Critique of Dreamers

Dreamers by Thomas Belfer centers on the story of three schoolmates that enter each other's dreams. While the work remains incomplete and only six pages in length, it presents an intriguing storyline and characters that warrant future development. Although the original work is done in English, it contains numerous elements often found within Japanese manga.

Hidden within the opening page, one can find kanji on a poster board, replacing the numbers on a clock, and even a *teru teru bozu* framed by a window. In these small ways the author signals to the audience that the real world narrative takes place in Japan. These small signifiers are important in contextualizing the characters' personalities and life experiences because not much insight is given through the textual component of the work. In this way *Dreamers* is similar to the work of Erica Sakurazawa in that the author has created a minimalist textual element which leaves the illustrations themselves to communicate a great deal of the story.

The first panel of page three contains two commonplace elements of Japanese manga. The panel portrays one of the female characters, Mana, brandishing a katana above her head. Surrounding her are energetic action lines, which are often found in *shonen* manga to dramatize or draw attention to a motion. To the right of Mana the viewer can see a large Japanese katakana *su*. This is one of the many Japanese onomatopoeia used as sound effects and for emphasis within manga. "*su*" represents the swooshing sound made when swinging a sword.

While the characters can seem a bit amorphous from panel to panel, the illustration of the characters themselves greatly resembles a style of character found within mainstream *shonen* manga. The two stylistic choices that adhere to this model are the depiction of eyes and both the shape and shading of hair. Mana's eyes have the specific placement of eyelashes near the outer edges often used for female characters in manga. Her eyes also contain the distinctive white dot in the corner of the iris to show the direction of the light source as well as to increase the sense of emotion. The way in which light reflecting off both the female and male character's hair are also popularized methods deployed in manga. The male protagonist's hair with short sides, lots of hair on the top, and a longer back is a typical hair cut and styling that a Japanese Gatsby model would have.

One thing in particular that sets this work apart from most manga is the shading. Often due to reasons of added time expenditure and economic costs, many manga tend to rely on stylistic choices that require less shading. *Dreamers* however is heavily shaded and employs the use of gradients and screen tones throughout every page. The difference between a traditionally drawn manga and *Dreamers* is quite apparent when held next to each other. This is not to say that traditionally drawn manga bear any less artistic merit or are obsolete, but *Dreamers* takes full advantage of what is possible with digital shading. The uniformity of screen tones and the flawless transitions within gradients within the work are things that would require copious amounts of time and mastery to achieve using traditional media. Thomas Belfer's method of approach may be seen as taking an easier route than those working with traditional pencil and ink, but when looking closer at each page, the viewer can see the great amount of care used in detail, line quality, and directionality.

Each page of the work displays an exploration into use of different panels, page layout, and perspective angles. The viewer's gaze is directed in various ways through the composition and placement of both illustrations and text. These two directional pathways

intertwine with each other causing the viewer's eyes to dance across the page. Thomas Belfer utilizes both pyramidal and monumental composition structures as well as placing figures on the golden ratio. More often than not, he will place figures within the frame so that pieces of them are cropped out. Page three contains an interesting visual ploy in which two of the characters are physically trying to reach each other through the panel break that separates them.

In terms of characterizations Thomas Belfer seems to like both ambiguity and individuals that go against what others would expect of them. The male protagonist appears to be a regular masculine character but often finds himself in reliance of help from his two more capable female friends. Mana's attire is traditionally feminine and something that a housewife might wear, but she challenges hegemonic views of women and dominance by assuming the role of rescuer in an early scene. The other female character, Nafumi isn't given that much attention and seems to serve in a supporting role and functions as a narrative device to elicit insight from the male protagonist.