

Illustrative – International Illustrative Art Forum

The sky was a perfect uniform blue, and the air fresh and crisp, as I touched down at Zurich airport from London. I'd just enjoyed fabulous weather there too, while at the London Frieze Art Fair, so I was in a good mood to see more art.

This year is the third **Illustrative Art Forum**, and after last year's critical success in Berlin, once again celebrates the many facets of the illustrative arts, from the worlds of fashion, textile arts, graphic design through to comics and more 'high-brow' illustration.



Opening night

Friday night saw the opening event at a large, brightly lit exhibition hall, containing over 400 illustrations, video and sculptural works. With booth-like structures extending from one end to the other, and even a section devoted to Illustration agencies from countries as far flung as Japan and Finland, Illustrative definitely had more of a 'Fair' feeling about it.

Of all the 35 artists exhibiting, a number of established and upcoming artists impressed with their talents. Well-known German illustrator Olaf Hajek presented an eye-catching series of portrait-style pieces with a distinctly Asian style, of half-human creatures entwined in loving embraces, day-glo pinks and blues painted on textured, glossy paper surfaces.

Fashion designer-turned-artist Helle Mardahl's gorgeously grotesque 'Royal Orgy of Consumption' dominated the space not far from the entrance, in the Illustrative 'Fashion Salon'. Spewing forth onto the floor were plush sculptures made up of intricately sewn body parts, in a style that she's now applying to wall pieces and sculptures, rather than to the distinctive clothing with which Mardahl first made her mark on the creative world.



Helle Mardahl

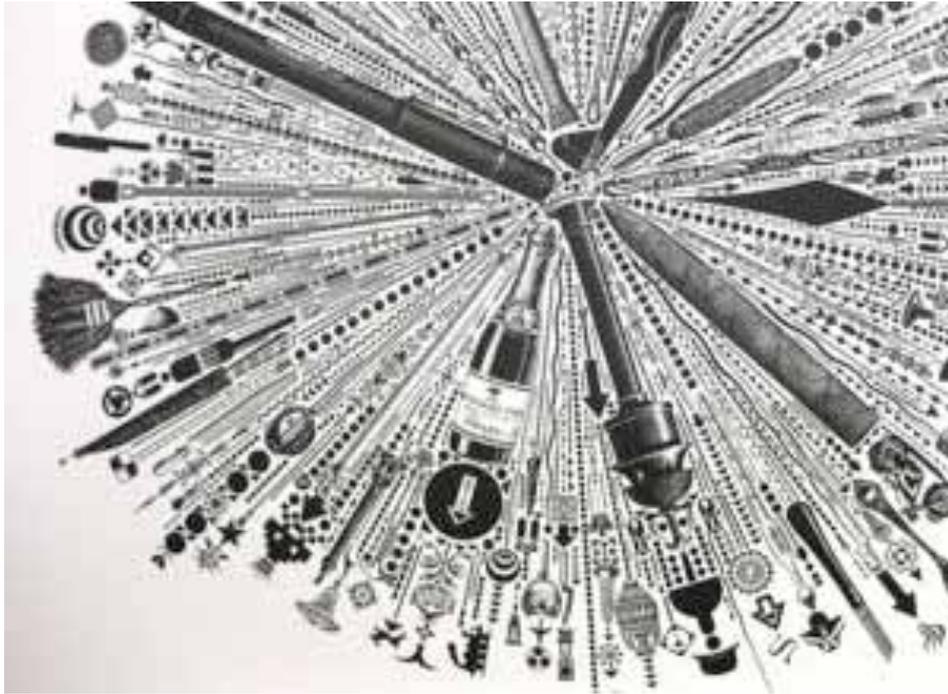
Fellow Danish designer Henrik Vibskov's installations made a similar dramatic impact, but here we were treated to a whole range of fashion pieces draped over mannequins, with a clear link to his illustrative techniques in drawings on the wall behind.



Henrik Vibskov

Moving from fashion to illustrated art, and it was hard not to notice the technically brilliant comic-style works by German Roman Bittner. His large-scale pieces, depicting lavish cityscapes in a 50's Americana aesthetic, almost burst with life out of the frame.

But if I thought that was painstakingly detailed, even more so was the work of Italian illustrator Lorenzo Petrantoni. Although the illustrations look decidedly 'old-style', using typefaces and illustrations in the style of early 19th century signage and advertising, they were still contemporary, because if you looked close enough, you'd find symbols and icons of our modern era buried within, in what seemed like a wry commentary on the excesses of modern life.



