PETER MILTON

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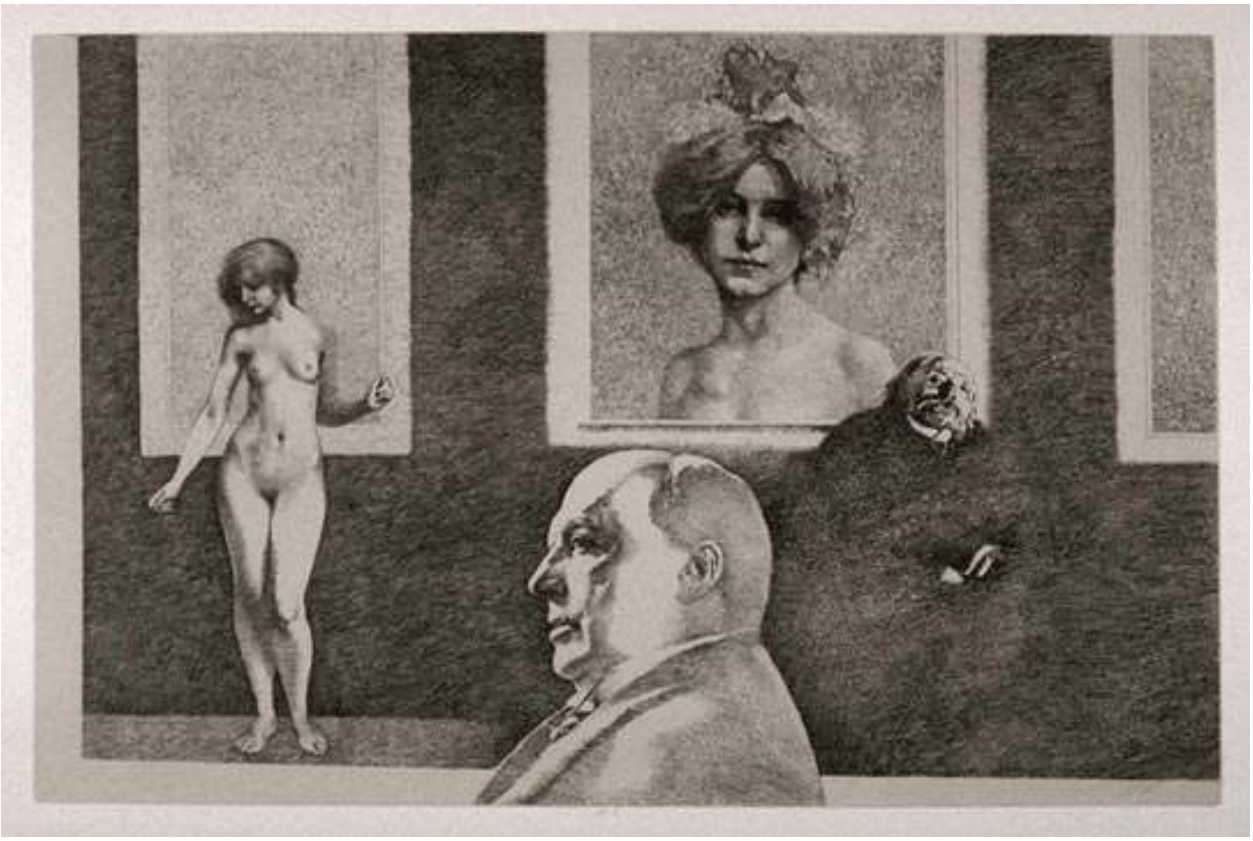

Peter Milton, The Jolly Corner III: 5, resist-ground etching & engraving (10 x 15 in.), 1971

Peter Milton: Selected Prints, 1960-1997. De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, February 28-May 24.

It takes only the most glancing, secondhand appreciation of Freud to recognize the significance of architecture—rooms, corridors, doors, staircases—to his construction of the human mind. You can also see as much in the expansive mansions of James and Proust, in the *nouveaux riches* hotels of Fitzgerald and antebellum estates of Faulkner, and, more explicitly, in the philosophical cottages of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Although Peter Milton, the subject of a retrospective at the de Young museum, is

committedly visual, his prints fit surprisingly well into this psychoanalytic/literary tradition: taking architecture as the primary metaphor, if not model, for structures of thought—picturing interiority by partitioning it.

Trained as a painter under Josef Albers at Yale in the early 1950s, Milton turned full-time to printmaking when tests confirmed that he was red-green colorblind. He notes in his chronology under 1962, "I'm shocked at degree of deficiency. Black-and-white prints from now on!" At that time he was completing a series of winter landscapes, lift-ground etchings that set bare trees against the cold snow, New England territory that curator Robert Flynn Johnson has termed "Ethan Frome country."

Only two etchings from this early period, the near-pointillist *Summer Tree* (1960) and the darker, Odilon Redon-inspired *Winterscape II* (1961), are included in this retrospective. Formally distinct from the bulk of Milton's work because of their tendency toward abstraction—some approach the comfortable reductionism of Mondrian's *Gray Tree* (1912), while others reduce trees to patterns of magnetic filings (though nothing as geometric as Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean*, 1915)—the early landscapes are also thematically distinct for being unpeopled. These pictures are untouched by the clocks, commodities, and other human traces that haunt Milton's later houses. Milton suggests that these landscapes represent the "opposite of architecture," which would also help to explain why they are underrepresented in this exhibition.

