

# COLLECTOR DAILY

## Awoiska van der Molen, *The Living Mountain*

By [Loring Knoblauch](#) / In [Photobooks](#) / August 6, 2020

**JTF (just the facts):** Published in 2020 by Fw:Books ([here](#)). Softcover, 24×29 cm, 48 pages on greyback paper, 16 pages on IBO (Japanese bound, black inside), with 16 black and white reproductions and portions of a musical score by Thomas Larcher. Aside from a short introduction, there are no texts or essays included. Design by Hans Gremmen. (Cover and spread shots below.)



**Comments/Context:** The Dutch photographer Awoiska van der Molen has chosen an artistic path that few could have predicted would end in durable success. In the midst of a 21st century photography world enamored with digital technologies, conceptual strategies, and identity politics, she has chosen to make serene black and white landscape photographs using analog methods. Those artists that take such paths are usually the risk avoiders, who want to follow in the footsteps of past masters and make work that looks like that which has already been celebrated. However well crafted these new pictures might be, they can usually be passed over as derivative, or as simply lacking a distinctive artistic voice.

But van der Molen has stepped beyond this safe predictability and found a way to chart her own course through the choppy waters of contemporary photography. Her works challenge the classic landscape canon of grandiose majesty and overt natural romance, while still venerating the traditions of crisp tonal control and exquisite print execution. In the past decade, she has produced imagery that feels deliberately indeterminate and open-ended, with dark photographs of mountains and forests that don't soar and project, but that embrace a more measured and restrained style that allows for wide ranging emotional interpretation. In the process, van der Molen has created a space for herself that feels surprisingly unique, offering viewers pictures that both revel in tactile subtlety and resist easy messages.

Following up on her earlier photobook projects *Sequester* (from 2014) and *Blanco* (from 2017), *The Living Mountain* is an artistic collaboration with the composer Thomas Larcher. Van der Molen traveled to the Austrian Alps (Larcher's native home) to make photographs of the mountains there, Larcher composed a new piece based on those photographs, and the resulting photobook connects the pictures and Larcher's handwritten score into one visual experience.

Music is, by definition, a one direction, from-the-beginning-to-the-end kind of medium, so it seems appropriate to consider van der Molen's photographs with a similar attention to sequence – this way we can read the flow as a progression, and mark changes in tone and mood as the pictures pass from one to another, just as the music would if we could hear it. The cover of *The Living Mountain* is an upward view of snowy peaks and the tops of evergreens, as seen from an enveloping darkness below – it's a slow moody start to the book, leaving us with the impression that the mountain is asleep or just waking up. As we keep climbing through the darkness, clouds roll in, silhouetting the trees and obscuring our view of the mysterious peaks above. When the sun comes out and burns off the mist, we start to get a better sense of our surroundings, with light bathing the valley, exposing a gentle waterfall cutting through the dense forest. This is the first photograph where we see van der Molen's nuanced control of light and texture, and the following images pull in closer to pay attention to the needled branches of a tree above us and the lichen stained face of a large boulder. As we continue to hike, van der Molen plays with contrasts, matching a craggy rock face with delicate trees, the highlights and shadows of a cluster of liling vertical evergreens reaching upward, and the lights and darks of the intricate facets of jumbled rock.

In the middle of the photobook, pages from Larcher's musical score have been bound into the flow, on thin sheets of Japanese folded paper with black inside to prevent too much transparency. Following van der Molen's textural studies, Larcher's meticulous notes and marks feel similarly detailed, and the movement through the staves has its own formal architecture, creating layers of repeated lines and mounded arcs of connected notes. The photographs from the first half of the book seem to move upward, with small detours of attention to flourishes of rock and leaf, and Larcher's composition appears to echo some of that same diagrammatic rhythm and flow, like a slowly building crescendo.

When we return to the photographs, van der Molen continues the ascent through the feathery vertical stripes of forest, eventually emerging above the tree line, where snow covers the land and rocky peaks jut into the sky. Bright vistas shimmer in whiteness, with triangular mountain forms repeating across the horizon line. She then looks down to the surface of the frozen ground, where drifts of smooth white snow are interrupted by small black outcroppings, not unlike Larcher's notes on the page. We then begin our descent, back through rock slabs, angled layers of stone, and more vertical trees decorated with spiky linear branches. Van der Molen ends the journey with another subdued look upward, with mist delicately enshrouding the undulating hills. In a sense, she's brought us up and down, both physically and emotionally.

The design of *The Living Mountain* is appropriately understated, but also lushly tactile and thoughtful, creating a strong coherent match between the content and the delivery. The ample pages of the book are made from thick almost cardstock paper which is coated and white on one side, uncoated and grey on the other. These sheets are then bound together in alternating orientations, creating full spreads of white or grey, atop which van der Molen's photographs are printed. The two surfaces have different characteristics when paired with the images – the white backdrop produces a shiny bright effect, while the matte grey mutes the tones and softens the mood. By moving back and forth, and smartly pairing the images with the papers, van der Molen creates a gentle rhythmic effect, which highlights her mastery of tones and textures. The addition of the pages of Larcher's score echoes and amplifies this abstraction, while mirroring the up and down movement of the journey through the mountains. Seen together, *The Living Mountain* is a tightly and elegantly linked package, simplifying the communication down to its essence.

It isn't easy to find new artistic space to explore within the existing genre of black and white landscape photography, but van der Molen has done just that with her deliberate approach. Between the musical sequencing and the quiet poetic precision of the photographs, *The Living Mountain* further reinforces van der Molen's position as a thoughtful re-inventor, taking scenes we think we've seen before and finding new approaches to discovering their hidden nuances.

**Collector's POV:** Awoiska van der Molen is represented by Annet Gelink Gallery in Amsterdam ([here](#)). Her work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.