

Daydream Nation



Gift Giving, Gucci, 2017

Rome-based illustrator **Ignasi Monreal's** digital paintings mix art-historical and pop-cultural references to sublime effect. Zoë Taylor explores his work for Gucci's 'Utopian Fantasy' campaign, examining how fashion illustration is breaking from its past.

"It's the first painted campaign that I know of, and a big leap of faith from Gucci," says the artist behind the thirty-two digital paintings used by the luxury Italian brand to advertise its Spring/Summer 2018 collection. From glossy double spreads in magazines – many of which reveal augmented reality effects when scanned with the Gucci app – to billboards, animated window displays, interactive sticker art, giant murals and 360-degree panoramas accessible via in-store VR devices, every image in the campaign was made by Monreal. It featured no photography.

While fashion brands have increasingly capitalised on illustration's popularity online, Gucci's 'Utopian Fantasy' (#GucciHallucination) has made the most extensive use of it. "Gucci is about making fashion extremely cool," says the tech blogger Dimitri Makris, who also notes that the brand enjoyed a 44.5% increase in revenues in the months following the campaign's launch, dispelling long-held myths that illustration can't be effective in fashion advertising.





Monreal's series mashes up imagery from Old Master paintings with pop-cultural, alchemical and post-internet references to create striking, slightly ironic scenes – from mermaids on iPhones and cherubs plucking Post-It notes to fashionista Fates, casually sitting on top of a Google Maps Earth. This “internet-friendly weirdness” – as *Ozged Digital*'s Dominic Cardogan puts it – is clearly directed at an Instagram audience. But the series also conveys a romanticism that transcends the wry humour. In its press release, Gucci describes Monreal's “haunting characters” who inhabit a “mythical universe”: from sunsets to thunderstorms, sublime skies pervade the series. Meanwhile, the references to classical painting offer a colour palette and an approach to lighting and composition that give these whimsical images drama and impact.

The paintings are designed to grab your attention, but also to be read. It takes time to discover their details. Take, for example, the campaign's lead image which merges elements from all three panels of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1500) with those from Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) – echoed in the pose of the central couple – alongside double-headed swans, arrows, disembodied hands and Disney-esque bluebirds. There's even a tiny portrait of Alessandro Michele, Gucci's creative director, sitting pensively by a stream in a pink suit, with a halo and a Jesus beard.

Of course, these images are striking partly because of the extraordinary garments they represent – the cape adorned with a golden feathers motif and the fully embroidered 14th century-style dress that take centre stage here. But equally important is the skill with which they've been rendered: the shadows that delineate the crisp pleats of a skirt, the regularity of the classic double-G print on a transparent dress and the glistening of sequined Snow Whites, bejewelled shell suits and patent leather handbags. Despite the evocations of old paintings, the heightened detail and accuracy have led many to describe the series as photorealistic, or even hyper-real.

The appearance and gestures of the characters in these paintings resemble those in a fashion shoot. “I used a lot of reference photos because it's a campaign with an agenda and the product needs to be visible, and the images can't be misleading – they have to be faithful to what's being sold,” says Monreal. He photographed the models himself in a low-key shoot “with no make-up or hair”, which he added later as he built up the images.

At first glance, you might assume that the images had been painted traditionally, but they're all digitally made. Using a Wacom tablet and Photoshop, Monreal effectively captures the feel of European painting from the Renaissance to the 19th century. Although he references iconic paintings such as John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-52), others are harder to pin down – maybe the flooring of a Dutch vanitas here, or a baroque sky there. “This was like my love letter to painting, and I enjoyed merging the realism with all of these different references from art history,” he told *Vogue*.



Utopian Fantasy, Gucci, 2018

From conception to the finishing touches, each painting took about two days to complete and Monreal worked in intense fourteen-hour stretches to achieve the level of detail he wanted. Over several months, he produced nearly 200 paintings for Gucci to select from. “It's digital painting, so it's all in my computer or tablet... Since I've been doing this since I was 14, I've really had time to refine and create my own specific artistic training, as a teenager Monreal developed a preference for the digital – which he discovered through video games – “because you don't have to have any materials and it's cleaner”.





The Spanish-born 27-year-old studied comics and illustration in Barcelona and then fashion creative direction in Madrid, before moving to London to work as an art director for brands like Swarovski. By night he worked on his illustrations, which soon took off with commissions for *W* magazine and various musicians, including FKA Twigs.

Gucci first approached Monreal in 2015 for #GucciGram, a series of fifteen illustrations by fifteen artists published on Instagram, which launched just after the arrival of creative director Alessandro Michele. Monreal's contribution of eerily blinking weather girls and TU psychics soon led to animated commissions for Dior, JW Anderson and Louis Vuitton as well as further collaborations with Gucci. These included T-shirt designs, murals and the centrepiece of the 2017 *Giff Gwing* campaign: an illustrated book that references the fall of Icarus and contemporary takes on Renaissance-style still lives to showcase Gucci accessories.

