PETER MILTON: GOING FARTHER, GOING DIGITAL

Brian Cohen

Marjorie Cohn, Emerita Curator of Prints at the Fogg Art Museum, speculated about what Rembrandt might have done had he known about aquatint (which wasn't invented until right around the time of his death). We won't ever know, as technology doesn't move at the pace we might wish for, even retrospectively. For the consummate engraver Peter Milton, by dint of longevity, the accelerated pace of technology, and above all the single-mindedness of his artistic preoccupations, the right tool did come along. Since 2008, when Peter was already in his 70s, he has used a computer to develop his imagery, but if you ask him, his artistic preoccupations have flowed steadily and consistently for over 50 years, and haven't changed a bit.

Save for this recent kismet of technology, Peter had been pretty much always out of step with what's going on around him. Peter describes being in the Yale MFA program in the late 50s when Abstract Expressionism was in full swing. That movement glorified the broad, autographic gesture writ large. Peter's work from this time nominally acknowledges the graphic language of Abstract Expressionism, though he was not interested in the emotional intensity, existential drama, nor grandiloquent gesture and scale of the dominant idiom. From his early work, Peter showed a predilection for delicate textures, repeated marks, and tiny incidents. One interesting feature of his early prints is the encroachment of what appears to be foul biting, usually unintended surface noise, that Peter has in fact laid down deliberately to act as an accretion of marks and minute gestures, and which prefigure his future mark-making.

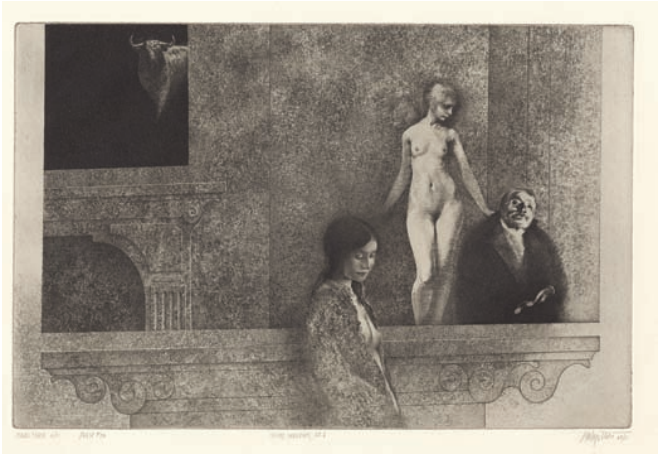
Peter describes his way of working in the 1960s. He would set up a rough collage of documentary photographs from which he drew directly onto the copper plate with lift ground. In *The Garden* this photographic collage served as a model he observed and drew directly from, but did not yet transfer directly to the plate. Later, he began to draw in ink on transparent Mylar instead of directly on the plate, assembling them into different collage layers that he would photographically transfer onto the copper via a light sensitive ground. He created in the Mylar a granular textured field by offsetting a mottled layer of ink onto the film. At this point in the development of his work the trace of his hand all but disappeared, leaving a minute gestural grain, a topographical matrix, throughout most of the plate.

For *The Jolly Corner* series comprised of twenty-one images, Peter developed a method of working from a few large Mylar drawings that he would reconfigure, repeat, and transfer to different positions on different plates. He used this approach for all his subsequent work on copper. He often works within a series, and this appropriation, reassignment, and variation of imagery gives his work a sense of evocation and echo, as well as dislocation, from one print to another. For an artist who can spend as much as a full year developing a single etching, this approach also allowed him to be much more efficient and prolific.

Peter describes himself as a "collage artist," though he says this with some ambivalence. He explains that this

term belies the passion for seamless realization that he nurtures (and also fails to acknowledge the highly developed drawing skills beneath all his work). Underlying the extraordinary control, resolution, and detail of his work in copper is an improvisatory approach of layering, repositioning, echoing, definition, and disappearance. His prints are remarkably erudite, massively psychologically overdetermined, and surprisingly, not very calculated. Recently interviewed by J.R.U. Rotstein, Peter said, "when I begin an image, and even when I'm halfway on the road to finishing it, I have very little sense of how it will end. With luck, something happens, an improbable connection occurs, and magically, everything suddenly makes sense. Leaving open the possibility of the unexpected is exactly where the art in the artist resides." He roams freely among icons and images from novels, movies, historic transportation, natural phenomena, portraits of celebrated artists (including himself), visual puns, birds, dogs, wolves, dancers, fairies, dirigibles, and characters from film, art, and literature such as Rudolph Valentino, Marcel Proust, Degas, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, Georges de la Tour, and Nijinsky. Peter shows a spiritual kinship to the ideas and iconography of the first decade of the 20th century, and a nearly obsessive relationship with Henry James, whose approach to consciousness, perception, and point of view Peter's work parallels. Though novelistic, a narrative thread won't be found in these prints. Time is suspended; scale is recalibrated; he is not driven to further narrative logic, and eschews a settled notion of coherence and order. The fractures, disjunctions, and odd recurrences evoke a sense of playfulness and discovery, along with a kind of benevolent haunting in which luminous forms (a bird, or a white shirt, gaslight, whisperings of smoke and fog) enter and retreat within architectural space with the unpredictability of subatomic particles. It is working within this sense of unpredictability, and by subverting timing and gravitation and the basic Renaissance premise of viewing one place at one time, that Peter discovers, through iteration after iteration, a logic and connectedness all his own: "I exist in a multiple and random world and the focus of my work is to impose coherence—a sort of logic—on that randomness, all without destroying any underlying sense of the ever-surprising and profoundly unaccountable nature of my, or of anyone else's, reality. . ." His incongruities and artifices again remind us that he is in control, and that logic is not a given but a construct and a discovery in *Points of Departure II: Nijinsky Variations*, *1996*.

