

THING OF BEAUTY | RICHARD LORD

***Mushishi* (1999-2008), by Yuki Urushibara, is not your typical manga. With a mellow, contemplative tone, an anthology structure and a mystical subject matter, it tells the story of those affected by *mushi*, spirits that can feed off their weaknesses, and of Ginko, a laid-back *mushi* master who helps them with their *mushi*-related problems. Artist Oscar Chan Yik-long, 31, explains how the manga changed his life.**

Back when I was 12 or 13 years old, I was buying a lot of manga, but the discovery of *Mushishi* was a life-changing moment.

I loved exploring all the topics manga dealt with, but *Mushishi* was quite unusual. I usually preferred manga that contained a lot of fighting and adventure and was initially attracted to *Mushishi* because of the watercolour images on the covers.

I bought the first three comics in the series, but initially found them confusing – they portrayed a world I didn’t understand. When I returned to them later, I found them interesting as I was able to relate to them.

I was always scared of spirits and demons when I was young. *Mushishi* deals with invisible spirits called *mushi* that feed off people. The manga changed the way I looked at spirits, as it describes how they come from a collective and when we die we go back to that collective.

*Mushishi* asks us to accept our problems and fix them instead of lying to ourselves. I had undergone brain surgery at the age of 10 and I didn’t know how to deal with it. But the manga helped me deal with my fear and anxiety and made me understand I didn’t have to pretend that everything was OK.

*Mushishi* planted a seed in my heart: the courage to face my own demons, in

both life and work. This has involved a lot of soul searching. What was I afraid of? Fear to me is like a surface – we have to dig deep to find out what we’re really afraid of. My process is to stay in the now – my fears are always in the future or the past.

These days I do a lot of drawings of demons and spirits. I’m not scared of them like I used to be. I wouldn’t say I’m spiritual, but I have a tendency towards spiritual things, such as astrology, and I’m trying to create my own spiritual world through my work.

The manga helped me create my own spiritual world, and not just accept the world view offered by Buddhism, Christianity or other religions. I’ve also watched the animation, which is easy to digest; the comic was hard. Every time I read it or watch it again, I get something different from *Mushishi*.



Oscar Chan



Above and below: stills from the 2014 documentary *Barbicania*.

ART HOUSE | RICHARD JAMES HAVIS

# Barbicania

*Two Italian filmmakers spend a month searching for the soul of London’s brutalist and ‘ugly’ Barbican Estate.*

**B**arbicania (2014) is an elegantly photographed documentary that follows two Italian filmmakers as they spend a month in London’s Barbican Estate talking to its residents and exploring its buildings.

Built during the 1960s and 70s, the brutalist estate is well known for housing the Barbican Arts Centre, a cultural icon featuring cinemas, galleries and performance spaces, but it is also a large residential development containing three 42-storey tower blocks and 13 blocks of terraced housing. The aim of *Barbicania* is to find “the magic key” of the Barbican Estate, that is, an underlying philosophy that unites the residents, buildings and cultural centres.

It is interesting that filmmakers Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine chose to try and discover the “soul” of a development that is regarded by many British people as cold and soulless. The post-war brutalist movement focused on using concrete and raw brick to create unforgiving modular shapes. And structures in this architectural style are regarded by many as ugly, domineering and Stalinist. The Barbican is no exception.

Bêka and Lemoine hope that an outsider’s point of view will reveal something new about the locale. They interview residents in their homes, watch a piano tuner at work in one of the venues and delve underground to find out where supplies for the ageing building’s infrastructure are kept after being scavenged from renovations.

The major point of interest is the realisation that although most modern architectural designs stemming from Le Corbusier’s concept of a “machine for living in” aimed at encouraging a sense of community, the Barbican does the opposite

– it encourages privacy and isolation. Strict building rules make it difficult for inhabitants to engage with each other and some long-term residents have never spoken to their neighbours.

Other revelations are not as unexpected, and the British class system is represented in microcosm. The working class does the menial and service tasks, such as managing the gardens, while the rich tower above them. The film is oddly reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), in which the workers toil underground to run the city while the pampered rich live high up, hardly aware of their existence.



“The idea is to understand how the very special place works. The process of making the project was almost mad,” says Lemoine. “We like crazy ideas, but this was quite intense because usually we don’t spend so much time on the site where we make a film. This was extreme, as we never went outside that little area for a month.

“The lesson of this film is that reality is more surprising than fiction, in the sense that you can be amazed by the people you meet. If you saw it in a fiction you would not believe it could be true.” ■

*Barbicania will be screened on Saturday at K11 Art House, in Tsim Sha Tsui, as part of the Milano Design Film Festival.*