PETER MILTON

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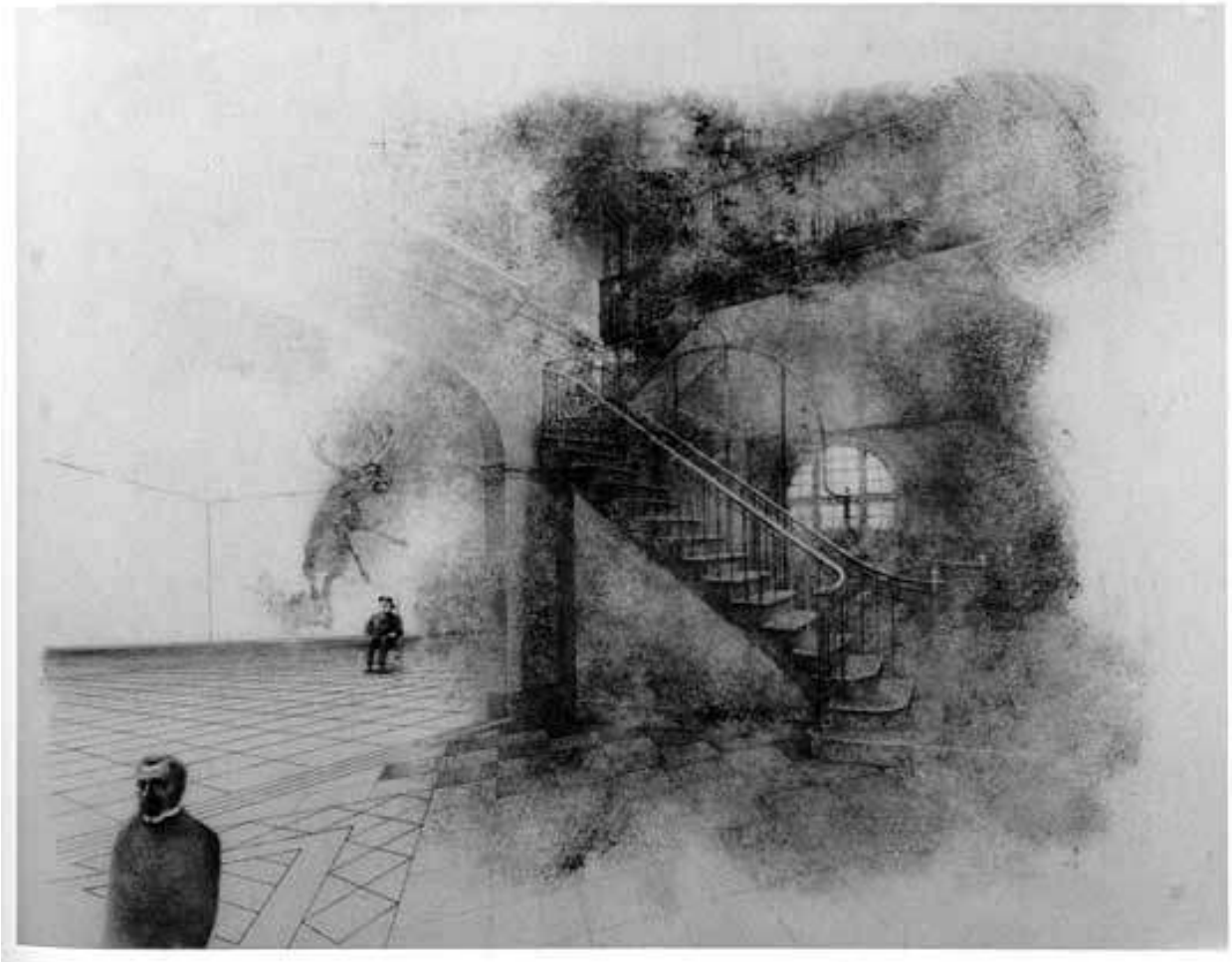


The Jolly Corner. Sequence II: Drawing #1, 1969, ink on Mylar.

Peter Milton

By Gene Baro

From the beginning of his professional life in 1961, Peter Milton has drawn almost exclusively for etching. The exceptions are three brush drawings, made when Milton finished graduate study at Yale University, and a number of bamboo pen drawings executed at about the same time. With the latter, the artist attempted to develop both a personal marking system independent of linear contour and a

description of form based upon thick and thin line variations. The stimulus was the reed pen drawings of Van Gogh.

