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Foto #NOFILTER museum

Still Searching...

2. Welsh Water

By **Sophie Berrebi**

Published: 11.03.2013

in the series **What Remains of the Photographic beyond Photography**[Previous](#)[Next](#)

One of the pictures that I always come back to when thinking about object photography is a black and white image by the artist Jean-Luc Moulène entitled *Bi-Fixe, 7 September 2003*. It shows two PET bottles of mineral water from Wales sold under the brand Ty Nant, which have been laid flat onto a medium-colored background and photographed directly from above so as to avoid distortion. The straightforward composition involving standard mass-produced objects (specifically a 1 liter and a 0.5 liter bottle) directly evokes pack shot photography, yet the slight graininess of the image and the use of black and white departs from industrial photography and works as an invitation to probe the relationship between the industrial object and its photographic representation.



Jean-Luc Moulène, *Bi-Fixe*, 7 septembre 2003. Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Last week I proposed to take a look at what remains of photography when photography changes. My interest lay less in technical issues than in searching for the ways in which photography imprints upon us a particular way of experiencing the world around us. To continue with this I want to shift the angle and consider not what is left over by photography, but instead things that photography makes possible, something that may be the subject of Moulène's *Bi-Fixe*.

His picture can be compared to the advertisement images produced by Ty Nant and visible on the brand's [website](#) (scroll down the page) as well as to those posted on the site of the bottle's [designer](#), Ross Lovegrove. In both cases, the bottles are presented against white backgrounds and brightly lit so that they appear to hover in space. The lighting emphasizes the irregularly undulating outlines of the bottles and mark with strong contrasts the bulges and recesses on their surface, thereby conveying very legibly the image of flowing water, which the design evokes. The pictures on the designer's website, which are accompanied by a sketch, underscore the sculptural quality of the object and conceptual source of the design. On the company's website the emphasis is oriented towards the product's quality: the bottle is placed next to a naked female model to emphasize, rather crassly, the affinity between the natural curves of the female body and those of flowing water, however contradictory this may be, given the un-ecological character of plastic-bottled water.

By laying the almost-entirely filled bottles flat against a uniform background, Moulène blocks the light from flowing through the transparent containers. As a result, his photograph shows light bouncing off the plastic and creating bright swirling lines that highlight all the nooks and crannies on the surface of the bottles, which comparatively lessens the visual impact of their outlines. Bubbles of air created by the partial absence of water and a few trickles of water dropped onto the exterior of the bottles add to the visual complexity of the image. Whereas the pack shots underscore the outlines of the bottles enclosing the water, Moulène's picture seemingly frees the water from its containers, creating a tactile, sensuous representation that is, however, paradoxically rendered possible only by the industrial object that contains it.

By playing container and contained against one another, the photograph disturbs the close affinity between object and photograph that the commercial images display: instead of emphasizing the bold design and the purity of what it contains and, in turn, of displaying the virtuosity of professional camera work, his picture works against the grain of that mutually enhancing contraption. At the same time that it unhinges the proximity between mass-produced object and industrial photography, *Bi-Fixe* suggests that photography is also at the origin of the object: the shape of the bottle directly proceeds from a photographic capturing of flowing water; it is an image that has been translated into a three-dimensional object.

In retrospect, *Bi-Fixe* reads like a prototype for investigations by the artist that have subsequently led him into experimenting with object design. Taking his cue – or so it would appear – from the photographic origin of Ty Nant's PET bottles, Moulène has devised several objects that not only resort to computer design but that clearly manifest, like the Ty Nant bottles, the fact they originate in a two-dimensional design that has been translated into three dimensions (rather than conceived and constructed in volume). His *Histocamembert* (2004) is a case in point, an object reminiscent of a pie chart blown up and translated into volume. No doubt the most conspicuous of these objects is *Body* (2011), an irregular bean pod-like shape some 8.5 meters long that Moulène produced in collaboration with the car manufacturer Renault. Similarly to his photographic rendering of the Ty Nant bottles, *Body* reads counter-intuitively: it exhibits color variations and dividing lines that bear, in fact, no relation to its actual shape, it is seemingly translucent yet opaque, and it is industrially produced but as useless as an object made by a [3D printer](#). Yet it is in fact anything but an object made by a 3D printer, a technology that directly implements the translation of images into simple objects. *Body* is a visual conundrum that evokes the two-dimensional, "photographic" quality of designed objects translated into volume by confusing the relationship between object and photograph. It is not unlike the glazed wickerwork pattern drawn on potteries traditionally, yet no longer encased in basketry, but messed up: a computer-generated design that takes us back to a photographic experience of the world and invites us, in turn, to look at photographs less as pictures of things than as objects that address the conditions of their making.

