

Fernando Fernandez – *Barcelona's Visual Poet*

by Jeff Singh

Five years ago, I wouldn't have known the name. Five years hence, he is among my favorite artists and has created what I think is one of the best examples of what comic art can aspire to... Visual poetry. As I often do, I like to introduce people to art and artists in the way I came to know them and how my knowledge evolved over time.

In 2011 I travelled to Europe on a comic art trip to meet to artist friends. In Brussels I met up with long-time friend and artist Alec Severin whom I spoke about in a previous CFA-APA submission. On the second leg of my journey I went to Barcelona to meet up with Jordi Bernet. I have always meant to talk more about that meeting in one of these articles. I don't speak Spanish and Jordi does not speak English so my friend Miguel took the train in from Madrid with his girlfriend and the time and spent a lovely 4 days in Barcelona with us. Jane, my wife flew in for the Barcelona part of the trip as we had been to Brussels before and it is a city that you only need to visit once unless you love chocolate and comic art. While in Barcelona, Miguel and I had met up with Juan Gimenez (Metabaraons) for lunch and later we went on to visit the widow of Fernando Fernandez.

This was among the highlights of the trip for me. We visited with Maria Rosa in her apartment. Since we were going to be there a while, the girls came up for a quick drink and then headed off for a few hours site seeing while we stayed to look at art. Maria Rosa is an accomplished artist herself. In her apartment, she had a room that had 4 or 5 large Tupperware like bins that were roughly 4 feet long, 3 feet wide and 3 feet tall. They were full of art, all standing upright. As I had mentioned I was not familiar with the name Fernando Fernandez upon entering the apartment but by the time I left I was amazed at what I had seen. Fernandez painted thousands of paperback cover for the Italian, British, German and Spanish markets. There were so many great covers there. I ended up purchasing two. As impressive as the covers were, there were hundreds of pages of comic art in the bins too. There was one particular story with fine line work and dry brush work about a bull fight that I liked but it was made clear that those pages were not for sale and if they ever came up they would be unreasonably priced. To this day, those pages stayed with me and I had always wished that I had been able to acquire them. I did find a page similar in style in the bin as well as another comic page in a completely different style. After a few hours of looking at art, we took a break and had a nice snack and conversation with the widow. I still couldn't place any of her late husband's work. She gave me a copy of two books. The first was a reference book on this professional portrait work and the second was a Spanish version of his Dracula work for which he is most famous. After finishing off the purchases we met up with the girls and went to the beach. It was March so much too cool for a swim but I wanted to put my feet in the Mediterranean Sea. Below is a picture of Jane and I by the Sea and what is that under my arm? It is the artwork I got from the visit at the Fernandez apartment/studio. A few minutes earlier I had been knee deep in the Mediterranean with the artwork still under my arm.



I have fond memories of that trip. Among the things that stayed with me was the memory of those pages I had seen in the bins. Over time they grew to be larger than life in my memory and I began to think that they might have been among the finest pieces of comic art I had ever seen. I don't have a photographic memory so I had more of an impression to go by. I'd even forgotten what most of the content was; only that it was great.

This year we took the kids to Europe for the first time. For serendipitous reasons, we were going to be in Barcelona for two days. I started thinking about those pages again and about possibly arranging a visit with Maria Rosa again. I had started buying up all the Warren reprints hoping to find the story I remembered in there. Since Maria Rosa does not have email, my plan was to find the pages, photocopy them and then send them to her to talk about availability. It turns out that as far as I can tell, this story was never printed in English. I was at a loss and then I stumbled upon a link in Spanish Wikipedia to a site run by Hector Fernandez. He is an artist and the son of Fernando. On his site he is selling artwork by his father. As I was going through the artwork that was there, I almost fell out of my chair. There was a page from the story. It was for sale. It was still available. I contacted him immediately and we started to talk. The entire story was available but it was more than I could afford and so I ended up picking up 4 pages from the story and a page from another book. They are here with me now and I will present them in a moment but it seems fate and some karma had a hand in helping these pieces find their way to my collection. It certainly was a special day for me when they arrived and I got to hold them again and look at the art in person. Perhaps not the finest original comic art ever but they certainly did not disappoint and lived up to every aspect of my expectations. I didn't actually get to meet Maria Rosa again on this visit. It was too short a time and Miguel was not available to meet up again to help with translation. Jordi was also out of town when we were there otherwise I'd have liked to meet up with him again.

In searching for reference for these pages before I found the site, I learned a lot about Fernando Fernandez and his artwork. It turns out I had seen his art many times before. The first time would have been in the pages of Heavy Metal Magazine in the mid 80's when I read it faithfully. He had produced a series called Zora which ran over a two year span. These were painted pages with beautiful layouts and colors. He is most known in North America for his comic work at Warren where he worked on about a dozen stories and had won some awards for that work. The page I bought on my first visit turned out to be a Vampirella page. It has been on my wall since I got home from Barcelona in 2011.

