

Manara Secret Gardens

Like all great authors in love with drawing, Milo Manara cultivates artistic passions that travel in several directions. Over the long career of Italy's best known comic book artist, sensuality is the ingredient that has made him the most influential on the international erotic comic book scene, becoming somewhat of a hallmark style. But alongside this, many other ideas, aesthetics and sensitivities have made their mark.

"The Secret Gardens of Manara" is a first-time exploration of the Veronese artist's eclecticism. It is centred around a dimension of his work that is both cross-cutting and subtle: a fantastical imagination. This dimension has accompanied him since his first days in publishing and, not by chance, is the glue that holds together the kaleidoscope of genres, settings and stylistic registers that is his masterpiece *Giuseppe Bergman* (1978–2004), a condensed journey through the art of the comic book.

In the secret gardens of his inspiration and his expressive intent, Manara's point of view has always diverged – sometimes, brazenly – from the banal contrast between realism and imagination.

One way he displays this personal viewpoint is through a recurring interest in a miscellany of eras, which he interprets by contradicting – quite openly and with the serenity of an ever-conscious pretence – the documentary nature of historic narration. One only has to think of the many works that are centred on the distant past – from the Roman era in *The Golden Ass* to the Renaissance in *Caravaggio* and *The Borgias* – or those set in the present, with its problematic political and technological energy, from the satire of *Alessio* to the eroticism of *Butterscotch*. The past always alludes to the present and the numerous fantastical occurrences that populate the stories serve to underscore human experiences and impulses, way beyond the mere pleasure of the fabulous. Nor has Manara refused to engage in unrestrainedly futuristic fantasy, from *Piranesi the Prison Planet* to *Fone*, all the while keeping the spotlight on social dynamics rather than the strictly technological. In this sense, Manara was and is more of an investigator than an observer of reality, an author in love with fiction's ability to formulate hypotheses of reality, rather than to offer reconstructions of it, however partial.

Another aspect of his visionary outlook stems from the often playful delight he takes in short-circuiting representation, with results that lie somewhere between plausibility and illusion. With Manara, the concrete world of communications, from TV to music, often spills over into parables on the sometimes blinding, sometimes

illuminating desires with which we try to make sense of the confused ordinariness of life (*Reclame, Giuseppe Bergman, To See the Stars*). Cinema, music or painting are often the material of dreams (*John Lennon, The Journey of G. Mastorna*). The individuality of bodies, so skilfully depicted by the artist, emerges, not only in the beauty of their anatomies, but also in the wonder of the strangest beings, be they monstrous or fabulous, to reveal their arcane characteristics (*Gulliveriana, The Ape*). Although rooted in a tradition of pre-modern figurative and strictly naturalistic drawing, Manara is a comic book artist with a visual uncertainty, an author enticed by the capacity of drawings – and good narrative ideas – to suggest without demonstrating, leaving room for symbols to perform their mysterious mission.

“The Secret Gardens” aims to take visitors on a new journey into the talent of Milo Manara, presenting him as much as a master of the brushstroke as of the imagination. He is a comic artist who has generated ideas that are conceived visually. In this exhibition they are presented in four sections: the splendid or perhaps monstrous “Creatures and other wonders”, the barely reassuring science fiction of “*Fantafuturi*”, the hidden paradoxes of history in “Imaginary Pasts”, and the cinema of his “Fellini fantasies”.

Fantafuturi

Manara has had a relationship with science fiction throughout his career as an artist, one that has been fuelled by a genuine passion: “I enjoy science fiction very much, and I am still a keen reader of the genre, which has always appealed to me”. Together with history-art, erotica and the fantastical, science fiction has been one of the areas in which the artist has been most constant since the 1970s, demonstrating a rich and varied spirit ranging from the documentary-like realism of the *Il fumetto della realtà* (1974/77) and *La parola alla giuria* (1975/76) series, to the wildest forms of fiction.

