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William Blake and the Age of Aquarius

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Bruce Thorn

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Block Museum's "William Blake and the Age of Aquarius" attempts to illuminate the wide sphere of influence cast by the art, poetry and persona of William Blake (1757-1827) upon post World War II American counterculture artists, musicians and poets beginning in the 1940's and through the 1960's.

Curator Professor Stephan F. Eisenman and his team undertook remarkable research with plenty of support from NWU, which proudly promotes an interdisciplinary approach to education and art, along with a commitment to studies of the Sixties. Accompanied by a stunningly beautiful book published by Princeton Press and NWU, the show is presented with a full laundry list of lectures and interactive events. One can only hope that other museums and curators are paying attention.

Much has already been written about this show and about Blake; so as an occasionally honest person, I have to ask myself: Just what do I have to add to the subject? There's the perspective of an artist who, as a Shorty during the last millennia, was introduced to Blake's poetry and reproductions of his works. I'm so old, I even remember seeing a beatnik on a back porch hammock with a pet chimpanzee; so allow me to

share some thoughts and recollections about the subject of Blake's influence upon beatnik and hippy cultures.

The first part of the exhibition was devoted to a fine collection of the master's engravings, drawings and portfolio pages, all of it crowded and double hung in the first of four halls; and that was that, no more Blake on display, but a long list of other artists. I plead guilty to harboring a preference for viewing artists on their own terms rather than as props for other people's agendas and theses.

Those who only know Blake's work from reproductions will be surprised by the miniature scale of many of the engravings, such as those from *The Book of Job*, which seem even more technically amazing than works by Albrecht Durer (1471-1528). Much of the line work is too small for the eye to isolate and thus appears as tonal magic. Did Blake work with a powerful magnifier or was he severely myopic? Text on pages from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is too small for most eyes, even though the lettering was amazingly produced by hand-painting stop-out varnish *backwards, with a brush*, onto engraving plates. One has to wonder if Blake had ever contemplated the luxury of scale.

One great Blakean treat in the exhibition was the drawing and watercolor *The Number of the Beast is 666* (c. 1805). Another eye opener, which I had never seen before and which has a more simplified subject and composition, was the etching and engraving *A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs from a Gallows*, 1796, showing the same brutal honesty found in Goya's *Disasters of War*. If you want to see *The Ghost of a Flea*, that will require a trip to London. The British aren't going to part with it.

The other three sections of the exhibition consisted of works by artists who were influenced by Blake and working during the 1940's through the 60's. Their works were more generously displayed than Blake's, but still tightly packed. The offerings were mostly two-dimensional works requiring close viewing, including video, photography and published materials, all of it fun packed, nostalgic and seriously relevant.

It's all arranged chronologically, beginning of course with William Blake before leaping 120 or so years forward to the 1940's and works by Jackson Pollock and his teacher Stanley Hayter. (Pollock also studied with Thomas Hart Benton). A diminutive and dramatic series of surrealist ink and gouache drawings from 1945 by Charles Seliger borrowed its title from Blake's "An Island in the Moon" (1785) and stages a cast of fantastic micro-biotic creatures in otherworldly situations.

With works included by Agnes Martin, Clifford Still, Sam Francis, Robert Smithson, Diane Arbus, Jess, Helen Adam and more, Professor Eisenman makes a case for Blake's casting of a very large shadow, or a lot of light, on the creative extravaganza that was the 60's circus. I wonder what Blake would think of this?

Selections from Ad Reinhardt's *10 Screenprints by Ad Reinhardt*, 1966, insinuate a Blake-like mystic joy. The most chronologically recent works in the show were a set of ten screenprints from Richard Anuskievicz' *Inward Eye Portfolio*, 1970. These exhibit a busier, more electric energy and might remind one of contemporary light works by James Turrell. I'm not sure if all ten of these prints were needed to get the point across.

There is an intriguing black and white video by Bruce Conner: *The White Rose*, 1967 that documents Jay DeFeo's hefty work *The Rose* being crated and moved; through a San Francisco bay window that has been enlarged by removing one of its windows and part of a wall, then placed onto a cherry picker and brought down into a large Bekins moving truck by a crew of uniformed professional movers overseen by as many supervisory suits. DeFeo effortlessly managed to resemble F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*. *The Rose* is breathtakingly beautiful, even in a grainy film. There is no dialogue in *The White Rose*, only a soundtrack by Miles Davis from *Sketches of Spain* (1959-60).

