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Immanence

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Artist's Statement

Celebrating the immanent rather than the transcendent, the *Études Series 2021* is a series of studies expressed as three dimensional assemblages of found ideas.

Part painting, part sculpture, part print, they are improvisations of the here-and-now on themes from Sergei Lyapunov's *12 Transcendental Études* (Op.11).

Neil Lowe (b. 1972, Zimbabwe) is a technologist, multi-media designer and artist residing in Dunedin. He holds a BA (Theory of Literature and Linguistics) and a BA Honours (Multi-media Design), both with distinction, and is about to embark on an MFA at the Dunedin School of Art. His work has been shown locally and at the *Museo Reina Sofía* in Madrid. *Immanence* is his debut solo exhibition.

Music, Objecthood and Immanence in Neil Lowe's *Études*

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The history of modern art is punctuated with moments of musical references: James McNeill Whistler's Chopin-inspired 'Nocturnes' in the late nineteenth century; Vassily Kandinsky's Schoenberg-inspired 'Compositions' in the 1920s; Paul Klee's Bach-inspired *Polyphony* (1932); the American jazz-inspired *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) by Piet Mondrian and Henri Matisse's *Jazz Suite* (1947) spring immediately to mind. In different ways, these artists found in music an important reference point for the construction of a visual language appropriate to the contingencies, complexities and contradictions of their experience of modernity. Like the non-Western and non-figural forms that had inspired the early European avant-garde music offered similar formal properties of rhythm, tonality and texture while remaining essentially conceptual. Music, it seems, was indeed the condition to



Figure 1: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Cerulean (Lullaby)*, [Folded, perforated aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, 210 x 230 x 50mm], 2021.

which “all art constantly aspires”¹ as Walter Pater had famously declared in 1877.

Pater’s idea was formulated at a time when the dominant mode of Western painting was mimetic and artists were just beginning to experiment with liberating form from content. In that context music - where content and form seemed inextricably entwined - appeared to offer a compelling “model for artistic transcendence.”² While this notion has firmly been debunked in both twentieth-century music and art theory, the notion of music’s essential abstractness – and consequent potential to offer some kind of transcendental affect – remains.

With this body of work Neil Lowe revisits and complicates the idea of transcendental affect inherent in the creative collision of art and music, referencing the *Twelve Transcendental Études*, Opus 11, by the Russian composer Sergei Mikhailovich Lyapunov (1859-1924).

¹ Brad Brucknell, ‘Re-Reading Pater: The Musical Aesthetics of Temporality’, *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol. 38, No. 3 (1992): 597-614, p. 598.

² *Ibid.*



Figure 2: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Aegean (Ówheo)*, [Folded, perforated aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, laser engraving, 230 x 240 x 60mm], 2021.

Composed between 1897 and 1905 Lyapunov's aim was to complete the cycle of 24 *études* in all keys that Liszt, whom he idolised and to whose virtuosic writing he declared himself "enslaved,"³ had planned to write but never completed.⁴

In musical terms the *étude* (or study) is a compositional form that emerged with the increased popularity of the piano in the nineteenth century as practice material to develop pianists' technical skills. By the middle of the century, *études* had evolved into concert repertory in their own right, with works in the *concert étude* form first by Frédéric Chopin (1819-1849) and later Franz Liszt (1811-1886) becoming firmly established in the pianistic canon.

³ In Chernyshev, Igor, *An Historical and Analytical Survey of the Transcendental Études by Sergei Liapunov*. Unpublished dissertation prepared for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, University of North Texas, 2007, p. 8.

⁴ Lyapunov modestly did not declare that he was completing Liszt's work, writing that, "It would be impolite of me to mention in the title that they serve as a continuation of Liszt's *Études* because I am relatively unknown in the world of music, and it might be construed as bragging" (Chernyshev, p.7). Instead, he dedicated the work to Liszt.



Figure 3: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Citrine (Bell)*, [Folded, perforated aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, laser engraving, etched and patinated copper, 260 x 250 x 80mm], 2021.

