

# 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



*Boys under the stairs, Anonymous Sex Journal, 2013*

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 newness, her progressive attitude towards commercial work and the ease 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 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 shows for Topshop. Much of her work continues to revolve around fashion.

Bowman's big-brand fashion collaborations nearly always have a social or environmental focus: her Earth Day design for the American cosmetic company Kiehl's (all proceeds of which went to the Trees for Cities charity); *The See-Saw*, an interactive poster exhibition for Diesel that aimed to "connect young people in London with African creatives through a shared sense of wonder"; to the brightly decorated K6 phone box made 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 found garments 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 suggests in her description of the collection: "A group of women are living in 2080 when shopping and factories are long gone. Instead they express their individuality and communal ties by painting on the clothes they find."

She is also the creative director of *The Esthetica Review*, a biannual publication devoted to sustainable fashion, an idea she puts into practice with Auria, a swimwear label run in partnership with Diana Auria. The garments are made from 100% recycled polyamide, retrieved from discarded fishing nets.

Writing for *Dazed*, Claire Marie Healy recently observed the current youth generation's 'ability to disrupt

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the idea of discipline'. The internet and the ease with which digital technology can be applied means that artists can work across different disciplines with more fluidity than in the past. This is not to say that disciplines no longer matter – Bowman fully grasps what it means to be a visual communicator today and she is interested in exploring this in all its multifaceted possibilities, from fashion design and creative direction to art installation and animation. She is currently toying with moving into performance.

She has also worked with a number of magazines and websites such as *AnOther*, *Nowness* and *Dazed*, visualising fashion collections in the form of standalone illustrations, animations and GIFs. Her interpretation of the SS15 London collections for *Baku* magazine inserted cropped runway photos on to geometric shapes that floated above London's bricked streets, warped into infinity. Shakily drawn, naked, fluoro-coloured women recline on the oblongs; one has her hand across her middle as if sick, in pain or comforting herself. It's a strange image and maps another possibility in the ongoing dialogue between the photographed and 'made' fashion image. As live runway 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 *Colour Me Fine* watercolour series also exemplifies this approach – bits of clothing from the SS11 collections can just about be made out on acrobatic, happy-go-lucky characters with double animal heads, long wobbly arms or giant eyes.

What's striking about Bowman's fashion films are the stories that she spins around the collections, enabling her to deal with subject matter that goes beyond the clothing. For example, her animation for *Test* illustrates looks from *Costume National's AW12* collection as part of a broader narrative that 'explores the ideas around surveillance. Conscious of the social pressure to share, share, share, our characters keep their dreams and emotions firmly hidden away under hats, glasses, protective PVC and underwear...'

Bowman's images attract our curiosity with their playful and rich mix of approaches: in one image, she might combine bleeding watercolours with digital collage, tablet

finger-painting and tonal pencil drawing. Talking to Cajsá Carlson about the way she mixes traditional and digital mediums, she said, "I like the strange contrast of when they are brought together in a way that's not too polished. It's important to show the process, to leave gaps and expose technology, both old (physical mark-making) and new (digital software). I think where the technology falls short, in those gaps and mistakes you find the human part." Her drawing is expressive and she's not afraid to take risks and make mistakes. But her playfulness is strongly directed; there's always an overriding need to communicate something, often a feeling or an idea.

Whatever medium she works in, Bowman's distinctive, expressive vision and its ability to make us feel something stand out – qualities that I sometimes find lacking in work that adopts a post-digital aesthetic. Her work is boldly colourful. Its decorative aspects are well moulded to their context and her drawing has a disarmingly naïve quality. But it's the curious figures that populate her work that we really engage with. Apparently it was the designer Kate Moross who encouraged her to pursue these drawings, noticing how people empathised with them. Her oddly drawn characters seem strange and slightly alienated but are unapologetically themselves.

**ZOE TAYLOR:** What is it you like about working across different media and disciplines?

**MB:** It just keeps things really fresh, so I don't get too familiar and too comfortable with one thing – I have to keep figuring stuff out again.

**ZT:** You appear to do it effortlessly and it looks like you're always having fun.

**MB:** I do enjoy doing what I do. It should be playful and alive and vibrant and as true as it can be, because that's why people engage in culture, whether its music or art or literature or whatever. As a creative person, you have to be able to convey feelings. That's your job – to feel something and convey it.

**ZT:** What do you like about drawing?

**MB:** 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 drew that 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 want the drawing to be raw.

