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Author

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55

pieter laurens mol

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

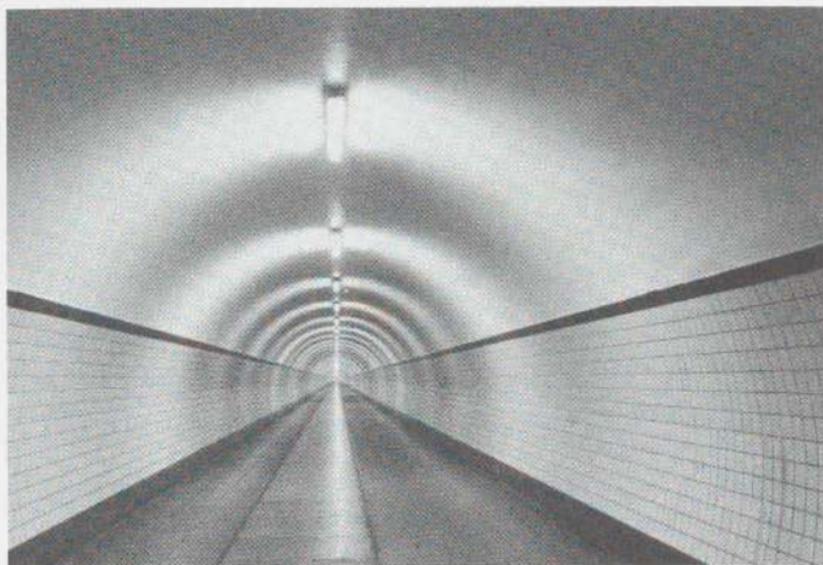
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Pieter Laurens Mol is among those contemporary Dutch artists whose work manifests great conceptual complexity and offers multiple layers of perception, interpretation, and meaning. The substance of each of Mol's creations, regardless of medium, reveals itself through a protracted contemplation of the work's formal configuration, its relationship to the materials used, its clues to the creative process, and an active search for the intellectual underpinnings of all of these aspects. Because of this, Mol's works sometimes seem enigmatic and almost hermetic, despite their generally uncomplicated form. They hover between the perceptible and the imperceptible, between possible and impossible, finite and infinite. Mol does not favor a single style or medium. He often compares himself to an alchemist whose mysterious practices evolve into emotionally charged and visually stimulating experiments. His diverse oeuvre encompasses and frequently combines photography, film, painting, drawing, sculpture, and installation. Yet, in all his work's variety and superficial disjunction, several important preoccupations return time and again. Fascination with the relativity of time, possibilities of manipulating space and scale, intense interest in the past, sensitivity to the importance of chance and accident in the artistic process, and inventiveness within limited visual parameters are all continuously present in Mol's creative universe. A special emphasis on the Dutch heritage is another dominant feature. In all its complexity, Mol's work demands total intellectual, emotional, and visual immersion in order to decode and appreciate the subtleties of the artist's intentions.

Mol's involvement with the visual arts began around 1967, when he was twenty-one, and flourished in the early 1970s. Initially trained as a carpenter and partially as an architect, Mol was interested from an early age in rocket construction. He had a passion for finding the optimal "performance on the verge of explosion, finding the most subtle balance between energy and material."¹ Consistently, Mol seeks the artistic language that allows for free experimentation with simple materials and forms, conveying complex ideas and an investigation of matter and spirit, emphasizing states of mind, often informed by a subtly poetic and even absurdist sensibility. His choice of materials is dictated not only by their physical properties, but also by their symbolic associations, on which the artist imposes his personal interpretation.

A constant undercurrent of Mol's work is his dialogue with the past, especially the Dutch past and that of Brabant, the northern province of the Netherlands in whose capital, Breda, he was born and raised. Both history and Dutch painting of the seventeenth century interest him, however, not as models or motifs for appropriation, but as inspiration as elements that transcend time and introduce new meanings.

Mol's work evolved under diverse stimulating factors. The ideas of Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, and Piero Manzoni were major influences, familiar to him from the publication *de nieuwe stijl*. Yet, not surprisingly, his encounter with the work of Marcel Duchamp had the strongest impact. Duchampian inventiveness and defiance of established artistic traditions and boundaries appealed greatly to the young artist, opening up new approaches to art and art creation. Mol's attitude that art is a result of hard work and great precision was modified by Duchamp's emphasis on chance and irony as important creative factors. In addition to acknowledging this Duchampian heritage, Mol sees himself as an heir to a tradition descending from the Northern Renaissance, intellectually stimulated by such masters as Pieter Brueghel and leading, within the context of twentieth-century art, to the rigor present in the work of his compatriot Piet Mondrian. One can also recognize the influences of Jean Arp and Francis Picabia and of the traditions of Arte Povera, Fluxus, and the conceptualism of Joseph Beuys and the Belgian Marcel Broodthaers.



