

PETER MILTON

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Peter Milton Revisited: A Decade of "Interiors" Prints

by Irving L. Finkelstein

In the decades since the 1960's, the art world has witnessed an explosion of personalities, styles and configurations that have often thrown existing values, assumptions and indeed the very meaning of art itself into serious question. To complicate matters, works of art have sold for astronomical prices during this period, often without any apparent relationship to their content, their innovation or their art historical importance. In a word, art has increasingly become a marketable commodity, rather than something beautiful and skillfully crafted, something to live with, something that is an expression of widely shared feeling and experiences among civilized, cultured people.

Although it has not completely escaped the pressures and contagion of the contemporary marketplace, printmaking has by and large retained an integrity and respect for tradition throughout the period. Most printmakers have continued to embrace the traditional processes — etching, engraving, woodcut, lithography, silkscreen — to create strikingly original and often deeply moving and meaningful unions of their ideas and feelings, their images and processes.

One such artist is Peter Milton, who has been justifiably recognized and acclaimed one of this country's most important masters of the print in the last thirty years. His highly sought-after works, like the early Julia Passing, 1967, Mornings With Judd, 1968, and Daylilies, 1975, have been judged masterpieces of that art form and are among the works that have found their place in the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Tate Gallery, the Bibliotheque Nationale and numerous other public and private collections around the world. Milton's

prints are already reproduced in books surveying the history of printmaking and have been the subject of many exhibitions, catalogues, articles and an ambitious catalogue raisonne, published in 1977.¹

Indeed, by 1977 Milton had reached a pinnacle of accomplishment and recognition, with 97 prints produced since 1960,² thirty-six one man exhibitions, and a list of 129 public collections that had already acquired his prints.³ His creative impulses fueled by this cumulative acknowledgment and reassurance, Milton embarked on a pair of prints, Les Belles et la Bête I and II, 1977 and 1978, and on plans for a third in the series, his largest and most complex works yet. These were followed by the less ambitious but equally sensuous landscape prints, Country Pieces, 1979, and, just as important, the evolution of what constituted a cycle of drawings, in pencil on drafting film, of images of evocative, dreamlike and sometimes erotic subjects — Jupiter and Io, Stolen Moments, Splash (two versions), Inner City, Friends, Dancing Lesson — several of which would eventually find their way into the Interiors. The Brooklyn Museum exhibition, Peter Milton; Drawing Toward Etching, 1980, revealed a magical, lyrical world of fantasy, dream and overt sexual abandon only hinted at in the earlier prints by the artist. Moreover, it confirmed the dialogue between drawing and printmaking in Milton's image making, a "mysterious process [in which the] drawings serve several purposes: as ends in themselves, as preliminary probing devices for themes and formal ideas, as primary sources of imagery, as the first, tentative gropings toward an effective composition."⁴

Even as the drawings evolved, ideas for prints developed and the works Sanctuary's Edge, 1981, and a set of four small prints, Europa, Cotillion, Butterfly and Friday's Children, 1982, ushered in the decade in which Peter Milton's main focus would be the development of the Interiors. In 1982 -1983, while he was artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College, Milton experienced "increased discomfort with the idea of the specialized printmaker," and, for the first time in over twenty years during which he worked exclusively in black and white due to his moderate red-green color blindness, returned to painting. Over that year, he evolved a large canvas, The Rehearsal (completed in 1984), based on the drawing for the never completed third print of the Les Belles et la Bête series. The Rehearsal takes place in a multi-layered architectural space

with steps, columns, windows, projecting panels, figures that seem very real and others that are embodiments of a dream or fantasy world, like the man in animal costume sitting at center stage. Although growing out of and in effect completing the earlier Les Belles et la Bête cycle, the painting also clearly laid the groundwork for the Interiors which would be initiated by Milton shortly after its completion.

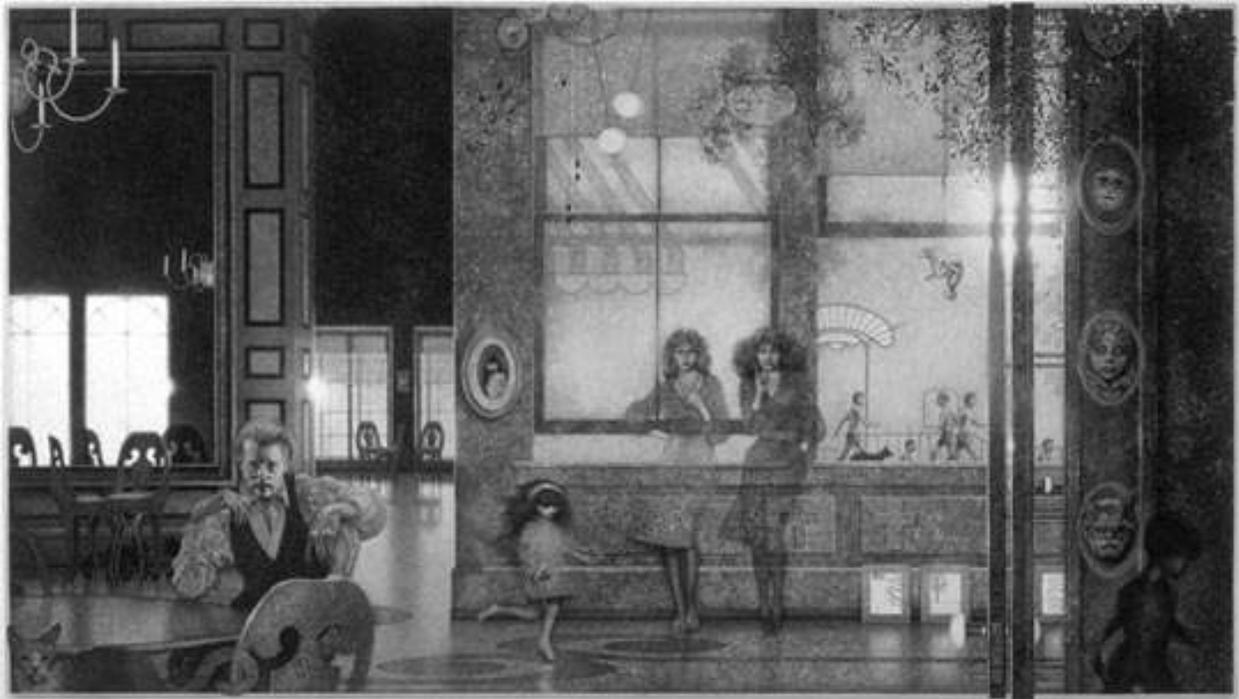
When the artist returned home from his stay at Dartmouth, the idea for a series of prints was already taking shape in his mind. Milton recalls that he initially conceived only two prints, horizontal in format, one with a central male figure accompanied by two female figures within an interior space, an image that would become Interiors I, and another horizontal work with a woman as the main focus, accompanied by two males, the basis for Interiors IV.⁵ As the first print was being developed the artist envisioned a pair of vertical prints to be placed between the two horizontal compositions when completed, bringing the series to four and creating a symmetry, a geometric order in the size and format of the planned series. The idea for the three final prints came substantially later, to continue the already established geometric order — horizontal, vertical, vertical, horizontal, vertical, vertical, horizontal — and bringing the final number of Interiors prints to seven.⁶

Each of the prints was evolved in the manner Milton had employed and refined since the Jolly Corner Suite of 1970: the composition was developed as a drawing in India ink on mylar and then transferred to the copper plate by light sensitive ground etching. Further refinement, additions, deletions and changes were accomplished by the artist directly on the plate with the burin, scraper and burnisher, as needed. Because of the size and complexity of the works and the tremendous amount of time that printing necessarily demands, the seven Interiors were printed by Robert E. Townsend in editions of 175 impressions, plus 25 roman numeral impressions and 15 artist's proofs each. Interiors VII had 25 roman numeral impressions and 20 artist's proofs.

