

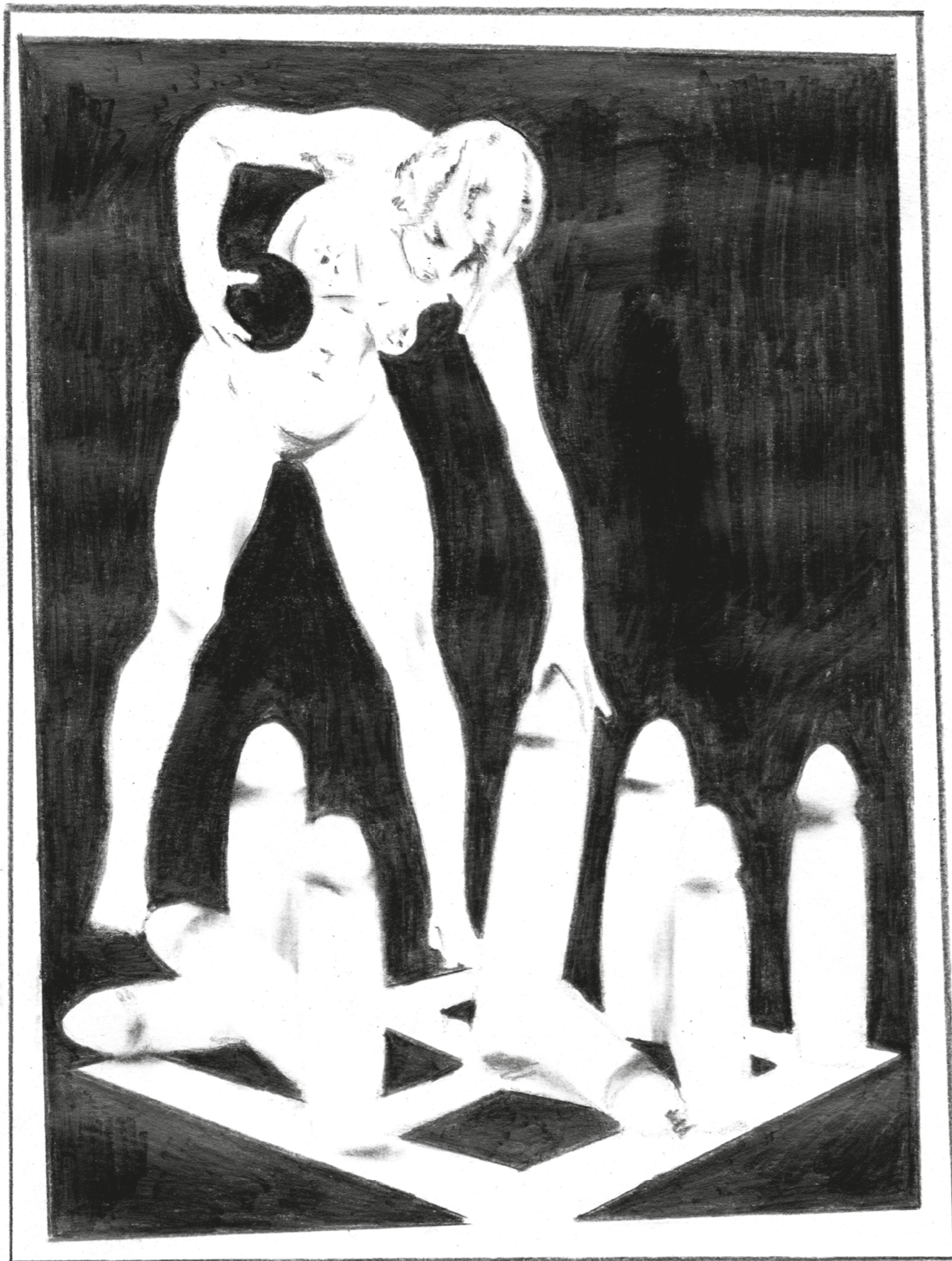
In a rare interview, mega-collector “Gigi Milan” talks to Hans Bussert about the capricious joy of amassing sexy book plates



The Libidinous Art of Ex Libris

From eccentric-erotic to downright pornographic, Ex Libris have never been shy about the sexual fantasies of their patrons. Yet the people who collect them are rather secretive. At least when it comes to the few big shots that make up most of the market. There are no malign intentions here, it is just that the world of book plate collecting is a small one. So for this interview Gigi Milan has chosen an alias—a hint to his roots as the scion of a Milanese noble family, but not revealing enough for other col-

lectors to discover just who exactly is accumulating one of the largest collections of erotic Ex Libris to date. As a matter of fact, Mr Milan is also one of greatest patrons of new Ex Libris art, having commissioned quite a few well-known contemporary artists. During our conversation in the abnormally quiet Bar Jamaica in his hometown's Brera district, the soft-spoken collector occasionally pulls out sexually charged book plates to illustrate his words.



Mr Milan, what first spiked your interest in book plates?

