

Our Story



Govett-
Brewster
Art
Gallery

Len Lye
Centre



Cover: Leon Narbey
A Film of Real Time 1971. A still from the film capturing the first exhibition *Real Time: A Light and Sound Environment* at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1970. Govett-Brewster Collection

Govett-Brewster kids with Don Peeble's *Painting No. 9* 1969, from the Govett-Brewster Collection. Photo Sam Hartnett



With Tom Kreisler's *Night Weather* 1984, from the Govett-Brewster Collection. Photo Mark Dwyer

Welcome to a place of art and ideas

Expect the unexpected in New Plymouth. Sitting on the western edge of New Zealand is a place of relative isolation, bounded by the remarkable Mount Taranaki, black sand beaches and dramatic Tasman sea.

In the midst of this place is a symbol of the spirit and independence of the people who call it home. The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and the Len Lye Centre tells a story of vision, insight, tenacity and generosity of spirit worthy of its surrounds.

Within and beyond these walls the message of the power of art and ideas resounds. World leading architecture, heritage restoration, innovators, inspiring artists, a team of talented and committed staff and a local, national and international community of audiences and supporters keeping alive the vision of our founders.

Welcome to our place, become part of our story.

Our Story

Contemporary art challenges our perceptions, our beliefs and our assumptions.

It helps us pause and think about the world in which we live and challenges us to see it anew.

At the Govett-Brewster we continue the legacy of Monica Brewster. We are empowered by her bequests and her enduring vision to take on and present provocative and confident works of art as a means to enable our audiences to experience things differently, and to confront and contemplate the unexpected.

The Len Lye Centre sits in architectural contrast to the restored picture theatre that is the Govett-Brewster. Its gleaming towers of stainless steel are home to the work of filmmaker, painter and sculptor Len Lye. It is the international centre for exploration of his work. The centre researches, collects, stores, conserves, exhibits and publishes on the life and creations of New Zealand's most internationally acclaimed artist.

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in
the West End Precinct, New Plymouth.
Photo Sam Hartnett





The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery owes its existence to the generosity of Monica Brewster, a woman of strong convictions and extraordinary vision.

Born Monica Govett in New Plymouth in 1886, the youngest of four girls, her family were well off and her ancestry connects with several notable pioneering Taranaki families and Sir Harry Atkinson, New Zealand Prime Minister for five terms.

Educated in Wanganui and New Plymouth to high school level she received no other formal education. Her family did however make several trips to England where she was exposed to a very different life from rural Taranaki. It was on one of these journeys where she met Dr Rex Carrington Brewster. Monica and Rex were married in Wanganui in September 1920.

The couple travelled to England and Europe several times. These experiences kept her vision broad and provided the opportunity to see radical changes in the art world. A keen follower of art and literature and a liberal thinker she had a diverse range of interests including sketching, theatre, horticulture and sports. She kept up to date with world affairs and was described as a very independent-minded woman and quite advanced in her opinions at the time.

Monica's close friend Edith Bruce (Brucey) was also a liberal thinker. They shared a love of art and literature and are remembered meeting regularly at the Taranaki Women's Club, of which she was a founding member and a patron of until her death. They would often lunch at the club having great conversations that were not everybody's cup of tea.

During World War II Monica declared herself a pacifist, a brave stand to take in a small New Zealand town at the time. With her long-time friend Elsie Andrews, she wrote impassioned anti-war letters to the editor of the Taranaki Herald. Elsie was very outspoken and her views were radically left wing, something that Mrs Brewster wouldn't have minded at all; in which she was quite different from all the people in her own social circle.

Rex died in 1952. After his death Monica led a quieter existence, and for the last ten or so years of her life kept to her bed. It is not clear if this was due to ill health, she did suffer from a bad back and arthritis in her hands, or her desire for privacy. Her mind was far from idle however and on 12 December 1962 Monica transferred £50,000 (\$2,150,000 today's equivalent) of investments by trust deed to the city of New Plymouth for the establishment and development of a public art gallery.

The money was inherited from Monica's own and Rex's family and was all made in New Plymouth, so she believed it should be used to benefit the community and establishing an art gallery would be a significant cultural asset for the town. She set up a trust deed that established the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery with mechanisms and safeguards to protect the long term vision of the gallery. She wanted it to be called the Govett-Brewster so both families were recognised.