The Interiors were evolved over a span of seven years, coinciding with the number of prints and more significantly encompassing the greater part of the decade of the 1980's. It was also the longest time taken by Milton to focus his creative energies on a single series or cycle of works. The period coincided with the artist's 54th to 61st years, a time of "midlife" for most people, a time for looking back, for nostalgia, and for

questioning oneself and attempting to evaluate one's accomplishments and one's failures. The autobiographical element, Milton's reflections on his life and that of his family, then, becomes one of the common threads linking the Interiors prints. The drama and emotional impact of the series grow out of his self questioning and his remembering times past. There is also an undercurrent of yearning for release and for freedom, often overtly or implicitly threatened by denial, repression and vulnerability to forces entirely beyond the control of the people in the Interiors. One such force that specifically asserts itself in the Interiors, most powerfully in the final print, is the catastrophe of the Holocaust, which touched the artist, indirectly but very strongly.

Although it is a long way from Interiors I to Interiors VII on first examination, the fact is that the seeds of the final print and all those between them are to be found in the first, and these germinate and take shape as the series progresses. In its iconographic and technical complexity and the emotional impact it produces, the Interiors series surpasses any of Peter Milton's previous works and takes its place among the most important monuments of modern printmaking. A grasp of the ramifications of the Interiors can best be gained by an examination of the thematic content of the individual works of the series.



Interiors I: Family Reunion

INTERIORS I: FAMILY REUNION, 1983 - 1984, 19.75 x 35.5"

Perhaps the most classical of all the Interiors in its quiet compositional equilibrium and bold vertical and horizontal subdivisions, Family Reunion promptly introduces Milton's recurrent motif throughout the series, the "central" figure, here the seated man to the left of center, with a related pictorial event or person behind or to the side of that figure that makes a comment about the figure, or sets up a psychological tension and, in some works, even a contradiction to what is going on in front of the print.⁷ The two standing women to the right of center and the running children balance the composition and provide the dramatic counterpoint to the seated figure.

This male figure looking out at the viewer is simultaneously the artist (whom he resembles), the thinker, observer and narrator: he introduces the series and will eventually reappear in the final print; it is as though his story is about to unfold in the Interiors. Technically, the figure is a fabrication, a piecing together of diverse photographic sources, the image of the face and figure derived from an Arnold Newman photograph of Friedrich Krupp, the German munitions manufacturer, the hands from a photo by Thomas Eakins.⁸ Only the man's hair was modified and the spectacles added to heighten the resemblance to Milton himself.

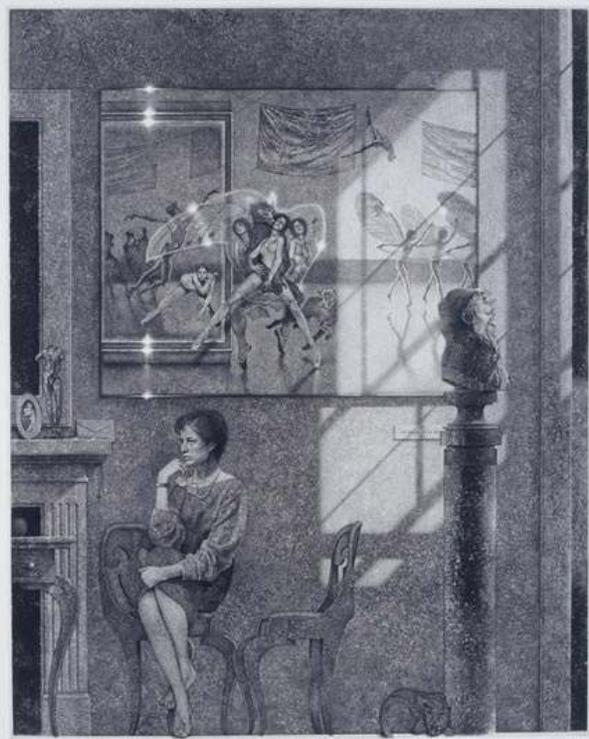
The two standing women, well defined and yet ethereal and ghostlike, embody a curious combination of feminine grace and vulnerability. Both are partially transparent, fading into the architecture, as it were, mainly from the waist down. Although Milton employed this device initially for pictorial reasons rather than symbolic ones, to attempt to retain the integrity of the architectural setting, he was well aware that this treatment of the two women begged for a symbolic reading, one suggesting a denial or repression of their sexuality. In fact parallels abound between these images and Milton's memories of his family from his childhood to his early adult years. One of the artist's two sisters was stricken with polio and thus was denied many of the normal experiences of growing up.⁹ Then too, repression was part of the Victorian values that permeated their family life during childhood and adolescence, particularly the denial of sexuality. Allusions to the "damaged child" are echoed in the print. On the far wall of the back room, framed by

the chairs silhouetted before the windows, is an image used before by Milton in Daylilies, the paralytic child walking on all fours, derived from an 1885 photograph by Eadweard Muybridge. To the right of that image, on the foreground wall, virtually midway between the seated man and the two women, is a portrait of a little girl in an oval frame, derived from a double exposure photo of the artist's daughter, Naomi, producing an unsettling effect, of something being very wrong, the child being injured, dislocated, perhaps even victimized. The two small children running across the foreground space, though "normal" and playful, seem ephemeral and transitory; they are inevitably momentarily remembered glimpses of fleeting childhood.