Very simple: I always liked to read and in my dad's library in our house near Como I would find these books that had the most amazing Ex Libris in them; little pieces of art that often told a story different from the book they were in.

How did all these books end up in your father's library? I would think that usually one mostly has books with their own plate in them.

My dad must have been somewhat of a book thief in his day. Possibly he raided the libraries of our fellow *Nobiltà Milanese* together with his friends from the Red Brigades. In the Seventies, all they were interested in was French theory, so he probably got to keep all the classics. Anyway, his own plate was rather boring. Basically, it was a derivation of our family crest. He only had it changed when he broke with his brothers; he asked the artist to add an optical illusion that showed him urinating on the crest when you looked closely.

After you discovered your first Ex Libris, what made you become a collector?

Looking at these book plates... they stirred my imagination. Who was this person? Why did he choose to be portrayed as a penis being led around by a naked woman on a leash? Of course some of the names of owners I came across were familiar. But then: who was the artist? In my early days as a collector I didn't know anything about those who designed the plates. I just knew instinctively that here was an art form that was closely linked to another—literature—which nonetheless managed to become a genre in its own right. And, as it is my nature, I just wanted more and more of this. Of course it helped that a lot of the Ex Libris I put my hands on as a teenager were quite sexy.

The art world has been notoriously snobbish about craft objects. How is that in the case of Ex Libris?

During most of their existence they were considered graphic design as opposed to fine art. And it's true that the styles and techniques employed by the creators were always pretty mainstream in any given period. There never really was an avant-garde. One has to keep that in mind when talking about Ex Libris as an art form. But as the art world is not only opening up to outsider art but also to traditional crafts such as pottery, the distinction between fine and commercial art becomes less valid. The same can definitely said about Ex Libris. To me they have always been more than just your average stamp collection.

To come back to your early days on the Ex Libris scene... could one even call it a scene then?

The heyday of the Ex Libris was around the turn of the last century, lasting well into the 1920s. That's when the bourgeoisie discovered the cultural capital that lay in collecting these plates that seemed to speak—excuse the pun—volumes about their owner. It was a story of distinction. The Ex Libris were much more than just a signifier for the person possessing a particular book. In fact, it became less and less about the books as people started collecting and trading Ex Libris without a book attached. Very much *l'art pour l'art* if you will. Broad stratum of society had their own plates made in those days. A lot of collectors would even commission more than one—sometimes in the mid-double digits. They were used as a sort of business card. It came from the books but meant so much more. When I started collecting in the Eighties, there was no such thing as a scene. I was probably one of a few

die-hard collectors in Northern Italy. Even finding Ex Libris was difficult. I would maybe come across a good one in a second-hand book shop in Trieste, or if I got lucky I was able buy a whole lot at Drouot in Paris. So it was very different in those pre-Internet days.

I assume your collection to be quite extensive.

I have a few thousand in my custom made cabinets.

Which kind of Ex Libris do you collect?

I have to admit that when it comes to a genre—and there are many—that my favourite book plates are those with an erotically charged motive. They can even verge on the pornographic. And yes, due to the time many of them were created, there is a certain objectification of women involved. But not entirely. Rarely have I seen an art form that so freely employs erect dicks—whether as tumbling bowling pins or dressed as little colourful birds flying about the bush.

What do you think is the fascination with the collectors of Ex Libris and erotica?

I'm not speaking for myself here, but I assume most of them to be bookish types whose prime sexual experiences come from literature.

And who are your favourite artists?

I really enjoy the wood carving in Jozsef Fakras' so-called "Sex Libris" from the Seventies, or those very few erotica designs from Christian Blaesbjerg. Cees Andriessen is a good counter-example for an artist whose book plates were more than just commercial works. They are miniature pieces of art in his distinct, naïve style. Unfortunately he hasn't yet created a book plate that could be considered erotica.

It seems like your main interest is in Ex Libris from the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties.

Oh, there are great ones from the first half of the last century, such as Walter Helfenbein's. But it's safe to say that book plates have always been a mirror of their time. So after the sexual revolution there was a liberation of mores reflected in the motifs, but also a certain urgency with regard to matters that are still relevant to us today. There is an edition of very interesting Ex Libris that Utz Benkel designed for Dr. Emil Kunze, a Hamburg dermatologist, which deal with the danger of HIV as a sexually transmitted disease. One shows a circle of copulating men and women in front of the road sign for roundabout traffic and another sign that says "AIDS".

Who is collecting and trading book plates these days? Is there maybe even a resurgence in interest?

To be honest, there's still very few fans like me. But, thanks to the Internet, the trading has gotten a whole lot easier. And recently there's been a spike in interest again. I'd say that a lot of young people are longing for something that hints to a time when people would still read and immerse themselves in a world of books.

I'm really curious by now: what does your own Ex Libris look like?

I have commissioned quite a few artists—famous ones, too—but I'd rather not tell. So far I'm keeping them to myself. I'm not ready to share them with the world yet.

Is that also why you are using an alias?

Yes.