ART MUSEUM
OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS

Paul Manes: A Texan in a Global World

By Barbara Rose

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Paul Jean Manes was born on May 4, 1948, in Austin, Texas, the second of four children and the only son of Paul Jean Manes, a haberdasher, and Alice Manes, a young schoolteacher. The family roots were in Missouri, but six months after Paul was born, the couple moved to Beaumont, Texas where the elder Manes opened Manes Clothing Company next to the Dixie Hotel. The business prospered and soon the growing family moved to a spacious brick house at 2405 South Street where the children had plenty of room to play and indulge their imaginations.

On trips to Missouri, young Paul would visit his uncles who were all blacksmiths. He loved the atmosphere of the sooty shops of his uncles, Ben and Fred, in Stoutland and Richland and learned a respect for hard physical labor as well as a sense of its nobility. The anvil that appears repeatedly in his paintings is a sign of homage to this family tradition that links the physicality of his own painting style with the lineage of his father, who was born on a farm, and of his uncles' pioneering trade that speaks of America's agrarian past rather than of its alienated cybernetic future. In many respects, the originality and uniqueness of Paul Manes' paintings results from synthesis of his early experiences of a rural and local culture enlivened with tall tales, Southern myths and Civil War history with the sophistication of the international world of art he came to know first hand as an adult.

Manes' engagement with modernism was different from that of European and East Coast Americans who had a consciousness and first-hand knowledge of the masters, both old and new. Like Jackson Pollock, Manes remained connected throughout his life to the vast spaces and landscape of the West long after he left Beaumont. Like Robert Rauschenberg, who grew up in a

generation earlier in nearby Port Arthur, Manes never forgot the omnipresent oil slicks and humid atmosphere of the area that supplies the majority of America's petroleum products nor its sandy beaches whose color and texture are often to be found in his work.

As a teenager, Manes was primarily interested in surfing. When he was ten, his father took him to Houston for his first glimpse of a big city. The following year, a tragic accident shattered the family's idyllic state: his father suffered an automobile accident which left him a paraplegic for the rest of his life. Adored by his family, Manes' father had played a central role in all of their lives, which were now changed. Despite his yearning to see the world, Paul did not move from Beaumont until his father's death in 1977. A 1970 motorcycle trip through Europe with his friend the photographer Keith Carter, however, convinced him that he wanted to be an artist. On that trip, he studied the old masters first-hand at the Louvre and the Prado as well as the Flemish painters in Bruges and Ghent. Confronting Rembrandt at the Rijksmuseum and Goya's Black Paintings at the Prado, he found the teachers he was seeking. They were more those of the past than of the present, although he realized that to see them in a fresh way he would need to learn what made modern art modern first.

Manes chose a long and arduous path. As a student at Lamar University in Beaumont, he copied Picasso and learned to draw and paint from nature and the model under the tutelage of Jerry Newman. His talent was obvious, but it would take many years of study and apprenticeship for him to arrive at a personal style and a vocabulary of images that were uniquely his own. Once he had a fixed sense of vocation, Manes was determined to follow his friend John Alexander and make his mark in New York, In 1983, he enrolled in the graduate department of Hunter College, mainly to study art history. At Hunter, he focused on the Renaissance while absorbing the lessons of the modern masters at the Modern Museum of Art, which served him as it had Jackson Pollock, the New York School painter he most admired, as the place to be educated. There he spent much of his time analyzing what made

Picasso, the Cubists and the Abstract Expressionists great. As much as he admired Matisse, he was not magnetized by his work in the same way, probably because he is color-blind, which is perhaps the reason his mature style came to be based, like that of Pollock, on light dark contrasts rather than on fields of color.

One of the first artists to move to Williamsurg, Brooklyn, Manes, like many struggling painters, was able to keep a large studio by subletting parts of the building to other artists. There he soon began painting very large paintings in the tradition of the New York School mural-size "big picture". Often his big pictures were even bigger than those of his predecessors, the sixties' and seventies' pop artists and other color field painters. His esthetic, however, was totally and consciously opposed to the instant recognition of the clear, flat graphic images that characterized American painting at the time. Manes admired the way Cezanne, Johns, and Rauschenberg layered their surfaces, correcting, subtracting and adding until they arrived at a tense equilibrium based on an ambivalent and shifting space that continues to vibrate on the surface, never coming to a static halt.

By this time he realized that everything that attracted him had been outlawed by Clement Greenburg, the prophet of "post painterly" color field abstraction, as old fashioned and academic. Manes met Greenberg and read his essays carefully but rejected Greenberg's formulations. He thought Picasso was right to question abstract painting by asking, "Where is the drama?"