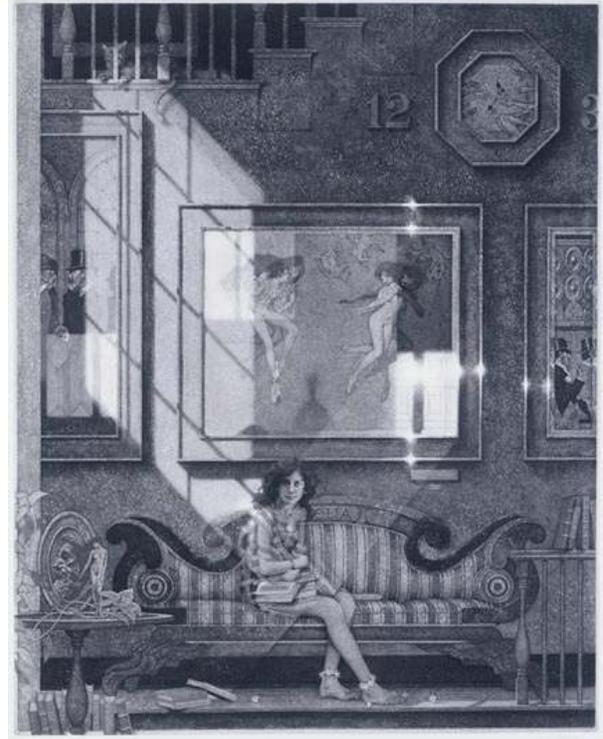
In the background to the right of the two women a group of boys appears, seeming to be playing innocent childhood games. These running figures, also derived from Muybridge photographs, occupy another layer of space outside and behind the "interior" setting of the print and suggest activity, hustle and bustle, that is a foil to the stillness of the secluded interior environment. But a closer look reveals that the running boys are basically the same image repeated, a kind of regimented ritual exercise, perhaps a reference to the boys' school Milton attended many years earlier. Most disturbing, however, is the image of the boy in the air, seeming to be falling out of the sky, about to smash into the ground and be destroyed, or even crash down on the other boys and destroy them too. These implications produce a sense of apprehension and an anticipation of the terror of the final Interiors print, still seven years in the future.¹⁰

Each of the remaining components of Family Reunion complements the primary thematic content of the print and anticipates subsequent Interiors. Props like the chairs at the left denote recollections of childhood: they are family heirlooms, furniture that had belonged to the artist's grandmother, Julia, the memory of whom sparked the creation of Milton's early masterpiece, Julia Passing. Even the little paintings standing against the wall to the right of the two women serve the function of "looking back." These landscapes relate to Milton's very early works, which were light and simple, not fraught with meaning like the mature, complex works. Also significant are the utilization and distribution of the light. The light fixture at the left corner looks way back, to Dutch and Flemish art (with hints of Vermeer and Van Eyck), for which Milton has great admiration, but this source of man-made light seems very weak next to the blast of

bright natural light reflected in the mirror behind the seated figure. High up on the wall, above the oval portrait, is a clock, its numerals displaced to spell out the birth date of the artist's sister. 7-6-31. Above the large windows behind the women the partially drawn shades connote privacy and protection from the threat of unidentified external forces, a device of secrecy and a means of reducing, or even eliminating altogether the light of the outside world, a poignant foreboding of what is yet to come in the final Interiors print.



Interiors II: Stolen Moments



Interiors III: Time with Celia

**INTERIORS II: STOLEN MOMENTS, 1985 - 1986, 29.25 x 23.75" and
INTERIORS III: TIME WITH CELIA, 1985 - 1986, (same dimensions)**

In an ironic twist, Interiors II and III evolved as a consequence of Peter Milton's encountering many seemingly unresolvable problems as he began to develop the composition that would eventually become Interiors IV, soon after completing Family Reunion. Laying that partially articulated work aside for a year, the artist built two vertical compositions around a central figure, this time a seated woman alone in a room. Because Milton worked back and forth on the two prints and because the sequence of Interiors II and III was assigned rather arbitrarily after both works were more or less

completed, it seems justifiable to examine the two prints together, as though they were two halves of a whole concept, or two panels of a diptych.¹¹

Unlike Family Reunion, the space in Interiors II and III is extremely shallow — there is less spatial depth than in almost any of Milton's other prints — so that in each work the viewer is forced to concentrate on the foreground, containing each seated woman and the various objects surrounding her. Who are these two women? Clearly they are not the same two standing young women in Family Reunion. Celia is obviously a teenager, soft, feminine, budding into womanhood. She assumes a self protective gesture, as if somewhat threatened by the viewer's interruption of her reading and her private reveries, yet at the same time she "exudes self possession and is the amused mistress of all she surveys." The unnamed young woman of Stolen Moments, by contrast, is older, very much an adult, caught up in her own thoughts, completely unaware of and unconcerned about the presence of the viewer. Though her features do not specifically coincide with those of Celia, the image of this woman begs to be understood as the embodiment of what Celia will be at a later moment in life. It is as though Time with Celia connotes an adolescent ritual, a moment preceding the loss of innocence, an introduction to the adult world of sexuality. Stolen Moments, then, becomes a reflection on that ritual and on the release and freedom of the time span between the two images of the woman. The artist concurs that this reading is entirely plausible in the dramatic sense, even if not specifically intended that way in evolving the two prints.

The image that became Celia began as a Pre-Raphaelite figure seated on a Victorian sofa (the sofa here belonged to Milton's grandmother, as was true of the furniture in Family Reunion), but the artist found that she did not work dramatically, and as the image developed into the final print she became more compact and more self contained. She confronts the viewer directly, yet withdraws into immateriality, much as the two women in Family Reunion, by breaking up into facets in a Cubist manner and dissolving into the sofa.¹² Commenting on this print and on his use of the Cubist structural device, Milton noted that

"Celia is an expression of my ambivalence and defensiveness about the rather intense, Romantic side of my nature. The original drawing of Celia started as a nostalgic look at the seeming innocence of Victorian art with its

undefensiveness about sentiment, its belief in an aesthetic of beauty and its confidence in the perfectability of man. My first Celia was quite wistful and soft and even the hints of eroticism in the piece behind her are affectionate and gentle. Curiously to me, from a distance, Celia still seems. . . impersonal, anonymous, unavailable. But when viewed up close, she seems quite at home, even glowing. I don't find the final Celia shy or threatened. . . but entirely self possessed and amused at her new, sophisticated self. I cannot help but wonder at the parallel and paradox of my sister's fragmenting subjugation to polio and Celia's fragmenting subjugation to the compositionally healing Cubism."

Just behind Celia, the framed paintings on the wall occupy the largest collective area of the print and command the viewer's attention as much as the Celia figure, offering further clues to the meaning of the print. The composition in the center, with its nude and partially clad, nearly weightless floating women comes directly from the hovering figures in Les Belles et la Bête II: Before the Hunt. The physical contact and gestures of the pairs of women are implicitly erotic, yet playfulness and lyricism prevail and keep the erotic activity from bursting forth, preserving (if only temporarily) the childlike innocence of the encounter. In the same vein, the Victorian gentlemen in the two side pictures embody the staid, proper character of the Victorian era; their stiffness and propriety are in marked contrast to the sense of total freedom, undisguised openness and pleasure of the girls in the center. Thus, the girls' freedom encompasses the anticipated pleasures and "forbidden games" of Celia's reveries of awakening, of sexual exploration, and of the possibility of being a normal adult.

