

PETER MILTON

The following text first appeared in *Peter Milton: Prints and Drawings*, an exhibition catalog published by Jamie Szoke Gallery, New York, NY, 1984.



MILTON

Peter Milton:
Prints and Drawings

*Introduction by Theodore F. Wolff
Art Critic for The Christian Science Monitor*

Organized by Jamie Szoke Gallery, New York

Jamie Szoke Gallery
164 Mercer Street
New York, New York 10012
October 9-November 5, 1984

Above: Family Reunion: Interiors I (detail)
Light-sensitive-ground etching, and engraving
19³/₄ x 35 inches

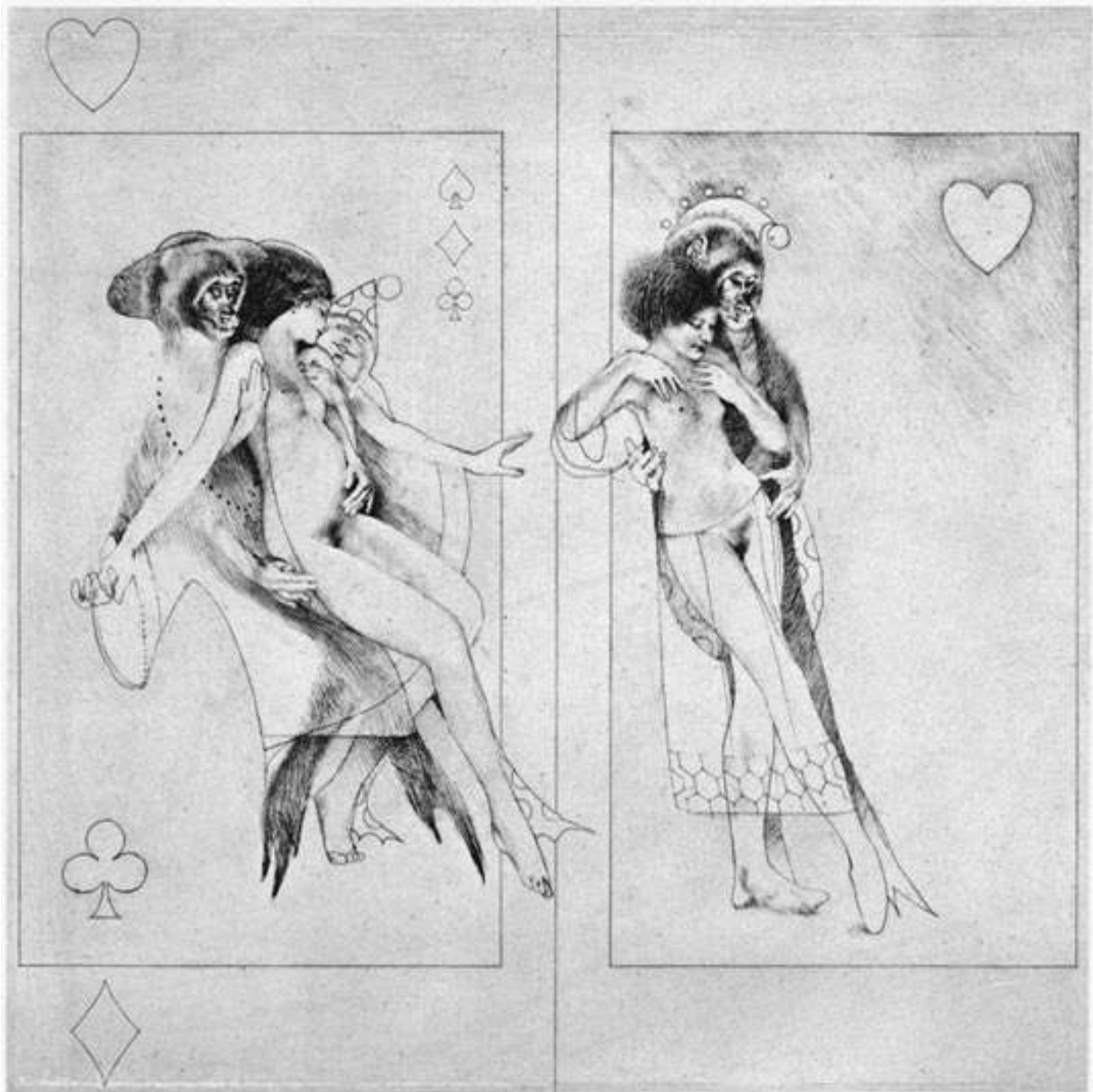
Measurements are in inches, height before width;
the prints are measured from the plate marks, and the
drawings are the size of the sheet.