This is Manara’s direction in 1974 when he draws several episodes of *Bambole Assassine*, an erotic sci-fi comic penned by Silverio Pisu, with whom he worked on other crucial works. In 1981, he published *Fone*, one of the misunderstood gems in Manara’s catalogue, which projects into a dystopian future Jorge Luis Borges’ surreal bibliophile visions and the proto-cyberpunk style of Moebius and other colleagues from *Métal Hurlant* magazine. In *Sesso o tabù? (X3)* from 1987, he mingles science fiction with eroticism, of which he has become one of the best known interpreters, and devises a “test comic” on sexual inhibitions, which imagines an experiment conducted by extra-terrestrials on a woman who is invited to bear witness to the erotic capabilities of the human species.

Piranese the Prison Planet (2002) is his most structured science fiction work, set in a remote universe dominated by genetic manipulation and the power of the media. Piranese is a prison planet where engines are forbidden and, most strikingly, where people who do not conform to the status quo are imprisoned: they undergo bio-imprinting, a gradual change in their genetic make-up, in order to made “happy, peaceful, optimistic” citizens. One young woman who has escaped genetic manipulation rebels against her dystopian fate, and roams among the space vehicles, asteroids and bizarre mediaeval and baroque architecture in search of freedom.

As an illustrator, Manara has also created many icons of the best known science fiction comics, including X-Men, Avengers, Star Wars and, most notably, Barbarella, the futuristic creation of Jean-Claude Forest – to him he dedicated a heartfelt tribute 2009. In 2003, he did several drawings and studies for a cinema remake of Barbarella, which never came to fruition.

Creatures and other wonders

Bodies occupy a central space in Manara's work. Not only as the most frequent figures in his drawings, but also as entire graphic universes to be explored in every way possible. Therefore, it should be no surprise that the bodies in this space are extremely diverse: anthropomorphs and aliens, the dazzling and the deformed, the angelic and the demonic.

What Manara's hand seeks to portray in bodies is vitality, a profound energy that can emerge from anatomical and formal details as much as from movements and attitudes. One clear example of the former can be found in the girls in his famous *Zodiaco*, who are hybrid woman-animals, perfect human creatures with a perfect zoological dimension. But while drawing bodies is also a matter of giving shape to their gestural quality – almost as if they were performing – the illustrations for La Fontaine's *Favole libertine* and for a collection of watches by Ulysse Nardin epitomise Manara's ability to build "scenes" at the centre of which can be found the most disparate of postures that are as humanly temperamental as they are monstrously unnatural.

His passion for the carnality of bodies has thus made Manara an artist with a keen eye for all the compositional possibilities of imagining organic beings. In his career as an illustrator and comic book artist, he has given form to creatures typically found in the world of fantasy and the fantastical, and also to men and women whose physicality is hyperrealistic.

In 1975, *The Ape*, his first comic for *alterlinus*, was a political reinterpretation of a key character in Chinese fantasy literature. The monkey king Sun Wukong was born in inorganic form from a stone, the product of the earth being impregnated by the wind. He travelled in search of immortality and power, with a mission to lead his people and, not without the arrogance of a true "creator", to subjugate all other species.

The demonic figures that recur in dozens of the author's works – from *Una strega a Venezia* to the ephelic *Gori Bau* who turns out to be a demon – appear not to be deviations from the norm, but rather the true spirit of his representation of fantasy: bodies that are quintessentially ambiguous, mythological hybrids whose plastic perfection burgeons with the plastic strength of pure desire.

Imaginary Pasts

Manara's interest in history is often very concrete, seen as much in his incursions into current affairs as in his reconstruction of key events and figures from the far-off past. However, even his works with a historic focus are often mediated by the imagination and fantasy.

A youthful work like *Alessio* (1977) is emblematic of the Manarian pastiche, in which political satire is mixed with fragments of history (from the Russian Revolution to the death of the anarchist Pinelli), but also contains dream sequences and storybook bizarreries: extra-terrestrials watching the Earth, or characters with angel wings. So it came as no surprise that Manara's approach to the Roman period was in the form of his 1999 free adaptation of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, which he revised with visual integrations from Fellini's *Satyricon*.