Lyapunov's *Études* grapple with the ontological difficulties of composing works in one's own style while being devoted to the ideas of another and succeed with extraordinary sonority, technical virtuosity and stylistic complexity. Lowe's relationship to his source is more fluid and ambiguous, one that enables the act of creativity to be understood, as he puts it, as a Deleuzean "folding adapted to new materials."⁵ At first glance his *Études* seem to use the musical form to declare the same kind of interest in the formal properties of abstraction that drove the modernists. Indeed, the jagged geometries and unapologetic factitiousness of the works evoke the early modernist canon of Cubism, Futurism and Constructivism – those avant-garde movements that sought to find an authentic visual language for modernity by coming to terms with the promise, at once utopian and dystopian, of the machine age. Unlike the modernists, however, this body of work draws on a long century of assessment and reassessment of the conceptual and theoretical bases of art making. It is situated in a very different time and place

⁵ All quotes from the artist are from personal communication, 23 July 2021.



Figure 4: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Cerise (Dance)*, [Folded, perforated aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, laser engraving, etched and patinated copper, 250 x 265 x 55mm], 2021.

and draws its abundant energy from the intersection of the elusive open-endedness and infinite algorithmic possibilities of twenty first-century digital technology and the embedded traditions of paint and material.

These eight works in the series take their titles from Lyapunov's twelve studies, using them as conceptual signposts rather than as prompts for visual transliterations. Like the musical *étude*, the works are highly process-driven and technically specific; like Lyapunov, Lowe tests the limits of originality and authorship by allowing the constituent technical framework of the compositions to be guided by another – in his case the Internet and computer software. Thus, the titles of each of the works refers to a colour palette randomly generated from search terms entered into the web application Adobe Color. In the case, for example, of *Étude in Aegean (Ōwheo)* – based on Lyapunov's *Transcendental Étude no. 4, Térék ('The River Térék')* in *G sharp minor* – the dominant shades of blue and green resulted from the search terms 'Aegean' and 'river' and come to replace the key signature of the original. The shapes of the folds that encase the inner panels were



Figure 5: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Pewter (Ghost)*, [Folded, perforated aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, laser etching, 290 x 270 x 80mm], 2021.

in turn created using an online Voronoi diagram generator and exploded into their individual shapes.

Étude in Aegean (Ōwheo) (Figure 2) retains some tension between illustration and free-flowing association by the inclusion of a laser-etched image of the pedestrian bridge over the Ōwheo and a wedge of salmon-coloured impasto. The latter, according to the artist, refers “to the spawning journey of the introduced Chinook salmon that have made Ōwheo their home.” In another work, *Étude in Cerise (Dance)* (Figure 4) – based on *Étude no. 11, La ronde des sylphes (Dance of the Sylphs)* in G sharp major – the subtle outline of the brise-soleil of the University of Otago’s Performing Arts Centre is just discernible, a wry nod to the dance school contained within the building. In *Étude in Citrine (Bell)* (Figure 3) – based on *Étude no. 3, Carillon (The Bells)* in B major – a laser-etched image of the Bell Tea Company building jostles cheerfully with an etched copper Voronoi diagram and a lush panel of lemon yellow impasto; in *Étude in Pewter (Ghost)* (Figure 5)– based on *Étude no. 2, Rondes des fantômes (The Ghosts’ Dance)* in D sharp minor – an ornate lamppost



Figure 6: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Obsidian (Elegy)*, [Folded, perforated aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, patinated brass and copper, 310 x 230 x 130mm], 2021.

and *Can't Stop*, the iconic image of a galloping horse that has long been a feature of Dunedin's commercial centre, are just discernible, etched into a dark ground alongside an evanescent smudge of silver clouds. For the Lowe, these "subtly reference the spectral dance of exchange relations inherent in capitalism according to the first chapter of Marx's *Capital*."