Enhancing Celia's anticipated rite of passage are all the remaining things that surround her. Her books, King Arthur, Parsifal, Alice in Wonderland, are reflections of a transition, the first two about a critical time in history, when one era was coming to an end and another about to begin, just as her book on Cubism documents a revolutionary awakening of modern art.¹³ Even the seemingly minor element of the clock at the upper right, with the strangely misplaced numeral "12" (onset of adolescence perhaps?), contains an array of hands reaching out as if to attempt to stop the clock, or to prevent growth and maturation from taking place, subtly reiterating the central theme of the print.¹⁴

The seated woman in Stolen Moments, alone in the room and in her own thoughts, is very compact and self contained, very still, yet capable of getting up and taking flight at any moment.¹⁵ She is complemented by a picture on the wall that makes

the print the iconographic antithesis of Time with Celia. Taken from the 1980 drawing also entitled *Stolen Moments* and refined mainly in the distribution of the light and the addition of a few details, this scene is virtually an orgy of passion, with a great sense of abandon, a total liberation, and an overtone of the demonic about it. The masked, wolflike figure in intimate contact with three girls encircled by his extended wings and in his explicitly erotic embrace, are the essence of the emancipation and fulfillment that Celia yearns for in the companion print. The tumbling male figure in the air, in a ballet leap with one leg extended forward, adds to the phallic overtone, just as the head thrown back contributes to the frenzy of unbridled passions this scene conveys. The seated woman, as she reflects on her inner life and the meaning of the loss of innocence, remains very real, in contrast to the women in the previously examined prints; she is not transparent, she does not dissolve or fade away.

Again, matter-of-fact details in the print strengthen and corroborate the reading. The apple on the table at left is an acknowledgment of the power of the Eve concept and is the "forbidden fruit" she stares at and unavoidably partakes of. The letter on the mantle piece, used before in *Daylilies*, also connotes something significant that has happened, since it has been saved, and the fact that the face of the envelope is hidden from the viewer preserves the privacy of its content and enhances the overtones of memory, nostalgia and mystery in the print.

Mystery and the enigmatic puzzles that defy logical explanation are an integral part of these and all the *Interiors* prints. Sculptural forms like the nude figurines, one male and the other female, next to the image of a male head in an oval frame in *Interiors II* and *III*, and even the male bust on the columnar pedestal in *Stolen Moments* lend themselves to various interpretations, but their function and meaning remain ambiguous; they are simply there. Milton takes great satisfaction in creating images that invite multiple readings and he offers this alternate, pragmatic interpretation of *Stolen Moments*:

"She's been walking through a museum or a private home filled with art and is exhausted. She sits down to rest, thinking about what she has seen, with no idea of the particular place she is sitting. Behind her is this totally chance juxtaposition of images and objects, the picture, the bust, the torso. I like the puzzlement, the enigma and the irony this offers. Without the enigma I'm not interested."



Interiors IV: Hotel Paradise Cafe

INTERIORS IV: HOTEL PARADISE CAFE, 1986 - 1987, 24 x 35.75"

The work with which Milton had originally planned to conclude the Interiors, Hotel Paradise Cafe is at once a far more complex work and one that is darker, more ominous and more universal in its implications than any of the Interiors that preceded it. This is the first work in the series to specifically evoke the era of the Great Depression and hint at the menace that would soon befall Europe, setting the stage for the theme of The Train from Munich.

Hotel Paradise Cafe, like the two Interiors that preceded it, focuses on a seated young woman, here at a table in the foreground, dressed in a hat, a fur wrap and a corduroy skirt that instantly evoke the 1930's. She is meditating about what takes place around her, in the cafe, in the ballroom behind the cafe and the outside world. She appears very palpable and exists in a space that also suggests a very material reality: mundane experiences: conversation, dancing, drinking in a cafe, even having a pilot for a friend or a lover.

The male figure in the doorway, remarkable for appearing to be two-headed, connects the space of the cafe in the foreground with that beyond, seeming to guard the doorway like the mythical three-headed dog, Cerberus, who stands at the gates to the Underworld, permitting all to enter but none to return.¹⁶ Indeed there are three guard dogs, his attribute or counterpart as gatekeeper, positioned to the left of the doorway. Their menace, their potential for attacking whomever — or whatever — comes too close, imbues the print with a tension, a feeling of Angst that accompanies the viewer through all the dark recesses of Hotel Paradise Cafe.

Between the seated woman and the doorway another woman, in black, is caught in a momentary gesture: her two leashed dogs, perhaps terrified by the threat of the larger dogs, are running in opposite directions; their mistress, turning, looking back, is uneasy, vulnerable, unstable, quite possibly about to be spun around like a top by the countermovement of her dogs. As if to heighten her fragility and helplessness, she becomes transparent and loses her materiality. This is true also of the aviator at the right. He is sullen, lost in meditation, contemplating perhaps the end of an era of romance, of innocence, of hope, about to fade and vanish, just as he fades and dissolves into the massive pillar. Does he know what terrible things are threatening to put an end to the carefree, idyllic frolic of the dancers who seem to levitate above the ballroom floor, oblivious of the realities of the outside world?

What we are permitted to see of that outside world has very frightening overtones. At the far left, reflected in a large mirror on the wall behind the large dogs, three figures, two men and a child, stand by a window through which can be glimpsed a figure falling through the air (recalling that of Interiors I), undoubtedly to his doom, an image repeated below in the framed picture against the wall behind the dogs. In the dim murky area above the mantle piece are the silhouettes of hunters taking aim, but they do not seem to aim directly at the ducks in flight. Far above them, in the left corner, three male figures are lined up like dolls in a shooting gallery, their backs toward us. They wear armbands; close examination reveals there are no heads under their hats. This is an eerie presentiment of what is about to happen in Europe, as are the images of framed window shades partly or completely pulled down, to the left of the hunters: the light of humanity is being blocked out.

The airship or Zeppelin at the right at first seems to be in the background, behind the architecture of the Hotel Paradise Cafe, but it is actually reflected in another mirror, on the wall to the right of the doorway. It must be in front of the building, in the viewer's space, or even behind the viewer. The reverse lettering, "Hotel Elysée," and "Cafe," reading normally, give the illusion of a huge plate glass window that separates the viewer from the people, animals and objects within, but allows the viewer to see them with perfect clarity, and vice versa.¹⁷ The Zeppelin as a form is massive, heavy, ponderous; yet, paradoxically, it is lighter than air, capable of escaping the limitations of gravity. More important, it is an embodiment of the period of the 1920's and early 1930's, the golden age of travel by airship. Yet, when confronted with the image of a dirigible today, the Goodyear blimp notwithstanding, one cannot help but be reminded of the tragedy of the Hindenberg going up in flames in Lakehurst, New Jersey in 1937, signaling the end of the era of the airship, and in an ironic way prophesying the downfall of Germany just a decade later.