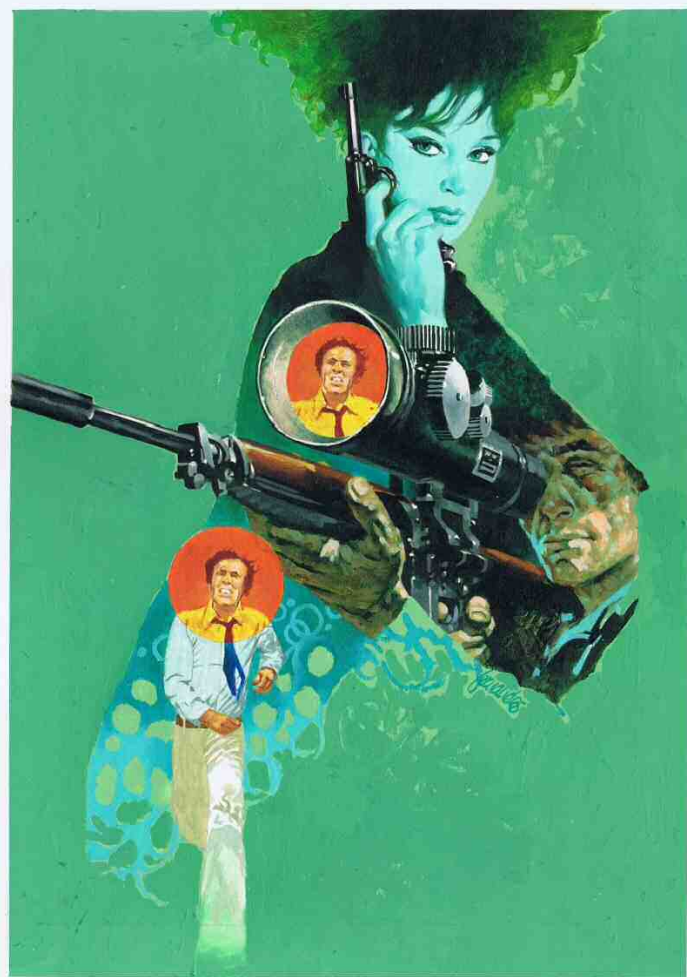
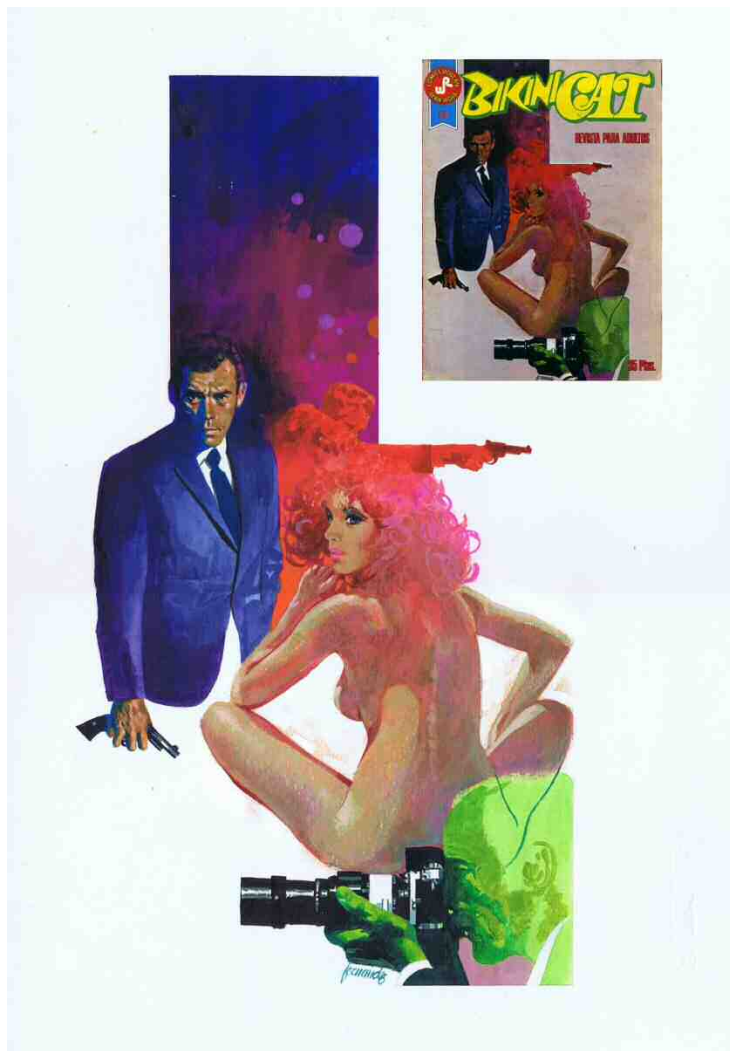
Fernando Fernandez was born in Barcelona in 1940 and grew up in the shadow of Sagrada Familia, Gaudi's most famous work. From a young age he knew he wanted to be a cartoonist and was always drawing. He



A stylized, handwritten signature that reads "Fernando". The letters are thick and expressive, with a cursive, flowing style. The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

mentions that his parents knew that there was no talking him out of being a cartoonist and so they supported him as best as they could. It was tough times in post-war Spain under Franco's dictatorship. Like many of the Spanish comic artists and others of their generation, Fernando started to work to help support his family at age 13 by working in an office. He and his family were not in a financial position for Fernando to attend any art schools so he taught himself how to draw at night. By age 15 he was starting to look for work as an artist and did his first assisting at age 15. His professional career began at age 16 working for Selecciones Ilustradas which was an agency that provided art for foreign markets. Here is where he learned a lot of the artistic skills, time management and work ethic that he would take on for the rest of his career. Fernando spent most of his career working as a commercial and fine artist. Although his contribution to comics was small in comparison to the rest of his career, he certainly left his mark with having produced some of the finest work ever done in comics. He produced 14 stories for Warren in Vampirella and Eerie from 1973 to 1981. Zora was first produce in 1980 and later published in English in Heavy Metal in 1983 to 1985. He painted the graphic novel Bram Stoker's Dracula in 1984. There was other work done during the 70's and 80's for other non-English publishers including horror and western artwork. In 1989 after undergoing heart surgery, Fernandez left comics and commercial art all together to focus on fine art which he continued to create until his death in 2010. He is survived by his widow Maria Rosa, his son Hector and his daughter Eva, all of whom are artists.

I will introduce you to the art of Fernando Fernandez as I discovered it. These first 4 pieces are the ones I found on my inaugural visit to Barcelona in 2011. The first two pieces of art are published covers. I was able to identify one of them as the cover to Bikini Cat #3, an obscure Italian comic magazine. The other is an espionage paperback cover likely made for the European market.



NOBANA
F. FERNANDEZ - 4512 DE

This is a large art page from *Vampirella* #29. It is from a story called "Stairway to Heaven". In this tale, a physician awakens and it is slowly revealed that he is been in a terrible accident and is in a transition point between dying and dead. He starts to remember his life and on this page he recalls his beautiful and unfaithful wife, Eva. It is a beautiful and haunting page with some of the finest romantic art I have seen. The Spanish artists often draw in a way that the line work from one image transforms into elements of the next and it creates a beautiful flow that ties the art together.



Fernandez along with Maroto, Gonzalez and Mayo all used this style to great effect. The dry brush panels are drawn directly on the same art board as the line work. In the rest of the story, his memory of her starts to darken as did their relationship and hence the horror themes that tie in with the publication.

