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Rehberg, Vivian Sky. 'Jean-Luc Moulène's enigmatic responses to creativity and labour'.  
*Frieze.com*, 21 September 2017

FRIEZE.COM

# Art of Work

## Jean-Luc Moulène's enigmatic responses to creativity and labour

BY VIVIAN SKY REHBERG



*Jean-Luc Moulène, La Vigie (The Watchtower) (detail), 2004-11*

'Enigmatic' and 'eclectic' are just two of the adjectives that curators and writers have cleaved to French artist Jean-Luc Moulène's output over the past decade. His drawings and fabricated objects have gained as much recognition as the photographic series he has been producing since the 1990s, but the variety of his work as a whole has left some critics perplexed. Moulène has shot many of his photographic series – which comprise landscapes and cityscapes, portraits and still lifes – over long periods of time: some include thousands of images. The landscape/cityscape genre, 'La Vigie' (The Vigil, 2004–11), for example, traces the dissemination of the invasive Paulownia tree from a sapling the artist first noticed fenced in at the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry building in the Bercy neighbourhood of Paris. 'Fénautrigues' (1991–2006) constitutes approximately 7,000 colour photographs Moulène took of the eponymous hamlet his family hails from in southwest France. Due to their classification in genres and as series, the photographs could be seen as cohering by default, while the sheer quantity of perspectives over time

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renders the act of aesthetically singling out and describing individual images difficult, if not somewhat incidental.

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Moulène's 3D works cannot be so neatly indexed. He insists they be called 'objects' rather than sculptures and has grouped them under the single heading 'Opus'. The terms 'object' and 'sculpture' both come with significant art-historical baggage, and the artist's choice of the former can be misleading, since he occasionally uses sculptural conventions, such as pedestals, and makes some of his 'objects' out of ready-made sculptures. But Moulène also often refers to his works as 'products': a term that links their manufactured status to an acknowledgment of their commercial value and modes of circulation. This dense, composite understanding of the nature of his 3D work is embodied in *Purple Graces* (2016), a triplet of common, concrete neo-classical garden goddesses, whose slickly draped figures the artist doused in flamboyant purple paint, chopped, spliced apart and re-bolted together to make a new object (or sculpture, or product).



Jean-Luc Moulène, *Trichrome 3*, 2015, glass, round steel, 40 x 67 x 44 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Moulène is neither a craft fetishist nor a readymade purist. He frequently embarks on collaborative works that require multiple partners with very specific technical expertise to whom he can delegate production. In an interview published earlier this year in *Elephant*, the artist said he likes to avoid using the same materials more than once; coupled with his playful employment of a vast range of processes and scales of production, this naturally yields incredible diversity. He may alter industrially produced objects, as with *Purple Graces*, but composing and fabricating some of his other work demands sharing knowledge and skills, and more technologically sophisticated means. Compare, for example, *Bitte à fruits* (Fruit Knob, 1999) with *Body* and *Body versus Twizy* (both 2011). The former is a gnarly, rectangular hunk of street bollard dunked into a smattering of softly contoured pebbles and stones that encrust its top like sprinkles on an ice-cream cone. Inspired by the hybrid car-scooter Twizy, the latter works result from Moulène's collaboration with the Renault car company and are the artist's reconceptualization and reconfigurations of vehicles into large-scale abstract sculptures. The softly faceted and brightly hued red, yellow and blue contours of *Body*, which fade to white, and the sexy volumes of its 12-sided lozenge shape recall an air, ground or water vehicle prototype, while the form of the original black and silver Twizy hybrid can still be discerned in the more solid six-sided *Body versus Twizy*.

Trying to untangle the relationship between Moulène's objects and images is a tricky business and possibly a bankrupt one. While recognizing their visual and material co-dependency, Moulène distinguishes between them in this way: 'My wall images play on representation, while my objects play on

presence.<sup>1</sup> Here, he points to the common understanding that photography inherently registers the absence of whatever it depicts. This is poignantly visible in the series 'Produits de Palestine' (Products of Palestine, 2002–04): straightforward photographs of household items against plain backgrounds. These couscous packets, orange flower water bottles and cans of tomato paste are forbidden for sale outside the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but their representations can circulate on the global market as artworks. These days, the distinction between an object and its depiction becomes increasingly fuzzy. Moulène asserts that many contemporary objects (including those he makes) are post-photographic, by which he means they are digitally designed and essentially prefabricated by software: they already exist as images before they are produced as things.