Experiencing contemporary art as banal and superficial, Manes found the drama where Pollock and Picasso had found it before him—in the epic scale and the grand manner of the old masters. He did not actually copy or diagram El Greco's compositions as Pollock had, but he spent hours in front of the Spanish master's works such as *The Vision of St. John*, with its apocalyptic opening of the fifth seal and the *View of Toledo* in the Metropolitan Museum, which he soon began to favor over MOMA, the Guggenheim and the Whitney. One sees echoes of El Greco's tumultuous forms in the upheaval in Manes'

visionary, ambitious and complex works in the two paintings in this show named in homage of the master, *The Vision of St. John*, with its leaping flame like passages and *Tagus*, named for the river that flows through the medieval city of Toledo, which Manes also visited to study El Greco's art in depth. As opposed to the New York School, who found their inspiration in Paris, Manes was drawn to Southern Europe, to Spain and to Italy. On visits to Madrid to see his older sister Myra, who had married a prominent Spanish businessman, Manes absorbed the lessons of the Spanish masters, their love of structure and dramatic chiaroscuro contrasts, reflected in a painting like *St. Sebastian*, which recalls the deep shadows of Ribera's poignant martyrdoms. The repeated motif of *St. Sebastian*, like that of many of Manes' paintings, is of overlapping and cascading interlocked stacked bowls. On a formal level, Manes was inspired by an early Cubist painting by Léger which in turn had been inspired by Rodchenko's abstractions of peasants. Léger had developed a form of Cubism that was figurative rather than abstract, although the space depicted was radically compressed in contradiction of the illusionism cultivated by the old masters.

Both in his reinterpretation of the role of drawing as an element that contradicts as much as it depicts as well as in his use of collaged elements to certify and establish the surface plane, Manes departs from the old masters and plants himself firmly within the modernist tradition. His version of modernism, however, is distinctly post-Cubist in its acceptance of Pollock's all-over composition as a point of departure and in its interpretation of the canvas as a field to be filled with an awareness of tis faming edges. This approach to composition came naturally to Manes who had worked as a professional photographer in Beaumont and who continues to photograph images that catch his eye during his motorcycle trips across the United Sates and Europe. Ultimately Manes decided to forget photography as an art because he concluded that photography is involved in a process that is selective and reductive as opposed to painting which is additive and consequently more complex. However, he readily admits that the framing of

the camera lens and the flattening of space of the photographic image have influenced him as a painter.

He regards his photographs as archival material, research in imagery that later may find its way into his paintings, although transformed and stylized beyond recognition. *For Mantegna*, for example, was inspired by a stack of lumber he saw on a recent motorcycle ride across the Rocky Mountains, as much as it is an homage to the radical foreshortening of Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, which Manes saw on one of his many trips to Italy. On one such trip, he rode his bike from Vinci, the birthplace of Leonardo, to Naples, where he studied Caravaggio's late paintings, stopping at museums, both large and small, all along the way.

In Italy he discovered the work of Alberto Burri, with its richly scarred and textured surfaces. In the Burri Museum in Citta di Castello, Umbria, Manes encountered Burri's use of burlap paintings, which inspired him to further emphasize the physical and material qualities of the support. He was far more drawn to the tactile qualities of Burri's and Tapies' works than he was to Greenberg's taste for a disembodied purely cerebral and abstract "opticality". The grittiness of Burri and Tapies appealed to him as a literal reality that grounded their paintings in the totality of sensation, rather than privileging eyesight alone. Manes had done too much physical labor to ignore physicality. He may have spent as much time reading as the conceptual artists, but he preferred history and poetry to Wittgenstein and Duchamp.

Manes' painterliness is not the record of a specific gesture in the sense of the painterliness of "action painting". There are spontaneous passages, but in general the work becomes increasingly reflective and deliberately focused as well as the record not of a single moment but of the passage of time. In some of the early bowl paintings created surfaces are made of layered, irregular shapes cut from burlap. The cut edges of the collaged fragments create a dynamic, all-over drawing. The bowls are a theme that relate many of the

works of the last twenty years, an all over circular pattern that is repeated to cover the entire canvas with a mesmerizing density of superimposed forms.

In the late eighties, Manes spent much of his time in Italy visiting museums and working in a small studio where he also kept a scorpion farm. In Italy, Manes began to draw from nature again, but in a more serious and focused manner. Gradually, he developed a minutely realistic style in graphite and silver point that revealed an uncanny talent for observation. Inspired by the drawings of Antonio Lopez-Garcia which he had recently seen in his Madrid retrospective,

Manes painstakingly studied a single rose bush branch for an entire summer in 1988, producing the first of a series of hyper realistic still life drawings, a corpus of graphic studies to which he has recently added large-scale, exquisitely detailed charcoal drawings of subjects such as rain—the weather has always been important to this painter of temperament—and the familiar collapsing bowl motif. This capacity for capturing microscopic minutiae on paper while painting macrocosmic visionary paintings that often invoke cosmic trauma is a uniquely broad spectrum in our age of technological specialization.