Lorenzo Petrantoni

Happily, one of my favourite illustrative techniques, the underrated world of collage, didn't get ignored. Flicking through books and magazines and getting my hands dirty with glue and scissors has always been one of my favourite pursuits, to which artist Eva Eul Sin-Han made use of, with a mixture of ink, pencil drawing and collage. The imagination can easily be stimulated by simple juxtaposition, which is why collage is often such a succinct mode of expression, and heavily favoured by Dada and Surrealist artists. In this case, Sin-Han cut and pasted humans from old magazines, scrubbing out their faces and rendering them almost alien – a menacing series of illustrations, which seemed to speak of manipulation and a kind of domestic 'evil'.



While many of the artists on show displayed expertly-honed technical skills, it was the works in the exhibition that hit me at a deeper level, somehow stirring me or giving me a fresh insight, that I lingered on the most. But that's the thing about illustration – it's silly to try and call it 'art', because if it were art then we'd be forgetting about 'illustrated' technique, which is what brings all these artists together in the first place. The confusion begins by mixing those artists who consider themselves 'artists', with those who are actually 'illustrators', who most often than not, lack the kind of sophistication in ideas that you tend to find in the world's leading art galleries.

But illustration as a medium in itself is becoming increasingly popular. Through the surging (and now somewhat dwindling) popularity of street art in the earlier part of the 2000's, with more graffiti-style works like those of Banksy commanding top dollar on the art market, illustration art has in some way or other already proved its value, not as pure 'art', but as something that's just as valid and just as saleable.



Glass sculptures

Curator Pascal Johanssen's position on Illustrative's intent was therefore quite curious:

'Illustrative is a first and foremost an exhibition, to bring together the best and brightest from the field of illustration. It's not a fair, rather, it's a curated travelling show, which has a competition to assist upcoming illustrators gain the exposure they need'

Surely the unique 'selling point' of Illustrative is *not* that it's a curated group show, which you could stumble across at any contemporary art space from the Pompidou in Paris to any lower East-side gallery in New York. To create an event, that's emphasis is purely on lifting the profile of the art form, while not on engaging the artists involved with any commercial possibilities such as the sale of works at the event, seems a bit mean-spirited.

And with the presence of agencies there, such as Japan's Taiko and Associates, and the claim of it being a 'Forum', I was almost convinced that was what the organizers at Illustrative were really trying to do was engage with the interrelated industries as well, but perhaps this side of things didn't really pan out as they had planned. Don't get me wrong here – I didn't arrive there 'tainted' by the corporatized nature of the Frieze Art Fair, but at least you know what you're getting – pure, unadulterated art selling, and as it happens, a mind-

blowing amount of fantastic contemporary artworks from the leaders in their field. A little dose of that might have made an event like Illustrative lose its self-consciousness and given it the buzz that was clearly lacking from the opening night event.

That said, the Young Illustrators Award is an encouraging aspect of the Exhibition, with four illustration categories including illustration, book art, animation, and a special Swatch prize being won by four up and coming 'young' artists.



The winners of the Illustrative Award, with Curator Pascal Johanssen

With this year's location Switzerland, a land of anonymous bank accounts and precision watchmaking, I wasn't surprised when I found out that a group of 30-odd Swatch watch collectors had descended on the Illustrative event for a club meeting, as they do regularly throughout Europe during the year. Intriguingly, one middle-aged gentleman from Spain (who asked to remain anonymous) boasted of a collection of over 15,000 Swatch watches, all apparently stored in his own flat.



Christian Montenegro's Swatch Watch face design
(photo by Sebastian Garbsch)

Swatch commissioned two new watches for the Illustrative event, which of course lured its loyal collectors along, to snap up one out of only 3,333 copies. Even if Swatch has managed to contribute its fair share of garish designs to the world of watch design over the years, this shows an effort on their behalf to engage with the latest trends in design and illustration.

So although the event wasn't quite a 'Forum', nor a 'Fair', and not just an 'Exhibition', its strength was in its diversity, and the sheer amount of illustrated works on display. Most of us were introduced to illustration from a young age, watching cartoons and flicking through bed-time stories and picture books, so certainly our fascination for it will never fade. To have so much of it under one roof is rather a treat, like a sweet shop for grown-up eyes.