Copyright © 1984
John Szoke Graphics, Inc.
164 Mercer Street
New York, New York 10012
212 219-8300

Catalog Price \$10.00

Anyone who genuinely loves prints - I mean anyone as devoted to the craft of printmaking itself as to the imagery obtained from any of the graphic processes - must have a special affection for those printmakers whose very lives seem distilled into what can be gouged, bitten, scratched or drawn on wood, copper, zinc or stone: artists like Jacques Callot, Hercules Seghers, Giovanni Piranesi, Rodolphe Bresdin, Charles Meryon, Muirhead Bone and Käthe Kollwitz, who were able to say everything they wanted without recourse to color, fancy brushwork, or wall-size canvases.

Peter Milton is an American printmaker particularly blessed with just the kind of sensibility which I suspect places him among this special band of graphic artists. His prints, which are occasionally simple and lyrical, but more often complex and



Dancing Lesson, 1980
Pencil on drafting film
8½ x 10

imaginatively provocative, have earned him a distinguished reputation in contemporary American art, and, like Callot's *Miseries of War*, Bresdin's *The Good Samaritan* or Kollwitz's *The Call of Death*, are works which no painter could have conceived or executed, for they are prints first, last and foremost.

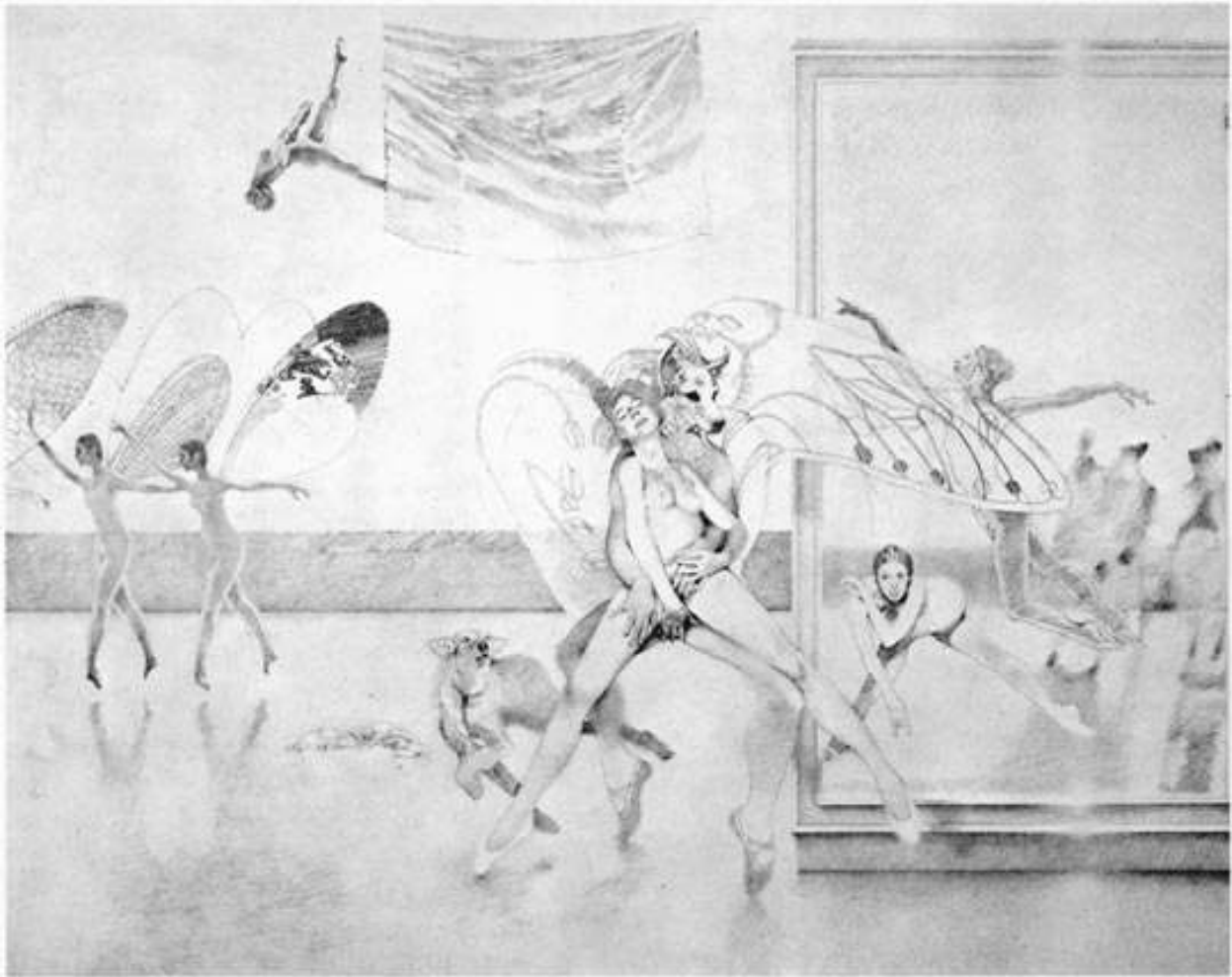
But, despite this special kind of graphic sensibility, Milton is also one of the relatively few American artists recently who has not only utilized drawing as a major tool in the production of his other work, but who has also pursued the art of drawing as an end in itself. In fact, it comes as something of a surprise in this day and age to discover that a serious artist of stature would produce complex, extraordinarily elegant and exquisitely crafted drawings that exist both as tools for the working out of formal and thematic ideas, and as the harvestings, the depositories, of a remarkably fertile, if somewhat idiosyncratic and exotic creative imagination.