The Age of Aquarius includes an amount of cultural ephemera, like the record cover from 1965, *The Fugs First Album*, and pieces from Allen Ginsberg, Maurice Sendak and the Chicago Seed. There were videos offering the Doors, the Mamas and Papas and old school projected light shows. I could have lived without the beanless and deflated bag chairs that visitors tripped over in the darkened mini theater; there's no way anybody was going to sit on those through the whole collection of shorts.

There were a lot of band posters in *The Age of Aquarius*. It's always fun to see graphics by the likes of Victor Moscoso, Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelly (aka Mouse and Kelly, known for their Grateful Dead poster art). Martin Sharp's *Jimi Hendrix Explosion*, 1968, displays a screen print version of action painting quite similar to commercial prints by Leroy Neiman (1921-2012); Sharp's *Mr. Tambourine Man, Blowing in the Mind*, printed on foil over paper and combining drawn and photographic images, is a prime example of the highly

accomplished state of screen-print art that existed in the Sixties. Warhol wasn't the first or only artist to discover the medium.

Eisenman makes much of the notion that Jim Morrison got the name for his band *The Doors* from a line of Blake's in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790): "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." What that probably means in contemporary, everyday language is that humans have by necessity evolved to view and understand experience primarily within the limited terms of practicality.

Morrison and most of his entire generation would have been quite aware of Aldous Huxley's 1954 classic, *The Doors of Perception*, which had previously also borrowed its title from the 18th century artist and poet. Huxley, a proponent of the psychedelic drug LSD who even dosed himself upon his own deathbed, had reportedly begun experiments with psychedelics because he was hoping to momentarily achieve visionary results "similar to Blake's art and poetry." It was largely through Huxley that Blake was brought to the attention of a drug-imbibing youth culture that was trying to expunge the horrors of the War in Vietnam, social conformism and racism.

The historical moment of "Tune in, turn on and drop out" (Timothy Leary) was a result of demographics and political history. As much as half of the population of the USA was under the age of 21 and the youth just wasn't having it. There was the military draft back then; television regularly showed body bags draped in flags on tarmacs and images of cities burning.

Everything in the post war era seemed to demand new paradigms. Young people wanted to wave their freak flags, to paraphrase Jimi Hendrix. A generation or two embraced non-conformity and turned to an eclectic menu that included communes, alternative lifestyles, cults, art, rock music, a full smorgasbord of mind altering drugs, Eastern religions, poets and mystics such as Blake, Rilke, Maeterlinck, Hermann Hesse, Maria Sabina, Rumi and Walt Whitman. There were also plenty of Christian based groups, though this was contrary to a prevailing mistrust of organized religion by a large majority of youth. Some counter culture adherents went so far as to idolize Chairman Mao.

Blake's authentic mysticism as a visionary and spiritualist will always lie beyond the knowledge or grasp of most people. He was an iconoclast who paid a heavy price for his own originality, a political rebel with a leaning towards egalitarianism, pacifism and utopianism, a creative type who proposed total equality between races and sexes. These traits of course made him a near perfect avatar for post war non-conformists and dissidents, who used him as validation of a generation's hunger for escape to a more enlightened, pacifist and moral path.

Mysticism is not about seasonable fashions; most of the art world is. Beatnik and Hippy hedonism have become yesterday's marketing ploys. The culture train moved onwards towards more accessible musical realms like Punk, Disco, New Age, Grunge, Hip-hop, House, Rap and corresponding tastes in the visual arts. In our perfect neoliberal world, the "magic of the marketplace" seeks to discount, dilute and commercialize any authentic mysteries. This is why I hope to one-day witness

a large-scale museum survey devoted to William Blake and just Blake.

There aren't any major works from the 20th century in the show that can hold a candle to Blake. DeFeo's White Rose is only shown on film. The works by Pollock, Sam Francis, Agnes Martin, Clifford Still and Diane Arbus are not knockouts. There is a lot of interesting and enjoyable material here, but only Blake's work is sublime. The problem with interdisciplinary and discipline based approaches to art is that it becomes about a thesis, not about the art. That's fine for some people, but it does seem to undermine the art experience. It's like reading a book about a book, or watching a film about a film. I can handle Blake straight up.

It has long been common to quote Blake out of context. Famous lines from his poems get presented like inspirational fortune cookies or Confucian wisdom but manage to forgo the complexity of the man's thinking as a spiritual visionary who disavowed organized religion. Blake as a poet had much more in common with Rumi and Saint John of the Cross than he did with Alan Ginsberg or the Village Fugs. As a visual artist, he was closer to Matthias Grunewald than to Stanley Mouse. He was difficult, inspirational and not afraid of contradiction; his work was about opening minds, not boxing thoughts into useful, marketable and popular packages. *William Blake, the Age of Aquarius* eschews a comprehensive presentation of the man's art or writing.

Bruce Thorn
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