This next page is the final page I acquired in my first lot. It is from a mermaid story that was done for something in European market but I am not familiar with it at all. The style is quite different and less illustrative but the line work and inking are still handled very gracefully and competently. Although not as painterly, we see the images flow together. The hair falls from one panel to the next while the bubbles rise from the bottom panel. The thought balloon is incorporated into the flow of bubbles.



The hair falls from one panel to the next while the bubbles rise from the bottom panel. The thought balloon is incorporated into the flow of bubbles.

The next several images I have are from works by Fernandez that I do not own examples of. The scans are taken from various references including the books I received from Maria Rosa. I have decided to include them at this point in the article as this is when I first came to know this side of Fernandez's artwork.

The first two are from the Dracula story showing his beautiful painted artwork. We would see this skill applied in the Zora work which I found later. They were done around the same time period, circa 1980.



ALGO TERRIBLE HABÍA OCURRIDO LA VIGILIA DEL DÍA 6, DEJANDO A LUCY POSTRADA EN EL LECHO, PALIDA, APENAS SIN FUERZAS PARA HABLAR...

COMO SI SU VIDA SE CONSUMIERA RÁPIDAMENTE POR FALTA DE UN FLUJO VITAL, NO RECORDABA CON CLARIDAD, PERO SOPESABA HABER TENIDO UNA DE SUS HORRIBLES PESADILLAS...

...DONDE EL ALETEO DE UN AVE NEGRA ACOMPAÑABA A ROQUELOS OJOS ROJOS QUE LA RECLAMABAN CON TAN SEDUCTORA VORACIDAD, QUE SE ENCONTRABA INDEFENSA...



MIENTRAS VAN HELSING, ARTHUR Y QUINCEY SE APREURABAN A PROVEERSE DE ARMAS Y LITENILLOS PARA SU POSIBLE ENFRENTAMIENTO CON DRACULA EN EL DORMITORIO DEL MATRIMONIO HARKER...

OH NO, DIOS SANTO!

MINA HABÍA DESPERTADO ANGSTIADA POR UNA INTENSA SENSACION DE PELIGRO, PREGUNTABA DE NUEVO MILY CERRABA EL MALITO DE MALUCHO QUE TANTO TEMIA...



ESOS OJOS ROJOS SON DE EL, ES DRACULA! JONATHAN DUERME PROFUNDAMENTE Y YO NO PUEDO GRIITAR NI MOVERME!



SILENCIO, SI HACES RUIDO Y SE DESPIERTA, LO APLASTARE HASTA QUE SALTEN SUS SESOS DELANTE DE TI.

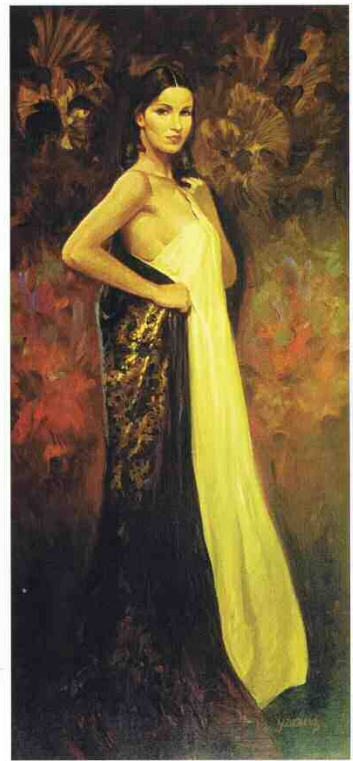


NO ES LA PRIMERA NI LA SEGUNDA VEZ QUE TUE VENAS APLACAN NI SED.



VAN HELSING LLEGO ANTES DE LO ESPERADO, CALMO LOS TEMORES DE LA SEÑORA WESTENRA Y LA ALEJO HABILMENTE DE LA HABITACION DE SU HIJA. EL PROFESOR RECONOCIO A LUCY SIN DECIR UNA SOLA PALABRA.

ESTA DEMOCRADA Y RESPIRA CON DIFICULTAD, DIOS SANTO, PARECE AGONIZANTE!



Dracula and Portrait work by Fernando Fernandez.

I have the Vampirella piece framed and on my wall. It is one of my favorites for stopping at to get lost in the art. There are some art pieces that really grow on you more and more with time. This is one of those pieces for me. Every time I study it I am amazed by the delicate line work and passion in the art, image and theme. I am also jarred by the contrast of the dry brush panels and their equally powerful expressions of remorse and anger. Although many artists have told stories about people have flashbacks or memories, the idea of telling it as two stories at once on a single page is quite a skill. This is what I mean by visual poetry, where the images are lyrical and flowing like a poem. We will see Fernandez use this same technique in the next story.

I do find that the crescendo style of storytelling with romance turning tragically wrong seems to be a common theme in Fernando's Warren work.

