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Photo by Paul Pagk

Mondrian's lonely, nondescript headstone

Remembered at MOMA, forgotten at the cemetery
Two NY artists track down the grave of Piet Mondrian

BY STEPHANIE BUHMANN

Between 1942 and 1943, Piet Mondrian painted one of his most famous works: "Broadway Boogie Woogie." It was his homage to New York City, where he saw his passion for the dynamics of modern life realized. American Jazz, and traffic infiltrating the urban landscape in a way that was reminiscent of his painted grids, prompted him to rethink his signature style.

In New York, he broke away from his more austere patterns of black lines on white ground and replaced them with colored bands. On a postcard from 1943, addressed to James Johnson Sweeney (the curator for the Museum of Modern Art at the time), Mondrian wrote: "Only now, I become conscious that my work in black, white, and little color planes has been merely 'drawing' in oil color...In painting, however, the lines are absorbed by the color planes." "Broadway Boogie Woogie" features a yellow grid on white ground, which is rhythmically intersected with red, blue, and grey elements. It is a reflection of the syncopated beat found in boogie-woogie and the blinking lights that characterized Broadway then as much as today. With its radical use of abstraction, "Broadway Boogie Woogie" would become a landmark within Mondrian's oeuvre. It also became a tribute to the last chapter of his life — the New York years.

In September 1938, Mondrian, who had been based in Paris, left the city just before the Nazis' invasion and moved to London. After the invasion of his native The Netherlands and the fall of Paris in 1940, he headed further West to New York City. On borrowed money, he arrived in New York in October. Local artist Harry Holtzman, whose own work was strongly influenced by Mondrian, sponsored Mondrian's immigration to the United States, paid for his apartment and studio, and introduced him to his circle of friends. In return, Mondrian made Holtzman the sole heir to his estate. Optimistic for the future, Mondrian began working on several new paintings, such as "Victory Boogie Woogie." Begun in 1942, it which remained unfinished as he rather suddenly succumbed to pneumonia on February 1, 1944 at the age of 71.

Though already considered one of the leading abstract artists by his contemporaries, Mondrian's critical acclaim never translated into prosperity. His works might have significantly shaped the course of art history, but they nevertheless remained hard to sell. As an idealist, Mondrian stayed true to his vision and pursued an art that could offer a pure and spiritual experience; but in the end, he died in poverty and solitude. This is surprising when considering that the memorial service held two days later at the Universal Chapel on Lexington Avenue and 52nd Street was very well attended. Among the attendees were American artists such as Alexander Calder and Robert Motherwell, as well as European expatriate artists — including Alexander Archipenko, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, and Fernand Leger.

An even bigger surprise — even to those who know that Mondrian spent the last three-and-a-half years of his life in New York — should be that the famous Dutch painter was buried in Brooklyn. Last month, two New York based artists and friends, the abstract British painter Paul Pagk and the internationally acclaimed sculptor Leonardo Drew, made it their mission to search for Mondrian's grave in. It was after Pagk visited Drew's new studio in Cypress Hills that both men decided on their quest. Pagk recalls: "I went out to see Leonardo without any intention of seeing Piet Mondrian's grave let alone the one of Harry Houdini, which is in the nearby Machpelah Cemetery. Two magicians: Harry Houdini freed his body from chains and strait jackets, and Piet Mondrian freed minds through paint."

Even with map in hand, it proved a difficult task to locate what Drew described as "the final resting place of one of our very own, art god Piet Mondrian." He remembers: "It was hot and we began to realize as we walked up and down the rolling hills of tombstones that this could take a while. So we thumbed a ride (from within the cemetery believe it or not) from another lost soul. After getting him thoroughly lost, we got closer to our goal..." Pagk remembers that the girl at the front desk of the cemetery said that Mondrian was buried in a "very old part of the cemetery," adding: "Old I thought; 1944 isn't that old, maybe she meant poor?"

Labeled number 1191, on plot block 51, Mondrian's grave turned out to be marked by a bland headstone. It was one among many identical ones, which are arranged in long rows. "It certainly wasn't very exuberant," Pagk explains. "Every stone was the same in rows similar to his paintings, organized in a grid. All that there was inscribed was 'Piet Mondrian 1872 – 1944.' No paint brushes were left for him, nothing, not even a tube of lead white or lamb black. Missing were also the primary colors — no one came."

While Mondrian himself might have appreciated the grid-like arrangement of the gravestones and the simplicity of this section, Pagk and Drew found themselves awed by the insignificance of the graveside. One cannot help but wonder if Mondrian was to be buried in The Netherlands or Paris, would his grave be more significant? Pagk sums it up: "Thousands pass in front of his paintings at MOMA and here, no one. If you didn't know, who Piet Mondrian was, you certainly wouldn't pay much attention to this specific headstone. It's too plain." But there is something well worth discovering here. Pagk explains: What really struck me here were his dates. When one thinks about Piet Mondrian's work, one thinks of his signature style — which came about between the late 1910s and 1921. That means he was already 48. Beautiful!!!"

It is depressing to know that the grave of one of the most important artists of the 20th Century has almost vanished into anonymity — but it should be encouraging that greatness is not necessarily something that needs to be achieved as a younger adult.