Milton's drawings are so complex, personal, concentrated and refined that we must go back to the Pre-Raphaelites, the hauntingly erotic etchings of Max Klinger, Dali's early Surrealist drawings and Arshile Gorky's "abstract" landscape studies of the mid-1940's for parallels and correspondences. And even then we will not be prepared for the specific imagery, nor for the ambiguities inherent in Milton's complex and original approach to drawing and printmaking.

They are ambiguities which exist both in the method and the effect of his work: in his original and provocative fusion of Baroque spatial and curvilinear compositional elements, for instance; in the precisely calculated interplay between pure whites and an infinite number of gradations of subtle greys. In the imagery, which depends both upon acute observation and photography for its veracity and effectiveness, and which suggests a world where nothing is altogether logical or reasonable, and yet one where everything fits naturally and inevitably into its precisely appointed place.

Indeed, what at first appears to be merely delicate and lyrical in Milton's drawings often becomes a brilliantly orchestrated visual puzzle, full of apparent contradictions and ambiguities, dreamlike ambivalences, erotic implications, and thinly veiled references to hidden fancies and desires. The viewer comes upon such unexpected things as startlingly lovely and provocative nudes, naughty Victorian ladies, ballet dancers leaping in air, miniature portrait heads more real than any photograph, astonishingly detailed architectural fragments, and animals about to leap forward beyond the picture plane. And yet, despite such inconsistencies, why do these drawings seem so serene and all-of-a-piece? How do they manage to project such an aura of formal and thematic inevitability?

The answer is that Milton, who as a brilliant craftsman can transform myriads of previously unrelated images, fragments and details into interlocking and sensitively executed compositions, is also an imaginative fashioner of pictorial fairy-tales, myths and visual enchantments. He has the magician's and the master storyteller's knack for weaving spells, for making the incongruous seem altogether congruous. In this, his works resemble *Alice in Wonderland* more than they do the masterpieces of Surrealism, and he himself comes closer to Balthus than to Dali, Ernst or Tanguy.



Stolen Moments, 1980
Pencil on drafting film
12 x 15

As a matter of fact, I suspect that Alice would feel at home in Milton's world, though she would undoubtedly miss the wonderful grotesques she met in Lewis Carroll's book, and feel more than a little shocked by the erotic goings-on in *Stolen Moments* and *Friends*. But what would put her at her ease are the settings, the mood, and the aura of disquietude that characterizes so much of Milton's work.

That aura is subtle but pervasive: merely hinted at in *The Jolly Corner* suite, shrewdly manipulated in *Splash '81*, pushed to almost Pre-Raphaelite extremes in the 1979 *Study for Les Belles et Ia Bête II*. Very much in evidence in all of Milton's art, the atmosphere of uneasiness is, in fact, often its real subject and theme.

Its cogency derives from his shrewd mixing of banal and exotic subjects, his juxtaposition of ornate design elements and a faithfully delineated "reality" and the uncanny virtuosity of his performance on the surfaces upon which he draws. In his hands, the whiteness of paper or the slight translucency of drafting film become light and atmosphere themselves. The entire universe is at his disposal: the whiteness of paper can become the sun, the moon, or the stage upon which an infinite variety of



