

## Sound Spheres

For over twenty years artist John Aslanidis has defined a space between sound and vision, through seeking to create “paintings you can hear and sound you can see”.<sup>1</sup> His paintings take the form of numerous interlocking and exponentially expanding concentric circles that are painstakingly mapped and masked out, and evolve from an intersection between music and painting. This stream of artistic interrogation has a historical lineage that stretches back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the birth of international modernism, yet the musical genre that Aslanidis responds to is rooted in the electronic music movement that came to prominence in the 1990s. Creating paintings of vibrational vibrancy that actively engage with the science and perception of sound – his work reflects a confluence of visual and aural stimuli that also mirrors the phenomena of synesthesia, where the senses become blended. These are paintings that are experienced by the body, and as such reclaim a contemplative awareness of the senses within the rush and tumble of the digital consumer age.

Pre-dating even the earliest modern painterly interpretations, the relationship between visual and auditory perception has long been reflected in musical language. The way musical sounds are described, the *timbre* or tone *colour* of different instruments have for centuries been spoken of as bright, dark, brilliant and so on, with new musical colours created through combining instruments in infinitely variable ways.<sup>2</sup> However it was not until the evolution of the modernist project that visual artists responded to music through abstraction, with giants of the era such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee making important contributions. In Australia early approaches include the pioneering works of Roy de Maistre, who in 1919 paired the notes of an octave with colours to visually express a piece of music.<sup>3</sup> While de Maistre’s work was first met with critical derision, the profound connection between abstract painting and music was to develop into a persistent arena of enquiry. It encompasses the systematic and quite literal works of de Maistre, to the atmospheric paintings of Donald Laycock (an early influence on Aslanidis) whose visual response to music resonates with simplified pictorial beauty and symbolic charge. Such works reflect an affective response to music that is fuelled more by a emotion and imagination, rather than rational analysis.

John Aslanidis’ work falls somewhere between these two approaches. He tempers mathematical exactitude that references the structures of sound and music, with an intuitive response to colour that harnesses its emotive effects on mood. Before commencing his Fine Arts degree at COFA, Sydney, Aslanidis studied at the Conservatorium of Music. He has been heavily involved in electronic music since the early 1990s and was part of Clan Analogue, a collective of visual and sound based

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<sup>1</sup> In conversation with John Aslanidis, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Kamien, *Music an Appreciation*, 1992, p. 6

<sup>3</sup> Steven Tonkin, *Sight and Sound: Music and Abstraction in Australian Art*, exh. cat. The Arts Centre, 2010, p. 4.

artists. As an indication of the extent to which Aslanidis, and others have identified his art with music, he was also signed to the record label Zonar Records as a visual artist in the late 1990s, further immersing himself in the contemporary music which this 90s subculture generated.

There are a number of analogies between music and the way Aslanidis constructs his paintings. The most obvious is his labour intensive process of masking out and exposing individual concentric circles, which are subsequently painted to create alternating curved lines of colour and tone. This results in a rhythmic oscillation between different colours that gives visual form to the pulse of a beat. The complexity is compounded when large masses of concentric circles overlap, perhaps suggesting the confluence of more than one bass line present in electronic music. This merge of larger forms often creates a *moiré* pattern in the work, which is an unpredictable outcome that in musical terms simulates the audible interference that occurs when two frequencies of a lower sonic register (like bass-lines) move in and out of consonance.

Another striking parallel between music and Aslanidis' art is the system of intervals, or access points, that he created in 1991 which govern the structure of his compositions. He has formulated an algorithm that mathematically positions the centre point in relation to one another for each of the radiating circles that traverse his works. This geometrical device acts as a foundation ripe for endless improvisations and alterations, depending on where and how he positions the points on the canvas. This in itself mirrors the way a musical score is structured, through a system of regulated intervals between notes which coalesce to form a whole.

The aesthetic of Aslanidis' work also draws upon physical phenomena present within nature. Much like the incursion of an object into water that creates infinitely expanding ripples, sound *waves* are essentially just vibrating air, and it is as if Aslanidis gives visual form to these invisible vibrations that cause auditory experience. His paintings that theoretically could continue to grow infinitely following the repetition of the process as each circle is laid upon the next, are limited only by the edge of the canvas. As such they seem to “capture a fragment of infinity,”<sup>4</sup> a conscious motive in his art.

