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Jeffrey Milstein

FLYING HIGH

AND ALWAYS COMPOSED

By Paul Slaughter



Looking at great photography is a visual joy, and at times, an emotional experience. We often measure a photograph's strength by comparing it to works of the masters—Irving Penn for fashion and product details; Ansel Adams for landscapes; Robert Frank for photojournalism; and Arnold Newman for portraits.

With today's digital cameras it's easy to take a good photograph, but to create a large portfolio of great work is a different matter. A case in point is the work of Jeffrey Milstein. Milstein has compiled several portfolios of work—including ones on aircrafts, Cuba, industrial archeology, Palm Springs and black boxes. Many of his images remind me of good architectural drawings—they are clean, informative and uncluttered.

Milstein—who currently has a studio in Kingston, New York, was born in the Bronx to Russian immigrant parents and then grew up in Los Angeles—says he has always been interested in anything artistic, especially drawing and painting. In college he traveled around Europe taking photos, but says he never wanted to be a photographer. “When I was thirteen and graduated junior high school my dad gave me an 8mm movie camera, and the first thing I did was go to the airport and film airplanes. I realize I started really early.”

After receiving a professional architecture degree from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1968, Milstein practiced architecture in the 1970s and 80s, and eventually joined a small, award-winning architecture firm in New York City. His burgeoning interest in graphic design led him to open a note card com-



For this former architect, photography is all about framing, exclusion and what he chooses to capture.



ALL PHOTOS © JEFFREY MILSTEIN

British Air Boeing 747, from "Aircraft" series.

pany called Paper House Productions in 1983, which he sold in 2000, to concentrate on photography.

Though never formally trained in photography, Milstein says he took a course by Jay Maisel over a weekend in Santa Fe. "At the end of the week I started to see photography differently and I wanted to see if I could do it, actually make a name for myself in that world."

As he moved forward on that path, he took his background with him. Says Milstein: "I think my photographic work reflects the style of architectural drawings. It's very organized, balanced and symmetrical."

Airliners in Flight

Milstein's portfolio titled "AirCraft: The Jet as Art," currently on view now through November 25, 2012, at the Smithsonian Na-

tional Air and Space Museum, is a visual treat. Thirty-three photographic archival-pigment prints, featuring large-scale images of airliners in flight shot at the precise moment when the aircraft is overhead, combine Milstein's passion for form, symmetry, color and flight. The photographs also open up conversations about the complexity and beauty of modern technology.

"They are an attempt to share my sense of wonder," Milstein says. "Watching a mammoth Boeing 747 gliding overhead on the way to touch down never ceases to amaze me, but they are also a meditation on how technology can be a double-edged sword when things go wrong."

Standing at the end of a runway—usually at Los Angeles International Airport—Milstein likes to photograph each aircraft



"Black Boxes"

toshop to create the white space around the airplane prints.)

As an extension of the Aircraft portfolio, Milstein started photographing black box flight recorders (left). "Some recorders survive in pristine condition, while others reveal the signs of the tragedy that brought them into collision with the earth or sea," Milstein writes on his Web site, describing the work. "These inert pieces of steel hold the key to understanding a tragedy. They are poured [*sic*] over by investigators to discover the cause of accidents and the hope of preventing future ones. While visually direct and clean, they are charged with emotion. For families and survivors these small boxes carry powerful last words and sometimes the only link to understand what happened."

Of all his fine-art portfolios, Milstein says his Aircraft portfolio presented the most location problems, because the police get nervous when they see people hanging around an airport with cameras. After 9/11, he stopped taking airplane photos for a full year.

Cuba 1 and 2

There have been many portfolios of Cuban life shot by photographers, but in his "Cuba 1" and "Cuba 2" portfolios, Milstein delves deep. His focus on street life in Havana, Cienfuegos, Santiago and Trinidad provide a rare glimpse into a country that has remained inaccessible to many in the United States. Wandering alone through the streets of Cuba with a handheld camera and an open mind, Milstein found beauty and order in the energy of the place. He met many warm and generous people who allowed him to photograph them and invited him into their homes and places of work. Milstein says, "In Cuba, I was taken with the richness and beauty of the faded architecture that was once so grand and opulent. The decay and sculptural forms within speak to layers of history, and the inevitably of change. No matter how hard we try, everything, even our own bodies, slowly decay. And yet, it can be very beautiful. This work reflects on change, while celebrating passionate ideals and the energy and light of a country in perpetual transition."

Capture, Printers and Paper

Milstein's first camera was an Argus C3, then an Asahi Pentax 35mm SLR with a 50mm lens. He has used a Linhof and a Noblex but today shoots primarily with a Canon EOS 5D Mark II and a Contax 645 with a Phase One P65 back. He shoots RAW and develops his images in Photoshop and Capture One. He uses an X-Rite Pulse system to profile his monitor and printers. He also does his own printing, up to 50 x 50 inches, on Canon Image PROGRAF 9000 and 8300 printers. He prefers Epson's Premium Luster paper.

before it lands, watching it from below as they streak past at speeds up to 175 miles per hour. "You have to find the right spot underneath the flight path," he says, "Not too far away and not too close. The plane can't be coming in too high or too low, and if the wing dips a little bit to correct for wind, the symmetry will be unequal. It is just a matter of finding the 'sweet spot' so that the aircraft is lined up exactly in the camera's frame." (He used masking and removal techniques in Pho-