

From the Collection



Len Lye (1901-1980), Roundhead, 1961

Kinetic sculpture: Steel, nylon and gold-plated copper ring on motorised base with music box

The University of Auckland Art Collection, image courtesy Len Lye Foundation

Artist Len Lye may have never visited The University of Auckland in his lifetime, but his dynamic presence now leaves a powerful impression on our campus.

A pioneer of experimental cinema techniques and kinetic sculpture, with a life-long interest in movement, Lye was born in Christchurch in 1901 and lived most of his life in London and New York.

Compared to his large steel sculptures that

violently whirl and crash, *Roundhead* is one of Lye's most delicate pieces, comprising four concentric circles that spin in space. It embodies big ideas of both massive and minute proportions. Initially named *Rings*, then temporarily titled *Orrery*, it became *Roundhead* in reference to the "Y" chromosome it resembled. It is driven like a torsion pendulum with the outer ring connected to a motor and the subsequent inner rings connected by nylon, swinging in alternate directions as they wind and unwind – a combination of engineering ingenuity and cosmic forces that typify Lye's work.

Accompanying *Roundhead's* syncopated motion is a modified music box that adds a sparse, ambient soundtrack due to pins being removed from the cylinder in a standard box. Lye had always intended *Roundhead* to be produced in an edition, even getting as far as numbering a set of bases. But when it came to recreating the music box, the Len Lye Foundation was faced with a mystery and needed to identify the original tune in the hope of locating additional boxes.

Foundation Director Evan Webb mapped the remaining and missing pins along a chart, much like dots of music along a staff. In consultation with a musical colleague, he established that the original piece of music (*Silent Night*) was not exactly obscure so further music boxes would not be hard to source.

The final component of *Roundhead* is the gold ring at the centre of the sculpture. Lye's wife Ann recalls leaving their home to go shopping when Lye yelled from the window that he needed something of hers for a work and asked for her wedding ring.

She agreed, replacing it with a \$2.98 ring from Woolworths. Their wedding ring remains at the heart of the *Roundhead* prototype to this day. Fortunately, subsequent versions, including the one purchased for the University Collection last year, do not require a wedding band.

After 45 years away from New Zealand, Lye visited in 1968, and again in 1977 for an exhibition at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. By then diagnosed with leukaemia, he established the Len Lye Foundation so his work could remain in New Zealand. Meanwhile, Wystan Curnow and Roger Horrocks had begun compiling a collection of Lye's writings. Horrocks, after meeting Lye in New York in 1980, soon found himself working as his full-time assistant.

Horrocks and Curnow's collection, *Figures of Motion*, was published by Auckland University Press in 1984, with subsequent collections of the artist's writings edited by Horrocks and published by Holloway Press in 2002 and 2009. Horrocks, founder of the Department of Film Television and Media Studies, also wrote *Len Lye: A Biography*, which remains a benchmark and reference point for all Lye scholarship.

Lye was an innovator who continues to fascinate researchers, as evidenced by last December's International Symposium on Performance Science, which was entertained by *Art That Moves: The work of Len Lye* currently at the Gus Fisher Gallery until 13 February, and by the Business School's enthusiastic sponsorship of that exhibition in recognition that Lye is an exemplar of Kiwi ingenuity.

Andrew Clifford