

Vera Möller

labland



## Artlab

Labland, the recent work of Vera Möller, presents a complex array of ideas and a gathering of diverse media. In this instance, photography is an apt vehicle for Möller's conceptual interests, for as a product of culture and reliant upon nature (namely light) for its creation, the photographic process eloquently articulates discursive contradictions. This is also partly due to the photograph's theoretical relationship to life and death and its filmic penchant towards invention and the fantastical. Such perennial conflicts find especial resonance in the imagery of Labland, an exhibition mainly composed of photographs of baby mice in an artificial and constructed environment. In Labland, Möller juxtaposes and toys with intersections between typically opposing domains such as nature and culture, natural phenomena and human construction, disarray and the order of patterning.

As a thematic reference point, Möller draws upon her background in biology, and her work explores the relationships between art, life and science. For instance, mice are banal, everyday garden creatures whose lives are considered expendable, both in the household where they are regarded as vermin and in the lab where rats/mice are used for a host of experimental scientific tests. Labland conveys these associations with implicit wit and a mischievous sensibility. Möller's images show mice in fantasy worlds of colour and shape. Such a setting operates to placate the description of mice as dirty pests. For in the photo-works the mice appear so small and vulnerable, and in various states of sleep and/or inactivity, that they become appealing — even cute — and, without doubt, this is a fascinating aspect of these works.

In this work the disposition of these animals is certainly ambiguous: Are they sleeping or are they dead? Are they digitally inserted or actual? Are these choreographed images? In fact the mice are not invented and there are no digital tricks apparent in the artist's method. Rather, Möller found the mice in her studio and they wandered around the top of her desk, where she photographed them clamouring over bits of sculpture or huddled together as one. It is difficult not to anthropomorphise these mice due to their tiny size. In one image, for instance,

a group of mice are bundled together, perhaps for warmth and companionship, suckling on the edge of a sculpture and imbuing it with odd maternal connotations, while in another image a single mouse precariously hovers as seemingly stranded, lost animal.

The sculptured painted objects and floorings in Möller's photographs (and gathered on the accompanying table which is a reconstruction of the artist's studio table) compose a 'landscape' of hybrid, striped and dotty forms where scale is unclear. The colourful patterning of these objects also suggests molecular forms where the microscopic is exaggerated. Often presented in groups, the surface of the objects begins to optically vibrate creating a dynamic tension, between the different colours, that ripples across the surface of the photographs and the objects. Blacks, whites and yellows bounce off each other. This is a deliberate ploy by the artist to adopt the techniques of camouflage or warning as found in nature where the colour of an animal can represent danger or can enable them to hide within their surroundings. In this way Möller's images contrast the drama of colour and shape with the ordinary and mundane. As bundles of soft and neutral-coloured form, the mice are visually set apart from their bright, playful and assembled surroundings. Furthermore, as the stripes and dots come together to visually play the eye around the image so that form almost becomes superfluous, the relative passivity of the mice emerges as a point of comparison, making a clear statement about the interpolations of art and nature.

The photo-works in Labland also refer to a tradition of still-life (nature morte) painting. Typical of the genre, Möller's images appear stylised, as there is a perceivable emphasis on placement and composition. However the vibrant colouring and patterning of the objects complicates this sense of design. Moreover, still-life painting typically engages with common inanimate subjects such as flowers, books, food and dead animals, and while Möller's photo-works do include mice, it is not clear if they are living or dead. These deliberately articulated tensions remain poised: dead or alive, designed or spontaneous.

The exhibition title gives a clue to the content as the different meanings and connotations of lab and land figuratively rub against one another in Möller's photographs. She adjoins and contrasts the meaning of these terms and so, when framing the images of Labland through the lens of the camera, she not only fuses 'lab' with 'land', in a metaphorical sense, but also culture with nature, the made with the found. In other words, her work comments on the specificities of these 'worlds' through their conjunction. In Möller's work these juxtapositions remain palpable yet shifting: as the eye moves, so too does the figurative, mutant 'landscape'. This is a discreet statement on the encroachment of biological developments upon what we understand to be human and natural. As biology shifts in accordance with technological gains, the associations of humans with what is 'natural' are set apart in an ever-widening gap.

Möller's images visually combine and contrast abstraction and representation; created and amalgamated forms with mice. Photography, with its extra-ordinary qualities, allows for an ease of such a cross-fertilisation of ideas. Larger than life and located in an artificial environment one could suggest the mice in these images are part of a type of art 'experiment': an art lab. As scientists experiment on lab mice, so Möller's Labland is a reference to the artist's process: the breeding ground of creativity in the artist's studio, and the humour of chance and experimentation.

Natasha Bullock  
May 2002

- 1 Roland Barthes discusses these ideas in 'Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography', trans. Richard Howard, Vintage, London, 2000 (1980 in French).
- 2 Notes from the artist, March 2002.
- 3 *ibid.*

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labland  
14.6. - 6.7.2002

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#### LIST OF WORKS

labland no. 1 - 9  
2002  
76 x 102 cm each

prototype graveyard  
1999 - 2002  
objects: modelling material, acrylic paint  
glass plates, perspex, MDFmasonite, wood  
lab table: welded steel stands, MDF  
(approx. 180 x 180 x 90 cm)  
dimensions variable

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2002

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**ARTS  
VICTORIA**



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