Monreal's playfulness and interest in myth make him an ideal partner for Michele's vision. His imagery echoes and complements the overload of references that epitomise Michele's work, which, in this collection, ranged from Elton John's glam rock wardrobe to Queen Elizabeth I, Disney and Marlboro packaging.

In the past few years, Gucci has teamed up with more illustrators than any other luxury brand, working with Jayde Fish, Angelica Hicks, Nour Flayhan and Unskilled Worker, among many others. Michele has said he wants to transform Gucci from a brand into an immersive experience, and his collaborations with artists and innovative use of social media have played a major role in this. "Today, creativity is often born and finds its voice in digital media, a vital source of visual culture," he once said. Illustration suits Gucci's new association with free imagination, fantasy and eccentricity, and although it gets great engagement on Instagram – where the fashion house has more than 32 million followers, and where Michele discovers his illustrators – the work of these artists is used not only for online advertising but also as giant murals on store facades, on clothing and in Gucci-curated art exhibitions.

Towards the end of 2017 *Vogue* cited Gucci's use of illustration and its emergence "as a tool for cutting through the visual noise of social media" as evidence that fashion illustration was "having a moment". But proclamations that 'it's back!' have become something of a trope in fashion, where illustration



seems to be continuously dying and being reborn, often simultaneously. Even its so-called 'golden age', during the first 60 years of the 20th century, was also its extended swan song, according to historian Colin McDowell.

Fashion illustration continues to evolve and diversify as culture and technology change, yet somehow the perception remains that it's a fleeting, diminishing form, forever overshadowed by its former glory as the dominant medium in style magazines. Perceptions of fashion illustration tend to remain fixed on that which echoes its history. *Vogue* even wonders if it might be making a return because of a current craze for nostalgia. It seems hard for fashion illustration to shake off the view that it is fundamentally of the past.

Nonreal wants to challenge this. "I want to try to help put illustration on the same level as photography and video," he has said. Speaking to *Plastik* magazine, he attributes his success to "working hard and having a painting style that is different from what we are used to in fashion illustration."

Nonreal enjoys creating characters, which he puts down to his love of comics. His work, which is dense, detailed and narrative-based, contrasts with fashion illustration's conventions of gestural line work, watery shapes and playfully exaggerated or semi-abstracted bodies on stark backgrounds.

Since the perfection of colour photography in the late 1930s, fashion illustration has largely sought to stake out its place by doing 'what photography can't'. Writer Holly Brubach explains that fashion illustration and photography were "twin forms that grew up together over course of 20th century", and each came "to specialise in what the other was incapable of doing as well". Over the years, much of it became less detailed, more abstracted: and it has explored gestural or exaggerated methods of representing the fashioned body in a myriad of playful ways. Although there might be suggestions of character, the *mise-en-scène* required to tell a story has largely disappeared.

The telling of stories in fashion has developed an acknowledged sophistication in photography, film and theatrical fashion shows. But in striving to do what photography can't, fashion illustration has perhaps been slower to match what fashion photography does at its most interesting – setting up scenes loaded with tension or mystery, which enables the images to go beyond representing products and explore other themes or issues.



The images in Monreal's 'Utopian Fantasy' series likewise set up dramatic scenes, which suggest stories and invite questions. Perhaps it's the allusions to history and myth that make them seem so loaded and mysterious. The way they situate fashion in a web of conflated references encourages interpretation, although their exact meaning is far from clear. Does this hi-tech recreation of old paintings bring into focus the new significance of digital media, or ask what it means to be contemporary now? What do we make of the juxtapositions of historic symbols of status and beauty with those of today? Or the mash-ups of fashion-shoot poses with icons from Western cultural mythology, from Ophelia to Snow White? Fashion illustration is capable of such complexity. It needn't be restrained by preconceptions of what it should be and now, more than ever, the possibilities for it seem unbound by technology. The boundary between the 'made' and photographic image hasn't always been clear, even in fashion – but the rise of digital media has blurred the lines even further. Photographs can be seamlessly altered, blended and mixed together to fantastic effect (see for example photographer Nick Knight's pioneering fashion images of the 1990s); likewise, the illusion of photographic realism can be created through digital rendering. While there is much still to explore within traditional media, this has opened a whole new terrain for fashion illustration. So, what can fashion illustration contribute today, alongside photography? In the words of Dolly Jones, former online editor for *Vogue*, it "allows for a different daydream". Monreal's work does just that.

Gigi Graving, Gucci, 2017