In this regard Aslanidis' work has a strong correlation with Emergence Theory, where complex patterns emerge out of multiple simple interactions, or the collective activities of many entities. It is this theory that explains naturally occurring yet intricate and repetitive shapes such as those found within snowflakes, or the ripples in sand dunes. Appropriately Aslanidis' work appeared in the 2012 exhibition *Structure and Emergence*, which featured work by 16 artists who explore the relationship between science, mathematics and abstract visual language. Curated by Daniel Hill

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<sup>4</sup> John Aslanidis interviewed by Steven Asquith, Artinfo.com.au. <http://www.artinfo.com.au/articles/read/john-aslanidis--sonic-networks-nos-4-7> (Accessed 23 January 2013, 4.55pm)

and Ron Janowich, this interdisciplinary exhibition toured college venues around the USA in 2012.

In the same way that Emergence Theory can explain patterns within nature, scientists, artists, biologists and philosophers have for millennia linked geometrical formulas with naturally occurring structures. Arguably the most long-standing subject of this enquiry is the Golden Mean. This numerical ratio has since the Renaissance been used to create a grid or spiral that is applied to the picture plane by artists to structure the composition an image. For some contemporary Australian painters such as Jeffrey Smart, Rick Amor, and of a younger generation Eolo Paul Bottaro, employing the Golden Mean to guide the arrangement of forms and compositional elements is a major aspect of their approach to picture making within their representational styles. The Golden Mean when used in painting has the effect of keeping the eye within the frame of the canvas, so that it endlessly bounces off objects and forms. In many ways, Aslanidis' approach to composition while also requiring a geometrical formula for structure, does the reverse, as his ever expanding circles lead the eye endlessly around and out of the rectangle, rather than endlessly in. In this way he extends upon the possibilities of incorporating geometry into painting, giving his work mathematical bones to indicate an existence outside of the frame, and consequently within the viewers' space.

Conceptually Aslanidis is not trying to illustrate sound in the manner of some earlier exponents of music/painting, but rather give visual expression to the physicality of sound. He is concerned with the physical reaction the viewer has to his paintings and talks about the experience of an audible hum produced by looking at his works.<sup>5</sup> This idea is closely related to the phenomena of synaesthesia, a cognitive occurrence where the five senses – sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste– become blended and perception in one sense leads to an involuntary perception in another. For a person who has synaesthesia the sound of a flute may look light blue, or the smell of beer breath and aftershave may result in a cloud of purple and green that surrounds the source of the odour.<sup>6</sup> Science is still investigating this mysterious and somewhat marvelous occurrence that occurs in the synaesthetic brain. It is also a subject of fascination for contemporary arts practitioners, as attested to by the 2012 music /visual art festival *Synaesthesia* at the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, and the recent collaborations between Aslanidis and Berlin based sound artist Brian May.

In two recent works *Sonic Network 9* 2011 (exhibited at dr Julius-ap, Berlin 2011 and White Box, New York 2012) and *Sonic Network 8* (exhibited at The Substation, Melbourne 2012) Aslanidis painted a monumental work, which May responded to in a generative sound piece using a software synthesis program that actually measures the

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<sup>5</sup> In conversation with John Aslanidis, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Catalyst, *Synaesthesia*, (11/04/2002)

<http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/s528838.htm> Accessed Wed 3rd April, 11.44am

frequency of colour within the electromagnetic spectrum. May measures the colours present within the paintings, and then divides the frequencies until an audio spectrum is reached, and there are eight octaves to work with. Through arranging sounds produced by reading the oscillating and kaleidoscopic variations of colour and tone present within Aslanidis' painting, May creates immersive soundscapes that directly relate to the colours Aslanidis has put down on the canvas.

In many ways these collaborations simulate an internal synaesthetic reaction of hearing sound when activating the visual senses, here produced in the physical world for all to experience. This fusion of digital and analogue approaches turns early attempts to paint music on its head, as here the painting informs the aural composition, and not vice versa. Whereas the way the painting is seen, or how the eye bounces around the vibrant lines of colour throughout the work is choreographed by the sounds emanating through the air.<sup>7</sup> In a broader sense the synaesthetic nature of these projects remind us that there is much about the human brain that is far from understood, including the furthest boundaries of sensory perception.

These collaborations further develop the over-riding experience of looking at Aslanidis' art, which is one that brings the viewer back into an awareness of the body. Eyes flicker and bounce around the canvas, responding to the shimmering tones and alternating bright colours that massed together appear anything but static. Some sensitive synaesthetic individuals may experience a hum, others may not, yet regardless the bodily response engendered by the work sets it apart from other protagonists in the field of music/painting. Similarly the fundamental relationship to music and sound explored by Aslanidis distances his work from the sphere of optical art, which it has in the past been related to due to its hard edge aesthetic qualities. Through his combination of mathematical structure and one of most fundamental and universal of geometric shapes, the circle, Aslanidis has found a mechanism to consistently vision a reality beyond the immediately tangible. Like a macro/micro technicolour fragment of infinity, barely contained within the four edges of a canvas.

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<sup>7</sup> In conversation with Brian May, Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2012.