In their reference to identifiable Dunedin landmarks these works evoke a literal sense of space and place, but as participants – interlopers even – in a larger conceptual and formal framework rather than as illustrations. The other works are resolutely devoid of recognisable visual signifiers. Instead, they are as much studies in pure form and texture as they are studies in ways of being and negotiating new formal and conceptual territories. In all the works Lowe revels in the Dionysian physicality of making; the thick impasto, lurid colours, and wildly etched surfaced speak of pleasurable experiments with form and texture, but always



Figure 7: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Indigo (Tempest)*, [Folded, perforated anodised aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, laser etching, 350 x 440 x 75mm], 2021.

subjugated to the Apollonian logic of the computer-generated forms. The result is a body of work where each piece is part painting, part sculpture, part print, existing individually and collectively as what the artist calls “a three-dimensional assemblage of found ideas.” The works easily reveal the materials (sheet metal, supporting struts, acrylic paint) used to construct them, but at the same time demand a deeper engagement with their seductive surfaces, unapologetic colour palettes, and dynamic forms.

The works are intensely personal meditations on the experience of physical displacement. Having recently migrated to New Zealand from South Africa, Lowe speaks of being “somehow dislocated” (not unlike the imported salmon in the Ōwheo) and the attendant urge to find ways to express “the physical and digital migrant/nomad experience” of being between worlds and careers. Viewed thus, his *Études* become studies, as it were, for perfecting a construct of selfhood that can encompass the alienation, disconnection and precariousness of being a migrant while simultaneously offering a path to the



Figure 8: Neil Lowe, *Étude in Persimmon (Summer Night)*, [Folded, perforated, etched aluminium, aerosol, acrylic, etched & patinated copper, brass and aluminium, 400 x 550 x 70mm], 2021.

plane of immanence that inspired the exhibition's title.

Expanding on this Lowe notes that,

The immanence/transcendence relationship is (to me) crucial to this body of work. Immanence refers not only to the here-and-now, but also (and perhaps more pointedly) to Deleuze's Plane of Immanence ; a construct he developed to avoid having to aim for the transcendence of 'truth' or 'beauty' or God in philosophy and in life. An ontology of transcendence creates a hierarchy in which certain ideas have a higher status, like Plato's dualism. Immanence provides a way for the substance of the universe to express itself (or fold) in different forms without needing to reach for the transcendent. It is a philosophy of becoming, not creation. The plane of immanence is all there is. When folded it seems like there is an inside and outside, a duality, but it is all the immanent.

In the final analysis, then, Lowe's *Études* are much more deliberate, refined and conceptually complex than the notion of 'an assemblage of found ideas' might suggest. Like the model of the *étude* that inspired them they are technically exacting in their form, virtuosic in their effects and profound in their affect.

References

- Brucknell, Brad. 'Re-Reading Pater: The Musical Aesthetics of Temporality', *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol. 38, No. 3 (1992): 597-614
- Chernyshev, Igor. *An Historical and Analytical Survey of the Transcendental Études by Sergei Liapunov*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, University of Texas, 2007.
- Lowe, Neil. Personal communication with Federico Freschi, 23 July 2021.

To listen to Sergei Lyapunov's *12 Transcendental Études* as played by Etsuko Hirose, follow this link by scanning it on your phone or clicking on it.



Federico Freschi is Professor and Head of College Te Maru Pūmanawa | Creative Practice & Enterprise at the Otago Polytechnic. He was formerly the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. A widely published art historian, his research focuses on questions of nationalism and identity as expressed in modern art and architecture. In 2016, Professor Freschi was the South African curator of the exhibition *'Henri Matisse: Rhythm & Meaning'* at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, the first exhibition of Matisse's work on the African continent. His most recent publication (with Brenda Schmahmann and Lize van Robbroeck) is the edited volume *Troubling Images: Visual Culture & the Politics of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Wits University Press, 2020). He is co-editor (with Farieda Nazier and Jane Venis) of *The Politics of Design: Privilege & Prejudice in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia & South Africa* (forthcoming, Otago Polytechnic Press).

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