Ultimately the print's title conveys an irony as poignant as that embodied by the Zeppelin. "Elysée" aptly describes the literal paradise that was Paris, the epitome of culture, enlightenment and sophistication, the literary and artistic capital of all Europe during a glorious age of hope and progress. But the light of that age was about to be extinguished.¹⁸ As if to signal the imminence of that light going out, the chandeliers at the right, for all the flecks of dancing light they produce, seem to be weak, incapable of overcoming the spreading darkness and gloom that take hold of the space. Finally in this context, the letter on the mantle piece— already seen in Stolen Moments — denotes the sense of loss and nostalgia that gives Hotel Paradise Cafe an added poignancy. With this print Milton anticipated and approached the threshold of the final work of the Interiors cycle but, perhaps because the emotional demands (on both artist and viewer) would be far too great, he first evolved two works that were decidedly lighter in tone and, in one of these prints, incorporated the element of humor, quite unanticipated in the context of the series.



Interiors V: Water Music

INTERIORS V: WATER MUSIC, 1988, 29.75 x 23.75"

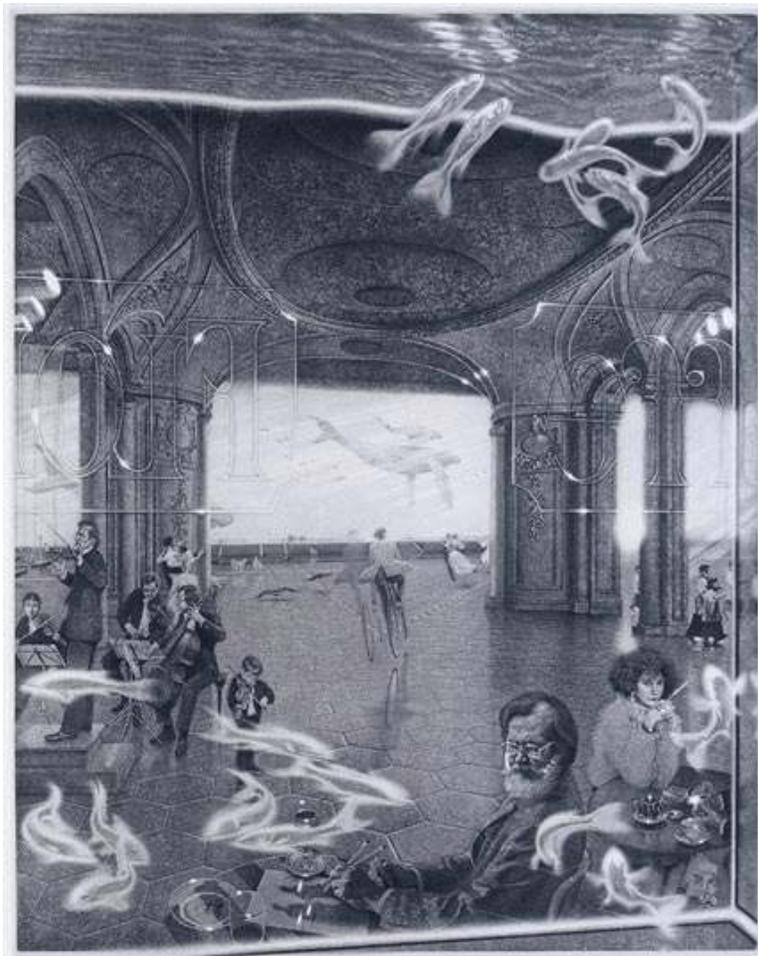
Returning to the vertical format of Interiors II and III, Milton next evolved the images that would become Interiors V and VI, but this time separately, a year apart. Although very different in composition and tone, Water Music and Soundings share three thematic elements, foremost among them the central seated figure, who is male and who closely resembles the artist himself in both works. Each print depicts musicians and music making, music being admittedly almost as important to Peter Milton as art.¹⁹ Finally, the element of water is a major component of both prints.

Water Music, like the two earlier vertical prints in the series, derives major parts of its imagery from a drawing which predates the inception of the Interiors. In that drawing, Splash, 1981, one finds the nucleus of the central group in the print. The seated

man in a business suit, grinning foolishly, holds a chimpanzee that is picking its nose; they are surrounded by frolicking nude adolescent girls. All are immersed in waist-deep water that floods the room: the man feels silly, feels himself getting wet. The girls, by contrast, are in their element: they feel perfectly at home in the water and are having a supremely good time.²⁰

The spirit of carefree innocence and playfulness was carried over to the print as well, even with the numerous modifications. In fact the humorous element is enhanced, as is the feeling that Milton is poking fun at himself: his expression has become more foolish, more aware of the absurdity of the situation. The chimp has become more clownish, wearing a v-necked sailor suit and waving a baton, as his long hair is being combed by the grinning artist. Both are utterly unresponsive to their wetness. The girls have donned swimsuits, the one playing with a fish in her lap has now become two girls who also, wave batons, and they are immersed in hysterical frolic ... as well as in the water. They are serenaded by a very serious violinist, derived from a photograph of Jascha Heifetz and, although Milton altered the face, the gesture of the maestro is unmistakable. He is intent on his music making, but he too is standing in the water, getting very wet! The addition of the violinist provides a much needed vertical element to this central grouping of figures, the most compact arrangement in any of the Interiors, and a link with the single dominant form in the upper half of the print. To the left of the artist's head, against the railing that is as yet not inundated, a framed mirror shows only an ear and the back of his head, singling out the sense of hearing and providing a surprise spatial pull in the way the reflection is offset. To the right of the group the portraits of Franz Schubert and Richard Wagner,²¹ and a jewel-like French horn, another allusion to Wagner's music, lean against the railing, and on the opposite side there is a tiny Mississippi Delta Blues band, in front of the polyhedron from Dürer's Melencolia I engraving, a delightful pun on "blues" and "melancholy." The lower half of Water Music, then, is a very sensuous, witty and humorous combination of water and music, hence the title, shared with Handel's famous composition. Sensuousness in abundance is found in Milton's lyrical treatment of the rippling water; it is decidedly musical in feeling also, as are the sparkling pearls in the water, like musical notes made visible and palpable.

However, as a foil to all the frolic and frivolity in the lower half of the print, an immense powerful creature, obviously a great whale, nearly fills the entire upper portion of Water Music, like a huge umbrella above and behind the figures, the baleful eye of the enormous mammal looking down at the silly antics below. Comparable with the huge form of the dirigible in Hotel Paradise Cafe, the great sea creature, whose tremendous mass is intimidating, capable of crushing us with a mere flick of its colossal tail, is also incredibly graceful, like a ballerina in the ocean, able to rise in a glorious celebration of its freedom. In the print, however, the whale assumes an almost godlike, judgmental character. It is a metaphor of the tremendous power of Nature over man: "Nature can take over and destroy us at any moment. We survive by the willingness of this immense creature to let us survive." The artist insists that the whale was intended to be a positive



Interiors VI: Soundings

force, a gesture of the freedom whales have, but in fact many viewers, the majority perhaps, see the image as intimidating and sinister, because of its immensity and brute force and the helplessness of the revelers below. The whale, huge and majestic, appears once more in the Interiors, but in a different context and with a very different effect.