At Yale, Milton etched eleven plates he considered worthy of retaining (Peter Milton: Complete Etchings 1960-1976, ed. Kneeland McNulty, Impressions Workshop, Boston, 1977, nos. 1-11). These lift-ground etchings were in his preferred medium. In this technique, the artist drew with brush directly on zinc plates, using a mixture of India ink and sugar. Milton's preoccupation was with short strokes, intrinsically interesting in shape and direction, that were deployed to stress their cumulative function as texture. After a drawing had been set down on the zinc plate, the artist coated the plate with the thinnest possible surface of hard ground; he then soaked the plate in hot water until it cooled. (In lift-ground etching, the cooled coated plate is hand rubbed until the portions treated with ink-sugar solution break free of the ground, revealing the drawing in reverse. In conventional practice, aquatint is usually laid down even before the hard ground, since the tiny marks will not hold the ink unless deeply etched or supported with aquatint. Milton's practice has been to etch the plate sufficiently to establish shape.) When the plate was cool, he laid down aquatint with an atomizer. Further etching continued the development of shape and aquatint tone concurrently. This method gave stronger body to the forms without sacrifice of tonal range.

Milton's etching method soon dictated changes in his drawing method. He worked to counteract, or at least to mitigate, the typical action of acid to widen marks as it bit them deeper by a further refining of his drawing. Greater precision and delicacy of draftsmanship provided better control of the etching process. Instead of fussing with the etching technique for more refined effects, Milton resorted to finer drawing. This was, in a way, a repudiation of what he had been taught at Yale during his graduate years: to avoid nicety of gesture.

Milton's development as a draftsman has been characterized by an increasingly obsessive concern with the refined stroke and with control, in the fullest possible sense of image making. His drawing has formed a dialogue with the technical possibilities and limitations of the etching medium. At the same time, he has simultaneously defined a concept of drawing centered in texture.

Les Belles et la Béte II: Before the Hunt, 1978, ink on Mylar.

Dissatisfaction with the action of acid has sometimes led Milton to use a burnisher to suppress mechanically or to weaken undesirable features of acid biting. Using the burin, he could then redraw directly or emphasize on the plate the particular qualities of draftsmanship that sustained his conception. These modifications—erasures and reinforcements of marks—altered textures and belonged as much to his drawing technique as to his etching process. Engraving — that is, direct drawing on metal—became more and more important in Milton's work, so that, by 1976, A Sky-Blue Life, a complicated plate, was at least half engraving.

The metal's resistance to the cutting edge of the burin makes engraving essentially a linear medium, which Milton found to be particularly suitable for reinforcement and clarification. Engraving did not serve primarily or easily, the artist's demand for textural subtlety. Neither did aquatint, which is basically a toning process and, according to the artist, "lacking in vigor."

Milton never made preliminary drawings for his etching plates; his draftsmanship was addressed immediately to the plate. Drawing on paper interested him scarcely at all, for paper, however smooth, interposed a texture of its own that he rejected. Drawing for him is a slow process, and the problem of overcoming the texture

of the paper holds no attraction.

The artist was commissioned by the Aquarius Press in 1969 to provide etchings for the Henry James story The Jolly Corner. The project called for twelve images (eventually there were twenty-one), and Milton's concern with the complexity of the undertaking and with his characteristically slow-paced production led him to think of a single drawing from which multiple images might develop. He was beguiled by cinema at the time, and the idea of a drawing that evolved in stages, through a number of drawings, toward one resolution was also in his mind. The stimuli coalesced when he began to draw in an ink-sugar mixture on Mylar.

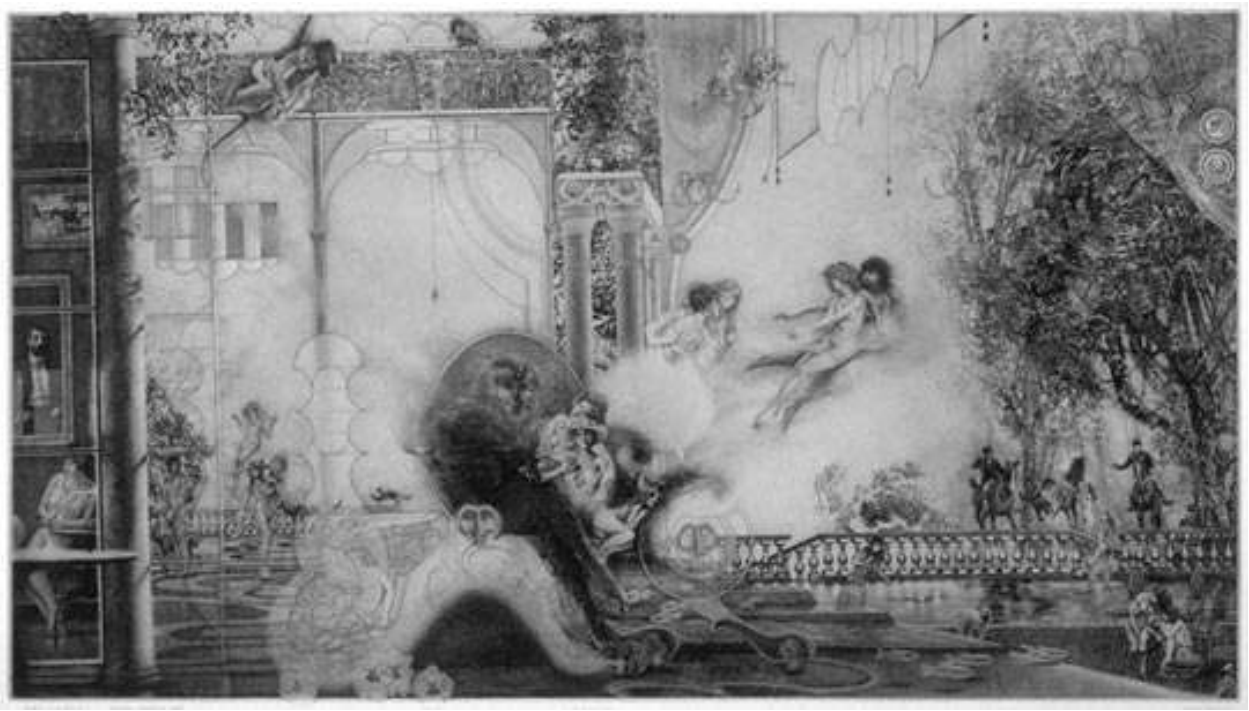
Milton had heard of using a light-sensitive ground with high-contrast photographs, and it occurred to him that the same process would be adaptable to high-contrast drawing. He began to work on acetate and shifted to Mylar at the suggestion of John Ross. These were his first preparatory drawings for etching. The plastic provided a transparent ground, and soon he took to drawing on both sides of the Mylar; one side for texture, the other for linear elements. As far as image was concerned,

