PUBLICATION

HOW TO MAKE GREAT PICTURES

ART OF THE HORSE

A top equine photographer shows how to capture majesty in motion

Secrets of a Master of Pattern and Perspective

6 Easy Steps for Sharper Shots

Tips for Shooting the Northern Lights
VIEW MASTER
Whether shooting from above, below, or on the ground, Jeffrey Milstein finds structure in our jumbled world

Text by Russell Hart; photos by Jeffrey Milstein

Most boys of Jeffrey Milstein’s generation were fascinated by airplanes. But few have followed that allure as far as he has, or made it such a vital part of their adult lives. For Milstein, who was born in 1944 and grew up in Los Angeles, it all began with watching planes come and go at LAX, when that airport was also pint-sized. He went on to shoot still photos and 8mm movies of them. And at the age of 17, when other kids were content to drive a car, Milstein got his pilot’s license. He was taking pictures in midair while his peers were making snapshots; but adulthood summoned and he became an architect.

Milstein’s original career choice foreshadowed his approach to photography, which he has been doing in earnest for 15 years. (“I had no ambition to be a photographer until my mid-fifties,” he says.) He brings a visual rigor to his work that can justifiably be called architectural. Whether he is shooting airplanes from below (his first serious project and the one that made him famous), cruise ships from above, or Indian storefronts and Palm Springs trailer homes from ground level, his subjects occupy the frame with precision.

Milstein burst into the fine-art world after a second career as a publisher of photographic notecards, which featured not only his own architectural images but pictures by the likes of Jay Maisel and Howard Schatz, whose late-life career path he himself would eventually follow. He began by exhibiting his own large-format prints of various aircraft undersides, photographs he made as the planes were actually landing. That may sound impossible given the difficulty of capturing fast-moving subjects, but Milstein brought a lifetime of visual discipline to the task.

The images are absolutely consistent in their presentation: Each plane, whether it is ferrying commercial passengers, cargo, or a CEO, is squared up from nose to tail, with razor-sharp detail. It looks as if it had been photographed upside-down on a seamless background in a studio. In fact, Milstein shot the planes handheld with a Contax 645 and Phase One digital back, with shutter speeds in the 1/2000 to 1/4000-second range and a great deal of “practice, practice,” he says. He later masked out the skies in Adobe Photoshop to create a pure white background.

It’s no surprise that Milstein is
an admirer of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose highly detailed black-and-white studies of water towers and other industrial structures were all made in soft, overcast light, from the same mid-level point of view, against pale, flat skies. Like the Bechers, Milstein found beauty in utilitarian subjects, his cherished airplanes. Unlike the Bechers, his subjects were moving at speeds up to 180 miles per hour.

Milstein’s ground-up airplane work was compiled in his first monograph, 2008’s Aircraft: The Jet as Art (Abrams). Since then, he has been shooting mainly from the air or from ground level. His bird’s-eye views of cruise ships have the schematic feeling of architectural floor plans—except that you can clearly read each real-life detail, including people lounging in deck chairs, in his huge 48x64-inch prints. His images of housing developments in and around Los Angeles and New York City read like site plans, only photorealistic. Like his airplane underbellies, these images show familiar things from new and revealing perspectives.

Even his studies of Palm Springs trailer homes, all shot at ground level, are perfect elevations—to use the architectural term—of those all-American abodes. This body of work will be gathered in Small Dreams: 50 Palm Springs Trailer Homes, to be published by Schiffer in fall of 2016. His interest in the subject harks back to his own architectural design work on the cutting edge of what has since become known as the tiny house movement. “I’ve always loved

CONTAINER PORT, LOS ANGELES

“I’m drawn to color because of the visual experience it brings to the viewer,” says Milstein. “But the graphic elements have to be there.” Shot with a Phase One IQ180 digital back on an Alpa camera with a 75mm (48.2mm equiv.) f/5.6 Alpa Schneider APO-Helvetar lens; 1/1000 sec at f/5.6, ISO 100.

CARNEVAL VICTORY, MIAMI

“I usually photograph cruise ships late in the day when their lights are coming on.” For this shot, he used the same gear as above but with a 60mm (36.6mm equiv.) f/4 Rodenstock lens; 1/500 sec at f/4, ISO 200.
INDIAN ROPE SHOP, GWALIOR
Despite this picture’s tight, square-on framing, Milestein shot it hand-held with a Canon EOS 5D Mark II, using a 24–70mm f/2.8 Canon EF lens set at 70mm, his exposure was 1/80 sec at f/6.3, ISO 200.

CARNIVAL VICTORY, NIGHT
“Like the airplanes I’ve photographed, these ships are technological marvels,” says Milestein. “I wanted to do a similar typology with them.” This companion image was made with the Pentax 645Z and 68mm (83.5mm equiv.) f/2.8 lens; exposure was 1/250 sec at f/2.8, ISO 4000.

small, efficient houses,” says the photographer, who found his subjects among three different trailer parks in California’s most famous desert oasis. “But trailer homes really become a personal statement for their owners, in the way they style and decorate them. Some are even little theme houses—you’ll have Egyptian right next to Chinese.”