Photograph from the installation *The Imperative Mood*. 1996. Mixed mediums; hourglass: 59 x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ " , canvas: 106 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 137 $\frac{7}{8}$ ". Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

Mol's early work, primarily in photography, documented his performances or actions and bore characteristics of the second wave of European and American conceptualists. But Mol does not see himself as a conceptual artist, since his interest lies not mainly in the "idea" but in the visual reality resulting from that idea and recorded through film or photography. His works of the 1970s, which attracted broad European attention, highlighted his playful attitude toward reality, his poetic conceptualism, and his almost lighthearted tone permeated by an acute consciousness of time.

During the early 1980s, Mol focused on photographing the figure's movement in space, as in the 1980 wall installation *Untitled (Reclining Model)*. The work is composed of twenty-four frames depicting the sequential changes in the sky configuration above the figure. These fan out in an arc above a small still life, the traditional seventeenth-century Dutch painting genre. The painting is given almost iconic presence by its placement close to the floor. The intensity of visual tension results from the contrast in scale. Present and past are set into a mysterious dialogue.

The relationship between time and space is explored in many of Mol's works, exemplified by the installation *The Imperative Mood* (1996). The photograph of the underground tunnel near Antwerp and its line of vaulted ceiling lights, diminishing according to the laws of perspective, is in tension with the large hourglass, where the constant trickling of sand attunes the viewer to the inevitable—even imperative—passage of time. The midpoint of the hourglass is aligned with the last light on the distant horizon in the photograph. Additional tension exists in the space between the photograph and the hourglass itself. The physical distance becomes a metaphorical space, charged with energy.

In all his installations, Mol strives for a perfect balance between contemplation and visual beauty. He often creates a reflective inner space, as in *Course into Calm* (1994), composed of a table with an open drawer in which a night moth sleeps under glass; above the table on the wall hangs a small drawing, a simple horizontal line in charcoal. The relationship of parts and the choice of materials—zinc, glass, charcoal, wood, paper—result in a special ambience contained within the conceptual and physical space between object and viewer. In a recent interview, the artist elaborated on the work's expressive quality:

It is really totally calm, peaceful, abstract. . . . I made use of old glass because old glass has this soft reflection and in fact it says when you heat me up I become a liquid again. It anticipates already a sort of melancholy. When you move by moving yourself physically it gives this soft watery glow, it is on the verge

of being there and not being there, but it is there to be discovered by the viewer. With the drawer half-open it is a very delicate tranquil moment; the moth adds a quality of still life, stillness and fragility.²

An earlier work, *Visionary Rumor* (1989), exudes a totally different, almost ephemeral quality. It consists of a freestanding sculpture like an open pedestal, an inset vitrine with a blue background drawing, and a white plaster cast of an ear, apparently listening to the sound of blue water. To Mol it almost resembles a seventeenth-century landscape.³ Here again Mol is an heir to Dutch artists of the past, but, as Gary Schwartz points out, "not because of the ways he or they construct space or conceive of subject matter. . . . He is their heir because he uses art as his main means of establishing the significance of things and probing his way through life."⁴ In its uncomplicated structure, the work exudes an aura of great tranquility.

Mol's traditional Dutch sense of tranquility is again conveyed in a piece entitled *On the Border of Sleep* (1986). Composed of two elements—a photograph of sea waves on the wall above several horizontal rows of old roof tiles on the floor—this work inspires a clearly melancholy, withdrawn feeling. The viewer contemplates the relationship of the evanescent image in the photograph, soft and fragile, to the earthy, physical configuration of tiles, recalling in size a human figure lying on a bed. The piece evokes the connection to the past through the use of time-weathered, traditional Dutch roofing tiles, which the artist acquired from an old building under demolition.

The source of inspiration for the piece was a visit to a friend in the process of moving who had an extensive collection of books piled on the living room floor. For Mol, the books symbolized a landscape of intellect, mountains of information and literature. A few years later, when passing a demolition site in Amsterdam full of piled roofing tiles, he recalled the image. He felt that there was a distinct connection, an analogous sense of melancholy and sadness; this prompted him to acquire the tiles for his work. What was of special importance to him and for the quality of the piece was the texture of those tiles of baked gray clay. They had unusual stillness, lying inert and dusty, with sections of mortar still attached, yet the play of light gave them a softness and sensuous beauty. While the structure resembled a bed or mattress, the tiles' gray tones and the remnants of plaster and charcoal on their edges lent them the quality of sea fossils. This association provoked the use of the photograph of the North Sea on a very misty, dull day when its surface appeared like a soft blanket. The same feeling of great tranquility emanates from the piece (hence the title), and yet the whole can also be experienced as a still life.⁵

