

A Sense of Place: Back for solo show, Beaumont native Paul Manes draws on past and present locations

Two disparate cities influence artist Paul Manes: Beaumont, where the Southeast Texas native grew up, and New York, where he lives.

The geography of the radically different locales grounds him, Manes suggested, paradoxes and all.

“I spent a lot of time in the (Gulf Coast) swamps. It’s something I recall very well. If you go from Beaumont to Houston on Highway 90, the landscape between Beaumont and Liberty is like it was in the ‘50s and ‘60s, with the bogs and palmettos and trees. I love the flora and fauna that exist there,” said Manes, whose “Big Big Picture show,” running Saturday through July 16 at the Art Museum of South east Texas, marks his first hometown solo exhibit since 1992.

On the East Coast, Manes is inspired by Manhattan’s non-stop energy and urban vistas.



Paul Manes, *Chiaroscuro*, 2003, charcoal, 114x102 inches

“I think everyone has a visual sense. As an artist, I draw on that and pay attention to it. You see a horizontal line and it smacks of landscape. You see a vertical line and it smacks of a human being or a tree,” he said in a telephone interview.

While “not a figurative painter” per se, Manes said he paints landscapes, what he called “light and darkness and textual visuals,” an approach AMSET Curator of Exhibitions Ray Daniel referred to in a phone interview as “painterly, with bold strokes heavy with paint and texture, varying from abstraction to realism.”

And the nine large and two small pieces in “The Big Big Picture Show” reflect this technique, Daniel said.



Still Life: Plums In A Colander, 1999, graphite, gessoed paper,
18x23 inches

The idea of place provides a key source for the work because atmosphere adds color to life, intimated Manes, who as a teenager painted walls and helped hang exhibits at AMSET. So while Southeast Texas might not be represented literally on the canvas, the environs permeate it on another level, he said.

“It’s part of me,” said the 57 year-old Manes, whose work is in the collections of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. “Sure, it’s played a role in my art. I know that area. I know the light, that ocean and the beaches and the Neches River and the swamps. There are 12-foot palmettos and otters and alligators,” he said. “I know the oil slicks

and petroleum production. It colors the landscapes and smells when oil is sucked from the land.

A 1982 studio art graduate of Lamar University, where he studied with art professors Jerry Newman and Lynn Lokensgard, a young Manes made frequent trips to New York as a fledgling photographer (and counts noted Beaumont photographer Keith Carter as a longtime friend) before switching to painting at age 30. And just as photography taught him “a sense for structure and composition,” he said, the Big Apple expanded a creative perspective first formed in Southeast Texas. “Perhaps no more so than after 9/11,” he said. “I live 10 blocks from the World Trade Center. I sat on top of the water tower on my six-story building and watched those towers fall. That doesn’t show up directly, but anything that is traumatic is translated one way or another in your work,” Manes observed.

Southeast Texas, what he termed “a geologically strange place,” helped shape his childhood and Manhattan informs him now.

-Jane McBride