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*“WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE AGE OF AQUARIUS”*

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# “William Blake and the Age of Aquarius”

## Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University

by Bruce Thorn

When visionary poet William Blake died over 200 years ago, his poems were not highly regarded. He was an iconoclast who paid a heavy price for his own originality, a political rebel with a leaning towards egalitarianism, pacifism and utopianism.

Yet his influence as artist, poet and prophet grew steadily and surged in the 20th century, particularly with a whole generation of American counterculture artists, musicians and writers from the 1940s through the 1960s.

The show, the first to consider Blake’s impact on postwar American artists features more than 150 paintings, drawings, photographs, films, posters and mediums from the 50’s through the 70’s and more than 50 rare Blake engravings and pages from illuminated books. It is explicit in wanting viewers to extrapolate and make connections to our contemporary cultural and political landscape.

Stephen F. Eisenman, the exhibit curator and Professor of Art at Northwestern, and his team conducted remarkable and lengthy research into the subject with much support from the university, which has a commitment to studies of the 1960s.

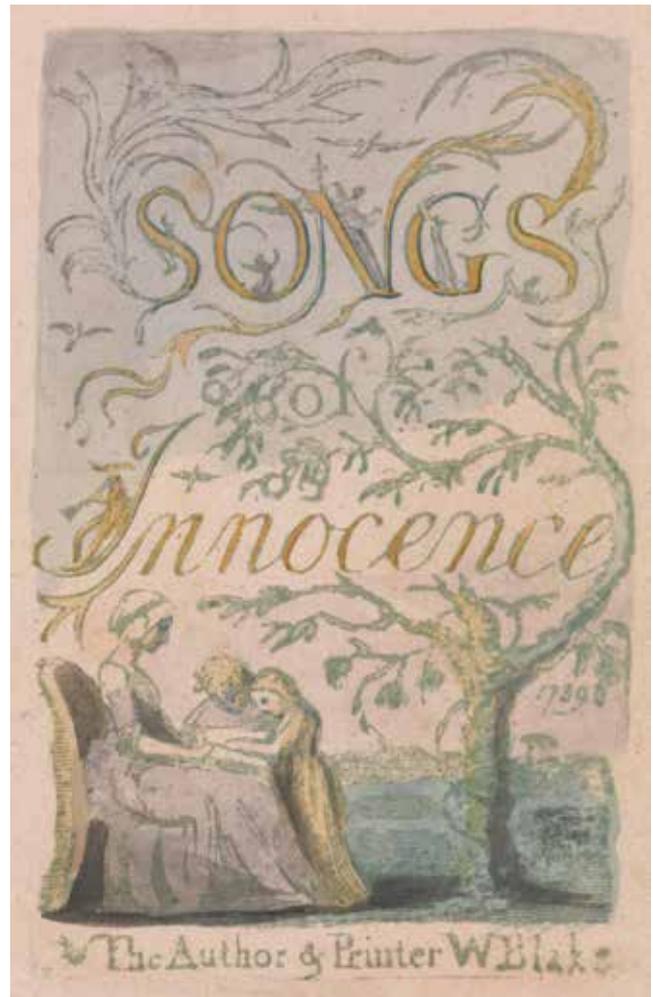
The show, seven years in the making, is accompanied by a stunning, richly-illustrated catalogue published by Princeton University Press and Northwestern.

So much has appeared about the exhibit, and Blake in general, that I must ask myself just what do I have to offer here. My best solution is to offer the perspective of an artist who, as an elementary school youth, during the last millennia, was deeply influenced by Blake’s poetry and reproductions of his works.

I plead guilty to harboring a preference for viewing artists on their own terms and within the context of their own times, rather than as props for other people’s theses. But it must be said that this show is an exemplary production that succeeds brilliantly in its intention to elucidate Blake’s sphere of influence within our recent time period.

The first part of the exhibition, crowded into the first of four galleries, was devoted to a fine collection of the master’s engravings, drawings and portfolio pages.

Those who only know Blake’s work from reproductions will be surprised by the miniature scale of the engravings, such as those from *The Book of Job*, which seem even more technically amazing than works by Albrecht Durer. Much of the line work is too small for the eye to isolate and thus appears as tonal magic.