The Gallery founder Monica Brewster (née Govett) in 1912 (b.1886 - d.1973)



From her bed Monica kept a keen eye on the development of the gallery and the ensuing controversies. However once the deed had been established she was very much hands off in keeping with the spirit of the document that the gallery should be run independently of individual or group interference. Monica was 84 when she inspected the building shortly before its completion, from a chair in which she was carried up and down the stairwells. The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery opened to the public in February 1970.

With no children or close relatives Monica bequeathed the remainder of her estate to the Govett-Brewster for artwork acquisitions – further enabling the institution's artistic and curatorial independence.

Monica died on 13 December 1973 and is buried at Te Henui Cemetery, New Plymouth. She has no headstone. The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is her legacy and her memorial.

She was a really remarkable person and I just hope that the city and the town never forgets why this is called the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Without Mrs Brewster we wouldn't have a gallery and certainly wouldn't have a great deal of the works that are here. She was really a far seeing and extraordinary person.

– Founding Gallery Director John Maynard

Leon Narbey *A Film of Real Time* 1971. A still from the film capturing the first exhibition *Real Time: A Light and Sound Environment* at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1970. Govett-Brewster Collection

Taranaki Herald, Letter to the editor, 23 Feb 1970

Art with impact

There's a Happening on in town, and it's happening inside the old Regent theatre which itself has experienced a remarkable architectural transformation.

The doors of the new Govett-Brewster Art Gallery opened on Sunday and unsuspecting visitors encountered the exciting sound, colour and form of "Real Time", the first exhibition.

The gallery literally has burst on to the New Plymouth scene. Already it has a reputation, though only hard work, well-spent money and stimulating materials and ideas will see that this particular reputation endures. Today comes news that parties from the Palmerston North Teachers' College and the Elam School of Art are to visit the gallery, a situation which suggests that Taranaki may have yet another unique attraction to join with the mountain, Pukekura Park, Brooklands Bowl, the Taranaki Museum and others.

The gallery can be expected to stimulate public interest. Subsequent displays may win general approval or create controversy. Either way, it should do a tremendous job for art and for the community. It certainly has set off to become a "real time" attraction.

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Following the announcement of Monica's £50,000 gift, the New Plymouth City Council set up a gallery establishment committee. Monica took advice from experienced art professionals Peter Tomry and Bernard Smith and with her lawyers Govett, Quilliam and Co, put in place an innovative and forward thinking trust deed ensuring the gallery maintains its independence and protects her investment from council and special interest group interference.

The terms of the deed included provision for an advisory group made up of gallery directors from other prominent national galleries and the appointment of a professional curator to manage and direct the gallery.

A plan initially presented by engineer John Matthews and artist Michael Smithers proposed using a rundown picture theatre on Queen Street for the project. Described as 'the perfect building for an art gallery, a rectangle with no windows', the Council purchased the site. Architect Terry Boon and engineer Murray Thompson prepared the plans for refurbishment. The old building was gutted and reinforced. Bowers and Schwieters Ltd, and later Boon Bros, were the builders. The gallery was created as a series of multi-level interesting and unexpected spaces.

The gallery's first director was John Maynard who took up the position in January 1967 three years before its public opening. He was committed to the gallery being a 'gallery for the future, modern and functional'. With no architectural features and being a completely closed box the theatre was turned into the ideal Modernist gallery space. Maynard



established a policy that the gallery collect contemporary art from New Zealand and the Pacific region, to create a Pacific identity.

The Govett-Brewster opened in February 1970. Maynard chose Leon Narbey (now an acclaimed cinematographer) as artist for the inaugural exhibition. *Real Time: A Light and Sound Environment*, was a loud, pulsing and multi-sensory exhibition. It astonished locals and became a landmark exhibition to the New Zealand arts community. It presented not only artistic talent but institutional change, showing to the public a new set of attitudes about what art is. It placed the Govett-Brewster at the forefront of New Zealand's contemporary art scene. Successive exhibitions and directors have continued this exploration of the new and experimental in contemporary art.