Splash, 1981
Pencil on drafting film
12 x 30

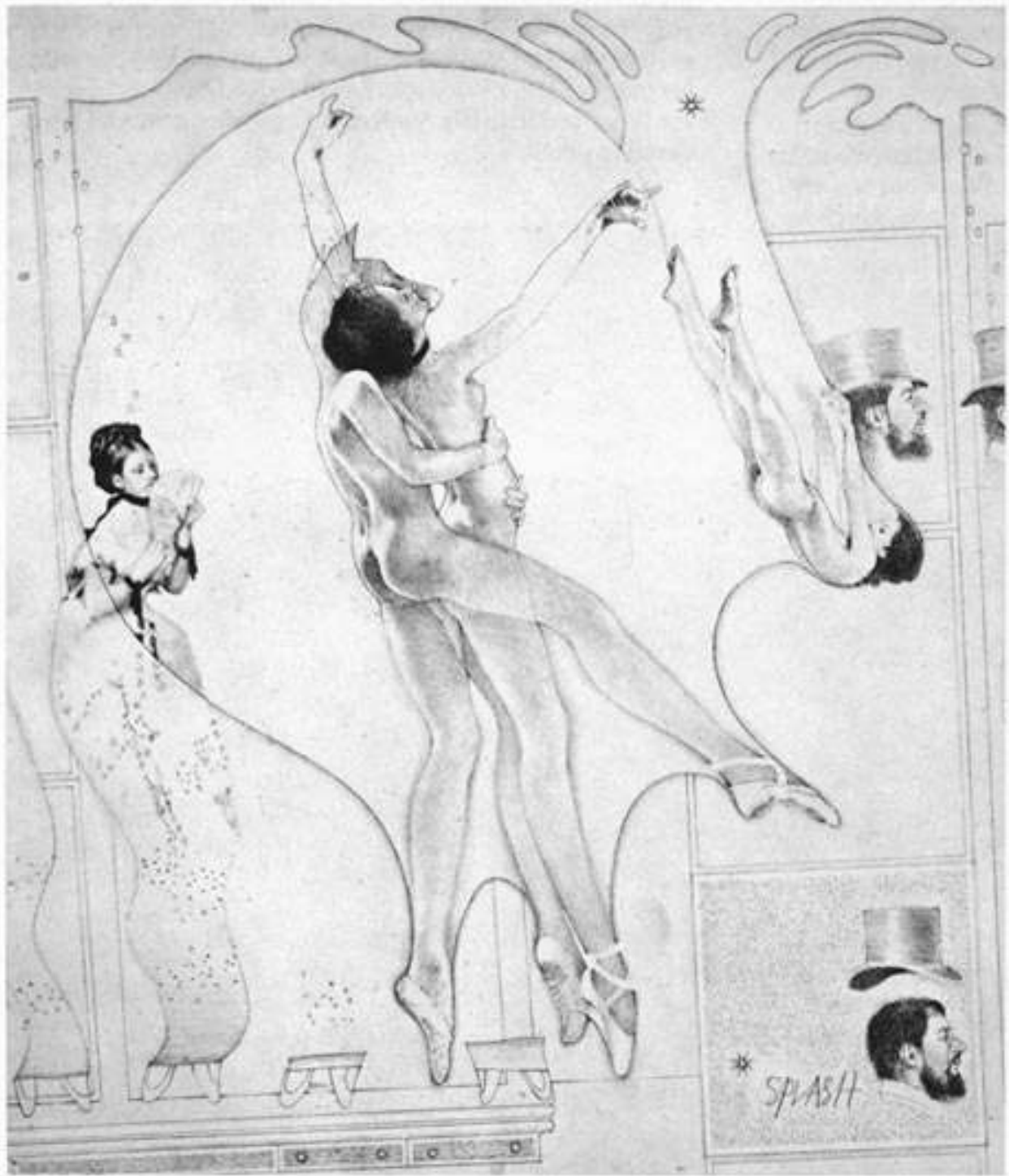
subtle greys or one or two harsh blacks do his bidding. His larger and more complex drawings, in fact, are veritable symphonies of whites, which give form to fascinating personages and complex structures, and illuminate seemingly unimportant areas of the composition. Even his simplest drawings receive a great deal of their conviction from his sensitive manipulation of the full dramatic range from pure white to absolute black.

This extraordinarily precise control over the tonal range of his drawings and prints permits Milton to modulate and vary his surfaces, so that he can either enchant the viewer's eye over and over again in a single piece of work, or engage his imagination over a protracted period of time, to read the work sequentially from element to element, and from detail to detail.

Unlike drawings by Matisse or Klee, which has an immediate effect, the impact of these drawings is cumulative. His 1981 pencil drawing, *Splash '81*, is a good case in point. It offers itself at first glance as an unfinished study of a rather professorial man who is flanked by two nude ladies and holding a monkey. A closer study reveals a rather complex spoof: the young girls have obviously undressed to tease the man and to flaunt their sexuality; behind them, glimpsed through the plate-glass of a huge aquarium, several other nudes swim in a variety of suggestive poses. The room in which the professor and his "students" are sitting seems to be itself turning into an aquarium.

Deciphering the puzzle of a Milton drawing is typically a pleasurable experience. And *Splash '81*, which is neatly packed with interesting details, lovely linear movements, subtle tonal contrasts, and some intriguing line-to-mass contrapuntal effects, also offers the viewer a glimpse into the artist's mind and imagination. He has written, in fact, that the person holding the monkey is partly himself, partly a 1920's photograph of André Kertesz; and, although it reveals none of the secrets of its own creation, the drawing does invite us to an intimate participation with its creator's wit and humor.