Milestone’s architect’s eye is fully engaged even when he’s shooting less obviously architectural subjects. His voluminous street photographs, taken in locales from Cuba to India, are as tightly seen and highly ordered as his high- and low-angle work. (“You’re unlikely to find a head-and-shoulders portrait among them, though; he seems to need straight lines.”)

Given the freedoms of digital capture and postproduction, he now shoots these images hand-held rather than on a tripod, as he did at first. Yet he doesn’t profess any big secret or overarching method to the way he maps his subjects so neatly into two dimensions. It’s just a combination of identifying subjects that have some kind of existing organization to them, then taking it further with all the shooting and postproduction tools photographers have at their disposal,” he insists. “I like it when things line up.”

The photographer compares what he does to examining things under a microscope, where surprising structures and patterns often appear. “I look for that sort of thing, only on a conventional scale,” he says. “I suppose it’s my way of ordering the universe.”

The logistical, technical, and hardware demands of that deft undertaking are substantial.
Milstein’s current camera of choice is the medium-format Alpa, but it is essentially just the link between his digital back—either a Phase One IQ180 or the CMOS Hasselblad H5D-50c—and large-format lenses. “I use the sharpest Schneider and Rodenstock 4x5 optics I can get,” he says. “So I do everything manually, including stopping the lens down and cocking the shutter for each frame.” When shooting in very dark conditions, he uses a Canon EOS 5Ds R and 100mm Canon macro or 55mm Zeiss Otus lens.

Aerial views present a challenge. He must do all this while leaning out a helicopter’s open door. It’s difficult for most planes to fly low or slow enough, and a helicopter that holds steady in one spot can’t tilt to the side, a necessity for shooting straight down. “So the helicopter has to be moving,” Milstein explains. “And it has to circle back many times so I can get the shot right.” To get the sharpest possible images despite the helicopter’s vibration, he steadies his rig using a hand-held KenLab gyrostabilizer. If, due to low light, he can’t shoot at speeds faster than 1/250 or 1/500 sec, he can end up having to toss as many as half his captures due to blur.

Yet even the best shot made under such challenging circumstances isn’t quite good enough for Milstein. He says he “tweaks” the image in postproduction, using Photoshop’s distortion controls to make it perfectly square and symmetrical. “It’s like having after-the-fact swing and tilt,” says the photographer, referring to the perspective-control “movements” afforded by a traditional view camera.

Much like photomicroscopy.

Milstein’s photography depicts familiar things from an unorthodox point of view, one that tells us something more about them than we know already. He mentions a piece about his work that ran in the Huffington Post last August, titled “Photographer Highlights Income Inequality with Aerial Photos of LA Neighborhoods.” A social study was not Milstein’s original intent. But as he shot more and more from the smoggy skies above his old hometown—he has long since moved to upstate New York—he noticed a visual pattern that told the economic tale. “I could really see the difference between the poorer and wealthier areas,” he
LAX After years of photographing airplanes in flight, usually from the ground, Milstein undertook a new series depicting planes on the ground—from the air. He shot with a Phase One IQ380 digital back on his Alpa, with an 75mm (48.3mm equiv.) f/5.6 Alpa Schneider APO-Helvetar; exposure was 1/500 sec at f/5.6, ISO 100.

BE THERE & BE SQUARE

How to shoot for a dead-on perspective

ANY SUBJECT containing straight lines can be tough to make "square," with horizontal and vertical elements parallel to one another, not converging or diverging. Experienced photographers, especially those with an architectural bent such as Jeffrey Milstein, tend do this instinctively. But there’s a method to it. Here’s how to try it:

To make vertical lines parallel, preventing them from converging toward the top or bottom of the frame, keep the camera absolutely level—no titling it up or down. This cuts off the top or bottom of the subject, zoom out to a shorter focal length or use a wider-angle lens.

If keeping the camera level creates a large, unwanted foreground or bottom or top of the frame, compose loosely and plan to crop it out later. To make horizontal lines parallel, preventing them from converging toward the sides of the frame, rotate the camera to the left or right and shift your position laterally.

If the subject’s horizontal lines are converging to the right, rotate the camera slightly to the left until they are parallel, then shift your position sideways to the right until the subject is recentered. Do the opposite if they converge to the left;

saying. "The homes in the poorer neighborhoods were more tightly clustered, of course, but even the color palette was dull and brownish. As I flew toward wealthier areas, it shifted toward greens and blues, colored in by big, well-kept lawns and swimming pools."

That sort of revelation is an important part of what keeps Milstein aloft. "Half of it is going out with a plan, and half of it is discovery," he says. "When I’m up there, even with a specific destination, I start to see amazing, unexpected things and I think, wow, that would make a great picture. That’s the thrill of it."