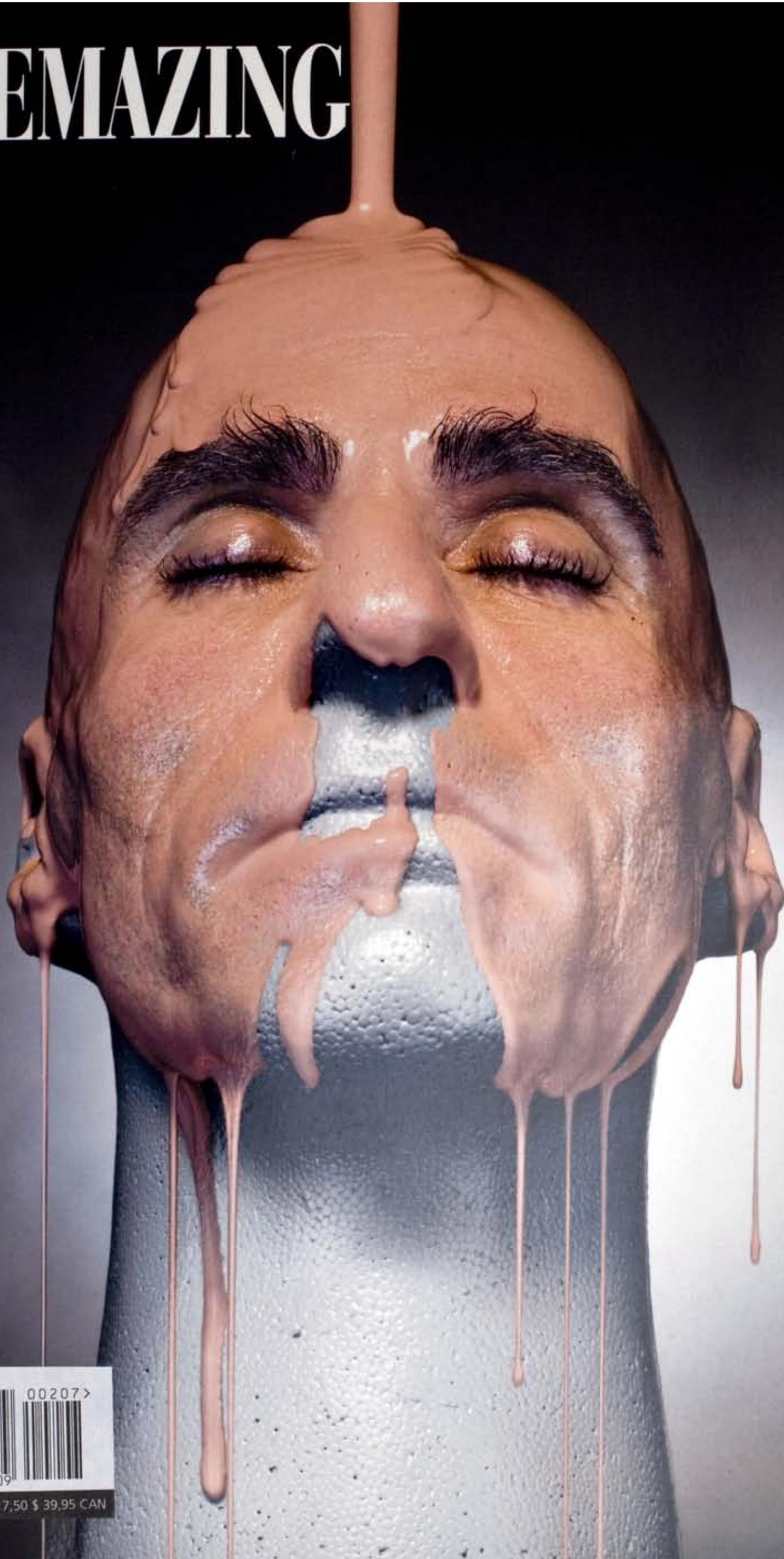


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# Jeffrey Milstein

## The Jet as Art

It's rare that any of us have the chance to get "up close and personal" to the underbelly of an aircraft. The huge winged metal flying machines that take us on our holidays and move us around the globe are now often the subject of heated debate about our carbon footprint, noise pollution or terrorism. Very few take the time to think about these creatures for the wonders that they are. The average Boeing 747 takeoff weight is around 875,000 pounds and carries over 900 people. Stop for a minute and think about that.