The run down picture theatre on Queen St was purchased and transformed into the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

Outside the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, April 1977



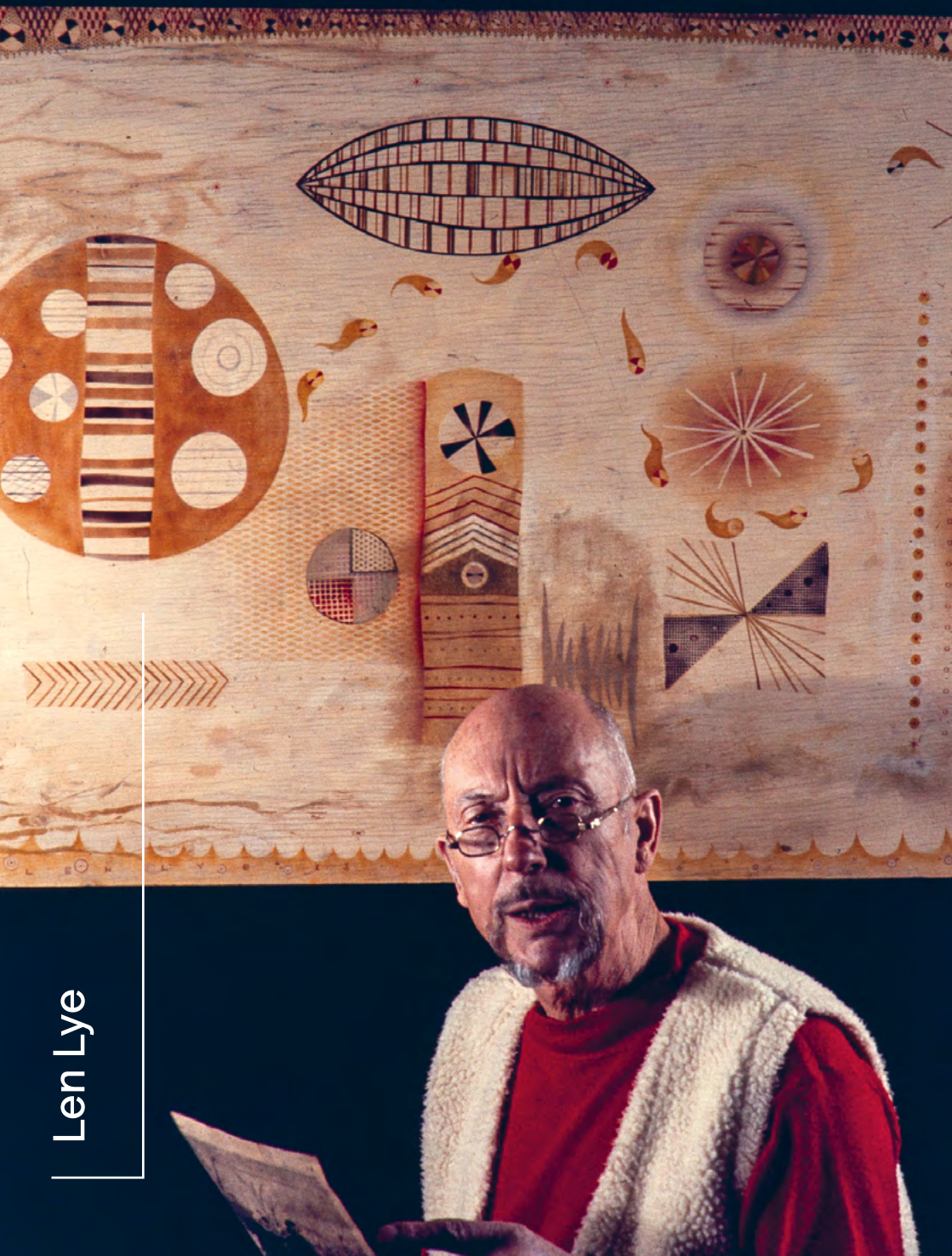
The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery,
King St, 1970



The Gallery, Queen St, early 1970s

The Gallery, Queen St, January 2010





Len Lye was born in Christchurch in 1901 and grew up at Cape Campbell and Wellington. His father Harry, a barber, died when Len was only three. His mother, Rose, created a loving environment for her sons but the family was poor and Len had to leave school at 13 to go to work. But he had endless curiosity and a talent for self-education. He frequented free public libraries and museums, and ended up with an extraordinary knowledge of art and the latest developments in other areas (such as psychology).

