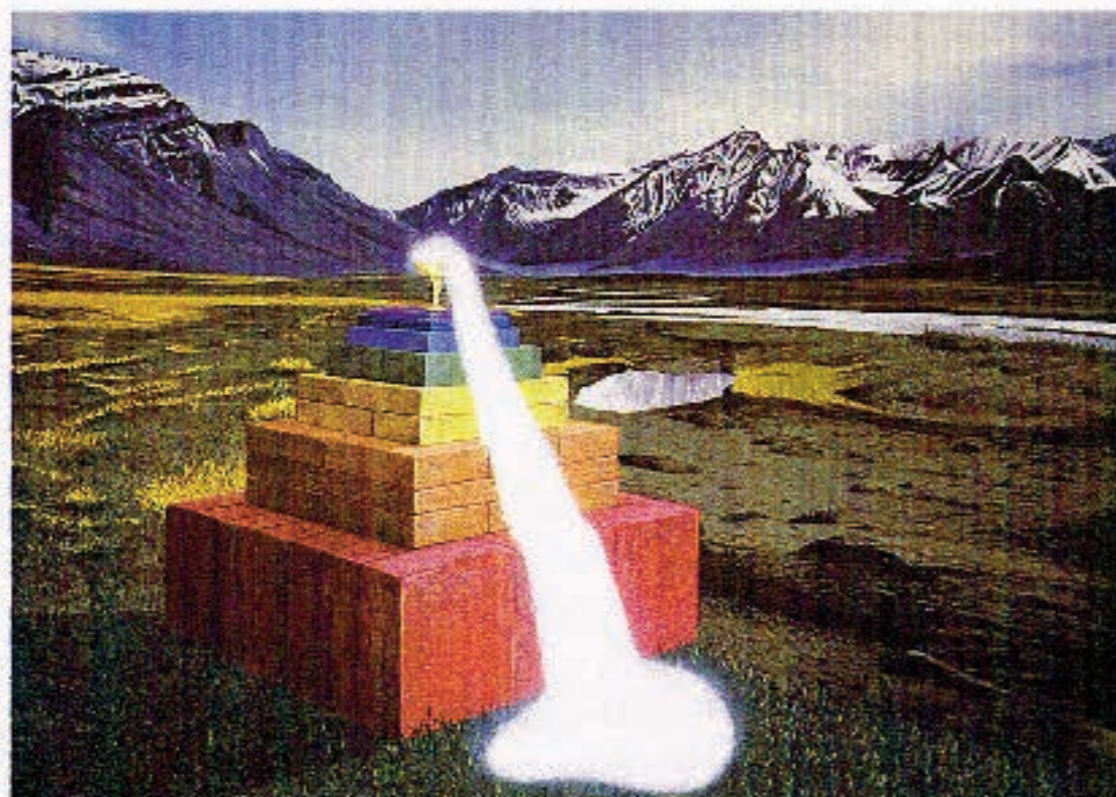


Antonio Peticov: White Light Means Energy

Ruth Thompson



"Fibonacci's Spiral Monument"

Artist and printmaker Antonio Peticov embodies the term "multicultural." Born in a small village on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil, Peticov spent his childhood in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, two of Brazil's largest cities and cultural centers. In his early 20s, he left his native home to travel in the United States and Europe, settling in London during his late 20s and moving to Milan for most of his 30s. Today, at age 48, Peticov spends half the year in São Paulo and the other half in New York City, maintaining homes and studios in both cities. "As much as I can, I like to travel and know more," he said. "It gives me different ways of thinking."

This is along alternative path in a way of life for Peticov, who first got involved in printmaking at age 12, creating linocut cuts and woodblock prints. He indirectly learned about the trade via his father, a Baptist minister

who was in charge of organizing a world conference of the Baptist Alliance in the mid-1960s. Peticov used to visit his father's office in the Alliance's publishing headquarters in Rio, where the art director showed him around the graphics studio and introduced him to various artistic methods and techniques.