Painting for Manes is both exigent and rewarding. He may continue working on the same painting for years as he has on *The Entry of Christ into New York, II*, which was begun in the nineties and just finished this year. By any measure, like Manes' paintings of classic airplane bombers seen head on as if flying into the face of the spectator, this is an epic work, full of incident and detail, operating on all three levels defined by Erwin Panofsky as giving meaning to visual art—form, content and iconography. As the title suggests, the work is inspired by the painting done one hundred years earlier (in 1888) by the great Belgian artist James Ensor. As in Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels*, the painting has a carnival-like and at the same time sinister atmosphere and is filled with all manner of heterogeneous objects and subjects such as masks, musical instruments and costumes.

The first version of *Christ's Entry into New York* was painted in 1987 and sold to a Parisian collector. The second version, an apocalyptic, post-9/11 painting, is far more sophisticated and intricate, in terms of space, palette and technical mastery. The image, like Courbet's *Atelier*, is a "real allegory" of the experiences of the painter, in the studio and in the world, incorporating friends, family, mentors, and historical figures, and is full of contradictions. The trefoil arches in the background establish that the scene is taking place in an interior, inside a church, to be exact, whose hallowed atmosphere is brutally disrupted by the bomber flying headlong at us above the heads of the assembled crowd.

The congregation includes the figures most important to the artist-- his wife, friends, older sister, psychiatrist nephew, and his Bichon Frise named Beaumont—who share the space of his imagination with German Expressionist Max Beckman, Leonardo da Vinci, an Egyptian sphinx, a swaddled baby, a blindfolded priest, a skull, a buzzard, three dunces representing folly, a rapacious green-faced art dealer, the crutches that appear in a number of early works symbolizing infirmity just as the empty bowls are a synecdoche for famine, the familiar anvil contradicting Leonardo's claim that painting is a conceptual art by emphasizing the act of physical labor that causes an image to come into being, a masked hangman and a glaring devil whose red face pops out of the dark jumble of beautiful women taken from paintings by Delacroix, Gerome, and Picasso.

Underneath the dog is Chairman Mao, representing the mindless massacres of modern times. To the left of Leonardo, presiding over this bedlam, is Sir Isaac Newton, watching the laws of physics being strained, thus inverting Duchamp's famous statement that he desired to strain the laws of physics. And in a final ironic inversion, Manes subjects the entire delirious company to the law of gravity, bringing us back to reality with the dripping of the fluid oil paint that is allowed to dribble and flow across the surface in earthbound vertical streaming rivulets.

Finding that he cannot cut his impulse to paint big down to size, Manes recently moved his studio to an immense space, with windows across one wall, in Jersey City, New Jersey. He stashes his collection of classic guitars, which he plays fairly well, there, as well as his large collection of country music, Blues and rock and roll. Music is important to him; he thinks of the physical vibration of the guitar string translated into visual imagery as a tweaking of optic nerve, through the interpretation of rhythmic vibrations. He is not, like the New York School artists, a jazz aficionado. As far as he is concerned, jazz is just improvised riffs, but Blues and rock and roll have a content and rhythmic structure to which he can relate.

Manes' large scale paintings have a dual focus: close up, the eye registers the literal size of the brush stroke, whereas from a distance, multiple strokes resolve into an image. Manes takes advantage of the discrepancy between near and distant vision to emphasize the stroke while at the same time insisting that it coalesce into a legible and suggestive image.

Of the contemporary artists, Manes is most impressed by German painter Anselm Kiefer; indeed we feel that in his exploration of the theme of the deadly bomber planes he is exploring historical themes related to those of Kiefer. Anything but a minimal artist, Manes is critical of contemporary art because he feels that today artists are reduced by their environment and accept being reduced to a marketable trademark. He laments the lack of ambition to be seen in the galleries, which does not nourish the hunger for intense and rich visual experience. More and more he finds himself in the museums, especially in the galleries of Asian art and at the exhibitions of the Asia Society, rather than in the trendy galleries full of projected animation and video games.

In the last few years Manes has begun reading and memorizing poetry. He feels that connecting to poetry was like "plugging back into the electric sources, like going from a hand drill to power drill." Many poets, from Blake and Rilke to Yeats, Eliot and Dickenson, have been important for him, but he is

moved, above all, by the spare, merciless stoic vision of Wallace Stevens. Among the poems he has memorized and enjoys reciting is Stevens' *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, which mixes the divine with the mundane, images of worldly power with the reality of what the Spanish call the *fugaz de la vida*, the fugitiveness of life. In *The Entry of Christ, II*, Manes interweaves the sacred and the profane in terms of divergent imagery from different places and period of time into a rich tapestry which puts both Heaven and Hell on Earth. The sacred and the profane intermingle in a steamy, fetid atmosphere that is like a night club in Purgatory. Manes recalls how Caravaggio brought the lofty theme of the dormition of the Virgin down to earth in the image of a barefoot peasant woman. He quotes Stevens' tough lyricism:

And if her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.