INTERIORS VI: SOUNDINGS, 1988 - 1989, 29.75 x 23.75"

Very distinct from the preceding work in its mood and organization, Soundings dispenses completely with the humorous antics and frivolity of Water Music, as well as with the presence of any superhuman or supernatural being. In fact, at first glance Soundings appears to be a very straightforward scene, lacking the extraordinary juxtapositions and ambiguous readings of the other Interiors. But that is not the case.

Seated at a table in the foreground is the artist, looking decidedly older than he appeared in Water Music, more serious, more intent on what he is doing. Specifically he is attempting to draw the two faintly defined figures on the paper, presumably the objects of his gaze outward into the viewer's space. It is now that we realize the view is not what it seems. There is an immense fish tank through which we must peer to see the artist, and he to see us. Or are we perhaps in the fish tank? Has he been distracted from his work by the movement of the fish, or some other event we cannot see? In fact the print evolved from an image of a man trying to listen to a concert, from which he is repeatedly distracted by the movement of fish. At any rate, the artist is captured not actually drawing but rather distracted, hesitating, thinking perhaps about what he is trying to draw. The creative process does not come easily but is a struggle, he seems to be saying. He is working with one sharpened pencil and four erasers in his hands; there are four steps back for each step forward.

What's more, the artist is isolated, the activity around him seems random, and everything that is happening in the print is independent of his existence at the table. There is nothing to indicate that even the two figures he is attempting to draw are aware of his presence; they may be looking at the fish, or just engaged in conversation. The viewer too must question the physicality of the artist. When looking closely, we realize that he, like the figures observed in the earlier Interiors prints, is transparent. The floor

tiles are clearly visible through his entire image. Is he real, or perhaps an illusion? Can he be a reflection in the glass of the aquarium? But the drawing in progress on the table is opaque, by contrast. This raises the question: what is more real, the artist or his work?²²

The woman at the table behind the artist, derived from an André Kertesz photograph of Colette, is oblivious of him in spite of their apparent proximity. She is in deep thought, staring without any real focus at the fish in the corner of the aquarium, while her companion at the table strikes a match to light her cigarette. She is completely unaware of him also. Behind them two choirboys with ghostlike shadow-reflections are caught as they move out of the scene. They are the only religious reference here, and it is as though religion were making an exit, disappearing from the contemporary secular world.

To the right a most unusual musical ensemble, with a conductor who is unmistakably Mahler-like, and a string quartet with a boy violinist that is separated from the group and has his back to the other musicians, is performing some chamber work.²³ The viewer senses that the ensemble is substantially larger than those musicians visible; the conductor is facing unseen players. Yet, even though the music must be filling the interior, no one really seems to listen or even be aware of the presence of the musicians. They are either occupied with another activity (drawing), totally immersed in distant thoughts, or distracted by the gyrations of the fish. Only the two dancing couples in the back, apparently doing a waltz, are caught up in the rhythm of the music. The undulating fish in the aquarium, performing a ballet all their own, also levitate weightlessly, as do the dancing couples, the birds and the cyclist in the center, receding into the distance, his back turned on everything, as though trying to escape from the material world.²⁴

The world depicted in Soundings exists in a setting and space distinct from those of any other Interiors prints. The architecture, derived from the Hotel Ritz in London, provides a vast open space for all the seated, standing and moving figures to play out their respective roles. However, the artist pushes and pulls this space almost beyond its pragmatically credible limits, forward and back. The huge aquarium, the water line reaching very nearly to the top of the print, appears to be in front of the picture plane,

but the seated artist stares out at the presumed subjects of his drawing, who logically would not be inside the aquarium with the fish, and therefore occupy a space on the opposite side of the tank. The reverse lettering on the plate glass window reading "Gaffe Florian" adds another plane, and hence another layer of space: to which side of the aquarium is this window? Since the lettering reads backward as one looks at the print, it must be read correctly to those persons inside the print, who are already inside Florian's Cafe. Is the viewer inside or outside, or is he seeing this whole scene reflected in a mirror? Finally, in the distance, a floor-to-ceiling plate glass window encloses another aquarium with a family of whales, gliding gracefully through the water. Because adult whales are immense, the viewer is made to feel that the space is far deeper than is possible in this architectural context. That is, the whales look so tiny and distant that the space is pushed back farther psychologically than could be achieved mechanically, through perspective construction.

Finally, the gondolas at the far left, just forward of the whale tank, add yet another irony. They are not actually in a canal, but rather they are floating on the floor plane. Can this interior environment also be under water? Are all the people and their contemporary world, grand, filled with history and traditions, in imminent danger of drowning, of succumbing to forces they cannot understand, much less control?²⁵ The



Interiors VII: The Train from Munich

question, unanswerable here, recalls comparable questions and issues raised by Hotel Paradise Cafe, and it points directly to the central theme of the culminating Interiors print, The Train from Munich.

INTERIORS VII: THE TRAIN FROM MUNICH, 1990 - 1991, 20 x 35.5"

Evolved over a period of fifteen months, The Train from Munich was the result of Peter Milton's conscious decision to produce a work with an iconographic coherence as yet unachieved in the Interiors, focusing specifically on the horror of the Holocaust, the central theme of this, his most complex and profoundly intense work to date. Milton learned of the catastrophic events of the era at an early age, but was more directly touched by their magnitude in his adult life.²⁶ His wife, Edith, is Jewish and managed to make it out of Germany as a child in 1939, just as the storm of Nazism and Jewish persecution was spreading its poisonous cloud over Europe.

Perhaps because the print is so emphatically iconographic in its focus, Milton constructed a composition that is very compact, the space very finite and palpable: a train station with a central structure containing a waiting room with a window and a doorway to a tunnel, a shallow foreground space with stairways to the left and right, an area with waiting trains at left and finally a distant view in the upper right corner beyond the station. Within this tightly constructed staging area, the players enact the drama that gives The Train from Munich its gripping power.

There is no seated figure in the foreground of the print. People climb the stairs from the left and descend the stairs at right. To the left of the window a standing male figure with a dog and to the right of the door a doorman together frame the central area, which is the focal point of the print. In the window of the waiting room, an adolescent girl looks out: she is Edith in 1939; she escaped in time.²⁷ Opposite her a tall melancholy male figure stands, contemplating her. He is Otto Frank, the father of Ann Frank, his image derived from the famous Arnold Newman photograph. His daughter, tragically, did not escape. And in the back of the same room, or perhaps reflected in the window, looking into the print, the seated male figure who first appeared in Interiors I meditates and broods over the meaning of all the things that have transpired. Now he serves a different purpose than in Family Reunion. No longer in the foreground to introduce the

Interiors, he is relegated to the background, less conspicuous, as though the events have taken over and become the more tangible and meaningful images, and he has fulfilled his purpose.