By his early 20s, Len had made life-changing discoveries. First, he was deeply excited to learn about the revolution in modern art then happening in Europe. And second, he developed a life-long interest in indigenous cultures, especially the work of Māori and Aboriginal artists. Determined to invent an original form of art, he became fascinated by movement, and that led him to film-making and kinetic (motor-driven) sculpture.

After living for several years in Samoa and Australia, he moved in 1926 to London where his bold art amazed some of Britain's leading artistic figures, particularly the painter Ben Nicholson who invited Lye to join the avant-garde '7&5 Society' (which included Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Frances Hodgkins). Lye was nicknamed 'the stoker sculptor' because he had worked his way to London as a stoker. The painter Julian Trevelyan said of him: 'He was like a man from Mars who saw everything from a different viewpoint, and it was this that made him original'. Film producer John Taylor described him as 'the one truly original thinker I've met – he had completely his own approach

Len Lye and his painting *Ice Age*, circa 1930s. Len Lye Foundation Collection and Archive

Len Lye's paintings in the exhibition *Big Bang Theory* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery 2018. Photo Sam Hartnett

to everything'. Lye is also remembered for his lively personality, and it's not surprising that the name he gave to his personal philosophy was 'Individual Happiness Now'.

By 1935 he earned a place in film history by pioneering a new method of film-making. The Depression was in full swing and Lye could not afford camera equipment; but using what New Zealanders like to call 'No.8 fence wire' ingenuity, he developed a technique of painting and scratching images directly onto celluloid. He synchronised those 'direct films' with lively dance music and they became popular with audiences all over Britain as forerunners of the genre later known as 'the music video'. They also won film festival prizes, and artists loved their bright, abstract, painterly images.

Lye had many leading artists and writers among his friends. In the 1930s he exhibited in a number of surrealist exhibitions, including the landmark International London Surrealist exhibition (alongside figures such as Salvador Dali, Joan Miro and Pablo Picasso). In 1944 he moved to New York when the Abstract Expressionist painters were emerging as a new wave in art. Lye continued to produce paintings and experimental films but in the 1960s he turned to kinetic sculpture and exhibited with a new generation of artists making waves with kinetic art, at the time dubbed 'the Movement Movement'.

Lye's lifetime study of motion gave him a unique approach to kinetic art. Although he often worked with metal and motors, his art remained closely related to the rhythm of nature such as the movement of waves and branches in the wind. His

sculptures bounce and vibrate in ways that we can feel in our own bodies. Lye's work has broad appeal, and children even sometimes respond by starting a dance of their own.

By the 1960s, New Zealand had developed a strong contemporary art scene, and those involved were excited to discover they had a forerunner, now in his 60s, who had been involved in many important phases of art history. This led to an invitation to Lye in 1972 to hold an exhibition of his work at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. The artist said he had one condition, that New Plymouth needed to find an outstanding engineer to help him build new versions of the sculptures *Fountain* and *Trilogy*. Fortunately the city had such an engineer – John Matthews, a person with exceptional skills who was deeply interested in the artist's work.

Lye and his wife Ann travelled to New Plymouth in 1977 for the exhibition. He was so impressed by the gallery and by Matthews' work that he decided to bequeath his collection to the people of New Zealand, provided it could be adequately housed and cared for in New Plymouth. Lye liked the idea of his work 'coming full circle' by returning to the country of his birth. A Deed of Trust was signed with the New Plymouth District Council in 1980 shortly before the artist's death.

Like everything mechanical, kinetic sculpture requires regular maintenance. For that reason, the Deed of Trust created the Len Lye Foundation as a non-profit trust with the task of looking after the art work. Lye also challenged the Len Lye Foundation to build some large-scale

sculptures that he had conceived but not been able to realise. The Foundation has since completed several of those works, such as the 45 metre *Wind Wand* on the Coastal Walkway, which has become a New Plymouth icon. Meanwhile there have also been exhibitions of Lye's art in New York (at the Drawing Center), Paris (at the Centre Pompidou), Melbourne (the Australian Centre for the Moving Image), St Louis (the Pulitzer Foundation), Bonn, Birmingham, Sydney and other cities.

