FUTURE IMPERFECT

ZOE TAYLOR explores the highly original, fantastical work of fashion illustrator MARGOT BOWMAN whose eclectic use of media, futuristic narratives and relationships with brands is mapping a path for the commercial image-maker.
Margot Bowman epitomises a visionary illustrator. In the true sense of the word ‘visionary’, her work often imagines how we will live in the future and practically explores issues such as sustainability. Then there’s her passion for grammar, her progressive attitude towards commercial work and the use with which she works across both traditional and digital media. It suggests that despite the catastrophes that may await us, the positive power of human creativity will pull us through—or at least make things bearable.

The London-based artist studied graphic design at Central St Martin’s and graduated in 2011. While still at art school, she created in-store artwork for Urban Outfitters Central St Martins and graduated in 2011. While still at art school, she created in-store artwork for Urban Outfitters and made what have been described as the first GIFs based on runway photos on to geometric shapes that floated above London’s bricked streets, warped into infinity. Skilfully drawn, masked, brightly coloured women recline on the oblongs; one has her hand across her middle as if sick, in pain or confronting herself. It’s a strange image and maps another possibility in the ongoing dialogue between the photographic and ‘made’ fashion image. As live creamery photos and videos saturate the internet in an abundance never seen before, the distinctiveness and individuality of the made image are in high demand – and the more wild and playful and non-photographic the better, as the illustrations promoted by SHOWstudio regularly demonstrate.

Bowman’s eccentric, Post-Mr Brainwash tendencies are in high demand – and the more wild and playful and non-photographic the better, as the illustrations promoted by SHOWstudio regularly demonstrate. Bowman’s eccentric Colour Me Pro, interactive poster exhibition for BT and Childline, exhibited in-store at Harvey Nichols.

Her interest in the future extends to designing her own clothing. In 2012, she hand-painted floral patterns to create a capsule collection, Albion 2080. The clothes tell the story of a possible future—a different world with its own difficulties. For Margot, human resilience seems closely linked with our creativity, as she expresses in her description of the collection: “A group of women are living in 2080 when shopping and factories are long gone. They toughen up under hats, glasses, protective PVC and outwear…’

Conscious of the social pressure to share, share, share, our narratives that ‘explores the ideas around surveillance. For example, her animation for Crash uses art-making as a way to invent friends. Although I had no interest in comics culture, sci-fi or gaming as a kid, I think it comes from feeling like an outsider yourself, and the playfulness is strongly directed; there’s always an overriding need to communicate something, often a feeling or an idea.

What draws you to strangeness?

ZOE TAYLOR: I love that it can’t be wrong. There are no mistakes and that’s such a liberating interaction. I never feel like, ‘Oh, I draw wrong.’ You just do it again if you don’t like it, or the mistakes become part of the work. Whether I’m working with my hands or working digitally, I trust the drawing to be right.

MY SPOTTING IS SO BAD – I’m dyslexic. When I was a kid learning to write and spell, it was really liberating to have a mouse of expression when you couldn’t make a mistake.

What do you like about drawing?

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ZT: You've collaborated with big brands on a number of projects that have a positive social or environmental focus. How do these projects come about? Are you the 'go-to' person for this now?

MB: Fingers crossed I am! People in brands want to make interesting, socially relevant, meaningful work that they feel good about. Brands are a huge part of our environment and what they produce can be really amazing.

ZT: You've said previously that you believe in being commercial – that to not work with big brands for fear of selling out or diluting your vision is an old-fashioned, pre-internet way of thinking. Can you say a bit more about this positive attitude towards working with major companies?

MB: It's exciting to be in the world and to be making work about the world, and brands are a huge part of our environment and what they produce can be really amazing. Sometimes my work will be self-funded or publicly funded or funded by a gallery, and sometimes it will be supported by brands. Whether you apply to the Arts Council or a big company, both systems are really corrupt! As long as you're doing what you want and making work you like, I think it's OK.

ZT: What are you working on right now?

MB: I'm doing W.E.T., which is an on-going research project. It's all about giving people the opportunity to imagine what living in the future will be like and it could take the form of a film or a performance or an installation or anything that inspires this shift that I'm really passionate about – moving away from a dystopian vision of the future towards something that's much more human and personable and emotional, as you said, and engaging with climate change and technology in a way that feels sincere and approachable.

ZT: Fantastic! Yes, this dystopian vision of the future has become a bit of a cliché, to the point where perhaps it doesn't affect us any more.

MB: Totally! It's so disengaging and it's really alienating and isolating and it makes you feel like, "I don't want to think about the future because it's scary and horrible." But no, you can think about it. It's not going to bite.

Fashion is really experimental. It's all about the new happening in your present – but doing it through the lens of the future – opens up a really good space for conversation. It was also inspired by Dunne and Raby's Critical Design. They explore it through product design, but I thought I could apply it to narrative and future fiction. My thesis at St Martins was about mythology in the world of digital media. The outcome was a website and a graphic GIF-based narrative called Everything Is So Amazing, which is set in a world where language has been reduced to emojis but the environment is otherwise very normal and domestic. The project I've been working on this year [W.E.T.] is kind of part two of that.

ZT: Emotions and human fragility in the post-digital world seem to be recurring themes in your work.

MB: I think it's really hard to express your emotions, and when you add this layer of digital mediation you run the risk of being stunted and not connecting any more. Personally, I've found that really confusing, especially in a fast-paced city like London. It's really easy to turn the whole thing off and not feel anything.

ZT: A lot of your commissions have been fashion-related and you design clothing, too. What attracts you to fashion?

MB: Fashion is really experimental. It's all about the new. That's the main premise of the fashion industry – newness – so if you like to experiment and make new things, it's great. Also, being a woman, I felt alienated by graphic design. It's not emotional, it's not colourful, it's all about functionality and that's not who I am. Fashion was on the opposite end of the spectrum, where it's OK to explore all of those things. For me, fashion is non-verbal communication – it's visual communication. Clothing is your exhibition. We're all communicating with each other through what we wear.

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margotbowman.com

Twist, animation, part of W.E.T. multi-media project

Journey, animation, 2015

Human Nature, The See-Saw Talk To Me, BT ArtBox project

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