My spelling is really bad – I'm dyslexic. When I was a kid learning to write and spell, it was really liberating to have a means of expression where I couldn't make a mistake.

**ZT:** Your drawing is very distinctive. What are your influences?

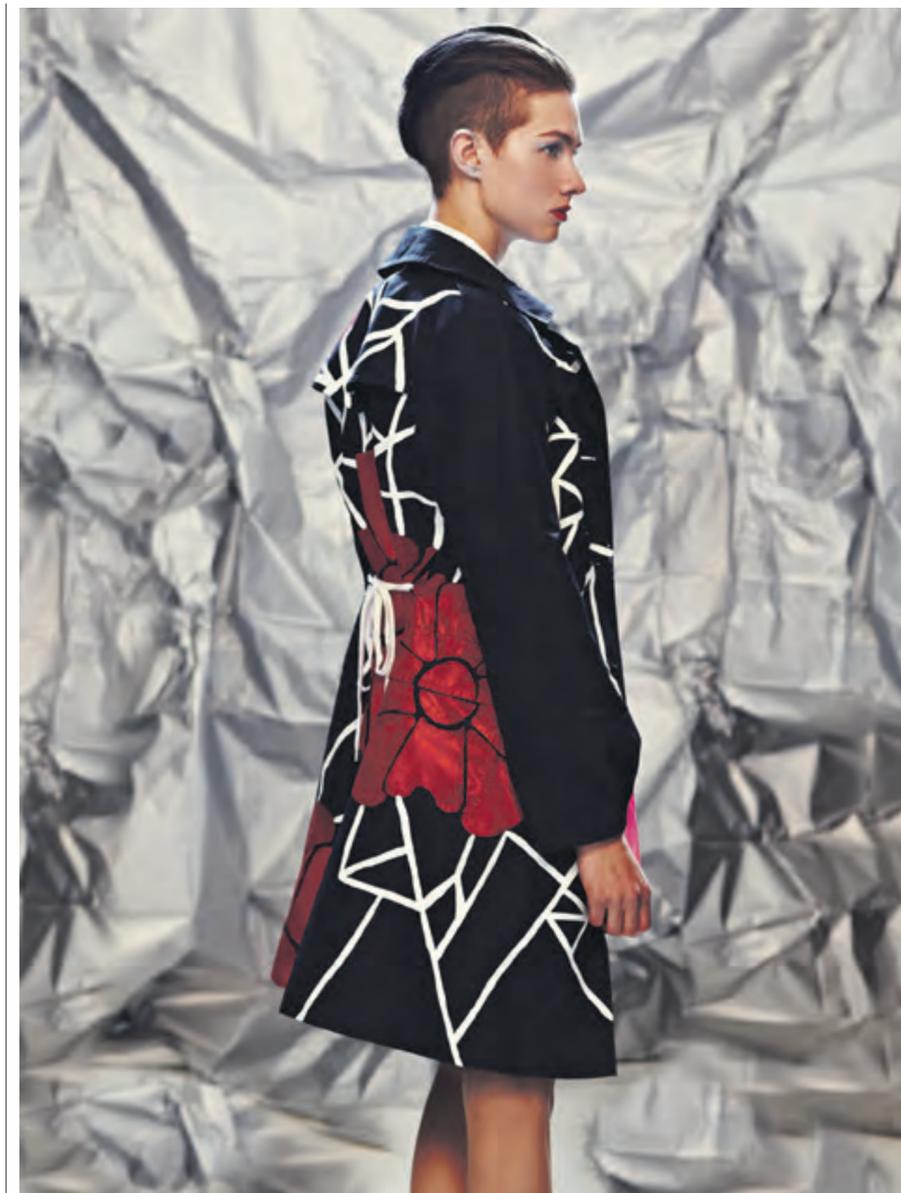
**MB:** Picasso's blue and pink periods. There's this blue-period painting of a clown, which I love. Tim Burton's drawing is amazing, too. I like Ralph Steadman because his work is really expressive. I love Francis Bacon – what I really like about his work is that it almost makes perfect anatomical and spatial sense but at the same time it doesn't. His triptychs have had such a big influence on how I form images.

**ZT:** You've said before that you like making strange, odd things. What draws you to strangeness?

**MB:** I think it comes from feeling like an outsider yourself, so you want to fill the world with other odd things and make strange things beautiful. Sarah Lucas has said she uses art-making as a way to invent friends. Although I had friends when I was a kid, I still felt like an outsider.