The man with the leashed dog next to the window is Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who was responsible for saving thousands of Hungarian Jews from certain extermination and who ironically disappeared himself, probably into a Siberian labor camp after the war.²⁸ Milton referred to this figure as "the heart of the print," and in light of the juxtaposition of Wallenberg's image with the two in the waiting room, his presence is truly poignant. He and his dog, as well as the doorman to the right are turned to face the unseen (to the viewer) figures and the dogs descending the stairs.

The doorman, modeled on Marcel Duchamp, was described by the artist as "unfair revenge . . . for the escapades of DADA, Mona Lisa moustaches, urinals-as-sculpture," and the like, and on that level interjects a very wry humor into the print's very serious and very dark tone. At another level Duchamp embodies French-ness, and his appeasing, almost intolerably ingratiating gesture toward the person coming down the stairs is Milton's comment on the Vichy government's attitude of appeasement, virtually welcoming the Nazis as liberating heroes, and its willingness to collaborate with them. Yet even that Duchamp figure appears very vulnerable and subject to destruction: he is thin and fragile looking and partially transparent, beginning to dematerialize. Moreover, he is in the direct path of that train in the tunnel and may be obliterated in a flash.

Actually all those in the station are in peril, including the flock of white doves in the foreground, about to be attacked by the snarling dog on the leash; at least they are free to take flight, perhaps to escape the menace. The birds fly out into the viewer's space; they cause a distraction. They are the counterparts to the fish in Soundings. The birds find themselves in a kind of tank as well, oppressive, dark, smoky, sooty, from which they must find a way out before disaster strikes.

In the terminal to the left an air of trancelike lethargy pervades the area. The train cars are empty, but we see men in uniforms — are they trainmen? guards? — and beyond the cars rows of people's legs. A group of three boys watches what we cannot see. The smoke fills the terminal, creating an oppressive atmosphere that magnifies the sleep-laden character of that part of the print. The train cars begin to suggest

deportation, and in that context the steam that fills the air and the sooty, acid smoke take on even more ominous overtones. Yet, however disturbing these evocations, everyone in the terminal area is either oblivious or fast asleep: the Magritte-like figure in the bowler hat, the Koudel-ka gypsy above the sleeping dog, even Paul Klee, the furthest sleeping man. Are they naturally asleep, or have they been robbed of consciousness, or do they refuse to see what is happening around them?

Beyond the descending dogs in the stairway, in the upper corner one glimpses a tiny cityscape with a viaduct under which a procession of military banners evokes the pomp of Third Reich rallies and of Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will. Dürer's equestrian warrior from his Knight, Death and the Devil engraving, depicted as a statue here, takes on ominous overtones. Everything will be overrun, turned into an inferno ("Cafe Dante" enhances that evocation), and already the vicious dogs, expressing the attributes of their masters, charge down the stairs. Some have made it into the tunnel behind the obsequious doorman. One is even on the threshold of the waiting room. But one element remains, and it is the most threatening, the most terrifying of all, the train from Munich, what Milton calls the juggernaut in the tunnel, its headlights already ablaze: "It seems poised in time, unmoving. But only for the moment."

The artist's own words most eloquently sum up the meaning of The Train from Munich and provide a strong clue to the broader meaning of the Interiors as a collective entity:

"For many of us the blackness that fell during the time of the Third Reich has redefined the boundaries of humanity. It revealed a depth which, once seen, is always there and informs everything. The Train from Munich is specific and in some ways personal. But I intend its images of smoke, descending steps, disappearing figures, of sleep and blindness to have a much more general application. They not only evoke the historical past, which has by now assumed mythic dimensions, but point toward any time when we allow darkness to prevail through our own free choice to be blind."

Peter Milton concurs that the Interiors constitute his most important achievement to date and that The Train from Munich is the most successful print he has yet produced. However, he unhesitatingly rejects the suggestion that he has created his magnum opus. "No; it's something I'm still looking for, a quest for something that I hope is still there to be found. I don't know exactly what it is; it's the illusion that keeps

pushing me along, it's being after something, and each next work may be the one in which I find it, but it never is, so I push on to the next one. For me the magnum opus is still out there somewhere." The Interiors bear witness to this quest, as well as the unending struggle to achieve it, and Soundings most explicitly articulates both the artist's struggle to create and his as yet unfulfilled search for the "great image," the magnum opus.

While The Train from Munich comes closest so far to achieving the artist's elusive quest, it is an achievement born out of struggle and repeated frustration and self doubt. "It was a devilishly hard print to make. I'd lose my moorings fairly often, the composition would lose its focus, I lost my justification for doing it, because I knew I had no business dealing with that subject if I couldn't measure up to it, so that put a terrible burden on me. ... It was an incredible struggle. Now everything fits in place but much of the final print resulted from disasters to the plate."

The strength of the Interiors prints, as much as it is due to their iconographic content, grows out of Peter Milton's broader preoccupations as an artist and printmaker, and these are brought into focus in these prints with a greater cohesiveness, intensity and sophistication than ever before.

"The thing I've been after is to work at as many levels as possible, and every one of the prints tries to do that. As the sequence develops the complexity increases significantly, the number of things happening and the ways they can be read: the spatial level, the dramatic level, the surface level, the level of working with the contemporary sensibility ... to make a meaningful statement with this art form ... These are the questions I turn over in my mind as I do the prints, in an attempt to find more levels of meaning than I would any other way. I don't know if I come to any great conclusions about these things, but in the tremendous time I spend working on everything I do, I cannot help but think about all these things, so there can't help but be more than a formal or technical statement but rather all the levels of meaning we've discussed."

Along with these levels of meaning that have been the artist's pervasive goals, the preoccupation that permeates the Interiors and all Milton's prints is the one so central and universal it tends to be taken for granted and to remain un-mentioned: the artist's sense of joy in drawing and exhilaration in the development of the actual printed image, in spite of all the struggle and setbacks along the way. "I've always seen an ongoing dialogue between drawing and print-making. My favorite stage in making prints is when I am hunched over the plate and working directly on 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."²⁹ That primacy of touch is an important key to the thematic, technical and pictorial strengths that punctuate and crown the Interiors and the universe encompassed within that monumental cycle.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Kneeland McNulty, Peter Milton; Complete Etchings 1960 - 1976. Boston, Impressions Workshop, 1977.
2. Five works from the 1960's were published in two states, each edition counted separately by McNulty in arriving at the total of 97 prints. Also, the portfolio The Jolly Corner, published in 1971, contained 21 separate plates, each counted toward the total figure.
3. McNulty, pp. 136 - 137.
4. Theodore F. Wolff, Introduction to the catalogue, Peter Milton; Prints and Drawings, New York, J. Szoke Gallery, 1984, pp. unnumbered.
5. References to the artist's recollections, comments and direct quotes not otherwise documented are from a tape-recorded conversation I had with Peter Milton at his home and studio in Frankestown, New Hampshire, June 12 and 13, 1992.
6. Admitting to a fascination for the number seven, Milton pointed out the fact that he had grouped his prints in sequences of seven earlier. The Jolly Corner Suite contains 21 prints, subdivided into three sequences of seven prints each.
7. Milton elaborates on his use of this compositional device: "Very often I set up two different subjects within a pictorial space, and I'll have the subject of the print really be the tension between them. If they're on either side of the piece, it creates a hole in the middle visually but not psychologically, To counter that I'll set a single figure in, to one side, off center."
8. Milton noted his attraction to this photograph by Newman was due to the unique effect of two light sources from opposite directions, creating a dark band down the center of the man's face.
9. The artist recalls that he and his sisters were very close as children, especially the