But Milton is not an artist who wants or needs to share his inner thoughts and feelings



Splash, 1980
Pencil on drafting film
10 x 8½

by way of his art. His openness is always oblique, and it takes second place to larger questions and mysteries which confront him as he starts a fresh print or drawing.

And Milton's works, often uncharted, even random voyages of discovery and exploration, allow the viewer to partake both in the excitement of the search and in the

rewards of what is found; to share in the artist's own delight when formal solutions appear magically out of nowhere, or when aching empty spaces are suddenly brought to life by exotic images or witty details.

There are, for instance, the tiny, meticulously crafted images tucked away in odd corners, which, without making any logical sense, add a valuable note of poetic allusion and of charm to the work's totality. An image of the Muybridge photograph of a paralytic child walking on all fours appears almost invisibly in the lower right corner of *Daylilies*; a very small reproduction of a Rousseau painting turns up in the upper left corner of *Les Belles et la Bête II: Before the Hunt*; and a pair of miniscule kangaroos occupy almost no space at all in the lower left section of the same print.

That these devices are effective doesn't deter us from wondering why Milton chose these particular ones and why he placed them where he did. The answers, which are complex, varied and highly subjective, often, as Milton himself admits, represent "after the fact" explanations. He is very careful to indicate how mysterious his creative decisions often are, even to himself, and states that they "take place in an area not only unknowable, but not even seeable *until after the decision has already taken place*... . Then it can all seem wonderfully rational, after the fact, when one looks for the reason or justification for the decision. Since one can find a logical reason every time for a successful decision after it has been made, it is most easy to forget, even ignore, how mysterious were the workings that first produced it?" And in another context Milton writes, "I find my reward in the unexpected pleasure of a surprising and mysterious effect, when all the knowns have finally, magically combined, to produce a completely unknown, magical end?"

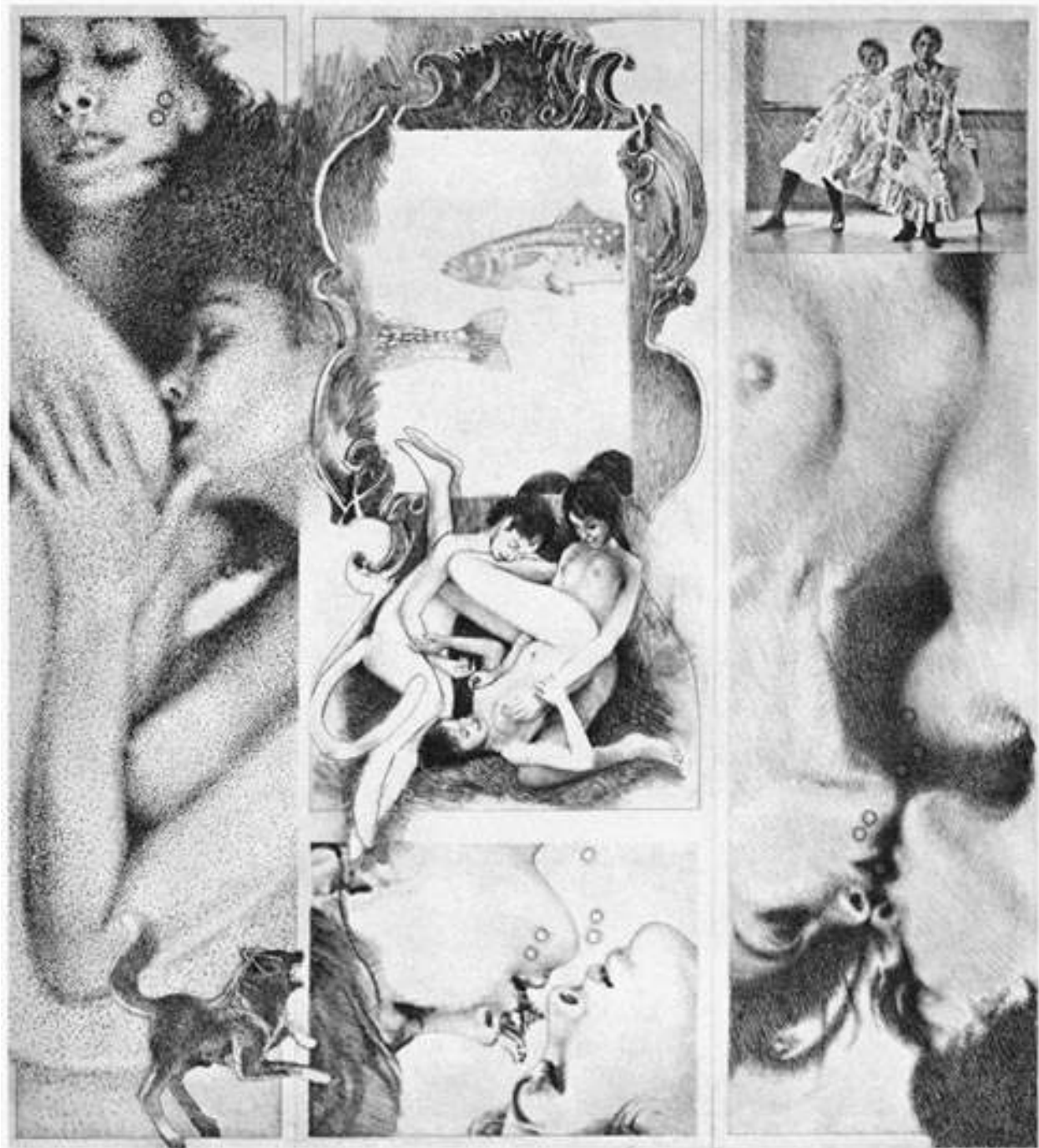
In this mysterious process, drawings serve several purposes: as ends in themselves; as