**ZT:** Your work often explores visions of the future, parallel worlds, alternate realities – where does this interest stem from and how did it develop?

**MB:** I wasn't into comics culture, sci-fi or gaming as a kid, but now they're big influences on my work. At St Martins College, I got interested in dystopian futures and sci-fi after reading *Crash* by JG Ballard. I love Ballard's short stories and Philip K. Dick and this 'reality plus one' idea really resonated with me. For instance, there could be a reality where everything is the same as it is now except everyone's got three eyes. And I think pushing that just far enough to make you re-evaluate what's ➤



*Albion 2080, painted clothing range, an exploration of the future of British national identity. Photography by Sarah Brimley*

Bowman's interest in the future is played out in the designs of her own clothing



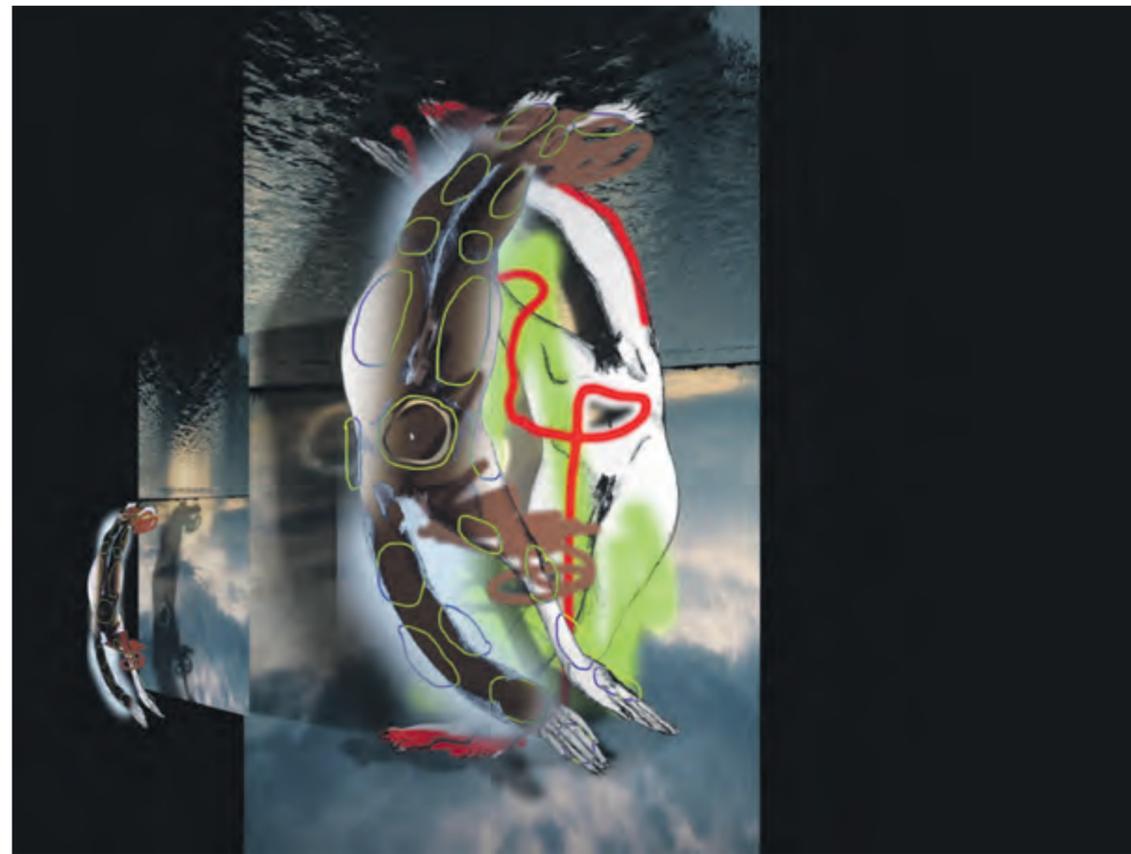
*London Collections for Baku Magazine*



Human Nature, The See-Saw



Talk To Me, BT ArtBox project



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



Journey, animation, 2015

## 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. I 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*. It's 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 a 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 insincere 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.

**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 part of that environment. When people ask me what I do, I say I'm an artist who does different kinds of creative projects and sometimes brands pay for it and sometimes they don't. If it's the right thing and the brand wants to get involved, you can do such cool stuff.

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 instigates 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. !

[margotbowman.com](http://margotbowman.com)