

# PETER MILTON



## Notes on: *Points of Departure I: Mary's Turn*

The last two drawings bring us up to the present. *Garden with Henry*, 1992, is the ink-on-Mylar study for the original etching/engraving to accompany the deluxe edition of the *Aspern Papers* portfolio.

The final drawing, *Mary's Turn*, 1993, also ink on Mylar, is intended as a study for the first of two prints involving Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas. The two artists had formed a close relationship for a decade, which eventually ran aground on the shoals of Degas's vituperative personality. And certainly Cassatt's goodwill from the start must have been tested by Degas's unrepentant chauvinism toward women.

In *Mary's Turn* Cassatt and Degas are playing billiards. It is now Mary's turn and she is about to run the table, to the intense annoyance of Degas, who is standing behind

her, looking on. She has such a magic touch, the balls are beginning to float. On the wall behind Cassatt and Degas are several of their paintings. A shadowy version of Degas's silhouette of Cassatt from *At the Louvre* has left its image and has entered another Degas, *Dancers Practicing at the Barre*. Watching the billiard game is a cast of characters from various Cassatt paintings, chief among them the girl from her *Girl Arranging Her Hair* (1886). This canvas was painted by Cassatt as her response to Degas's observation to her one day that women should not express opinions about style because they had no idea what style was. Cassatt stormed to her studio and produced *Girl Arranging Her Hair* which, when it hung in the eighth and last Impressionist Exhibition, caused Degas to stop in his tracks and exclaim, "What style!" Then he acquired it.

The original taking-off point for *Mary's Turn* was a 1908 Gertrude Kasebier photograph of a billiard game. A figure of a woman is lining up a billiard shot, while the figure of a man, bathed in light, stands dreaming in a doorway. I was first attracted to the image by its mysterious light, but it was the drama of the purposeful woman and the pensive man that soon established the direction *Mary's Turn* was to take. It took me a long time to give an identity to the man in the doorway: first I thought I would turn him into Paul Durand-Ruel, who was both Degas's and Cassatt's dealer—but I could find no portrait of him. Finally a much more significant and sadly appropriate figure suggested itself in the person of Ludovic Halévy, librettist to Offenbach and of Bizet's *Carmen*. He and his entire family were very close to Degas for most of his life. But the Halévys came from a Jewish background, and Degas's fanatic intolerance during the Dreyfus affair destroyed that relationship along with many others.

In an 1879 painting, Degas poses Halévy with an umbrella in a composition that directly prefigures *In the Louvre* (done later the same year). It seemed to me that Ludovic Halévy and Mary Cassatt could stand for the twin targets of Degas's two worst impulses: his lifelong misogyny and his curiously arbitrary eruptions of anti-Semitism. Both traits had an almost tragic effect on his later years, dividing him from the intellectual community of his world and isolating him almost as thoroughly as his encroaching blindness.

But, though these stresses of character—and particularly Degas's chauvinism—are

central to *Mary's Turn*, they are only the framework on which to raise their antithesis: a celebration of the delights and surprises of art. I have hoped, I suppose, to suggest a world transfigured by the artist, in which accomplishment is everything: where the painted portrait rematerializes in the world of its painter, and in which a billiard game is coaxed into an exercise in levitation by the sure touch of Mary Cassatt.

I found *Mary's Turn* an exhilarating experience. I think it owes its fluency to *The Aspern Papers* and to the momentum the drawings for that portfolio initiated. *The Aspern Papers* was a kind of culmination for me. I worked at extracting as many highly developed images as I could from a consistent source and point of view, and rather than struggling with the impacted process that is my usual mode, I found that more images kept turning up in my mind, and that things came to a halt only when I hit the publisher's deadline.

As with the *Stolen Moments* series, I discovered that instead of poring over the intricacies of a single image for months, I could roam freely. For me, drawing has become the most immediate and direct translation of what I find in the depths and shoals of my preoccupations. My prints—which after all comprise the bulk of my work—involve a multiplicity of complex techniques that I trust give them their own validity and richness. These processes interest me because their very convolutedness works mysteriously and magically to bring me to their ultimate equilibrium. Still, there is no question that technique can keep one from immediacy, and prints are, by their nature, once removed from the artist's hand. In a sense, they derive their very strength from the surprises that lurk in complexity. But sometimes I sense a certain loss.

My favorite stage in making prints is when I am hunched over the plate and working directly into the metal. I get great satisfaction from the immediacy of engraving—a process very similar to drawing. In drawings I return to the primacy of touch.

Not infrequently I wish I were still a painter with a ten-foot canvas in front of me, and I sometimes regret that because I am primarily a printmaker I live necessarily outside the critically sanctioned center of the contemporary establishment. But this has proved in a great many ways to be a blessing; at least it has reinforced my move inward, which is, after all, not the worst place for an artist to be.