Study #2 for Les Belles et la Béte II: Before the Hunt, 1978, graphite on drafting film.

the pen ran on its linear course unimpeded. Texture, visually present, provided no physical obstruction to line; it was simply on the other side.

The Mylar drawings allowed Milton to transfer through a light-sensitive transfer, the drawing onto the plate in any stage or at various stages. Increased flexibility was available through Mylar overlays, so that a number of drawings became one as far as the plate was concerned. Jolly Comer (Sequence I, Drawing #2) is composed from three sheets of Mylar, with four drawn surfaces contributing to the unified image. Jolly Comer (Sequence II, Drawing #1) was developed on both sides of the Mylar sheet and eventually contributed to four etching plates.

The Mylar surface allowed Milton to work outward from the texture. A texture would be laid down, then flaked off in the course of drawing, a reductive rather than an additive technique. In practice, Milton both added and subtracted in this drawing process. He established a middle ground that was modulated by flaking or by other textural modifications with a fine pen. The artist's drive toward refinement of stroke and increasingly subtle textural modulations was greatly assisted by his experience with



Peter Milton, Les Belles et la Béte II: Before the Hunt, 1978, light sensitive ground etching and engraving.

Mylar—a surface neutral enough to register only the drawing process.

In 1976, Milton began to think of the complex motifs that soon became the series Les Belles et la Béte. Through notation and for his own study, he worked in pencil on Rives Heavyweight Buff paper and in pencil and sepia ink on Basingwerk paper. The supports are of less interest than the shift to pencil, which prefigures the tonal, as distinct from the textural, explorations of the series. Milton's drawings for the plates in the series were initially drawings in pencil on drafting film; they were then further developed on Mylar in ink. The etching plates were made from the Mylar drawings.

There are notable differences, from Milton's viewpoint, between Mylar and drafting film as drawing supports: Mylar rejects pencil, but allows for the ready transfer of ink images to the etching plate; drafting film, while unsuitable for transferring images to plates, is extraordinarily hospitable to pencil. It accepts marks with superior precision and records spontaneous gestures of hand, however light, with outstanding clarity. The wholly neutral surface of drafting film permits the controlled buildup of minute particles of graphite and makes possible tonal manipulations of the greatest suavity. Milton's images, with their multiple relationships and associations, give a sense of existing in arrested time, yet of being in the stream of time. They seem at once arbitrary and inevitable. They are wonderfully harmonious with the way they are drawn, and this unity of means and ends gives Milton's work its authority.

It is not too much to say that Milton has fallen in love with drafting film as a means to drawing. He can work faster and more accurately on its toothless surface, and it seems to actively encourage the precision and subtlety that are his obsessions. A drawing will be smoky—sfumato comes to mind, as if his drawings were emanations of light, tenebrous or glowing, sometimes suggesting the fugitive, but always embodied in an atmosphere that registers the merest shifts in texture, the faintest gradations of tone.

Milton has recently begun to draw for the sake of drawing, not as a preparation for etching. In some instances, he has returned to the Mylar and pencil drawings prepared for the etched plates and has developed them beyond the image in the plate. The artist seems now not only to have reached but to have crossed a threshold in his applications of draftsmanship. Through the etching medium, he has learned a vast amount about drawing.

Gene Baro is a consulting curator for the Brooklyn Museum.