While he credits much of his personal development to "the character of my father, who instilled in me a strong sense of truth and of honesty, a love to work hard, to treat my neighbor as I would like to be treated," Peticov discovered his artistic sensibility through his friendship with his father's coworker. "He was a fantastic artist," Peticov recalled. "Just meeting him and knowing him, I discovered what I was. All the confusion I had in my mind vanished as I got a glimpse of what it would please me to do with my life. I had found my niche," Peticov said. From

that point forward, Peticov felt certain that art would direct his life. "In school everybody else was studying to be a lawyer or an architect, but I already knew what I was," he said.

Today, fluent in Portuguese, English, Italian, French, and Spanish, Peticov is also eloquent in a wide range of artistic media and uses each of these art forms to express what he views as the artist's role in contemporary society. "I think I have a mission with my talent. I try to be open, like an instrument, to be alive. I grew up in the rock-n-roll generation, and I like to democratize. I have never had my own gallery and never been able to rest on the assurance that whatever I made, I would be able to sell it. I have had to struggle," he explained. "But like the musicians I grew up around and who have been my friends, I try to communicate through media that will reach people. My musi-

cal friends did it with records, and I have done it with images that can be reproduced and disseminated, or that I can show in places where people will be most likely to go."

Screen printing has been both elementary to Peticov's democratic beliefs and vital to his aesthetic development. "Since the beginning of my career as a visual artist, I have been fascinated with the many techniques that would allow a work of art to be multiplied without decreasing its quality," he said. After his early experiments with relief printing, Peticov turned his focus to painting and drawing. And in 1967, at a youthful 21, he was invited to participate in a prestigious biennial art exhibit in São Paulo. Soon afterward, he embarked on a two-year journey of travel and study in the United States and Europe, where he got his first glimpses of fine-art screen printing.

Peticov first saw the medium in use at Gemini Graphic Editions Limited in Los Angeles, the printing firm that has produced serigraphic editions by art-world luminaries such as Andy Warhol, Ed Kauschenberg, and Frank Stella. After settling in London in 1971, Peticov took a screen-printing workshop, which "brought me closer to the technique," he said. But he didn't delve into serigraphy in earnest until moving to Italy in the 1970s. "In Italy, I found a workshop with a reliable printer that could read my work the way I needed. I found then that serigraphy was the medium that did it the most justice when it came to reproducing the ideas that I put into my paintings."

Peticov did not find this print studio by accident. He had focused seriously on his painting after arriving in Milan, and a series of successful exhibitions of his paintings had caught the

attention of publisher Alberto Serighelli to produce two of his original works—"Light Fall" and "Dreams in a Cloudy Day"—as limited edition screen prints. The Italian art publisher who ordered these commissions sent Peticov to the studio of Alberto Serighelli, a master printer who worked with the artist to create the prints.

"At the time, I could not imagine how important the encounter with Serighelli would be to me," Peticov said. "It was fundamental for my career because I saw then, in the quality and elegance of his work, that screen printing was the medium with the most appropriate language to translate the pictorial work I was developing." Over the next 13 years, Peticov produced 42 editions in collaboration with Serighelli, always working from an original painting to print what Peticov is careful to call "reproductions" of his artwork. "This is exactly what they were," Peticov

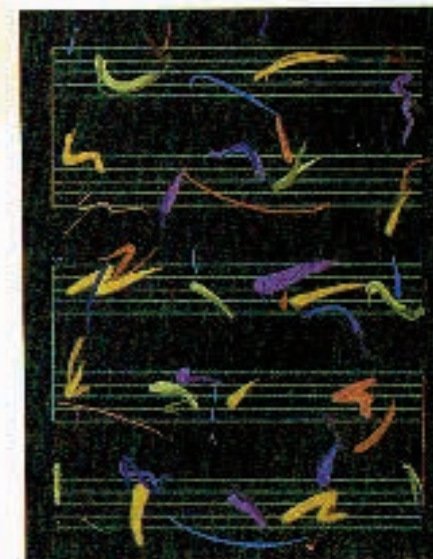


Figure 1 Peticov produced his "Birds of Paradise" series in collaboration with the late Rupert Smith, Andy Warhol's screen printer, and Fred Durfuss, a contemporary art dealer. One of the prints was reproduced as the program cover for the 1993-94 Phoenix Symphony performance series.

