

SUSAN MANCHESTER

Producing a pure, but not a simple art

BY LISA CRAWFORD WATSON
Herald Correspondent

They are tulips. Pure and simple. And while that may be enough to engage the viewer — it certainly works in the wild — there is more. Something in the substance and form, the lights and shadows, the composition of these drawings goes beyond a tulip to remind its audience of something else altogether, yet equally compelling. It isn't a conscious thing.

Too many people compared her to the innuendoes of Georgia O'Keeffe-ism, the splendor evoked by



"I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED to draw," says Susan Manchester. "The process fascinates me. Drawing an object allows me to see through that object to understand both its shape and its substance."

images of blossoms beckoning. So she started looking at flowers from behind. Still compelling, just in a different sort of way.

"I really like tulips," she said. "They're so sculptural, so muscular. I like what happens with the light on the tulips. The variety of both light and flowers catches my interest. I never get bored with them."

Who is the artist behind heroic tulips that could be pewter, only soft; who gives us images by capturing essences; who renders light by the absence of it; whose drawings look like prints and prints look like photographs — and who is clearly expressing herself as much through the technique and the process as she is the final product?

By studying the work of Susan Manchester, one can learn as much — if not more — about the artist and the forces that govern her work as one can learn about the work itself. She draws because she can, because she always has, because she loves drawing more than anything else in the world. In short, she draws because she must.

"I have always loved to draw," she said. "The process fascinates me. Drawing an object allows me to see through that object to understand both its shape and its substance."

In her drawings, both figurative and botanical, Manchester uses pastels, graphite and conte crayons — the latter a very hard, compressed French charcoal which, she says, dates back to the Renaissance period when Michelangelo and the boys used to draw with something very similar.

She appreciates it for its flexibility; she can go very light or lay in heavy darks to the blackest black, if she wants.

Manchester tends to work more with tonality than color, employing no more than three subtle shades which enhance, but don't confound, the image.

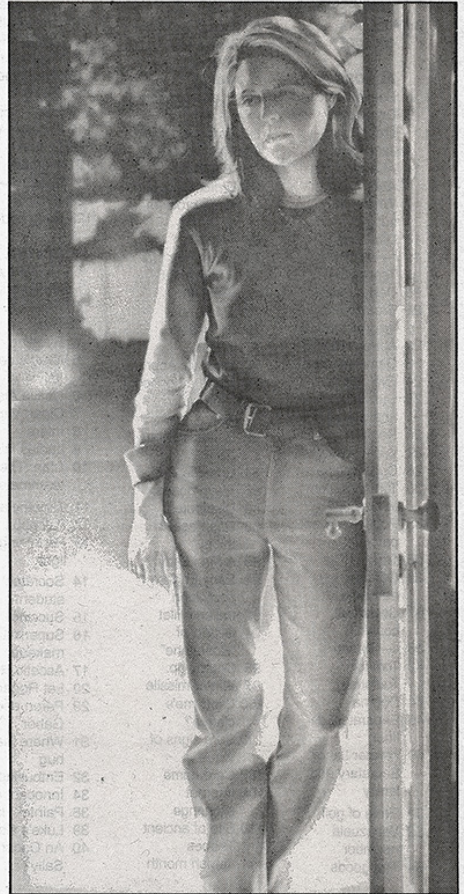
Though she loves color, it tends to serve as more of a distraction than a vehicle for her expression. It's all very Renaissance.

"I think of pastels as paint, though I tend to use them in an almost homeopathic way, which probably dates back to my days in Florence," she said. "I take the pastel in its lightest tonality and put it on the paper as a base for the next level of hardness, each seeming to blend very nicely. The figures sort of take on a light of their own, which makes for an interesting process."

Manchester attended the University of California at Santa Barbara, then convinced her father that she needed to go to Florence, the cradle of the Renaissance, because she wanted to assess the ancients.

After more than a year of study with masters, whose abilities she began to understand only later, she returned to California to further her studies at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Once she completed her studies in Florence, Manchester considered herself completely unemployable. Following her time at the art institute, she went to work for an architect before eventually



SUSAN MANCHESTER'S "Threshold" 1997

opening her own graphic arts business.

"I wasn't spatial enough for architecture," she said. "The order of the day was to become what was then called a commercial artist. I had the drawing skills to do so, but I had seen the other side in Florence, and I felt destined to become a fine artist."

A fine artist she has clearly become, but not without 15 years in graphic arts, botanical illustration for the Hopkins Marine Lab, the raising of three sons and a 12-year tenure teaching art at York School.

"I enjoyed my business, and I loved teaching," she said. "I believe that all of this prepared me to go back and pursue my own work, to gain a clear sense of

Please see **MANCHESTER** PAGE 5

'I wasn't spatial enough for architecture. The order of the day was to become what was then called a commercial artist. I had the drawing skills to do so, but I had seen the other side in Florence, and I felt destined to become a fine artist.'

—Susan Manchester



"I REALLY LIKE TULIPS," MANCHESTER SAYS. **"THEY'RE SO SCULPTURAL,** so muscular. I like what happens with the light on the tulips. The variety of both light and flowers catches my interest. I never get bored with them." Above is her "Between Dimensions" 1997.

MANCHESTER

FROM PAGE 4

who I am as an artist and what I wanted to do."

Though she is devoted to her drawing, Manchester is also a print maker which, she believes, is merely another way of thinking in art, where one's own medium of expression becomes informed by the experience of the printmaking process. She likens it to traveling in another land, then returning home, the same, yet somehow different.

"As a student, my affinity for drawing led me to printmaking, particularly toward the 'Rembrandt' school of hard-ground etching," she said. "The look, smell and feel of the intaglio print captivates me. I often used to make drawings that looked like prints

when there was no printing press available. Now, long after my student days, I devote a portion of my time to printmaking, enjoying the processes and the collaboration with master printers."

Manchester still invests the majority of her time and talent in drawing, including heroic figurative images, which often take up to four months to complete. In fact, her current focus is the combination of her botanical images and her figures.

"It is my desire to use a little less detail, to be not so specific that I can't create a universal something," she said. "This way, the image becomes more emblematic, which invites the viewer to engage in the piece. In completing my figure studies, which often

take too long to be considered studies, figurative work doesn't have to do with just the figure, but also the representation. It's more about states of being than story lines. I suppose it's my way of capturing the detail of the moment."

Manchester presents a solo show every three years, not only because it takes so long to complete her work but also because it gives her art a sense of evolution rather than repetition.

Her next exhibit, a one-month show starting Feb. 5, will hang at the Edith Caldwell Gallery in San Francisco. Her work is accessible locally at her Pearl Street studio in Monterey.