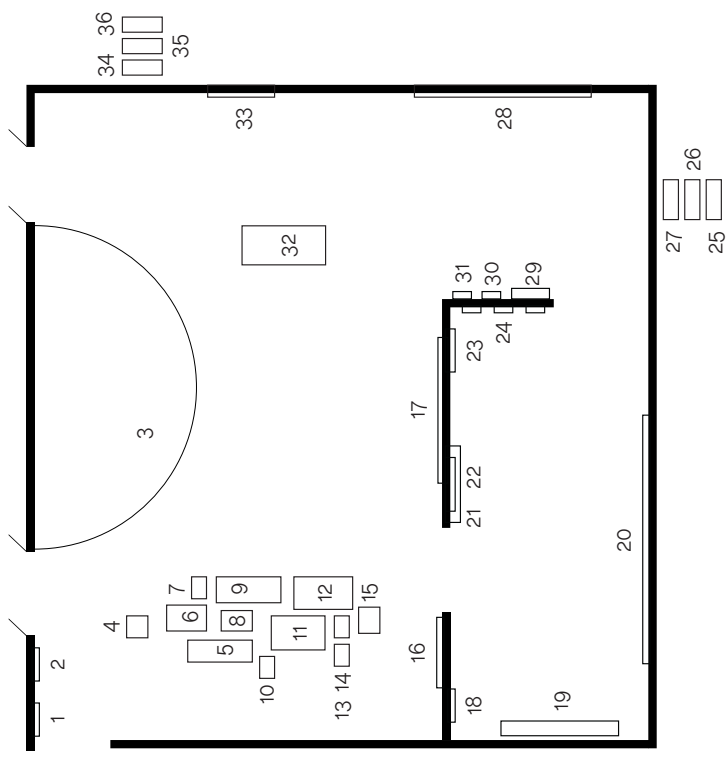
As well as being a conversation between two artists, ‘Waking Up Slowly’ charts a movement towards an ever-elusive state of enlightenment or consciousness. In the realm of plants, it is a movement towards light. In the fish world, it is a migratory course set by a collective intelligence. In the celestial world, it is the light that reaches us from a distant star. It is a process of which all creation is a part. This state we are in.

Len Lye *The Long Dream of Waking*, 1947
Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

West ramp



Gallery 5



Elizabeth Thomson

- 1 Rustic Modernist, 2017
- 3 Waking up Slowly, 1996/2019
- 5 The Opunake Home Guard, 1985
- 6 Dragonflies / Foiled, 1985
- 9 Peeping Tom, 1986
- 11 Manukau Heads, 1987
- 12 Glare, 1985
- 17 Ants Head, 1993
- 20 Snake River, 2004 / 2019
- 21 Relativity and the Structure of things I,II,III,(Cracks IV),VIII,X, 2019
- 24 Inner Raoul studies I,II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, 2011
- 25 Ocean of Eden I, 2012
- 26 Delta, 2009
- 27 The Greening of New Bluealand, 2014
- 28 The Fearless Five Hundred, 1989
- 31 21 Primitive Bodies, 1994
- 33 Cellular Memory III, 2019
- 34 Cellular X, 2019
- 35 My Titirangi Years - not sure about the neighbours, 2019
- 36 My Titirangi Years - Rangiwai Road, Tennis in the Bush, 2018
- 38 La Planète Sauvage - Terra Luna, 2019
- 39 Voyage Sauvage, 2009
- 40 La Planète Sauvage Sauvage - Zunil, 2019
- 41 La Planète Sauvage Sauvage - Lavinia, 2009
- 42 Caldera I, II, III, IV, 2011
- 45 Lady North Star Parterre, 2010

Len Lye

- 2 Red Clay, 1948
- 4 Self-Portrait (with Night Tree), 1947 (1954 modification)
- 7 Roy Lockwood, 1947
- 8 The Long Dream of Waking, 1947
- 10 Georgia O'Keeffe, 1947
- 13 Ann Lye, 1947
- 14 Jean Dairymple, 1947
- 15 Self-Planting at Night (Night Tree), 1930 (1940s reproduction)
- 16 Tusalava, 1929
- 18 Wall Motion Sculpture Engineering Drawings, 1960s
- 19 Convolution (Ribbon Snake), 1965 (2008 reconstruction)
- 22 Cave Mime Cards, 1930s
- 23 Color Cry, 1952-1953
- 30 Sun Fish and Sea Slugs, 1937
- 32 Grass, 1961 - 1965
- 37 Roundhead, 1961 (1998 reconstruction)
- 43 Land and Sea, 1977
- 44 Day and Night, 1978

Ian Hugo

- 29 Bells of Atlantis, 1952

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