That image of sea waves and the foam forming on their peaks recurs frequently as a motif in Mol's works of the late 1980s, as exemplified by several pieces in the *Mutiny Lyrics* series. Yet throughout the 1980s, Mol also explored other themes that would inform the majority of his oeuvre and help to expand his visual language. These included the myth of Icarus and the symbolism of Saturn, Mars, and Venus. In formal terms, photography receded into the background, and novel materials like iron, lead, zinc, sulfur, tar, and gunpowder became vital elements of his assemblages, introducing new forms. Funnels, for instance, have always held fascination for Mol, possibly a result of his interest in rocket construction, in which the narrow neck channels the energies before the moment of explosion. He also began to enlarge his vocabulary, using domestic utensils, bottles, and other everyday objects, playing unusual materials against each other and attempting to extract their metaphorical meanings. *The Underflow* (1987–92) is of that period. It uses zinc on wood panel, a traditional washboard, and a black-and-white

photograph of the artist overlaid by an old glass pane, creating the effect of an old-fashioned photographic negative. The undulating horizontal ribbing of the washboard evokes again the rhythmic movement of waves, an impression enhanced by the material's bluish-gray color. The title hints at the various levels of reading engendered by the piece. Characteristically for Mol, the surfaces are beautifully worked out, the textures subtly playing off each other with unexpected eloquence and expressiveness.

The visual language of the works devoted to Icarus, Saturn, Mars, Neptune, and Venus relates to explorations of states of mind: respectively tragic, brooding, violent, and playful. To poignantly express their metaphorical meanings, Mol uses materials specifically associated with those symbols. Lead, iron, and zinc, for instance, evoke Saturn, Mars, and Neptune, the three planets and symbols that attract him most. Traditionally, Saturn and the saturnine temperament are associated with the artistic identity: creative, pondering, melancholy—as exemplified by the Dürer engraving *Melancholia* (1514), one of Mol's favorite images. The representation of solemnity is a vital and recurring preoccupation in Mol's work. He conveys a meditative brooding tone through the use of various devices and objects, such as dead crows or discarded roofing tiles. But these melancholic undertones often contain an ironic twist, as in the 1992 work *Grand Promptness*.⁶ In contrast, Mars—the god of war, the red planet, a symbol of sanguinary temperament and male prowess—is represented by the color of red lead or rusty iron. Several works created for the present exhibition, such as *Vigilantia* (1996), *The Dream Estate* (1996), and *The Chromatics of Fatigue* (1996), explore both the Saturnian and the Marsian mythologies, aggressively intruding into the viewer's virtual space and causing him to contemplate diverse aspects and juxtapositions of urban and natural environments, to discover new realms of experience.

Mol's works on paper constitute an important part of his oeuvre. By its very nature, a drawing is the most immediate registration of the artist's exploratory or creative impulse. Much like Mol's other works, his drawings combine several mediums: pencil, charcoal, watercolor, and such unorthodox materials as gunpowder and iodine. The choice of materials here too is related to their literal and evocative qualities. Many drawings, such as the *Iodine Studio Drawings* (1987), depict the private universe of the artist's studio, the laboratory of his creative work; others comment on natural phenomena. Their variety attests to the artist's creative and intellectual richness. As Mol himself has emphasized, they are circumscribed by the same set of rules that discipline his creative process in all mediums and lead him toward extracting an inner beauty from the subject and the materials. It is that combination of the temporal element; the uninterrupted dialogue between past and present and between specific Dutch qualities and those universal; the emphasis on craft, materials, and precision; and an ironic wit often tinged with a melancholic and poetic quality, highlighted by the formal parameters of the work, that make Mol's oeuvre conceptually stimulating, emotionally involving, and, in its complexity, radiant with a mesmerizing visual beauty.

Magdalena Dabrowski

Senior Curator, Department of Drawings

notes:

1. *Pieter Laurens Mol* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1977), p. 4.
2. Author interview with Pieter Laurens Mol, Breukelen, the Netherlands, March 5, 1996.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Gary Schwartz, "Pieter Laurens Mol and the Dutch Past," in *Pieter Laurens Mol: Grand Promptness*, ed. Marente Bloemheugel (Breda: Artimo Foundation, 1996), p. 59.
5. See note 2 above.
6. Mark Kremer, "A Moral Universe," in *Pieter Laurens Mol* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1992), p. 11.



Vigilantia. 1996. Mixed mediums; frame: 90 1/2 x 141 3/4", image 86 5/8 x 140 7/8". Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

biography

Born 1946 in Breda, the Netherlands
Works and lives in Breukelen and Amsterdam

selected one-man exhibitions

- 1996** *Pulse and Orbit*, Sean Kelly, New York
Lure of Thumb, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam
- 1994** MIT List Visual Arts Center, Boston
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati
- 1993** Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven
IVAM, Centre del Carme, Valencia
- 1992** *Once I Existed*, Galerie Franck & Schulte, Berlin;
Louver Gallery, New York

selected group exhibitions

- 1992** *Poiesis, aspects of contemporary poetic activity*,
Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
- 1988** *La Giovane Scultura Olandese*, Palazzo Sagredo, Venice
- 1987** *Art from Europe*, The Tate Gallery, London
- 1986** *Origins, Originality + Beyond*, *The Sixth Biennale of Sydney*,
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

cover: *Grand Promptness*. 1992. Pencil on black-and-white photograph, steel shelf, six old bottles. 48 1/2 x 41 3/8 x 8 1/4". David and Helaine Dorsky Collection.

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