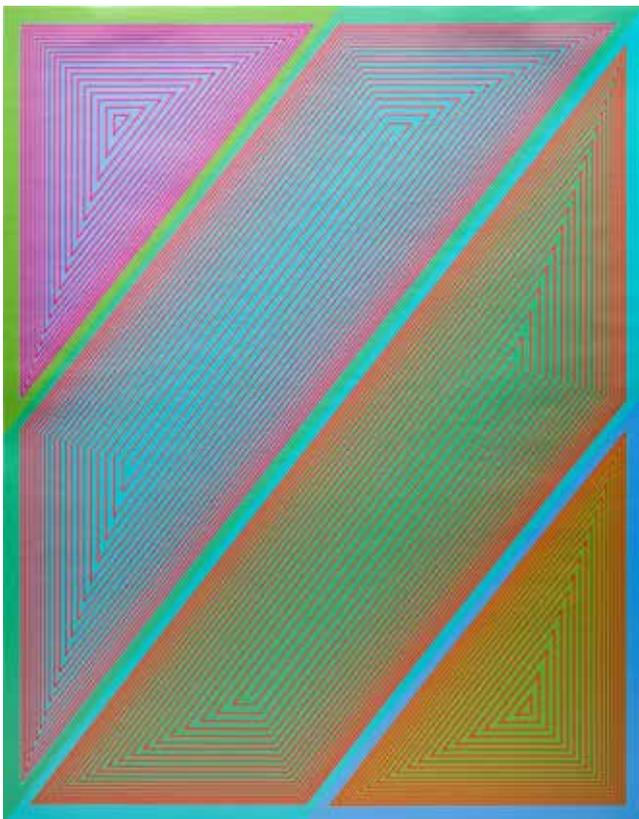
William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*, Plate 2, 1793  
Relief etching, with some white line etching and hand coloring.

The text on pages from *Songs of Innocence* and *Experience* is too tiny for most people’s eyes, even though the lettering was amazingly produced by hand-painting stop-out varnish backwards, with a brush, onto engraving plates. Did Blake work with a powerful magnifier or was he severely myopic? One has to wonder if Blake had ever contemplated the luxury of scale.

A great treat and show-stopper is the original drawing and watercolor, *The Number of the Beast is 666* (c.1805). Another eye-opener, which I had never seen before and which utilizes a more simplified subject and composition, is the etching and engraving, *A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs from a Gallows* (1796). It shows the same brutal honesty found in Goya's *Disasters of War*.

The exhibition presented Blake's works double hung with little space between pieces. Most of "The Age of Aquarius" portion were works by artists who were influenced by Blake. These artists' works were better displayed but still tightly packed. These offerings, which include video, photography and published materials, are mostly two-dimensional pieces, all fun-packed, nostalgic and seriously relevant.

The show proceeds chronologically, beginning with Blake, before leaping almost 120 years forward to the 1940s and works by Jackson Pollock and his teacher Stanley Hayter. (Pollock also studied with Thomas Hart Benton).



Richard Anuskiewicz, *Inward Eye #2*,  
From the portfolio *Inward Eye*, 1970, screenprint.

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 seems to stage a cast of fantastic micro-bi-otic creatures in otherworldly situations.

The number of artists influenced by Blake is surprisingly large: Agnes Martin, Clyfford Still, Sam Francis, Robert Smithson, Diane Arbus, Jess, Robert Duncan and Helen Adam. Professor Eisenman makes the case for Blake's casting of a very large shadow, or a lot of light, on the creative extravaganza that was the Sixties circus.

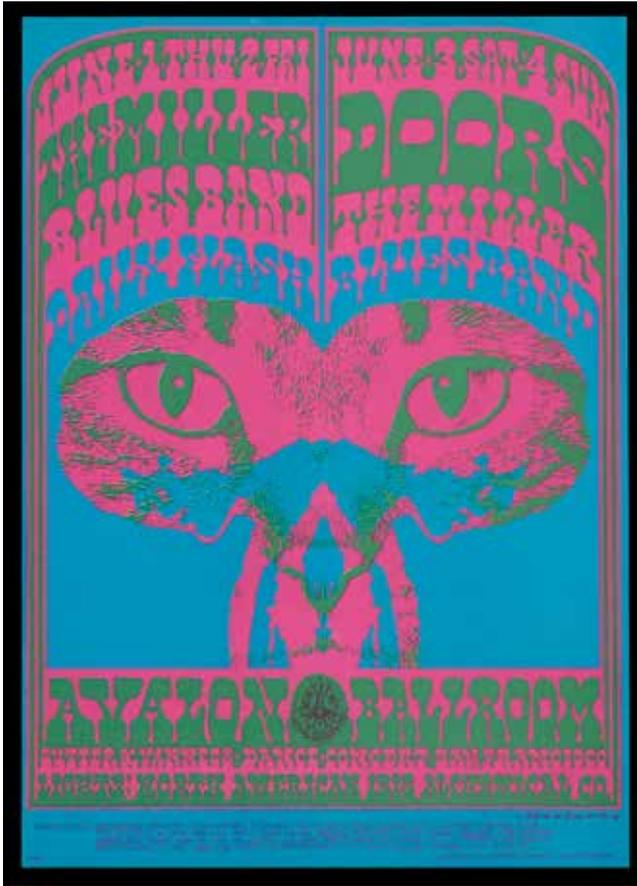
Selections from *10 Screenprints by Ad Reinhardt* (1966) insinuate a Blakean mystic joy. The most recent works in the show were a set of ten screenprints from Richard Anuskiewicz' *Inward Eye Portfolio* (1970). These exhibit a busier, more electric energy and might remind one of contemporary light works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

