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# Notes: artists' books on music

As the jazz quartet set up on Monday February 24 on the pavement outside Bowen Galleries, the afternoon peak traffic slowed, and sometimes stopped, to observe a large audience gathered for the opening of *Notes: artists' books on music*. Curious spectators and stray passersby were drawn in by the saxophones and drums. Music by Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins created a soundtrack on Ghuznee Street that felt rather more akin to an arts festival event than any regular exhibition opening. While the jazz may have been the initial attention grabber the excitement within the gallery was firmly centred on the "visual music" of the books on display.

The diverse group of contributors, brought together from across Australia and New Zealand for this exhibition, produced almost as many varied responses to the theme of the show as there are genres of music. From the battery-powered whimsy of Leon van den Eijkel's *Art book and sound* through the diffuse improvisations of Seraphine Pick's *Halfcut* and Aaron Waghorn's *Bob Dylan* and on to the more measured contributions of Stephen Allwood and to the unsettling beauty of Anna-Marie O'Brien's *Oversharing*, the works engaged the audience with a resounding sense of delight and sensation. Many of these books were deeply embedded with music – the wise and compelling texts of Robin Maconie, including his *101 ways of hearing a dog bark*, and the graphic scores in Wai-te-ata Music Press's *Strange Terrain* edited by Jack Body – projects overflowing with ideas and observations that will resonate for years to come.

Other pieces on exhibit were hinged less firmly to music – works by Phil Dadson, Shona Rapira Davies and Rachel Te Matapuna, Deborah Smith, Euan Macleod and Pauline Rhodes meditate and delicately interact with the sounds and elements of the natural world; while Alison Clouston and Boyd's *Bird Cry* ibook literally brought the music of birdsong into the gallery. Sarah Maxey introduced a cat-like book (complete with whiskers) and Susan O'Doherty contained fragments of music manuscript within her sculptural work.

Bill Manhire's block-like book *cicada* flicks with the text *I am still trying to see your song*, and similar inquiring undertones inhabit Denis O'Connor's series of drawings *big aitché*, *little aitché*. These tones are to be found also in Warwick Freeman's *I collect stars* and in the song lyrics of Peter Stapleton's *Black Creek*, elegantly hand-printed at Christchurch's Kowhai Press. This same poetic ambience is evident in the works by Rob Cherry, Wendy Bornholdt, and also in Michael Morley's *Meditations on the solar wind*. Peter O'Doherty's *House music* brings a quiet and lush wit to the show, as do the hushed intonations in the work of Ans Westra, Diane Prince's *Hine Rakautauri* and of Kim Pieters in her *arbitrary knowledges*.

Another Morley piece, *the silencers*, moves away from the conventional book and introduces a volume of vinyl records into the exhibition with a series of paintings on 7 inch singles. Also incorporating the record, and like Morley in a similarly stylus-wrecking manner, is Brendan O'Brien's square LP, *Accidental sounds*. Another work incorporating an

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innovative format is Paul Thompson's *zook* – a fusion of the zine and the book – entitled *To the Southland* it is more particularly a modulated union of music sheets and landscape images.

Other works manifest a more visually noisy aspect of music, perhaps one closer aligned to the Lou Reed adage that *music should come crashing out of your speakers and grab you*; works bearing in this direction include Geoff Dixon's *Songbirds and space for the left hand*, Maiangi J Waitai's *do we do anything* and Chris O'Doherty's *Pictures with musical references*, all present images bustling with staccato-like musical rhythms. Pieces by Victor Meertens, Jeff Henderson and Benedict Quilter crackle with other oblique energies. Meertens' skewed recomposition of a score by Alban Berg documents an anarchic exploration of the relationship between art and music. Just as ambitious, Peter Vangioni's *4 on the floor* connects the music of legendary drummer Maureen Tucker with Dutch typographic artist H.N. Werkmann, in wordless pages alive with textures and shapes that seem like blueprints for the abstract films once projected behind Tucker's former band, *the Velvet Underground*.

Many artists channelled songs into and through their work, from Tracey William's sublime interpretation of Ruru Karaitiana's *Blue Smoke* and Michael Kempson and Nicky Crayson's emotive arrangement of the lyric to Billie Holiday's *Fine and Mellow*, to Noel McKenna's *Ol' McKenna had a farm* a sustained and highly soulful reworking of nursery rhyme – one can almost imagine James Brown (or even *Flight of the Conchords*) relishing the opportunity to interpret ... *and he had a dog who sang/ baby I feel good*. Another tender song reinterpretation is to be found Jeff Thomson's metal sculpture *Are you lonesome tonight* where the combination of a script manipulated from wire and shadow add fresh meanings to a familiar lyric.

In common with Kempson and Crayson's jazz inspired work, Gregory O'Brien's *Geography of Northern Europe* transports Italian trumpeter Enrico Rava and his music into our midst in Wellington; a second piece by Gregory O'Brien, in collaboration with Spencer Levine, *Roadsong*, in turn transports us – this time on a meandering pilgrimage among the roadsigns between Waihi and Tauranga. Raewyn Atkinson's book is one more work that connects strongly to place and travel, this time to North America. A further presence entering the exhibition is that of composer Douglas Lilburn, featured in the work of innovative type designer Kris Sowersby and in *Gordon's notebook* a cinematic assemblage by Julie Nevett.

Timed to coincide with the New Zealand Arts Festival 2014, *Notes: artists' books on music* highlights a somewhat overlooked area of contemporary local art practise, and this combines and encompasses with some of the visual work of composers and writers. The exhibition typifies the creative spirit of the Festival, to not only present to the public fresh and highly original work but to entertain, excite and provoke. In the words of Little Richard, from Tara McLeod's dazzling piece *Tutti-frutti – Whop bop a lu whop bam boo*. Right on!

**Brendan O'Brien**

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