

String theory

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Conversations between painting and music have been a point of fascination for centuries, with each discipline providing just as evocative a muse to each other as any romantic liaison or stormy sea. Just as composers have tried to evoke colours or conjure landscapes, artists have attempted to replicate the moods and melodies of song. For Pythagorus, the vibrations of sound and harmony held the key to the universe's rhythms; for Kandinsky, Klee, et al., a path into abstraction. The intangible quality of music has long been a source of mystery and experimentation, from Whistler's symphonies to Mondrian's boogie woogie, to Rauschenberg and Cage's exploration of silence and space. Since the pop era, the culture that surrounds music has become a rich resource for artists, with rock music playing a prominent role in works from the likes of Raymond Pettibon, Yoshitomo Nara, Bill Hammond or Bek Coogan, while on a more conceptual level, Julian Dashper or Michael Parekowhai have made reference to music's modes of production, distribution or social dynamics.

With the advent of consumer electronics and digital technology, sound and video have become materials as accessible as pigment or percussion, triggering a renewed interest in image-sound experiments through the possibilities of new media. Whereas much visual music of the early 20th century relied on a subjective interpretation of one media to another, digital systems have made it possible to intertwine sound and image in various ways through the direct translation of electronic data, allowing objective and precise relationships (although these are still subject to decisions of parameters and form). Examples include Clinton Watkins feeding sound into a video signal (*Landscape Distortions*, 2010) or Billy Apple's work with composer Jonathan Besser to translate weather data into music and animation (*Severe Tropical Storm 9301 Irma*, 2001-06).

For composer-painter Michael Smither, describing music through colour and form has been an interest since the 1960s, although it wasn't until his *Polyphonic Chords* (1980) series that he established a specific scale that combined harmony with colour, much as Isaac Newton had done when defining the colour spectrum based on the musical octave. The abstract colour-music works that have become a primary focus of Smither's recent practice are a return to these earlier experiments. As the artist most visibly exploring this territory in New Zealand, Smither has also become a mentor to Shannon Novak, whose experiments in abstraction and visual music have taken many cues from Smither's theories.

Like Smither, Novak (and many visual-music artists before them) is interested in synaesthesia; a condition which causes multi-sensory sensations, such as smelling a word, hearing a shape, or seeing colours in response to sound. Whether abstract or figurative, Smither's paintings can seem to vibrate for some viewers when corresponding music is played – many derive their colour combinations from music theory or are created as visual compositions that can be played. But Smither is less concerned with the subjectivity of actual synaesthesia, as such, developing his own formal systems that directly map specific colours and shapes to notes, whereas Novak, who has mild shape/sound and colour/sound synaesthesia, is more flexible with his use of colour and form, also suggesting technological or architectural networks, structures and rhythms. Both bring a social dimension to their experiments in this area, implicating the viewer in their work, sometimes as an active participant in colour-music activities, or simply seeking direct ways to communicate sensory information.

With his *Call/Reply* exhibition at Pierre Peeters Gallery, Novak presents a work-for-work response to a series of 48 small paintings on paper in Smither's *Notes and Crosses* exhibition, which takes place simultaneously at Artis Gallery across the road. In turn, the *Notes and Crosses* works are a further development of a set of colour-coded playing cards Smither designed for Novak's Texas project, *One Song, Three Composers* (2011) – a matching colour chart was placed with three keyboards as a guide for musical improvisation, but with the corresponding keys on each keyboard coloured differently to create harmonic variations. Through this act of homage, Novak acknowledges the earlier experiments of Smither, but also highlights a network of ties, linking geographical spaces as well as the exchange of ideas that takes place between associated practices, particularly the mutual influence that passes between an established and an emerging artist. By binding these exhibitions together for comparison, Novak also draws into focus the different ways these shared interests resonate for each practitioner.

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