

ROBERT OWEN

Soundings (Compositions #1-17)

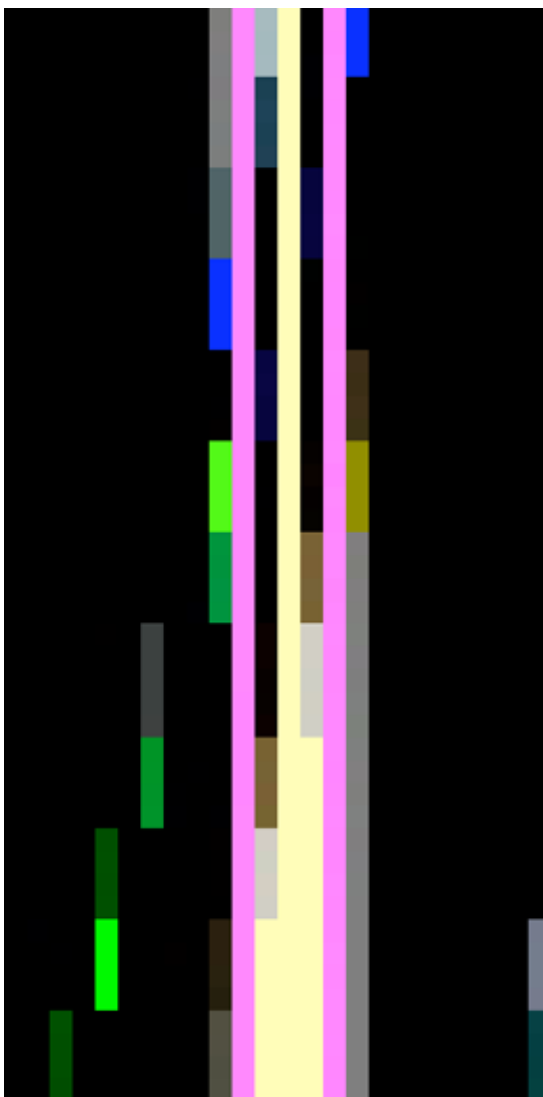
Beyond the physical realm of day to day reality there is another, uncharted space. Plato described this through his allegory of the cave, whereby the 'reality' that we perceive is but a series of shadows on a cave wall, beyond which is the incomprehensible world of actual experience.

Through the series of work, *Fallen Light* (2012) Robert Owen proffers a manifestation of the theoretical space that lies beyond our material world, as though having turned away from Plato's cave wall. In doing so, Owen articulates the notion of infinity through an eloquent allusion to the fragmentation of music, vibration, colour and space.

Inspiration for this series came from an image that Owen saw in the 1970s; *The Vision of Ezekiel*. In this 16th century woodcut, Ezekiel, a prophet of the Old Testament peers through the curved edge of the material world, into the edge of infinite space. The medieval figure sees geometric constellations that allude to technological inventions and erstwhile unthinkable forms that bear little resemblance to his natural, physical world. One wonders how, upon seeing these alien forms and concepts, he might return to the normal world where language does not equip him to describe these marvels to other men.

Owen has always been interested in transforming intangible sensations, situations and ideas into palpable manifestations: the shape of an emotion; the colour and form of a sensation; the weight of a theory. As an artist, teacher and thinker, Owen does not write a lot, yet he speaks of his work in such fully formed blocks of language, and with such poetic beauty that it is almost surprising that language is not incorporated into his practice. By eschewing written language, however, he allows himself to transform his cerebral workings into physical and visual objects. In the past, works such as *Sorry Stones* (2000-04) embody this ability to articulate without words. With no sharp edges, the amorphous, continuous forms of the stones encapsulate the heavy, dark, sinking emotions that surround apology and guilt.

Similarly, *Soundings* (compositions 1-17) articulate, as no words could, the infinity and complexity of space beyond our perceived reality. As you stand among these 17 canvases you are presented with a series of portals within which your spatial logic is challenged. Like rips in the fabric of time, the sharp pastel/neon zips and the rising and falling pixels of colour protrude and recede on an infinite background of soft, matte black. Pulling your eyes between columns of light, and dense sooty space, it is hard to tell where real space sits among the vibrating columns of light and dark.



Soundings (composition #01) 2012. 1250 x 625 mm.

These works are not shiny, nor reflective, and they do not bounce the room you stand in back at you. Rather, the powdery black enfolds you in a nexus of spaces that illicit a feeling of transition or travel. This movement into infinity is interrupted and deconstructed by the flecks of immateriality created by pixels of light and colour. These interruptions vibrate and resonate like sound waves or musical notes, each one a different pitch and tone.

In preparation for writing this short piece, I had a lovely and rambling conversation with the artist in his studio. And I think that the path of this conversation is an eloquent rendering of the way that these works might fit into Robert Owen's oeuvre in general.

Initially, we talked specifically about this series of works; Soundings. It is possible to view this series of works through several viewpoints. I viewed it as a long grid-like work, broken into sentences or bars, with musical overtones and energetic undertones. I also viewed it through the geometric sculpture that lay in front of it, dividing it at odd angles; locating it within another work and dislocating it from reality. Owen spoke about how Soundings was not specifically representative, and could not, therefore be read in a structuralist interpretation of semiotic association. He suggested, rather, that the works were a product of their environment, and of years of working and thinking about certain concepts. He suggested that they would change depending on who viewed them.

Aside from this specific discussion, we also talked more generally around Owen's illustrious practice, and out into the realms of art, life, philosophy and all the crossovers that these spheres naturally contain. Owen spoke about the beauty of spending a significant period honing certain skills, becoming so comfortable with a craft that the process of painting (or sculpting) simply becomes an extension of the artist. He spoke of this point in time as a marvelous situation where you no longer concentrate on the method, but become a medium, through which myriad concepts and proposals might be communicated. I would propose that this comfortable mastery (that Owen has worked on for upwards of 50 years) is embodied in the interconnections present within his career as a whole, and the fact that he kept referring to Soundings as being 'fragments'.

Begun in 2009 as an extension of Music for the Eyes (2006), and emotionally related to the Transitions of Night series (1999), Soundings are an eloquent continuation of scores of Robert Owen's creations. The works have the verticality and soaring levity of skyscrapers that Owen has worked on. They have elements of geometry and astronomy that are present in works such as Turn of the Moon (1983-84). They contain grid-like properties reminiscent of pixelations and calculations that have reverberated within Owen's works over the decades, as well as manifesting gradations and refractions of light and colour that hark back to his early investigations into abstraction, minimalism and colour theory in Greece, London and Australia.

But these allusions and references are not mimetic or repetitive. Rather they fragment and push forward ideas originally embodied by other works, generating a complex set of routes between astronomy, music and abstraction.

Aside from being interconnected fragments of his whole practice; fragments of a series; fragments of light, colour and vibration, these works are also only fragments of the whole experience that they aim to facilitate. Redolent of music, geometry, light and colour, they depend on the tenacity of the viewer in questioning them and appreciating them within their own nexus of context, connotation and reality.

In this sense, Soundings is an apt example of the difference between looking and seeing. They are, of course, just paintings. Pleasant to take in as a viewer, and capable of being categorised within various factions of art history. However, if the viewer chooses to do more than just look at them (and sees them instead), Soundings may become constructions of geometric infinity, beyond the scope of quotidian reality.

Pippa Milne
November 2012



Fallen Light 2012. Stainless steel, 1200 x 1100 x 950 cm.