Interiors I: Family Reunion, 1984
Light-sensitive-ground etching, and engraving
Copper plate
20 x 36

preliminary probing devices for themes and formal ideas; as primary sources of imagery; as the first, tentative gropings toward an effective composition.

For Milton, in addition, they also serve as the first, ghostlike hints of what his prints will ultimately look like. And for all their beauty and importance, his drawings must still take second place to his prints, which, at least to date, represent the fullest and most complete expression of what he needs and wants to say and do. To compare his drawings and prints is to sense that the former represent a more youthful, playful, hedonistic



Friends, 1981
Pencil on drafting film
9 x 10

attitude toward life, while the latter represent a more considered evaluation - even in some instances a subtle judgment - on what life has taught him. The drawings, in short, seem rather amoral, quite pagan in fact, while the prints, even those that come across as somewhat naughty, project a subtle atmosphere of Victorian and New England morality and sensibility.



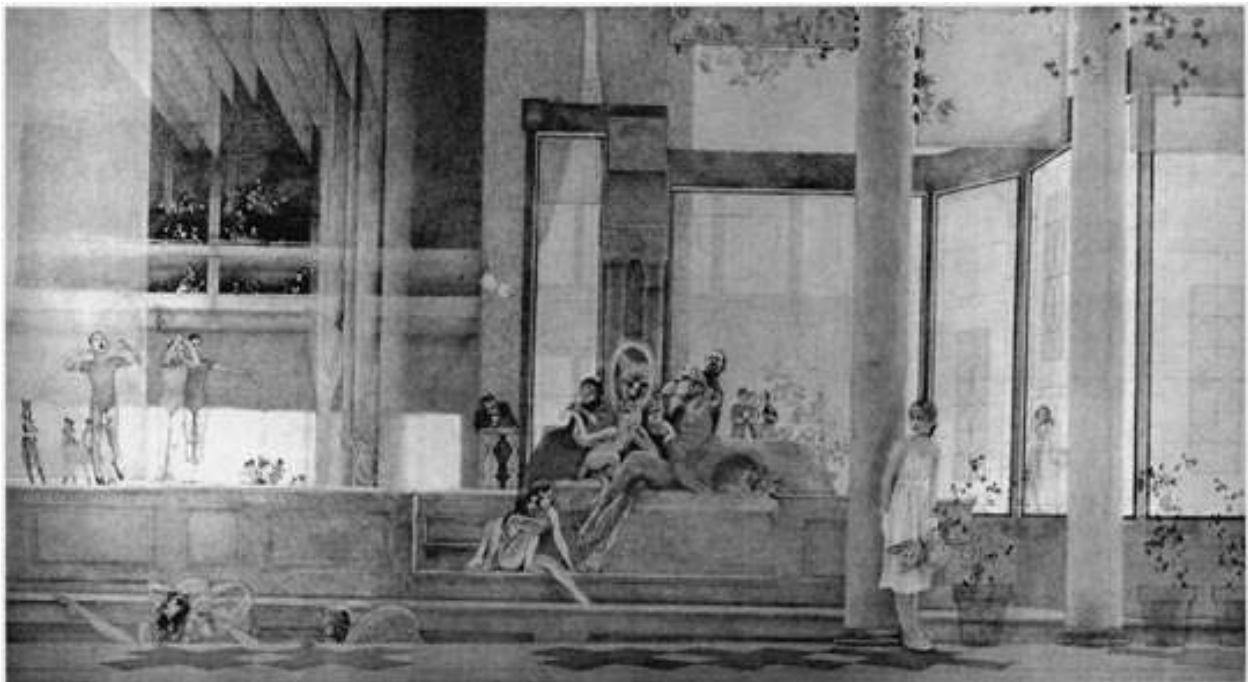
Les Belles et La Bête I: The Rehearsal, 1977
Light-sensitive-ground etching, and engraving
Copper plate
20 x 36