The fantastical is crucial to his masterpiece, the long *Giuseppe Bergman* saga, which debuted in 1978, offering an unusual pastiche of genres. The series is a kind of reality show ahead of its time, in which Bergman rebels against the idea of an ordinary life and is driven by a quest for adventure at any cost. This takes him around the world, living experiences that hover between reality and fiction and are interspersed with narrative, artistic and comic book references. *To See the Stars*, the penultimate chapter in the saga, is a voyage through the history of art. Manara thrust his character-avatar into a gallery of paintings and famous images, envisaging him in classic, Renaissance, Romantic works of art...

This series saw the collaboration between Manara and his mentor, Hugo Pratt, with whom he created *Indian Summer* (1983). The story is centred on a faithful reconstruction of 17th-century colonial America, in which a community of Puritan settlers is contrasted with a tribe of Native Americans, and magic springs forth from the mysterious powers of Phillis, the Lewis family's daughter.

Manara infused other epics, like *Revolution* (2000) and *The Borgias* penned by Alejandro Jodorowsky (2004 – 2010), with visionary elements that were sometimes dreamlike and sometimes grotesque, but were untethered from the dimension of the factual. The only exception is his biographical reconstruction of the life of *Caravaggio* (2015 – 2018), Manara's greatest artistic passion. This masterpiece remains close to the known life story of the artist Merisi and Manara seems almost to have set aside the "imagination in power" motto that accompanied him from his very beginnings. Yet, by choosing to give ample space to episodes forgotten by historians, like a voyage to Malta, he once again displays his deep trust in the imagination: "because it was no doubt an adventure that was worthy of that name", Manara has said.

Fellini fantasies

The “dream machine” is what Milo Manara calls cinema, another of his enduring passions. Over the years, he has worked with directors ranging from Woody Allen to Luc Besson, and even did the drawings for the statue of one of cinema’s most quintessential divas, Brigitte Bardot, unveiled by the actress herself in 2017.

But for Manara, one filmmaker towers above them all: Federico Fellini. His love for the director of *8 ½* and *La dolce vita* is deeply rooted in Manara’s inspiration. Indeed, in 1984, he dedicated a short story, the unforgettable *Senza titolo*, to Fellini’s ability to tell inventive, surreal stories. This heartfelt esteem turned out to be mutual and led to a long partnership between the two artists, which included Manara’s creation of the film posters for *Intervista* (1987), and later *The Voice of the Moon* (1990).

However, the pinnacle of the collaboration was in a series of comic books, which were again marked by a hint of the fantastical, no doubt in step with the Fellinian world of dreams. “My relationship with Fellini was initially one of friendship and fondness; then came our collaboration on comics, a medium he always loved, partly because its roots were in cartoons and the settings of stories. [...] He put it beautifully when he said that what he found in comics was the immobility of images, similar to that of butterflies pierced by an entomologist’s pins”.

Trip to Tulum (1986) is an adaptation of what was originally a Fellini film script. It is a curious, meta-cinematographic project that presents the initiatory journey of a director in Mexico, in locations for a film which, as in real life, Fellini never managed to make.

In 1992, Manara published *Il viaggio di G. Mastorna detto Fernet*, created from a storyboard by Fellini. This is the story of another journey on the outskirts of the world of dreams, but this time the theme is death. Mastorna is a famous clown and cellist, who gets on a plane to the next leg of his tour. A snowstorm forces the plane to make an emergency landing in a square in a large city. Here, Mastorna witnesses an extraordinary performance by a dancer and hears a surprising announcement: a news report of a plane disaster that has left no survivors... The work ends here, just in time to hint at Mastorna’s journey into the afterlife, but left unfinished, like many of Fellini’s projects, suspended between the dream world and reality.