Lye's films have never lost their energy and freshness. They are archived at Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision in Wellington which preserves and makes available high-quality copies for screenings at the Len Lye Centre, and also meets the many requests from international venues. The British Post Office recently issued a stamp to commemorate *A Colour Box*, one of Lye's most acclaimed experimental films and regarded as a masterpiece of British cinema.

Len Lye continues to inspire many artists today as a great innovator, one of the most original creative figures to have emerged from New Zealand.

A film still from Len Lye's *Rainbow Dance* 1936. Courtesy of the British Post Office and Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision

Len Lye in 1959

Len and his wife Ann Lye, date unknown.

Len Lye in front of tapa cloth, New York, in 1966. Photo William Vandivert

Images courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation Collection





The Len Lye Centre building which adjoins the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is an example of innovative thinking in both engineering and architecture. Inspired by the movement of light in Lye's sculptural and film work, the building design is deeply influenced by the life, ideas, writings and work of Len Lye.

It is the first public art gallery in New Zealand to be devoted to the work of an individual artist. Its exhibition spaces and cinema are a showcase for the highly original work Lye did in many areas of the arts, including film, sculpture, painting and photography. The centre presents changing exhibitions of Lye's art, together with work of other artists with a unique vision and perspective. In addition to the thousands of visitors who come to see the art, there are overseas scholars who come to do research on the Lye collection and archive.

As part of the Deed of Trust between the Len Lye Foundation and the New Plymouth District Council there was a commitment to find a permanent home for the Len Lye archive. After a nationwide search, the architectural tender was given to the Auckland firm of Andrew Patterson. The result is the extraordinary, award-winning building which opened in July 2015. It echoes Lye's aesthetics by its highly reflective façade made of 32 tonnes of stainless steel. Being close to the sea, the smoothest type of marine-grade stainless steel was chosen to resist corrosion. Sourced from Japan it was fabricated, curved and buffed to achieve the highly reflective surface by Rivet a local stainless steel fabricator. Regular cleaning assists in the removal of salt deposits to prevent staining and has so far proved effective in

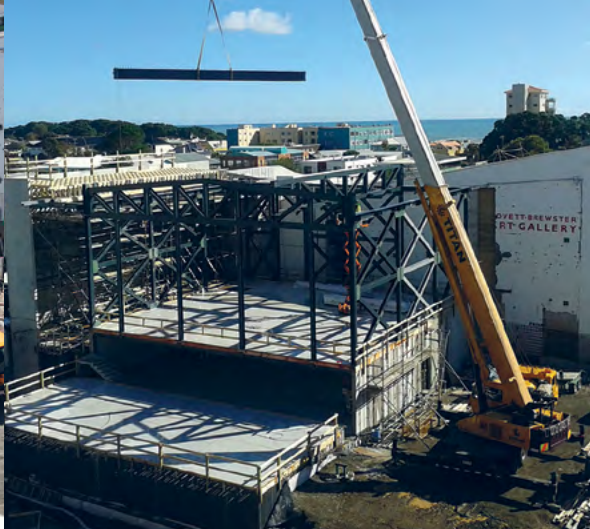
keeping the panels bright and shiny. The concrete wall moulds were also made by Rivet and Whanganui company Emmetts precast and trucked the concrete panels up one at a time. They are 14 metres high and weigh 30 tonnes each.

The \$11.5 million building costs of the Len Lye Centre were contributed by individual and corporate sponsors and by the New Zealand government.

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery building closed in April 2013 for earthquake strengthening, upgrades and construction of the Len Lye Centre. It reopened as a combined art museum on 25 July 2015.

Lye was fascinated with temples and in conceiving the overall design it seemed aesthetically and historically appropriate to draw inspiration from the 'megarons', or great halls, of the classical world, as well as Polynesian forms and ideas. These influenced Lye and he is, after all, the client.

– Architect Andrew Patterson





Direct film-making like Len Lye at a Gallery workshop. Photo Sam Hartnett



Len Lye's *Fountain* kinetic sculptures. Photo Trevor Read



A press conference in the Len Lye Centre Cinema. Photo Glenn Jeffrey

What We Do

As New Zealand's leading contemporary art museum we're dedicated to offering opportunities for artists and audiences within the galleries and beyond its walls. Through exhibitions, artist residencies, commissions, publications, films, performances, educational programmes, discussions and forums our broad programme seeks to inspire and engage people of all ages in the local community and further afield.