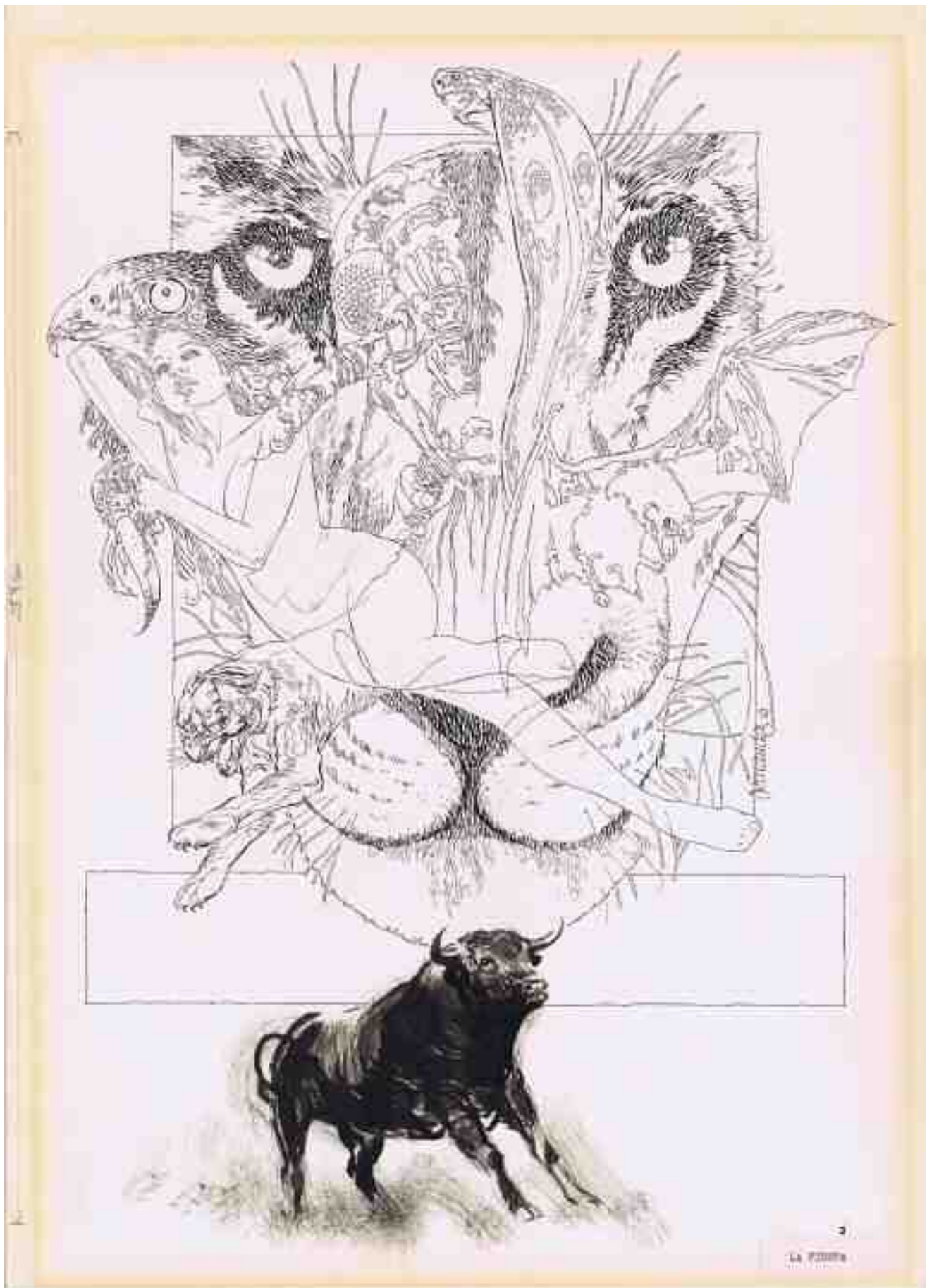
Here presented is the entire story La Fiesta. In this story we are to watch two tales unfold. One is of a bull fighter and a bull. The second is of a male and female dancer in a dance and relationship. The story of the dancer is told in fine and flowing line work. This is juxtaposed against the harsh dry brush art that tells the second story of the bull fight. The first two images introduce the characters of the bull fight and the dance. The first is of the bull fighter and we see the history of man and violence as human nature. There are images including those of a caveman, soldier, boxers and a gun fight. The second image of the bull shows the beauty and deadliness of nature with images of the female, snakes, lions, bats, birds of prey and a praying mantis. The next two pages introduce the bull fighter as the male and the bull as the female. We start to see visual clues that tie the images of the two stories together. Both dancers have their arms up representing the horns of the bull and their dance which has now started as has the dance between Matador and bull. At first the dance is a playful, a sport but passion soon gains control and then things start to change in both stories. In the bull fight story the matador spears the bull which ties in with the intercourse of the dancers. The Matador is gored by the bull. He finally regains control and in the end is the victor. In the story of the dance, there is the threat of death to the female dancer and then she stabs the male. The dance continues with passion and they embrace again as she prepares to kill him and follows through. In the end, the female dancer was the Matador and the male was the unknowing bull. It is truly a remarkable visual tale. I have kept the images small to hopefully have their use fit under the fair use guidelines. I think it is important to see the story as a whole to see how it flows and how it is told. The contrasting style of the two stories also adds a very strong visual element to the work. It is a masterpiece of comic art and visual poetry. I do not know where this story saw publication prior to being reprinted in the Art of Fernando Fernandez in 1980.