In this, the prints serve as the final step of a complex dialectical process in which Milton's free-spirited probings and imaginings are formally reconciled with larger and more insistent cultural and philosophical issues. It is, however, a somewhat uneasy reconciliation; witness the ambiguities and apparent contradictions, the overall atmosphere of disquietude with which his prints are permeated. As was also true of the creator of *Alice in Wonderland*, Milton manages to affect a successful but rather precarious truce between a childlike acceptance of free-wheeling impulse, and a more socially burdened concept of virtue. His world is filled with delightful and provocative images that can never be quite nailed down, never quite interpreted into words.

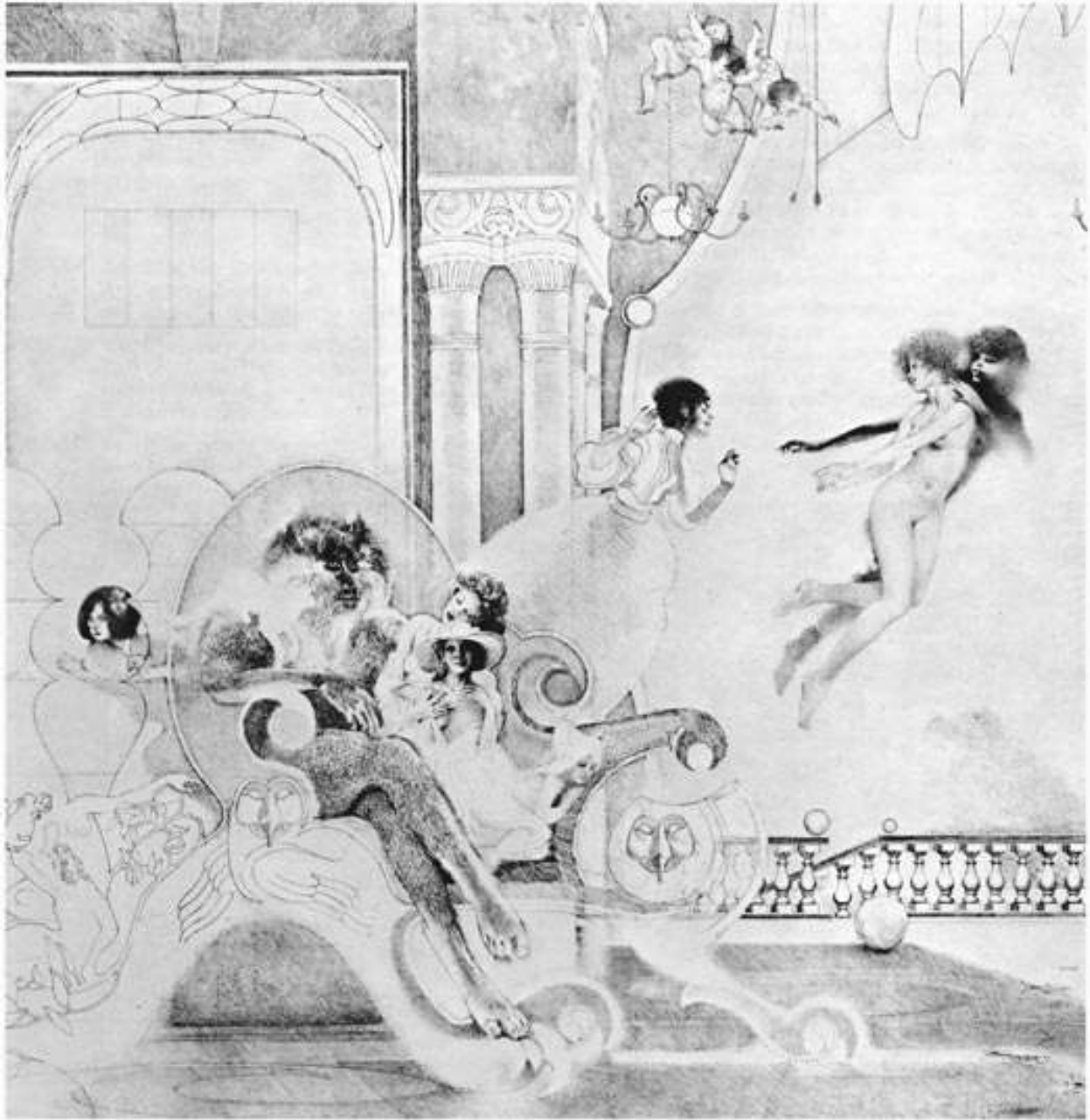
Personally, I prefer it that way. Because his imagery is kept so successfully and perpetually on edge, so eternally open to another and yet another interpretation or meaning, he provokes, challenges, charms, seduces, as he leads us through his art. And that is why his work will remain alive. The last thing he'll ever do is cause us to glance at his work and say, "Oh yes, that's what it's all about;" and then, like an already-read newspaper, toss it aside.