I do not personally understand how this phenomenon happens, but it has never ceased to amaze me. Because of this I have enormous respect for the human achievement that aeronautical engineering represents. The philosophical impact of aeronautics on our culture is unmistakable. There is perceptibly a deep aesthetic symbolism in their appeal. However, I have never considered the structure of an aircraft with such intensity until I saw Jeffrey Milstein's impressive photographs.

He combines the appeal of the jets to both enthusiasts and art lovers alike. By isolating the aircraft out of its environmental context we can pay more attention to the physicality of its structure and form, which in turn accentuates the beauty of these winged miracles. Milstein's photographs are taken whilst the jet is in flight. The resulting image has extraordinary characteristics. At first glance there is the recognition of the plane as an object on a white surface, then comes the acceptance of the reality of the jet followed by a compulsion to get as close as possible to scrutinise the detail. The fact that the image is taken whilst the plane is airborne with the light reflecting upon its surface gives the impression that it is somehow alive. The display of the underside of an aircraft

is not dissimilar to that of butterflies pinned onto a board, like specimens. Despite their obvious demise, butterfly wings do not discolour and it is so easy to picture them moving in ones minds eye. Unlike stuffed animals, insect specimens do not require glass eyes, which always divulge their lifelessness. Insects somehow retain the potential to move or spring to life even though we know they are deceased and cannot. Milstein's jets have the propensity to do this also. By extricating the jets – with attention to purity of form – Milstein follows the typographical approach favoured by photographers such as Bernd and Hiller Becher.

The Bechers' objective philosophy sought to depict the world in truthful terms with no interference from artistic fancies of the photographer. Milstein's images are less dry than that of the Bechers as their often bright, even loud colours amplify them. They scream to be viewed. His depictions from underneath, the side and front on are more open, less conservative. They allow the viewer to focus on the detail without the distraction of its surroundings.

**Laura Noble:** When did your enthusiasm for aircraft begin?

**Jeffrey Milstein:** When I was about seven, I read a book about a boy who got a ride in a biplane with a barnstormer. From then on I dreamed about flying and I still remember that book. Growing up I built and flew model planes and read airplane magazines.

**LN:** Do you remember the first photograph you took of an aircraft?

**JM:** I think that the first camera I had was a Keystone 8mm movie camera when I was about 14. I went out to

the airport and made movies of the planes flying overhead as they were landing. It is funny, I never thought about that, but those photos were really prescient.

**LN:** How did the genesis of the aircraft project come about and the process to make it happen? I suspect making it happen was quite complicated.

**JM:** As a child I loved to go to the end of the runway in LA, where I grew up, and have the planes fly very low right overhead on landing. I loved the feeling of being so close. It was scary too.

When I started to photograph seriously, I had a vision of making really large photos of the planes from the front as they are ominously coming at you. As I took the photos, I realised that they were beautiful objects at the moment that they passed right overhead. The challenge was to get the detail I wanted at the exact moment, stopping the motion in perfect focus. The first ones didn't have as much detail. It is only with the latest high-end digital cameras that I am finally able to get the quality images that I had imagined.

**LN:** I presume that the weather conditions were key to making a successful image, did you have difficulty? What are the perfect conditions to take a good image?

**JM:** Well, yes weather conditions are important, but also the time year. In the middle of summer, for example, I cannot shoot aircraft that land in the middle of the day, because the sun is too high and causes flare. I have been shooting at LAX for so many years that I know all of the landing patterns of all of the different airlines. For some middle of the day shots I have to wait until winter. The ideal weather is cloudy bright, like a big bright light box.



LN: How many photographs in total did you have to take in total in order to collate this series?

JM: I usually go out expecting to spend four to six hours at a time during which I will shoot between 50-75 images. Out of that I might have a few, or no really good shots: the pilot has to be in exactly on course (any cross wind makes this a problem on landing); the plane's wings have to be exactly level at the moment when I shoot the picture; pilots are constantly making corrections using roll; and I need to have perfect timing, panning and focus. A lot of things have to come together...

LN: Could you tell me about the setup needed to capture these images? The process to find the right position must have been a mathematical one, was there an element of trial and error?

JM: This is a very thoughtful question and yes, you are exactly right about position. The distance is critical. I use a high-end 39MPXL medium-format digital back on a Contax 645 body, which I hand hold. The planes are going so fast when overhead I just have to pan with the movement and try to time the shutter exactly. I have used triangulation to estimate their altitude at the time I take the pictures, but mostly it was through trial and error that I found the best places.

LN: Is there a particular aircraft that you would like to photograph?