Exhibitions

We present the work of local, national and international contemporary artists as well as artworks from the Govett-Brewster Collection. The galleries also exhibit the spectrum of Len Lye's work – drawing, painting, film-making and sculpture – often in the context of the history of his art making, influence on other artists, and the legacy of his contribution.

The Cinema

The Len Lye Centre houses a 60-seat cinema and presents Lye's films to their best advantage, films that are landmark works that pioneer innovation in film, media and art. Visitors can also experience a selection of international film festivals, experimental, arthouse and cult movies, as well as a programme of New Zealand cinema, symposia and lectures.



Artist in Residence 2018 Sriwhana Spong.
Photo Sam Hartnett



The Matuku brothers with Tom Kreisler's
Old and new 1983, at the Open Collection
#3: Tom exhibition in 2017.
Photo Mark Dwyer



Educator Chris Barry with a school class
and Len Lye's painting *Land and Sea* 1977,
in the exhibition *Big Bang Theory* 2017-
2018. Photo Sam Hartnett



Govett-Brewster Babes with Len Lye's
kinetic sculpture *Universe*.
Photo Mark Dwyer

Artists in Residence

Three residency programmes reflect upon the value that guest artists and film curators bring to the life of a contemporary art gallery, and the role it plays in enriching and developing the arts.

The Collection

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery houses an important collection with a focus on contemporary art from New Zealand and the Pacific Rim, in line with its founding policy. Collection strengths include sculpture, conceptual art and abstract art from the 1970s and 1980s.

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery also holds the foremost collection of work by Len Lye, on behalf of the Len Lye Foundation. The collection includes Lye's pioneering kinetic sculptures, photograms, paintings and a substantial archive.

The Govett-Brewster also houses and cares for long term loan collections of various New Zealand estates.

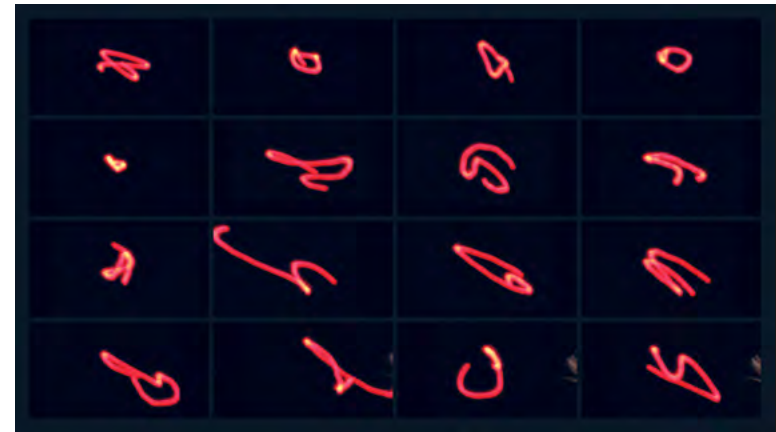
Education

In the purpose-built education studio, our education team introduces school students to vivid, original artworks in our current exhibitions to take advantage of the myriad curriculum linked learning opportunities. Lifelong learning programmes for all ages, including our accessibility community and young people, expand our role as a hub for innovation, exploration and conversation.

Public Programmes

Held throughout the building and tailored to the current exhibitions, regular events include workshops, family art-making, baby-friendly art talks, exhibition insights, seniors' art discussion groups, after school art classes, tours for people with hearing and vision impairments, and cinema screenings.

Monica Brewster and Len Lye are both Kiwis but came from very different worlds. However they both were visionaries in their own right and their legacy has created something unexpected but wonderful in New Plymouth. The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery remains true to its mission statement as 'provocateurs since 1970' while the Len Lye Centre both inside and out has put our city on the international map as a centre for challenging, innovative and highly original art.



Govett-
Brewster
Art
Gallery

Len Lye's *Wind Wand* (2000) is a renowned kinetic sculpture and a much loved landmark on New Plymouth's foreshore. We photographed the motion of Lye's *Wind Wand* at night and from the stills the light made, our squiggles were born. These marks represent the energy and vibrancy of the artist Len Lye, the special electricity of Taranaki's environment, and the dynamism of the combined art museum Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre.

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Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

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