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V MAGAZINE



Manuela Soto's Bindarella-like figures find empowerment in the male gaze.

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TEXT: SAMUEL ANDERSON

Every tattoo is a multitude of tiny traumas, but the figure drawings that tattooist Manuela Soto deploys, both on her clients' skin and in her pen-and-ink drawings, take the theme of sacrificial flesh to a whole new level. The 26-year-old Switzerland native's figures reflect the aesthetics of manga and hentai, the Japanese styles favoring blow-up doll bodily proportions and bedroom eyes. While she may give them hypersexualized, almost distorted bodies, Soto's figures, often clad in dollar bill-stuffed G-strings and luxury logos, are designed to subvert sexual violence and the trauma of patriarchy.

In addition the illustration techniques of Japan, where Soto traveled six years ago with the intention of staying permanently, the drawings reflect several subcultures—from Spice Girl fandom to Chicax culture—all of which figure into the artist's eclectic background. And while they began as a kind of composite self-portraiture, Soto, who now lives in Los Angeles, has since taken drawings across the world; after her inks took off on Instagram, she was invited to a residency at prestigious London studio Sang Bleu. She has also collaborated with LA streetwear brands like Left Hand and Dimepiece.

Soto's drawings are currently on view at her solo show "Meant to Be" at the LES micro-gallery Lubov. Here, the artist talks her various inspirations, surviving trauma and reckoning with race.

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How did you get started in tattoo art?

I started tattooing in my bedroom cause I was too broke to pay for ink. Then people from all around the world started to request appointments through Instagram DMs. This is how I started going on "tour." Four years later I moved to the USA and live in Los Angeles because of tattooing.

Do you have tattoos yourself? Do you have a favorite?

Yes, many. I couldn't choose. Most of my tattoos are thought as prayers or promises to myself.

How were you first exposed to manga and hentai?

I was a big Sailor Moon fan as a child for obvious reasons, and Spirited Away is one of my favorite movies ever. I think our generation has definitely been very impacted and inspired by Japanese animated culture.

At 20 years old I took a one way flight to Tokyo hoping to get a job and stay forever. That's when I was exposed to Japanese erotica and hentai. I was intrigued by the representation of woman in this culture. I felt connected to this imagery because of the art first, but then also as a woman who's experienced sexual abuse.

This is because most are portrayed to be submissive and in tears in "rape fantasy" scenarios, like martyrs. The art is composed of beautiful bodies, shapes, colors, etc., but the message is not always beautiful...I wanted to use this sexualization as empowerment, showing people a beautiful form instead of an object, or something to be taken advantage of.

Hentai has influenced my work so much, working around its varying levels and codes has help me heal a lot.

Your work reflects a couple different subcultures, from tattooing to anime to Chicx culture. To what degree do these cultures have an IRL presence in Switzerland? Or did you mostly seek them out online?

I have always been traveling, and I would describe my work as a research of identity, and also very nostalgic. I grew up in Switzerland raised by my mom. My dad is a South American political refugee who raised me on Skype trying to break my "European" education, while also refusing to share his own culture. It's only when I started visiting the United States and people would keep asking me "What's your race?" that I realized that my

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identity was something that I had never really thought of.

In Switzerland, I was surrounded by culture constantly, however I was never able to connect with them because they weren't my own. I think this is something any mixed race or mixed cultured person goes through at some point. Lacking cultural identity, I had to build myself through my childhood icons. I started drawing my self-portrait very early, trying to draw who I wanted to be, a mix between Sporty Spice, Sailor Moon and Lara Croft. This is how I started tattooing my clients' self-portrait, because my work is the representation of our generation.

I discovered Los Angeles as a tattoo artist and was lucky to be surrounded by amazing black and gray, fine line Chicanx tattoo artists who made me feel so connected to this technique and the history behind it.

Do your characters have names? Do you have a favorite?

Most of the girls I draw are commissioned by my clients, trying to create a visual image of their inner self or who they want to be, so most of my characters would wear their owner's name. I also created my little girl gang called "Tender Force." Peach, Jelly, Angel and Chili, four very different girls that I wish to make come to life as an animated series soon!

Click through below to see Soto's work.



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