The Jolly Corner Suite (1969), on the other hand, is the cornerstone of a show that takes consciousness of architecture and the architecture of consciousness as its implicit themes. Inspired by a long story by Henry James, the series consists of three parts, each with seven resist-ground etchings/engravings, which together occupy a full wall at the de Young. Scaffolding plays such a visible role in the series—men building here, a house under construction there—that it makes you wonder what was at stake in the construction of the prints themselves. And sure enough, Milton was working with new tools: for this series he changed his technique to drawing in sugar ink on Mylar. That image would be transferred to a copper plate sensitized with Kodak Photo-Resist, a process whose very technology still amazes Milton. "The Luddite in me shivers," he once told Johnson.

The prints in this series use Jamesian layering effects to build character. Whereas

we expect literary narrative to unfold across several frames horizontally, or diachronically, Milton's visual narrative works vertically, nearly synchronically, achieving a measure of density within a single frame—much as James might work a single sentence. This subordination and coordination of detail lead some critics to understand Milton as Surrealist on the model of Dalí (hyperreal) or on the model of Escher (pseudoscientific). The better point of comparison would be Ernst, especially the Ernst of the collage novel *Une Semaine de Bonté*, where overstuffed images come straight from the pages of Victorian life, their excessive details working like wallpaper to unify a given space—an effect we commonly call texture. An even better analogy would be Robert Altman's signature panoramas, where a single frame can deliver a dozen leading actors and visual events, all set in focus to the point that there is no one center of focus. Focus is something of your own making.

The crowded exteriors of The Jolly Corner prove especially striking within the context of this installation, which itself was visibly short on space. Robert Flynn Johnson began planning the retrospective for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco several years ago, while preparing Milton's catalogue raisonné of prints (Chronicle Books, 1996). Originally slated for the Legion of Honor, the exhibition ultimately landed in its sister museum, the de Young (since the federal government refused in 1996 to insure large traveling shows at the de Young due to seismic instability, this museum has had to forego blockbusters). An immediate result of this show-swapping is that the de Young's walls are noticeably crowded, the architecture of the installation re-creating the high-density effects of each single print. It has the general effect of framing Milton's prints as the ultimate in overstuffed museum pieces.

The most recent print on display, *Twentieth Century Limited* (gelatin-resist etching and engraving, 1998) fulfills its potential as the ultimate museum piece by taking as its subject all of 20th-century art history. It's a first-rate end-of-millennium allegory and might just be Milton's best work to date, one that suffers only from its placement at the de Young between two earlier works. Two trains have arrived in historic Penn Station, that great expansive space with vaulted, cathedral-style ceilings, and their crash represents the apocalypse of modern art. Paintings are scattered across the concourse, and they are easy enough to recognize as the greats: Picasso's *Guernica*, a

Motherwell elegy, Mondrian grid, Johns target, Rauschenberg goat, and Warhol screenprint of Marilyn. Each work is re-created within the print, revealing a fascination with miniatures that Milton dates to 1939, the year he encountered them en masse at the World's Fair in New York. And each painting comes with a joke: the Motherwell elegy is being charged by a bull, the Duchamp bicycle wheel is mangled, the miniature picture of the uptown Guggenheim gets labeled "Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe"—a fine use of Magritte's overused tag line.

Call it Milton's way of embracing the anxiety of influence and, at the same time, making great claims for his own work as a master's masterpiece, a full reckoning of modern art history, a consciously latter-day revision of Robert Hughes's *The Shock of the New*. Not only did the print represent one of Milton's greatest formal challenges—how to define and unify the expansive interior of the train station—but it was also a major existential challenge, posing the question of how to stand the ground of figuration. While most figurative artists working today rest content with their own anachronism, Milton aggressively confronts the rise of conceptualism. He has taken jabs at Duchamp before, most noticeably by casting him in the role of bellhop in *Interiors VII: The Train from Munich* (1991), but *Twentieth Century Limited* represents Milton's most sustained response to Duchamp to date. By dropping so many Duchamp references in miniature, he manages both to replicate and trivialize his legacy to art. Milton questions the eminence of Duchamp's valise by offering us the so-called "millennium in a valise": figuration that can carry loads of high-concept, one-liner art within it. Faced with reams of conceptual art that reads like text and lacks visual complexity Milton has used miniature-making in particular, and printmaking in general, as strategies of containment.—Jori Finkel

Peter Milton's response

To the Editors:

Jori Finkel's excellent review of my exhibition at the de Young Museum *[On Paper* 2/5, P. 41) gave me much pleasure. I was particularly grateful that the trivializing

word "fantasy" was not used once. Her approach to my work as architecture, and architecture as metaphor, was enlightening.

While Ms. Finkel and I were discussing my work I was remembering my introduction to the fascination of things miniature, which came during an elevated tram ride over a diminutive city at the 1939 World's Fair. The review, as printed, seemed to translate this experience into somehow involving 20th-century art in miniaturized form. Much of the miniaturized work in *Twentieth Century Limited*, the print which Ms. Finkel was discussing, is post-World War II. And the thought of it all being at the 1939 World's Fair *en masse* was rather starling. If Andy Warhol had put together his diptych on Marilyn Monroe for the `39 Fair, that would have been an apotheosis of postmodernism run amok. I was, incidentally, nine years old at the time and had not even heard of the *Mona Lisa*, much less Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* take on it.

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