Screen printing has been both elementary to Peticov's democratic beliefs and vital to his aesthetic development.

stressed. "Reproductions. Very well done...dozens of colors and screens... the best quality. But for me, they were always a little bit cold and impersonal. I just signed the already numbered prints. It was a great [printing] job—maybe the best—but I didn't have much fun in that fine-art multiplication business. It didn't match my expectations about the rewards of genuine printmaking," he said.

But during this same period, when Peticov traveled home to Brazil, he also published some original screen-print editions—not based on paintings—in collaboration with a Brazilian printmaker. According to Peticov, this master printer, the late Omar Guedes of São Paulo, "always managed to bring the best solutions out of the lack of material or technological means that characterized his modest workshop." Guedes also worked with Peticov on a few reproductions of his paintings, "but the atmosphere was quite different, very cooperative, and constantly inventive. We created together some very satisfying work," Peticov recalled.

About this time, the artist also began working with a printing business founded in São Paulo by Luiz Carlos Burti, a childhood friend, near the working-class neighborhood where the boys had grown up. The firm, Graficos Burti, was very successful, eventually becoming "probably the best printing plant in the country of Brazil," Peticov said. When the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro held an exhibition of Peticov's artwork in 1977, Burti published the show catalog. In subsequent years, Burti produced several more catalogs, various offset printed posters, and calendars featuring Peticov's imagery for the years 1986-88. When Burti constructed a new building for the firm's main offices, he commissioned Peticov to create a piece for the entrance. The lobby ceiling was 25 feet high.

"Due to the nature of Burti's business, the most appropriate mural that I could imagine had to be printed following the same principles that ruled the [printing] world: four-color separation and four-color-process printing. I saw that I could synthesize the essence of the work done on those premises by creating a large screen print that would embellish the reception area with a clear and straightforward explanation of the basic methods employed in that kind of large-scale printing industry," Peticov said. He asked the color separation unit at Graficos Burti to provide him with four-color-separation films of a photograph, enlarged 100 times, of a famous Brazilian actress. These color separations were produced in 16 different sections that could be fitted together to make the total image.

Peticov then built eight rectangular panels of high-grade plywood, and shot the 16 sets of color-separation enlargements into 32 single-color films. To create screen-printing matrices for the 32 films, he called the print shop at the manufacturing firm he had established in partnership with his brother some years earlier. The small plant produces pillow cases, sheets, light blankets, and quilted comforters, and maintains screen-printing facilities on its premises. When the 32 screens were prepared, Peticov employed the four-color-process inks used by Graficos Burti to print the entire image onto the plywood panels. The panels were then installed in the company's reception area. Upon its completion, Peticov looked with satisfaction on what he calls "a very special edition of just one copy of this serigraph made of eight adjoining parts."

This was only the start of Peticov's success as a printmaker. He pushed his printmaking talent to its apex in New York in 1988, where he produced a series of serigraphs called "Birds of Paradise" (Figure 1) in collaboration with

the late Rupert Smith (see "The Designer and His Printer: Remembering Andy Warhol and Rupert J. Smith," *Screen-Printing*, Jan. '90, page 60). Smith was Andy Warhol's screen printer, and also worked in association with Fred Dorfman, a contemporary art dealer who had published three serigraphic editions of Peticov's imagery in 1983. To produce these images, Peticov worked side by side with the printer who ran Smith's workshop. Creating six separate screens of Peticov's abstract images and a musical staff, they printed the images on canvases covered with black, white, gold, and silver background colors, combining screens and colors differently on each printing. They then printed varying images on 45 sheets of 43 x 51 in. printmaking paper. "We had only six screens, but we used them to our advantage, moving and alternately turning them in all possible—and probably forbidden—ways to achieve new images. We often cleaned the screen while it was still oxidizing the printed paper," Peticov explained.

