

Featured Articles



Jeffrey Milstein's studio on Wall Street in Kingston is filled with large-scale images of uplifted airplanes captured from the ground and airports photographed from the sky. Michael Bloom photo

Flight Patterns

The high-flying artistry of photographer Jeffrey Milstein

By Jeremiah Horrigan

MAYBE YOU'VE DONE IT. Or maybe you always wanted to do it. You were a kid and one day you gathered your courage and you went out and did it, worried you'd get caught but knowing it would be worth it, standing there in the weeds where you weren't supposed to be, waiting for the silver-bellied beast to come roaring down at you.

Jeffrey Milstein did it as often as he could. His was a California boyhood whose nostalgic essence was best captured in the movie "American Graffiti," George Lucas's affectionate re-creation of the early '60s, a time when teenagers tooled down the street in rumbling road beasts fueled by cheap gas, frustrated romantic dreams and long draughts of milkshakes from Mel's Drive-In.

The beasts of Milstein's boyhood weren't chopped-and-channeled Chevies but machines that packed a vastly more powerful punch: twin-engine Douglas DC-3s, friendly beasts that glided out of the skies at 180 miles an hour and onto the runway at Santa Monica Airport. Though those inside never noticed the skinny kid standing beneath their wings, those beasts captured Jeffrey Milstein's imagination once and for all.

So he swept out hangers at the airport in return for flying lessons when he was 13. He built and flew model airplanes. Got his flying license at 17. He left the ground and the world behind every chance he got.

But like so many teenage dreams, Milstein's got put on hold, the victims of everyday life. It would be another 40-plus years after he got his aviator's license before Jeffrey Milstein would turn his eyes backward and skyward, creating a flight plan that's culminated in his becoming the world's premier photographer of airplanes.

An architectural first

It's easy to imagine Milstein as a young man; at 69 years, he's as trim today as a teenager. When he speaks, especially about his love of flying, it's the voice of someone who's never lost touch with his younger self.

Milstein grew up in Los Angeles. His parents were Russian immigrants. His mother was a housewife and his father an entrepreneur and inventor.

Their son was the kid you went to school with who was always drawing and getting his work posted and praised by the teacher.

But as he grew up, Milstein's artistic bent was met by his parents' expectation that he pursue a career.

"OK," he remembers today with a shrug. "I liked architecture, so I enrolled and got my architecture degree at Berkeley."

By then, he was ready to "get out of Dodge." That meant moving to New York City, where, after a few scuffling years, he had his first architectural success not in the glossy pages of Architecture Digest but in the unfinished, homelier pages of a gone-but-not-forgotten magazine called Family Circle.

He sold a design for what he called a "bolt-together house" to the magazine in 1972. Eager to photograph it, the magazine fronted Milstein enough money to buy a bit of property in Woodstock and build his design.

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Guru of Glass

Michael Anchin, who creates high-end glass art in his studio in Willow, estimates that he has made some 250,000 pieces over the years.

Flight Patterns

Airplanes in flight have captured the imagination of Jeffrey Milstein since he was a child. Years later, he is the world's premier photographer of airplanes; his images have been displayed in such prestigious venues as the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

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Cars, Cuba and black boxes

You might get the impression that Jeffrey Milstein has his head buried in the clouds, whether he's shooting airplane underbellies from the ground or airports from the skies.

But Milstein also has an eye on the ground, some rarely seen ground: Cuba.

"It's such an unusual place," he said while paging through a copy of his book "Cuba: Photographs by Jeffrey Milstein" (Monacelli Press, 2010).

Cuba's isolation from Western society, coupled with its own particular and flavorsome political and cultural heritage, proved irresistible.

Milstein's fondness for order is

The magazine sold 25,000 copies of plans for his 280-square-foot house. Lately, it's been featured in books and magazines as a pioneering example of the so-called "tiny house movement."

"It's become a cult house," Milstein said, a wide grin of pleasure spreading across his face. "Google 'bolt-together house' and it'll come right up."

By the mid-1970s, Milstein was well and truly launched. His sense of creativity was settling into a mix of art and science. He'd found that sweet spot where he could make a living by being creatively engaged in a profession he enjoyed.

And the last creative realm he was thinking of exploring was photography.



The paper chase

By 1975, Milstein had moved to Woodstock, where he lives to this day. If he'd traded the city architect's steel and stone for a countryman's funkier materials, he was about to become involved in an even humbler medium: paper.

He started Paperhouse, a graphic design and high-end greeting card company. Though he didn't consider himself a businessman, he saw the company launched by himself and a 64 KB computer become one that eventually employed 20 people.