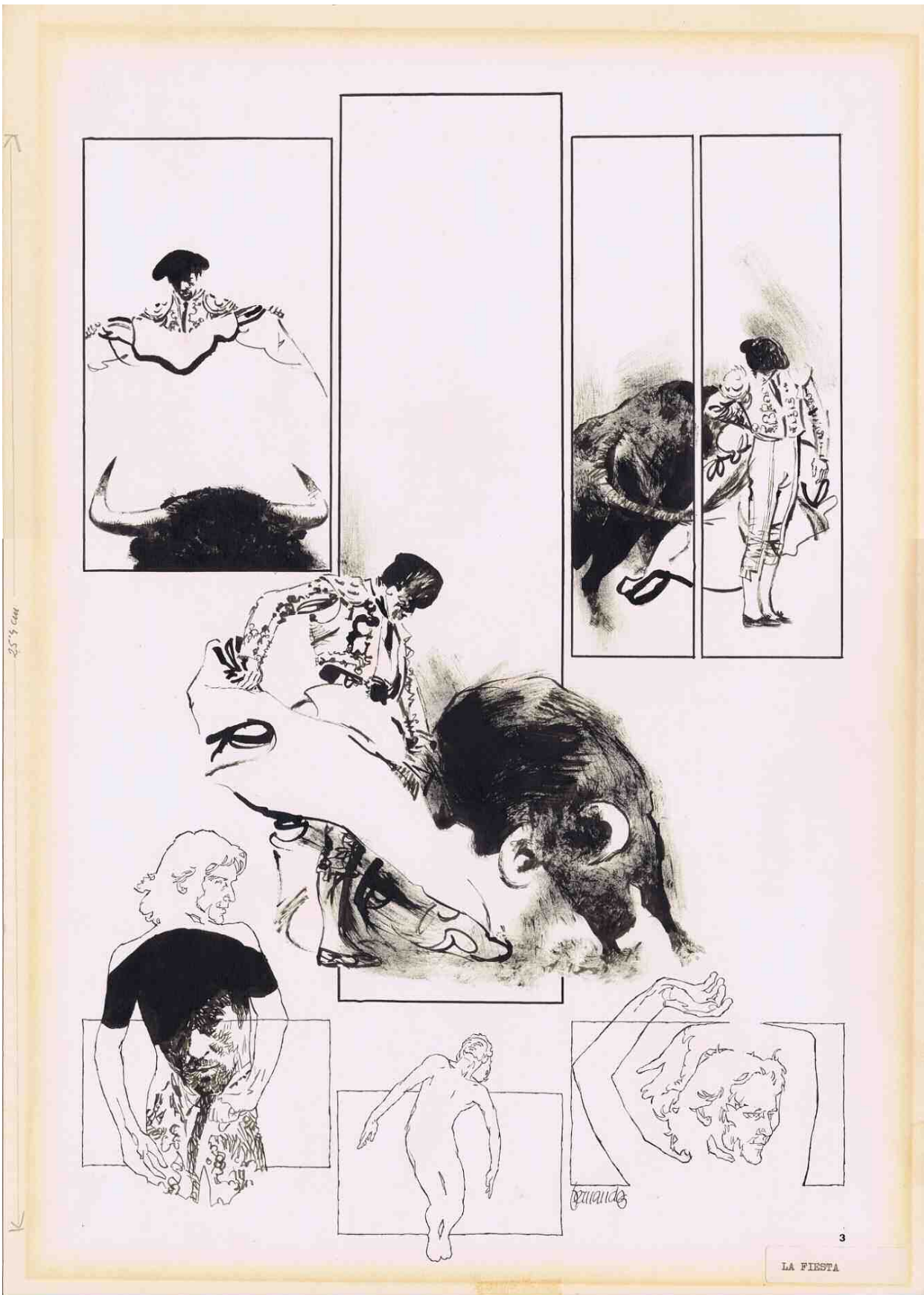
I had both the enviable and unenviable task of picking pages from this story to add to my collection. I couldn't afford the entire story and so I settled on 4 pages. The first was the easiest for me to choose, page 3. It is the first story page and has the best images of the Matador and bull. It is also the page that I remember seeing in 2011 for the first time. It is the page that left the impression that ultimately led to this art finding its way to me. I am more drawn to the beauty of the dance and pages combining the dance and fight as parallel events with its visual cues. I think the original idea is beautiful and so I picked pages that are early in the dance before the violence starts to set in and things spiral to their inevitable and tragic conclusion. The pages are free of any lettering which I think detracts a little from the page as it makes them look a bit sparse but at the same time it leaves it as pure art. The story tells itself so well that I don't think there is a need for words. Since I have only seen the story in Spanish, I don't even know what the text says and I can only imagine it helps to draw connections between the dance and the bull fight.



La Fiesta – an example of visual poetry. 12 pages.

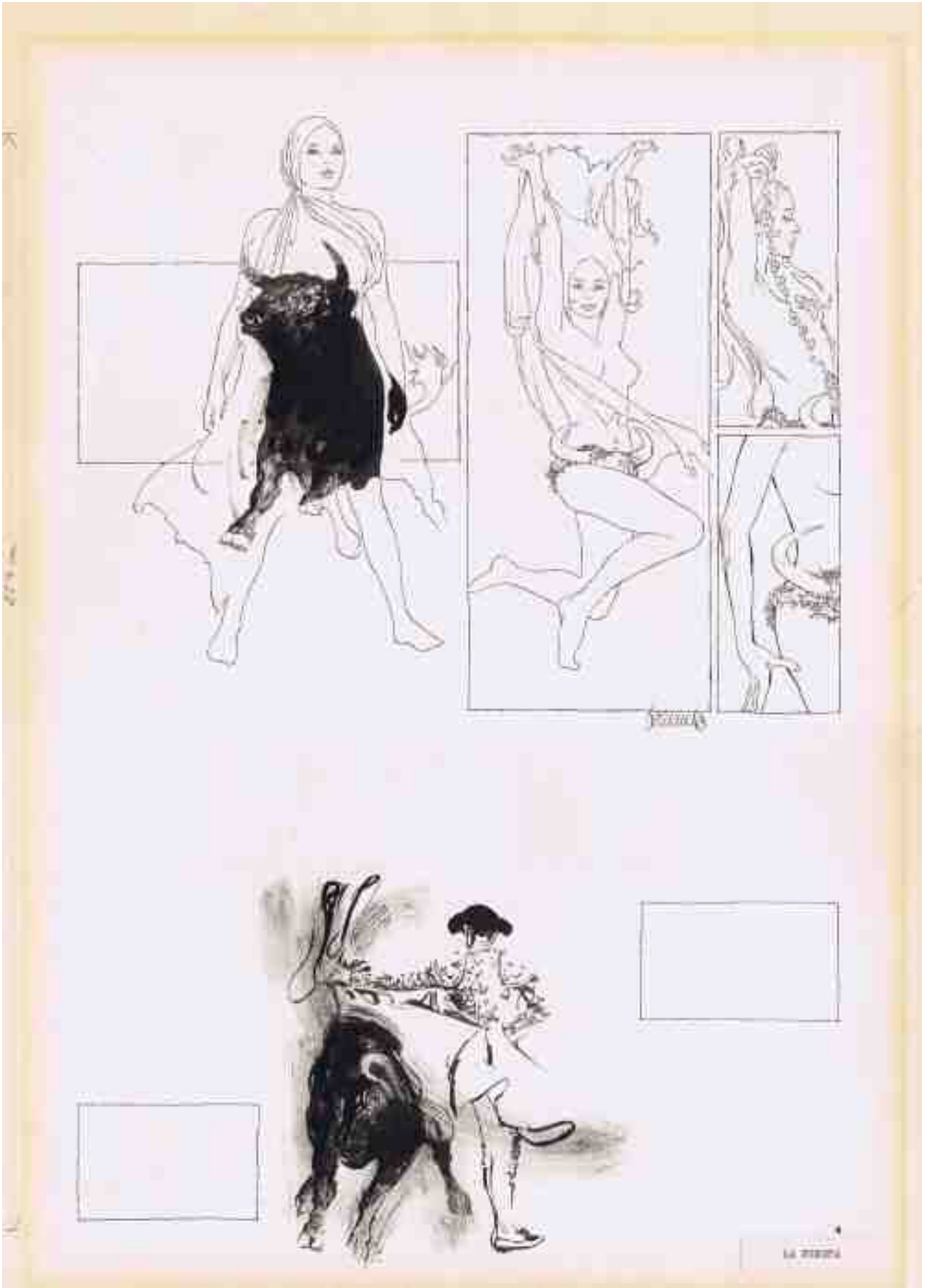
Here are the pages I had chosen with better images. The first is page 2, the nature of the beast. It reminds me of the story of the scorpion and the frog. In each of us are millennia of genetic factors, evolutionary experience and instinct that we are unaware of. The power of this black drop on our decisions, reactions and actions is something we are often unaware of and can lead to unexpected ends. We may try and rationalize and control these base elements but in the end we are what we are... animals. The collage image is quite intricate and incorporates a number of elements including a snake, insect and a lioness. The bull in contrast is simple and bold.