Dorfman sponsored this innovative exhibition in his ground-floor gallery in the building where Smith had established his Manhattan studio. The show included 12 screen prints on canvas, 45 on paper, a limited edition of holographic light sculptures, and performances by Brazilian musicians Marcio Rezende and Junio Homrich. The musicians used a flute, saxophone, and a variety of percussion instruments to interpret the images Peticov had created as a sort of abstract calligraphy against the formal grid of the musical staff. Each print and painting in the show was named for a tropical bird. The images from the "Birds of Paradise" series are still in wide circulation, and one of the prints was reproduced as the program cover for the 1995-96 Phoenix Symphony performance series in Phoenix, AZ.

Because communication of ideas



Figures 2 and 3 Peticov's prints, such as "Working Fine" and "The Studio," are often marked by two visual elements—the colors of the rainbow and bright, clear light into which the colors merge.

is Peticov's primary goal, he has recently mounted exhibitions in Brazilian shopping malls, and has been working since 1989 on a "living sculpture" of hundreds of varieties of trees along a Brazilian river. This 16-mile-long environmental sculpture will highlight the seasonal colors of foliage on the numerous trees Peticov has planted. The artist said he has been moving away from gallery exhibitions and towards installations of this sort because "people go to the mall, not to an exhibition." Another reason for this move is Peticov's desire to foster a spirit of cooperation through his work. "Human-kind is the most advanced species on the earth, but we don't work together. We work by competition instead of cooperation. I am trying to work toward cooperation," he said.

In the hope of sharing his images with as many people as possible, Peticov has illustrated record albums and book jackets, as well as created numerous offset posters and notecards. His artistic sense is described aptly in the catalog for the limited-edition screen prints published before the "Birds of Paradise" suite. This catalog notes that Peticov's work is often marked by two visual elements: the colors found in the rainbow, and great swaths of bright, clear light into which these colors ultimately merge. Both of these elements

are well represented in the screen prints "Working Fine" (Figure 2), "The Studio" (Figure 3), "Dreams in a Cloudy Day," and "Light Fall."

Peticov says that the rainbow and white light express his notion of art as *disponibilità*, Italian for "availability." "I try to make my images available, like an empty canvas or pure light," he said. "I want them to reach the viewer." As one critic noted in the limited-editions catalog, to Peticov, "white light means energy and symbolizes the complex process of creation in both an artistic and religious sense. Thus, the obvious religious reference to the cosmic act of creation, spanning seven days, is implied in many of his images."

Peticov reiterates this idea allegorically. "The art world is a hard world to go to because it is ruled by ego," he said. "The emperor of the art world is the emperor in the story of 'The Emperor's New Clothes.'" In this tale, Peticov recalled, the emperor appears naked in a public procession, rather than admit that he can't see the suit of clothes that a man impersonating a tailor has pretended to weave, while pocketing the money meant for the fabric and thread. The "tailor" tells the king that only truly intelligent people will be able to see the material, but a child watching the procession bursts out with the truth.

"I try to use the art world to com-

municate my ideas, but sometimes the art world uses me," Peticov said. The artist prefers the role of the child who watches the procession, unafraid to shed light on the truth. When, through his work, he is able to reach the largest number of people in the most beautiful way, Peticov feels that he has achieved a cherished idea. "I think I have a mission with my talent," he said. "I try to be open to be used—by God maybe, or perhaps a figure even broader." In this sense, we might think of Peticov himself—or of any talented artist—as a vehicle of communication that can transcend boundaries of dialect, culture, or economic status—like a paintbrush poised over an empty canvas, or sunlight streaming through an open window, or sound pouring forth from a musical instrument. ■

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