tagged: [3D printer](#), [advertisement](#), [Berrebi](#), [Bi-Fixe](#), [computer design](#), [conditions](#), [design](#), [female body](#), [industrial photography](#), [Jean-Luc Moulène](#), [light](#), [object photography](#), [objects](#), [representation](#), [three-dimensional](#), [water](#)

4 comment(s)

Andrea Gyrody

Posted 15.03.2013 at 12:54

Thank you for the post, Sophie. I have a few thoughts, but to start, I want to return to the issue that David Company raised in response to your first post. If we are postulating that photography has a grammar all its own, then how can we address its inheritances from (or commonalities with) the history of painting, drawing, image-making in general? Your discussion of Moulène's transformations of the two-dimensional into the three-dimensional reminded me of Cubist sculpture (Picasso's portraits in particular), which took its cues from developments in Cubist painting and its fracturing of the picture plane, such that the sculptures look like paintings or drawings modeled in space. If Moulène's move is distinctly different, then I think we're missing a term here to explain why the photographic enables something unique that would constitute a grammar separate from that shared by all images.

[Reply](#)

megan driscoll

Posted 15.03.2013 at 17:30

Indeed, the notion of "objects that address the conditions of their making" is hardly the unique province of photography - it was, arguably, one of the fundamental conditions of modernist sculptures. The move that Moulène makes to bring that into photographic space (not as a reflection on the making of a picture, but a consideration of object-conditions) is intriguing, but if we frame it as revealing what makes photography possible, does that bring us back to a photography that is instrumentalized as a transparent frame - or study - for objects in the world?

[Reply](#)

Carol Yinghua Lu

Posted 18.03.2013 at 09:12

Dear Sophie,

Your text touched upon the different approaches different photographers could take towards portraying the same or a similar subject matter based on his or her purpose and motive. It is less about what photography can do than more about what one intends the photographs to do and tell. In this context, I would like to bring to your attention and that of our readers a prolific and exemplary photographer Chin-San Long (Lang Jingshan in Chinese alphabets) and his legendary practice in painting-like photography.

Born in 1892 in Jiangsu Province, Chin-San Long studied photography with his art teacher in school at the age of 12 and belonged to the first generation of photo journalists working in newspapers offices in Shanghai in the 1930s. A pioneering figure in art photography, Chin-San Long was absorbed in his research and experimentation in art photography around a time when many Chinese photographers were engaged in a kind of patriotic photography that documented wartime affairs and anti-Japanese movements in China at this time. What Chin-San Long was concerned about was to marry a modern technique and the traditional aesthetics in Chinese paintings and by doing so, to enter Chinese art and aesthetic into the international consciousness.

Since the early 1930s, Chin-San Long became known for landscape painting-like photography in which he employed different techniques to create the kind of compositions and moods seen in Chinese ink wash paintings. It was a genre of art photography that is usually referred to as editing photography. By taking a number of negatives on the part of a landscape, through stacking, blocking, releasing, synthesis and other methods to make a unified picture of the composition being, Chin-San Long created his photographs based on compositions, styles and subject matters from classical Chinese paintings, from landscape paintings to paintings where animals that were typically seen in Chinese paintings such as deer and cranes and figures, particularly of fish men, monks, and loners were featured. Chin-San Long also hired actors to pose as those figures from the paintings and incorporated the images into his photographs. Like Chinese painters, Chin-San Long would also inscribe on his own photographs. In his works, Chin-San Long showed the possibility

of photography to depict and convey the same poetic, sensuous, emotional and illusionary quality and temperament as classical Chinese paintings.

[Reply](#)

Joanna Fiduccia

Posted 20.03.2013 at 07:39

I want to return to Andrea's comment, for I believe there is a distinction to be drawn between Moulène's transformations and the mingled mediums in the history of image-making at large. A photographic object—that, or something like that, seems to be what is at hand here—cannot merely be a coincidence of like and like (i.e., mass produced object, reproducible print), though of course that coincidence seems part of it. Sophie's selection of Bi-Fixe is a prompt to be more precise, and to recognize certain industrial designs as attempts to arrest material, fixing its motion into a shape. One that can be more easily circulated, now that any spontaneous movement has been annihilated from the matter. And that, it seems to me, is a photographic operation.

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