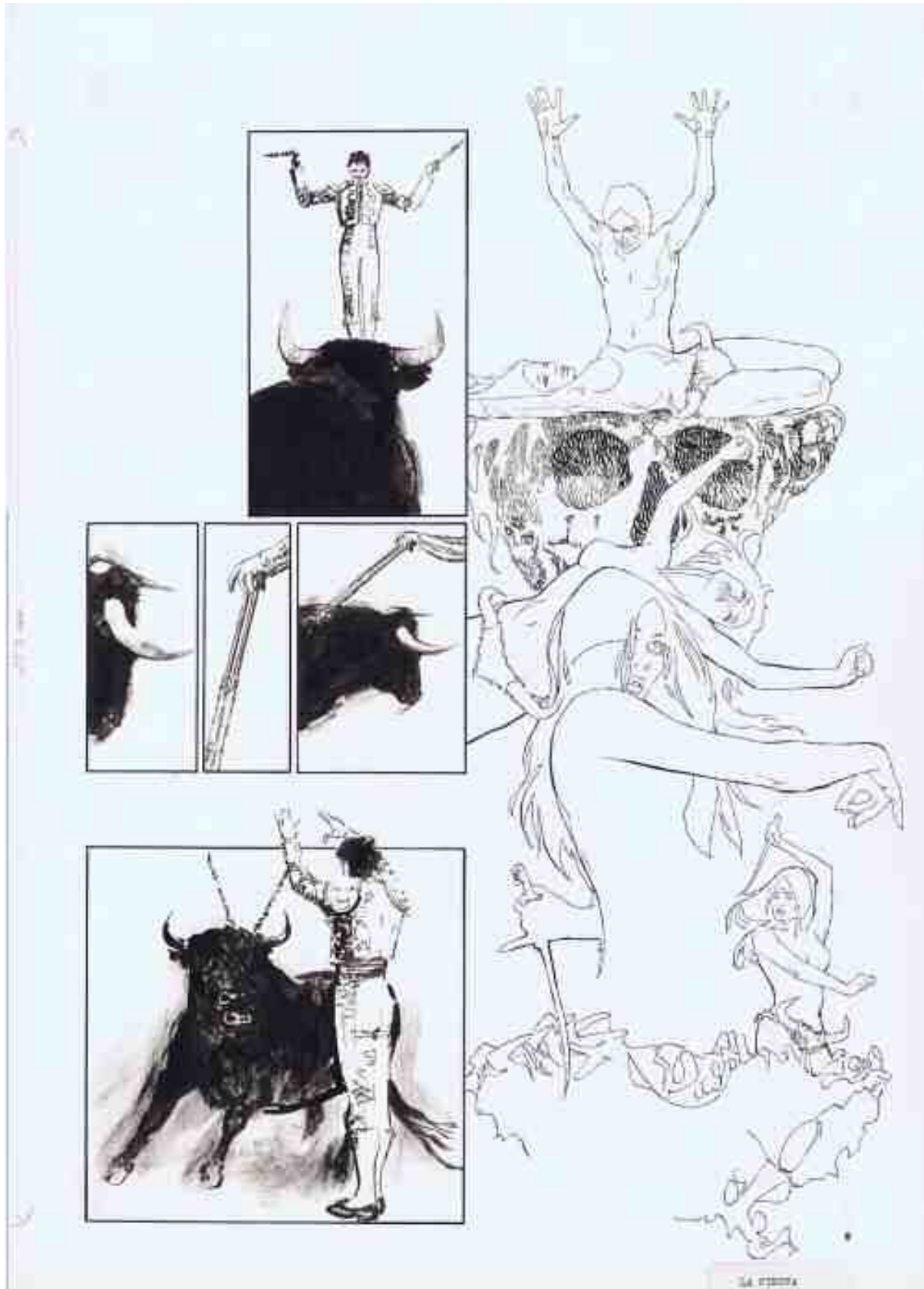


The next page is my favorite, page 3. This page ties the lower visual elements in the first two splashes together with the beginning of the bull fight. It also introduces the male dancer as the Matador in our parallel story. The oblong rectangular panels that used do not restrain the story elements and act to produce a bit of timing and music to accompany the story. These visual cues are interesting in their duplicitous reference. In the final open panel the male dancer has his arms up again mirroring either the horns of the bull or the Matador. This image ties into a similar arm position on the next page.