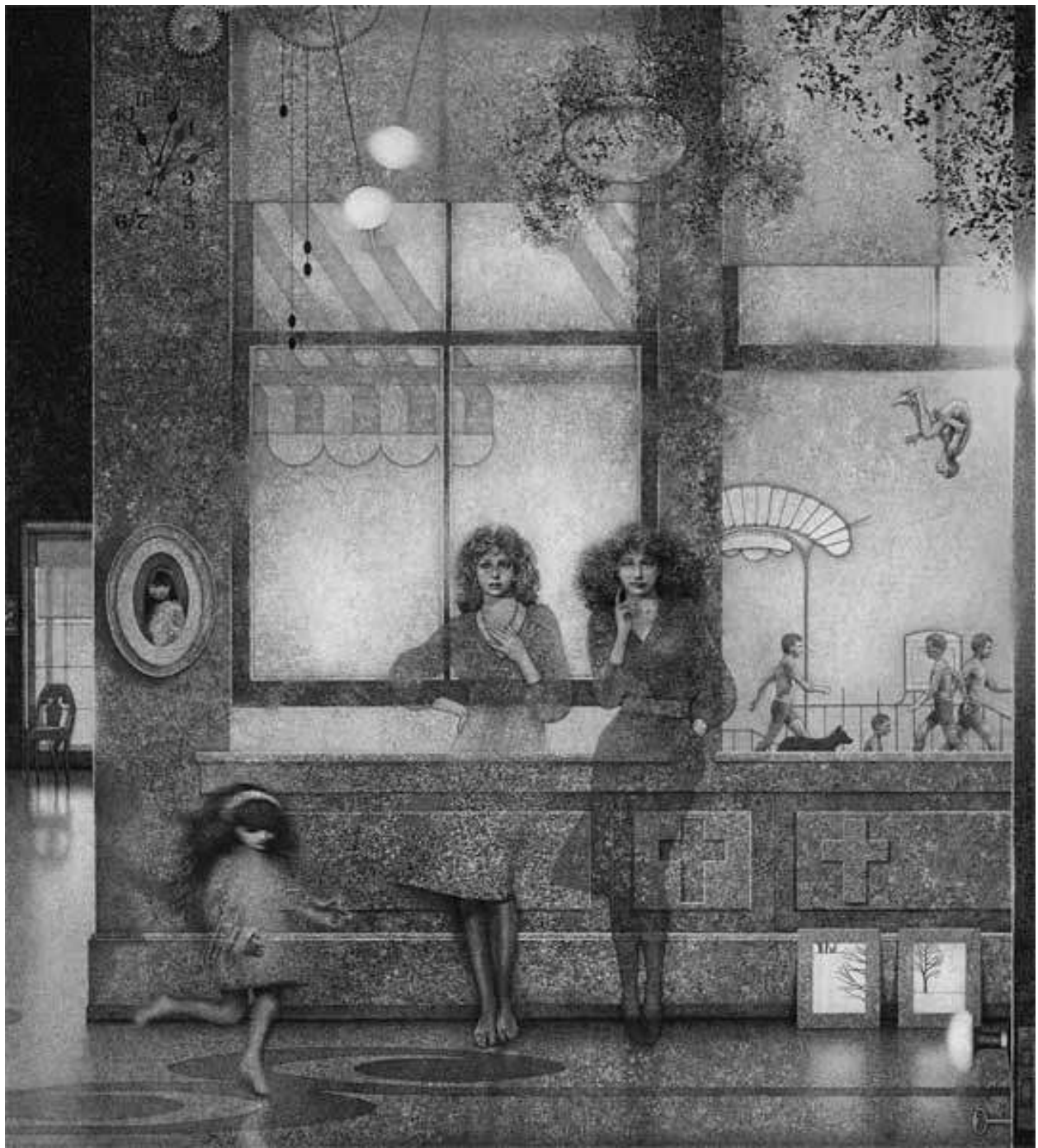
Les Belles et La Bête I: The Rehearsal, 1977
Light-sensitive-ground etching, and engraving
Copper plate
20 x 36



Study for Les Belles et La Bête III, 1982
Crayon and pencil on cronaflex



Study for Les Belles et La Bête II: Before the Hunt, 1977 (detail)
Pencil on drafting film



Above: Family Reunion: Interiors I (detail)
Light-sensitive-ground etching, and engraving
19³/₄ x 35 inches