

Why we're a bit shy of Len Lye

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There's always been a wonderful kind of cultural arrogance attached to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, right from the time New Plymouth Mayor Denny Sutherland looked with horror at an object in one of the early exhibitions and said it looked like one of the dunnies at Rugby Park.

Arrogance is probably not the right word to describe the gallery's spectacular disregard for the views of the average citizen. Maybe "insouciance" is fairer.

Whatever the right expression, it needs to convey the singular determination of the gallery's directors, staff and acolytes over the past three and half decades to insulate themselves from the treacherously variable opinions "ordinary" people have on what art is and how it ought to be shown.

Those running the new Len Lye Centre continue that tradition with commendable focus.

So far, it's paid off. With annual visitor numbers projected to reach nearly 100,000 in the first year, by January 73,000 had walked up the big concrete ramp since it opened last July.

However, there is growing unease that the Len Lye is shy of..well...Len Lye. Some letters-to-the-editor writers say there aren't enough of the kinetic genius's sculptures on show at any one time.

They tend to be out-of-towners who've journeyed a long way from their cultural high grounds in Auckland and Wellington to be wowed. The few wonderful examples on show are wowing them, but euphoria is short-lived when they realise four versions of Fountain (now reduced to three) and a couple of other Lye gadgets are all the kinetic sculptures they will see.

The centre changes its shows every few months, which probably raised expectations we would see sculpture numbers climb. But currently there are hardly any - just three Fountains and Fire Bush, confined to the first gallery space.

The second floor - formerly the platform for at least a couple more - has none. It's being used for an exhibition on cameraless photography, presumably inspired by the work Lye did during his life in England prior to his US days.

So where does the insouciance come in? Just this: the centre believes people make the mistake of regarding the place as some kind of museum. It's not, one of the staff told me huffily. It's an art gallery, and must concentrate on what art galleries do, which apparently is provide an ever-changing menu of displays, rather than become a repository.

It's a slick argument, of the kind that has successfully maintained the Govett-Brewster's reputation as a daring and avant guard exhibitor of art from the Pacific (while ensuring most of the local wannabe artists are kept firmly in their place, which is not in the Govett-Brewster).

However, as a strategy this kind of thinking may have a fatal flaw when applied to the Len Lye. Aficionados of Lye travelling all the way from New York are unlikely to be impressed when they're told they'll have to keep coming back if they want to see the full range of his kinetic brilliance.

Some people as close as Wellington are saying they're unlikely to make frequent trips.

To be fair, there are other factors at play.

There are something approaching 30 Lye sculpture designs, and so far only about two thirds have been created, usually through painstaking trial and error. These are fragile machines that rely on complex mechanical systems to perform their magic.

It makes them high maintenance and high cost, and tricky to exhibit. People can get too close. One of the Fountains had to be removed for repair after somebody manhandled it.

Not all have been made to the scale Lye envisaged, so some are being built again, a time-consuming process involving a small cast of enthusiasts and students.

Some at Canterbury University's engineering school are producing wonderful new versions of the Lye machines. The university naturally wants to have first dibs on exhibiting them, the result being New Plymouth has a rival to any claim of being the Len Lye Centre of the world.

Just how that plays out will be interesting. Hopefully, it means we just have to be patient and assume the recent new impetus given the Lye industry will eventually ensure there are more and more of his sculptures available to be shown here.

Hopefully, more of them at the same time, meaning the abandonment of what looks increasingly like a self-defeating policy whose weakness may be exposed as initial curiosity about what's in the shiny building begins to wear thin.