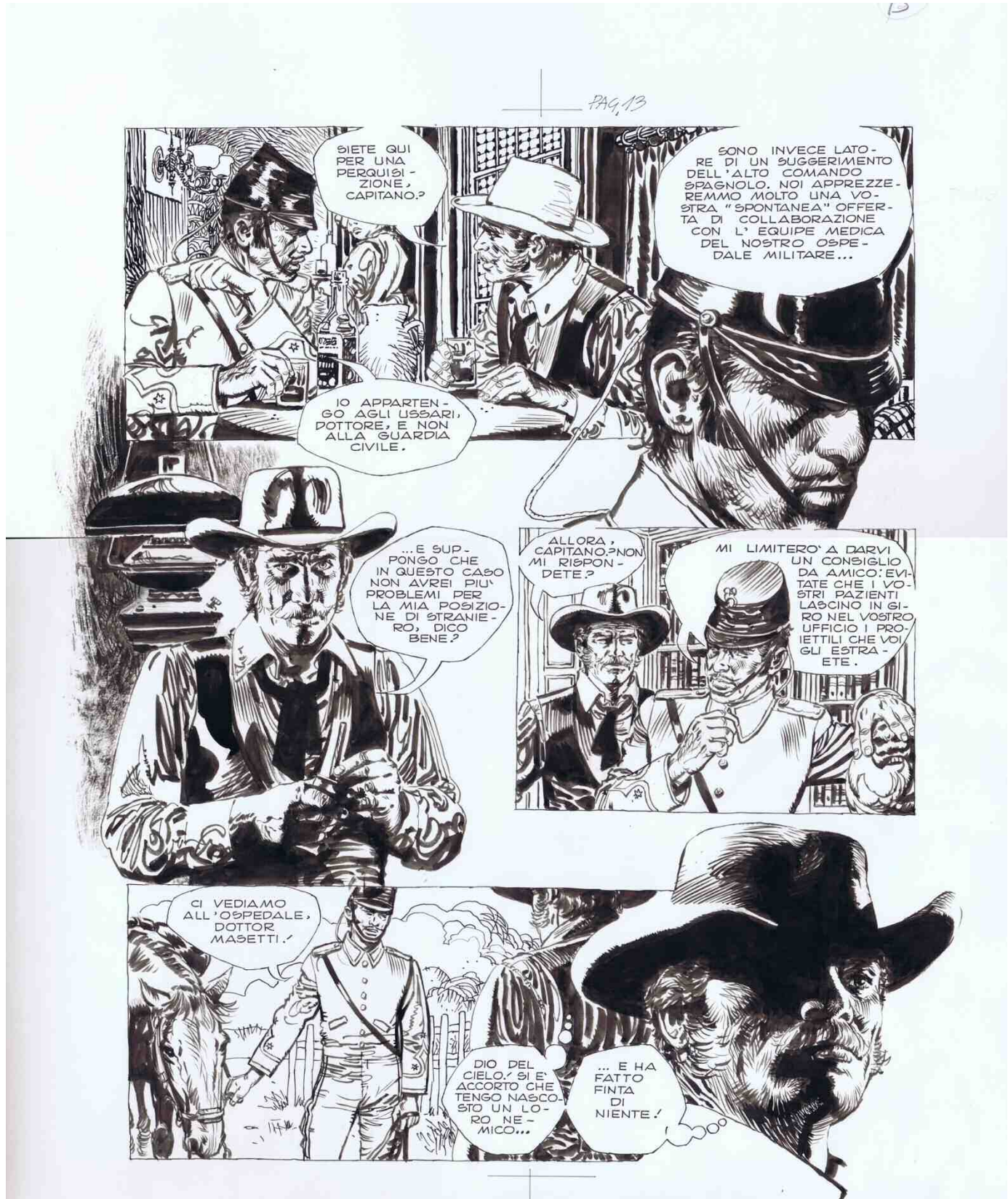
The following page is also the title page. On this page we are introduced to the female dancer and she is given the persona of the bull. She is wearing horns around her. Her dance begins with her arms over her head to and with a cape. Who is she in this, the hunter or the hunted? Lastly, a beautiful bull fighting image.



The last page I own is page 8. It is the turning point in the story. From here the passion turns ugly. The elements tying the two stories together are what I like most about this page. The arm positions of the male in the first parallel with both that of the Matador's arms and the bull's horns. The Matador spears the bull. The male appears to mean harm to the female and she pulls out a knife. The two dances are at a maximum level of passion as we are now approaching the climax of both narratives.



The final page I got from this deal was a western page. I love the western genre and almost all of the great European comic artists have drawn western comics at some point. Here is a page from *El Hombre de Cuba*. It is another interesting and well-drawn page. The style is different from the previous works but equally as appealing. I really liked the two portraits on the right hand side of the page. One at the top and the last panel, both have beautiful rendering.



There are two more pieces by Fernandez in my collection. Both came from the widow via Miguel. He had visited with Maria Rosa just prior to me working out a deal with Hector. At that time he took away a few pieces and among them were two he bought for me on speculation that I would want them. I did take them as I was happy to add a few more pieces to the collection. One is an unknown cover and the second is a prelim for a cover of an unknown paperback.



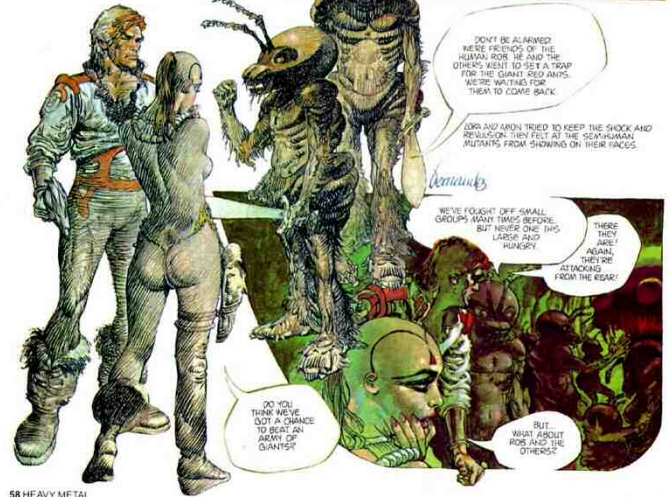
That ends my collection of Fernando Fernandez art but it is not quite a complete overview of his art. I would be remiss not show you a few examples of his art from Zora and Circulos. These were high points in his work when he combined his painterly talents with comic work to produce some unique material. Zora was published in Heavy Metal in 1984 but originally saw publication 2 years prior in Europe. Circulos was published prior to 1980 as it appears in the art book.