Jean-Luc Moulène, *Fairy Fantasy*, 2016, plastic, foam, wood, epoxy resin, 57 x 40 x 58 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; photograph: Florian Klienefenn

Moulène's objects, photographs and drawings are increasingly entangled in exhibitions that eschew temporal and material boundaries within his *oeuvre*. A show taking place this year might include photographs from the 1990s and objects from the 2000s, or vice-versa, with no obvious thematic binding. Instead, an exhibition might be driven by one of Moulène's more general conceptual or formal concerns. In preparing his 2009 survey exhibition at the Carré d'Art in Nîmes, the artist studied the architect Norman Foster's plans for the art centre, clocked the organizing grid structure and decided to superimpose his own slightly displaced grid on top of Foster's. He then used the intersection points of these two grids to determine where he would place his works. In his 2015 exhibition, 'Il était une fois' ('Once upon a Time'), at the French Academy at Villa Medici in Rome, he winked at the Academy's former director, the Polish-French painter Balthus, by repainting the walls in Balthus's signature colours and by including one of the older artist's drawings from 1977: the final year of Balthus's tenure leading the Academy. Moulène further collided present and past by installing a row of 'Tronches' (Faces, 2012) – concrete funerary masks, cast from ordinary rubber costume masks of figures from popular and political culture – each displayed on a deep-blue, quilted packing blanket on the Villa's similarly patterned parquet floor. His solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which opens this month, is not a retrospective but is organized around a set of artistic production protocols he's used previously – *la latéralité* (laterality, or the relationship between left and right sides of bodies and things), *l'intersection* (the intersection) and *la coupe* (the cut) – and will include new objects made in collaboration with designer Romain Guillet using 3D modelling.

What's most appreciable, and possibly radical, about Moulène's approach to making exhibitions is that he insists all of his work is equally relevant and timely. His various products can be put into circulation with each other at any given time, thus calling into question the value the art world might choose to identify as a consistent hallmark of, or as legibly new and original in, an artist's practice. And, while I'd ordinarily say



it's lazy simply to reiterate that an artist leaves it to the viewer to finish the artwork, Moulène insists we take the time and make the effort to read his images and objects, without seeking to create a totality. He provides a formal framework and drops the elements into it with interpretation. Instead, he asserts: "The form of a work has no stake in the game other than to make experience possible; it is a kind of rhetoric that helps communicate thought."<sup>2</sup>



Jean Luc-Moulène, *Il était une fois* (Once upon a Time, detail), 2015, installation view at Villa Medici, Rome. Courtesy: the artist and Villa Medici, Rome

One thought that recurs when considering Moulène's production as a whole has to do with the nature of artistic labour, and of labour as such. The brilliant glossy contortions of the 19 intricate blown-glass 'knots' he's created over the past few years are exquisite. The real tension, however – for me, at least – lies in the making. A gripping YouTube video documenting Moulène's work period at the Centre International de La recherche sur Le verre et les Arts Plastiques (International Centre for Glass and Visual Arts Research) in Marseille, shows a crew of glass blowers heaving, hauling and fanning great blobs of molten stuff in an effort to inflate a transparent balloon or dome. The effort of this heavy labour is real and the sense of accomplishment sincerely dashed when, at the very last moment, the delicate, hardened form is released from its blowpipe and crashes unceremoniously through the hands of a worker to the ground.

Taking Moulène at his word, it could be said that his objects play on the presence of labour – as records of the manual or digital transformation of raw materials into commodities – while his wall images play on its representation. The initial title the artist conceived for his provocative, graphic series of nude portraits of sex workers, 'Filles d'Amsterdam' (Amsterdam Girls, 2005), was 'Workers with their Tools'. His 'Objets de grève' (Strike Objects, 1999–2000) provide meaningful access to French labour history, by compiling a photographic catalogue of the objects striking workers have made, sometimes with the support of trade unions, using their tools of production to express their demands to a broad public and even, occasionally, to

gain some income while off the job. Manufrance mail-order service workers, for instance, had the bottom of a frying pan imprinted with 'Justice, Liberty, Employment, Solidarity' to commemorate labour disputes in the 1980s (*La poêle des 17 de Manufrance*, Frying Pan for the Manufrance 17, 1999), while Lip factory workers created their own version of the Monopoly game board in 1976 (*Chomageopoly*, Unemploymentopoly, 1999).<sup>5</sup>



Jean-Luc Moulène, *Indexes*, 2016, concrete, 138 x 74 x 50 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

The co-existence of Moulène's photographs and objects interferes with critical drives for aesthetic coherence and narrative penchants for tidy artistic progressions. But it also reflects a particular understanding of artistic work, and work in general, in a changing world. By embracing both manual skills and digital technologies, individual and shared modes of production, Moulène's approach offers a compelling portrayal of the transformation of labour and its value in our time.

*Jean-Luc Moulène lives in Paris, France. He had a solo show earlier this year at Thomas Dane Gallery, London, UK. He has a major exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, from 19 October to 20 February 2017 and his work is included in the Taipei Biennial until 5 February 2017.*

Lead image: Jean-Luc Moulène, *La Vigie* (The Watchtower) (detail), 2004-11, installation view of 'ENDWARDS' at Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerp, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerp

1. Jean-Luc Moulène interview with François Piron, *Kaleidoscope*, issue 9, winter 2010, p.145
2. Ibid.
3. Moulène donated the collection of objects he photographed to the French state and they are housed at the Archives nationales du monde du travail (National Archives of the World of Labour) in Roubaix, France.

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