

PETER MILTON

Some Thoughts on Peter Milton and Digital Printmaking

by Robert Flynn Johnson

"Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not." George Bernard Shaw

Despite the often historical, artistic, and literary references in his work, Peter Milton has always been a thoroughly forward looking, modern, and technologically astute practitioner of his art, and his most recent prints, which embrace digitally produced imagery, have sent him in another new and perhaps unexpected direction. This has raised both enthusiasm and some consternation among collectors who have followed the evolution his work for half a century. It is a natural human quality to expect the reassurance of predictability in someone or something we know and admire. For artists who are fully engaged in the era in which they live, this presents a challenge when they wish to venture into new subject matter, styles, or technologies. This of course is a dilemma only for an audience which is already aware of an artist's early work and which supports that work; who often find it hard to respect the right of the artist to evolve and explore his creativity, wherever that may lead. An example might be Bob Dylan whose acoustically performed socially conscious folk songs became hugely popular among young people in the early 1960's. then he radically changed his style and chose to perform with an electric guitar at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, he was greeted with shock, boos and outrage. His public, unable to appreciate and respond to his creative evolution, wanted the "old" Dylan back: until, with passing time his talent eventually prevailed and he won them back.

Closer to the reaction to Peter Milton's use of digital technology, perhaps, is the invention of photography which in the nineteenth century was initially seen by artists as a catastrophe: something to be feared and resisted as a threat to their livelihood. In

time, Delacroix, Manet, Degas, Cezanne, Eakins and other enlightened artists of the nineteenth century seamlessly incorporated photographic imagery into their work, as did twentieth century artists like Picasso, Bacon, Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol. This chronology of resentment and resistance at the outset followed by a grudging acceptance which eventually led to outright enthusiasm is a story which can be told of countless artists who when they advanced their work in a new direction at first confounded their former supporters.

So it now is with Peter Milton. There has been some polite yet distinct distress among some of Milton's admirers concerning his foray into the field of digital technology in the creation of his recent graphic work. I would ask them what can be wrong with allowing an artist to experiment and develop new ways to express himself? Milton has always pushed against the boundaries of tradition in his work. As far back as 1971, he solved the challenge of creating the 21 etchings in a timely manner to illustrate Henry James's *The Jolly Corner* by altering his customary manner of printmaking. He abandoned drawing directly on the plate with a sugar lift ground and began working on Mylar sheets that could be transferred to light sensitive plates. By this method he created a whole new way of layering imagery into his work. There was little or no critical resistance at the time, and this innovation became Milton's preferred method of printmaking for nearly four decades until in 2007 the advent of digital technology caught his eye and sparked his imagination.

His present digitally produced prints [whether in limited editions printed on paper or presented on film in light boxes] still demand as much time to conceive, create, alter, revise, and finish as his earlier works. The digital format is not some short cut. On the contrary, it has presented Milton with a series of new visual challenges that he relishes taking on in order to keep his art moving forward. Yes, the result may be less rich and textural than his etched work but it is also more luminous and three dimensional. For those who know and admire Milton's earlier work, it might take some time to become accustomed to this unfamiliar new direction in his art. So many artists, when they reach the level of critical regard that Milton has achieved, put their careers into automatic

pilot not so much creating new art as manufacturing a predictable product. This will never happen with Peter Milton. In his sixth decade as an artist, Milton continues to reinvent himself. Through his admirable inability to resist the fascination of new technology he challenges himself and his audience, and pushes his art to another level of visual experience.

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