References

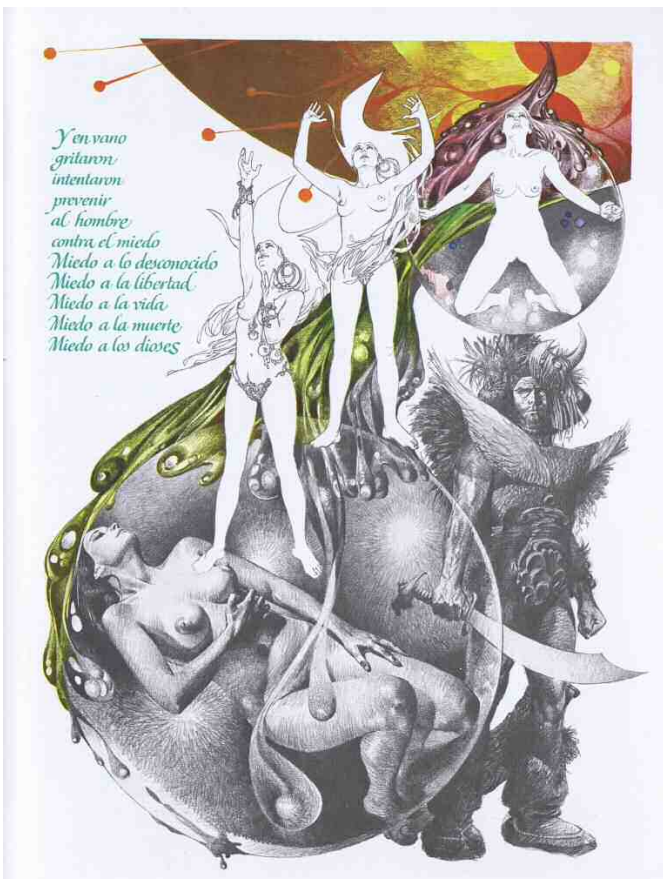
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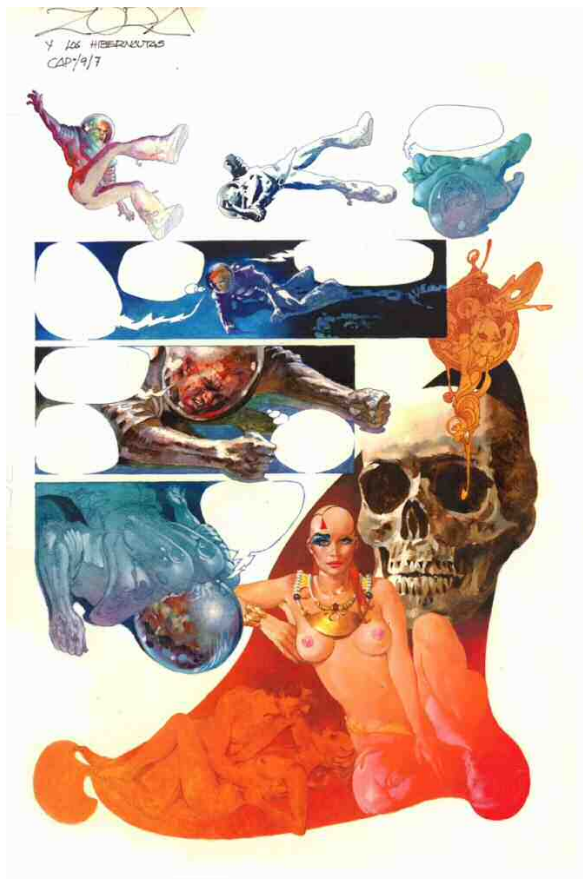
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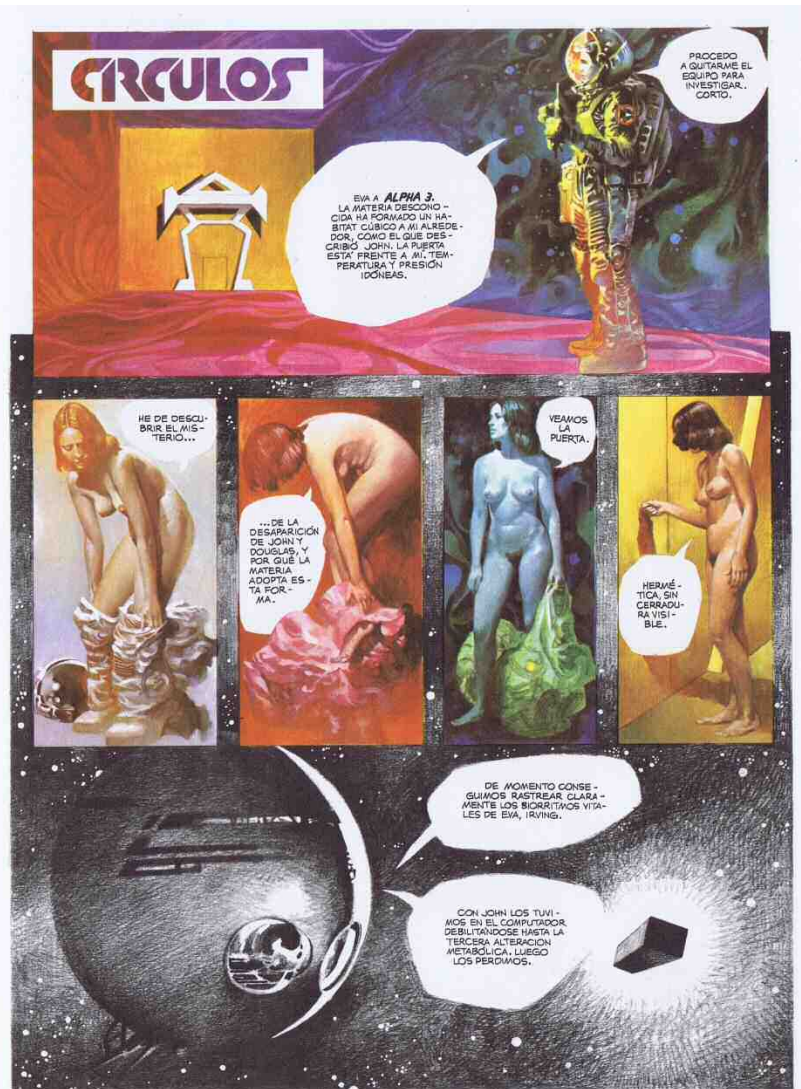


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