JM: Qantas has a Boeing 747, called "Walla Dreaming". It is painted like a giant Aboriginal folk art painting. It rarely comes to LAX and when it does it is usually so early that there is not enough light. I only saw it land once in good light and I was sadly not in position to get the picture.

LN: Do you have a personal favourite of the existing images, or is there one that was particularly difficult to capture?

JM: I really like them all. I like Southwest aircraft because they have some really colourful paint schemes. I used one on the cover of the book. Alaska Airlines has a Boeing painted like a giant salmon. But I also like the all white or silver ones like Air France or American Boeing 767s. They are more stark and abstract.

LN: How did your transition from being an architect to becoming a photographer manifest?

JM: I had never really thought about becoming a photographer. In high school I was into art. I loved drawing and painting. But I was warned against such nonsense and directed toward a profession – so I chose architecture. I always loved graphic design and in the mid-eighties started a design studio where I published a set of architectural note cards. They were a big hit, and I went on to develop a whole line of photographic note cards.

I started to take more photos, and took a photo class with Jay Maisel. That really sparked my interest. In

2000, I sold the design company, which had grown quite nicely, and decided to spend my time on my photography.

LN: Could you take me through the process of an image from the initial photograph to completion?

JM: After taking the photos, I download them to the computer for review. The best are "developed" in Photoshop. A mask has to be created to neutralise the background to a light grey. This can be quite time consuming. Then the usual digital spotting, colour balancing, and dodging and burning to bring out the features.

Other than removing the background I try to keep all elements true to the original.

LN: Are you interested in taking pictures of aircraft from a new angle, for example from above whilst the aircraft is on the ground for example? It would be a new angle for most people.

JM: Yes, I am working on other views. The book includes front and side views, and I am currently working on a new series of front and side views for my limited edition gallery prints. I am also expanding the series to include other flying craft like blimps, helicopters and private and military aircraft.

LN: How often do you fly yourself?

JM: Not as often as I should. Maybe once or twice a month. I am always so busy these days.

LN: What sort of aircraft to you fly?

JM: I have Beechcraft Bonanza F33A. It is a very classic single engine plane.

LN: In the book, Walter J. Boyne talks about his sadness regarding the "never ending process of replacement". Do you feel the same way?

JM: Well, yes and no. I get really excited when I see an old Boeing 707 or an even older DC3. There is a lot of nostalgia associated with the 1950s when these aircraft flew. But it is the order of things. New designs are quieter and more efficient. The old ones have to be retired to make room for the new models.

LN: Did you come across any hurdles trying to start this project with all the paranoia in the US regarding terrorism?

JM: Yes, I actually started photographing planes before 9/11. After 9/11, I stopped for about a year, before venturing out again. I think all photographers are finding it harder to photograph in certain public places these days. One of the reasons I use LAX as my preferred airport is that I feel there will be a little less paranoia there. Still, as soon as I start to set up, invariably a cop pulls up. I carry a press pass and copies of published work. Usually that satisfies them and they go off. Sometimes I have to find a different spot.

LN: When I first saw your work I couldn't help but

liken them to pinned butterfly specimens, do you see them in a similar way?

JM: Yes, I have actually used the exact same analogy myself. Pinned butterflies; they are also a kind of deadpan portrait series.

LN: How does your training as an architect help you with your work?

JM: I tend to photograph very "straight on" which if you think about it, is how architectural drawings describe things in plan an elevation. It is kind of abstract...

LN: You have only photographed airlines that pass through America, do you intend to expand on this series by photographing aircraft from Russia or the Middle East for example?

JM: If you mean photograph in Russia or the Middle East, probably not. I did get an Aeroflot plane recently, but it was a Boeing 767. I think that most countries today fly either Boeing or Airbus on international flights, so what you would get are the same planes with different paint jobs, which can be interesting also. Recently I have been shooting at other airports.

LN: How did the decision to omit the sky from the images come about? Was it a result of unifying the scale of the image as well as an aesthetic one?

JM: It happened that some of the pictures were taken on bright hazy days where the sky just kind of disappeared. I realized I liked the way it made the aircraft more of an object in space, almost like an architectural drawing.

LN: Is the extra technical information in the back of the book a nod to fellow enthusiasts or a key element to the completion of the series?

JM: I think that it wasn't really necessary in the sense of a "pure photographic book" but I found that people wanted to know more, and not just the aviation types; curious people. For example, aircraft in the book are not represented to a consistent scale. The only way that you could compare size would be to refer to the data. Now when you hear about some plane on the news you will know a little more of what they are talking about.

TEXT BY LAURA NOBLE

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