There is an intriguing, silent black-and-white video showing Jay DeFeo's hefty, outsize work, *The Rose*, being stabilized, crated and moved through a San Francisco bay window that has been enlarged, then placed onto a cherry picker and lowered down into a large moving truck by a crew of professional movers. *The Rose* is breathtaking.

There are many published artifacts on view, such as a Village Fugs record cover from 1965, *The Fugs First Album*, along with work by Allen Ginsberg, Maurice Sendak, Ed Sanders (of the Fugs) and the alternative paper, Chicago Seed. Videos offer the Doors, the Mamas and Papas and old-school projected light shows. I could have lived without the deflated beanbag chairs that visitors tripped over in the darkened mini-theater.

Want to see the psychedelic art that was of a piece with that era's excitement? The show contains many band posters and graphic art. It can be revelatory to include pop music in dialogues about cultural trends, periods and influences. It's always fun to see graphics by the likes of Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelly (aka Mouse and Kelly, known for their Grateful Dead poster art), Milton Glaser and Rick Griffin, who designed the poster for the film, *Lucifer Rising*.

Milton Sharp's *Mr. Tambourine Man, Blowing in the Mind*, printed with foil on paper and combining drawn and photographic images, is a prime example of the highly-accomplished state of screen-printing art that existed in the Sixties. Warhol wasn't the first or only artist to pioneer the medium.



Victor Moscoso, *The Doors, The Miller Blues Band, Daily Flash*  
June 1-4, 1970, Screenprint.

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 generation would have been quite aware of Aldous Huxley's 1954 classic, *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley, a proponent of the psychedelic drug LSD, who even dosed himself upon his 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 gained the attention of a drug-imbibing youth culture trying to expunge the horrors of the Vietnam War, social conformity and racism. So a generation or two embraced non-conformity and turned to an eclectic menu that included drugs, communes, cults, art, rock

Jess Collins, *Untitled* (gift of Jerome and Diane Rothenberg) 1963, Collage.



music, alternative life styles, Eastern religions and mystics such as Blake, Rilke, Maeterlinck, Hermann Hesse, Maria Sabina, Rumi and Walt Whitman.

Blake's authentic mysticism as a visionary and spiritualist will always lie beyond the knowledge or grasp of most people. He proposed total equality between races and sexes. These traits of course made him a near-perfect avatar for postwar non-conformists and dissidents, who used him as validation of a generation's hunger for escapism to a more enlightened, moral and pacifist path.

Mysticism is not about seasonable fashions, unlike most of the art world. Beatnik and hippy pseudo-mysticism and hedonism were at odds with idealistic notions of community. The culture train moved onwards towards more accessible musical realms: from Punk, Disco and New Age to Hip-hop, House and Rap with corresponding shifts in the visual arts.

My one problem with the show is that there aren't any major works from the 20th Century in the show that can hold a candle to Blake. DeFeo's *The Rose* is seen only on film. None of the works by Pollock, Sam Francis, Agnes Martin, Still and Arbus are knockouts.

In our perfect neo-liberal world, the "magic of the marketplace" seeks to discount, dilute and commercialize any authentic mysteries. This is why I hope,

one-day, to witness a large-scale museum survey devoted to William Blake and just Blake.

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 they become about a thesis, not about the art.

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 forego 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 or St. John of the Cross than he did with Alan Ginsberg or the Village Fugs.

As a visual artist, Blake 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 and popular packages. "William Blake, the Age of Aquarius" eschews a comprehensive presentation of the man's art or writing, As for me, I prefer my Blake straight up. ■

**Bruce Thorn is a contributing editor to the New Art Examiner.**

William Blake, *The Circle of the Lustful: Paolo and Francesca*, from Dante's *Inferno*, canto V, c. 1825-27, Engraving.