"Paperhouse took a lot out of me. We were doing very well, but in 2000, I decided to sell it."

While he was casting about for a way to exercise his creative needs, he thought first of painting and printmaking, never of photography.

"I'd done some photography over the years as part of Paperhouse," his voice trailing off into silence.

Then one day that same year Milstein took a class with commercial photographer Jay Maisel, considered one of the country's top Photoshop gurus. Milstein started attending photography fairs. One thing led to another and he decided "I'm gonna try this."

Saying those words, he spreads his arms to encompass his current lair, the former home of Yallum's Uptown Men's Store on Kingston's Wall Street. It's a space brimming with both the tools of his newfound trade and their large-scale, stunning results: still-life portraits of airplanes captured – on the fly – in exactly the same poses as his boyhood's DC-3s.

A wing of the Smithsonian

Milstein was fortunate, he says, in being able to find a niche in the commercial art world that had neither been explored nor presented in quite the way Milstein adopted. The grace and physical beauty of the planes whose portraits he has taken was immediately evident to the editors at Abrams, who published his book "Aircraft: The Jet as Art" in 2007. But it remained for a showing of his work at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum to demonstrate the startling power of his portraits. The Smithsonian was so high on his work it gave over an entire wing of the museum to his show and ran it for a year.

In his plane portraits, Milstein is still standing in the weeds at the end of a runway, except this time he's pointing a high-resolution camera at the sleek descendants of the DC-3 of his youth.

apparent here as well, particularly when he's photographing earthbound vehicles whose sleek aerodynamic lines echo America's long-ago romance with space-age design.

A section of the book highlights Cuban cars, which is to say, American cars that have survived and even thrived since the 1960 American embargo of the island.

Here you'll find colorfully customized, bulbous-fendered Fords and Chevies dating back to the late 1940s and later-model rocket-finned Plymouths.

The architectural aspect of these cars appeals to him, he said.

Another of Milstein's projects is difficult to categorize, though its connection to his aerial photography is obvious: his photographs of black box flight recorders.

Some of these somber – and rarely seen – objects have a story to tell, but not in so many words. Milstein said he never considered researching and publicizing the final messages contained in each box. The starkness of the images speaks loudly in Milstein's characteristic setting of absolute whiteness.

Some of the boxes are pristine. Others are battered and scorched. All hold heart-breaking secrets the observer can only guess at, and finally contemplate.

"It's a challenge getting a sharp image that way, getting it in focus," he said. "I usually get maybe two or three I can use."

After he digitally removes the background from his chosen image, the bellies of targets stand exposed against a pure white background.

The symmetry and purity of his images are sometimes compared to architectural drawings.

"I guess what I love about what I do is bringing symmetry and order to what I see. Life is so chaotic," he said.

Looking down

A number of successful museum shows and national and international magazine spreads have led Milstein to another creative crossroads: About two years ago, he stepped out of the weeds at runway's end and hopped aboard the objects of his desire. These days, he's looking down instead of up. The new targets of his camera's eye are airports.

Back in high school, he'd film the ground beneath his wings using an 8mm Keystone home movie camera his father had given him.

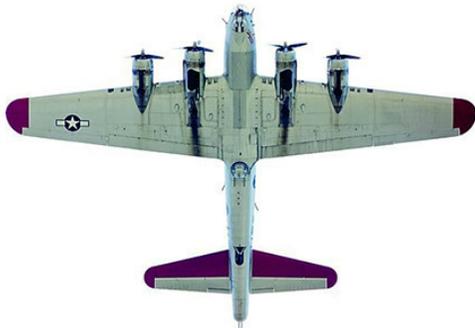
Going no-hands in the air isn't much more difficult, and decidedly easier, than going no hands on a bike or a Chevy, he said.

Where better to observe symmetry conquering chaos than staring down on airport runways radiating out from their passenger hubs into the cross-hatching roads of surrounding suburbs, images caught in magic-hour light, images at once clinically precise and magically inviting?

For those who remember it, "American Graffiti" came to an end not at Mel's but at a small nameless airport. The film's hero, Curt (Richard Dreyfuss) has failed to make earth-bound contact with his dream girl, the mysterious "blonde in the white T-Bird."

He says goodbye to his old way of life by boarding a plane. Looking down morosely from the air, he spots a lone white automobile tearing down a grid-like two-lane. He gives the barest of smiles.

Curt's hardly the first teenager to have escaped a predictable life by hopping aboard a plane. And as Jeffrey Milstein can tell you, he's far from being the last.



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