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Of Dreaming, Poetry, and the Spirit of the Form The Drawings, Etchings and Engravings of Marvin Bileck By Robert Godfrey, 1996

This essay was published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition "Marvin Bileck Major Works" at the Belk Gallery, Western Carolina University, in 1996.

Over the past fifty years the drawings, etchings and engravings of Marvin Bileck have indicated an unwavering search for the spirit of the form, whether derived from the objects – landscape and figures – as in the drawings or from the drawings themselves from where the etchings and engravings spring. To achieve this state of being in the work the artist has used in the most profound way, the naked line as the dominant abstracting mark and the tool (pencil, etching needle or burin), in consort with the hand, as the orchestrator.

"I sort of feel that the more limited the means of the form, the more primitive it is and, therefore, the more easily transposed. Any gut feeling – visceral felling – in terms of moving with the tree or rock somehow creeps into line. The line begins to have a life of its own. And this line can connect and make us one with the form of the object, revealing some of our own experiences upon seeing the object."¹

To understand the source of Bileck's work, indeed, his sensibility, we must understand the importance he places on poetic imagining; what the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, refers to as the onset of the image in an individual consciousness. In this state of being the artist searches for – dreams of – the spirit of the form by confronting the image, not as an object to be rendered, but rather for its essential poetic form, what Bachelard sees as the object's specific reality. The closest analogy to Bileck's searching methodology may be that of daydreaming, a phenomenon springing from the feeling for a sought or remembered thing or space; a sort of sensorial intelligence.

"The dreamer. In the midst of "making' the artist dreams. He dreams of what he could not do in broad day life; to close his eyes and be back in the Mind, in the state of Somewhere Else."²

From this phenomenological response to the object comes the responsibility to bring the sensorial intelligence together with the abstract perception. To assure that these two do become welded, Bileck relies on the making process, of hovering over the piece of paper or the print plate with an imperative and concern for both craftsmanship and aesthesis. One informs the other and both inform the artist.

"There are times I think I'm almost with our intelligence of knowing when I'm lost in the kind of playback I get from the etching needle or the engraving burin as it plows through a piece of metal. And that kind of experiencing sometimes removes me from consideration of representation to such a degree that I may actually – and fortunately, I think – lose the object but find a new kind of form. I think much happens through the tool and the hand. There is a kind of intelligence one step removed in what we think of as the average reckoning of forms."³

Marvin Bileck is an artist whose insights, aesthetics and sensibilities are aligned with a select group of the most superior draughtsman in a visual sequence which has no temporal, cultural or geographic restrictions. Artists in this rare sequence include Rembrandt, Holbein and Hokusai. These are the artists who, in their graphic work, are consumed with establishing an inner dreamlike state in order to provoke an imaginative and poetic response, to the thing. And all of them – Bileck, Rembrandt, Holbein and Hokusai, alike – have found that it is through the solitary line directed and moved by the tool and the hand (Hokusai used his forearm or his shoulder) that this imagination can be controlled without

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sacrificing passion or losing the spirit of the form.

“But art can police the imagination and can govern, discipline, and order through principles of form – one of which is purity of line. Reduce your enterprises, dear mind, select that one wave, that single line. Fix your stare on the isolated line-wave and follow it though.”⁴

Marvin Bileck’s work both delights and instructs. We delight in his poetic meanderings which are manifested through the swinging and springing lines, leaping and exuberant; hardly contained, as if the artist is constantly imagining himself changing sizes as he moves around in his world. Here we share and indulge in the artist’s poetic image. His work also pulls us back to another reality in order to instruct us on the specific character of place and space its smoothness, its openness, its rockiness, its ruggedness; how a branch grows and rises up, how a rock heaves and tenses against another. Through this poetry depicted.

In an age where fashion is more prevalent than aesthetics and popular culture rules, where there seems to be an individual lack of faith or interest in dealing with issues of quality, Marvin Bileck stands as one of the very few contemporary artists who has, through his work (and his teaching), been unwilling to compromise or sacrifice visual standards. His work, comprised of single and seemingly simple lines, in total, is extremely profound.

Endnotes

¹ From a recorded conversation with Marvin Bileck in his studio, Winsted, Connecticut, July 1, 1996.

² See Marvin Bileck’s essay “Simply Drawing.” Published in Artists’ Choice Newsletter, New York, Vol I no 5, March/April, 1981.

³ See note 1.

⁴ See note 2.

Other References:

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press Books 1968).

2 John Berger, *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

3 Etienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1959).

4 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1962).

5 Philip Rawson, *Drawing: Appreciation of the Arts/3* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

6 Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell* (New York: Viking Press, 1974).

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