Peter surprised me by asserting that he was always willing to make very significant changes even on the copper plate, yet the apparent extraordinary seamlessness of his printed surfaces show none of the changes of mind, the frustrations, the taxing toil or residue of scraping and burnishing a copper plate and resurfacing the metal. To get a sense of the variations of Peter's prints from state to state, look at his website, www.petermilton.com under Animations. It's stunning what he was willing to add to and take away from the copper. His insistence on pushing a plate to an unpredicted, unfound, and improvised conclusion caused him to invest so much time and effort into a plate that the work itself began to get tired and Peter frustrated. He began to feel that he had learned all he could. The copper no longer contained mysteries, nor was he wedded for life



to the conceits of the traditional print (the limited edition, the bravura of mastery, the craftsmanship), despite having few, if any, equals in this regard.

In the mid-2000s, some friends suggested that a computer might be a great way to organize his visual material. He took them up on the idea, teaching himself Adobe Photoshop with a little help from a young geek. After a year of frustration and stumbling, in 2008 he produced his first all-digital print, *Finished Sight Lines 1*: *Tracking Shot*. Peter discovered that the layering approach of Photoshop was the perfect tool to exercise his collaging impulse, extending his former practice of placing and regrouping his drawings on Mylar. Working at 1200 ppi, Peter creates up to 3,000 layers, altering, redrawing, eliminating, and moving imagery much as he'd done in copper. Peter is omnivorous as ever in appropriating imagery, browsing through or scanning from books, the Internet, and his own photographs and earlier drawings and intaglio prints.

Peter prints his computer-developed images both as digital prints on paper and on translucent film called Duratrans for display on LED lightboxes. The latter prints have the enviable ability to produce actual light. For an artist who has worked with the reflected white of printing paper against black ink to create images of unsurpassed luminosity, the enhanced radiance of the backlit prints is astounding.

When we sat down in his studio last summer Peter was digitizing and reworking a series of drawings he had done in the 1980s based on Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*. One especially luminous interior was newly occupied by the figure of Henry James, who broke the frame, defying spatial logic, and went about making sure the whole visual system didn't fall in place too neatly. Peter's wide-ranging imagery, repetition, revisiting, and variation of particular motifs and thematic threads, and his extraordinary concern for detail are remarkably nourished in his digital work. Carefully controlled harmonics, sly dissonances, and the contrast of crisp edges against dissolving passages still distinguish his work, as these qualities have for over fifty years. Nonetheless things have changed; there is no matrix, no tangible surface to work from, and as such no tactile character to the surface and no depth to the ink especially in unrelieved areas of grey. The disjunctive imagery seems a little too disjointed, as if not every form entirely belongs to the same world. A few things take a little getting used to, such as the availability of different size prints from the same image, which is of course impossible in intaglio.

Beyond the shift to vastly different input and output, digital manipulation, and LED presentation, Peter has contended with the adjustment of the market and the critical response to this work, which has ranged from accusations of betraying tradition to a guarded admiration for learning new tricks at his age. For someone never really in step with the theories and movements in the art world, he is intrigued and maybe a bit surprised by his newfound synergy with today's digital media.

I asked him if he had any nostalgia for working in copper and he said he does miss the intimate touch and earthy physicality of intaglio, and perhaps something of its risk and immediacy. He quickly added that he is engrossed in a new process and all the surprises it offers. Peter then urged me to hold onto my engraving tools, reminding me that young people these days are digitally fluent, but the archaic skills in metal are hard-won and seldom practiced now. As a person who created prints of monumental power, mystery, and distinction from copper plates, he arrived at a place of fatigue and frustration after decades of painstaking and prolonged work. Digital technology renewed his vision, fueled his imagination, and furthered his expression. He has no misgivings about going farther.

Writer's Information

Brian D. Cohen is a printmaker, painter, educator, and writer. In 1989 he founded Bridge Press to further the association and integration of visual image, original text, and book structure. Artist's books and prints by Brian D. Cohen have been shown in over forty individual exhibitions, including a retrospective at the Fresno Art Museum, and in over 200 group shows. Cohen's books and etchings are held by major private and public collections throughout the country. He was first-place winner of major international print competitions in San Diego, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC and the Prix de Print. His essays on the arts and education are a feature of *Art in Print* and *Parenthesis* magazines and the Arts and Culture section of the Huffington Post.

www.bridge-press.com

Image Documentation

Peter Milton with LED lightbox image En Plein Air, 34"x21", 2016, photo credit: Britain Hill

Tracking Shot, copper, 36"x23," 2008

Nijinsky Variation, first State, copper, 38"x24", 1996

Nijinsky Variation, copper, 38"x24", 1996

Jolly Corner III:6, copper, 15"x10", 1971

The Garden, second stage, copper, 24"x18", 1968