- sister stricken with polio. "... but her illness came down like a great wall that was almost impenetrable. What happened to that relationship remains extremely painful [to me] and, unconsciously perhaps, those feelings are built into the print."
10. Milton remembers having had "intense dreams of bodies falling from the sky," and finds a parallel in D. M. Thomas' novel, The White Hotel [which] uses "this same image as a metaphor for the Holocaust. It was when I was at the boys' school that I first learned of the death camps. I do believe I was making this connection consciously . . . but maybe at that point I needed to keep the true meaning secret."
 11. Milton's decision to number Stolen Moments as Interiors II and Time with Celia as III, even though the latter was, by and large, completed first, was a purely visual judgment. When hung side by side in the designated sequence, Interiors II and III appear to be illuminated from a single light source, an unseen window in the center, so that a symmetry is created by the diagonal bands of light projected onto the back wall plane in the two prints.
 12. The artist was consciously experimenting with Cubist devices here, not only in articulating the Celia figure, but in the spatial organization as well. "In Time with Celia and also Stolen Moments I deliberately attempted to limit the space to the shallow depth one finds in Cubism. Yet, greater space is implied, for we can move up the stairs in Time with Celia and around the corner in Stolen Moments."
 13. Milton pointed out that Celia is an anagram for Alice.
 14. This motif was derived from the Milton drawing Inner City, 1981, in which the hands were reaching to pull down a shade to cover up an orgy taking place below.
 15. The model for this seated woman was a photograph of Dorothy Thomas, a photographer and also the biographer of Alfred Stieglitz. Milton observed, "She had a wonderfully vulnerable face, which attracted me very much and seemed very appropriate for this image."
 16. The ambiguity of this male figure was deliberate. Looking closely at the form, one can see a third foot, providing a logical, pragmatic explanation: there are two standing figures so aligned that all one sees of the farther ^figure is his foot and his head looking out at us. Milton clarifies: "I'd like you to be able to look at this and say there are two people there and they're perfectly ordinary, but it feels like a strange two headed apparition. That sense of the duality of nature is something I recognize in myself, and is also a part of the human condition. One is always fighting different aspects of one's nature, a struggle going on constantly in all of us."
 17. Milton creates another tantalizing enigma here, implying two spatial readings. The viewer is normally understood to be outside the plate glass window, looking

- into the huge interior space, but since the lettering on the glass is reversed, the viewer must be inside, the lettering being meant to be read from the other side, the outside.
18. On another level, Milton was fascinated by the fact that Elysée, when the lettering is reversed as on the plate glass, looks similar to Ulysses, and that led to the literary allusion. It attempts to juxtapose the Judeo-Christian tradition (Elysée = Paradise in U and New Testament terms) and the Classical heritage (Greco-Roman mythology) in our culture. The artist added that "the James Joyce reference was thrown in for free."
 19. In an interview conducted by Elizabeth Peak at the Franz Bader Gallery, Washington, D. C., on the occasion of the publication of Water Music, Oct. 19, 1988, Milton spoke at some length about the frequent references to music in his images and titles, and the analogy between the larger scope of his work and music. "... music is basically geometric in the sense of having coherence in rhythm and interval . . . ; music is mathematical in the way it works, and the way the emotional response is produced through a mathematical ground point is a strong connection with my own work. Music is what keeps me going, is what gives me spiritual food more than any other single thing."
 20. Milton described the image of the man as "a combination of me and this person in a photo by Andre Kertesz I used. Literally I was thinking of the man with the monkey teaching a class on evolution, and the girls are his students who happen to be more at home with the subject than he is. They have become completely inattentive (their books are floating in the water), one girl plays with a fish, and they enjoy . . . being totally free. It's the wistful game we all play at times, where we wish we could be what we imagine totally natural life would be, which, being complex human beings, is never possible, so there's a kind of nostalgia for this idea of what it'd be like to be totally free." (Interview at Franz Bader Gallery, Oct. 19, 1988).
 21. Milton points out that Wagner is depicted submerged in the Rhine, a visual joke perhaps not too obvious.
 22. The artist's attempt to address this question brought these observations: "It raises the question of whether I use my work as a way of making myself real in the sense that I don't feel that I actually am, because of some self esteem problems, and so on. In Water Music I'm much more light-hearted and affectionate toward myself, and in Soundings I'm really acknowledging my insecurities. Thus one can see these two prints as an examination of .myself from two opposite attitudes, a kind of symmetry."
 23. Milton indicated that the reference to Mahler was intentional, and that two of the musicians in the ensemble were derived from photos of the Alban Berg Quartet.
 24. The dance motif occurs in different guises throughout the Interiors series, most

overtly in Hotel Paradise Cafe, Stolen Moments and Time with Celia, as well as here. In Water Music, the undulating patterns of the water, and the repeated shadows of the transparent doorman in The Train from Munich can also be described as having distinct dancelike rhythms.

25. The gondolas and the reference to the Cafe Florian on the plate glass window resulted from recollections of a recent trip to Venice. The artist indicated that "a metaphor presents itself here: Venice is a city that's sinking, and [there is] the implication that our whole civilization and man's environment is also sinking. It's rather frightening when you realize that you're looking into a pocket of air space that's inundated, way below the aquarium in front and the tank with the huge whales in back."
26. "I learned of the horrors of the Holocaust during my adolescence and I was incredibly horrified, and somehow I've never quite been able to shake it..."
27. The Train from Munich is so complex iconographically that on completing the print the artist felt compelled, for the first time, to provide a four page written statement, "Some Notes on The Train from Munich," attempting to offer insights into the genesis of the work, explain its content., pull the diverse elements together, and thereby enhance the impact of the print. Many of the insights in the current discussion of the print, as well as several direct quotations, derive from this statement.
28. Milton evolved the train station from photographs he had taken of the railroad station in Budapest some years earlier. The choice of Wallenberg in this Hungarian setting came much later, something the artist calls "a fortuitous coincidence."
29. Peter Milton, Introductory statement on the drawings for Henry James' Aspern Papers, 1992, p. 13.

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