

VISUAL ART

JUL 20, 2016

The Difference Between Artist Amanda Manitch's Best Work and the Work She's Best Known For

by [Jen Graves](#)



AMANDA MANITCH: More than T-shirt girls. MIGUEL EDWARDS

Seattle artist Amanda Manitch can dash off one of her *T-Shirt Girls* quickly. They're pencil drawings of pouty, waify white girls with bruisey eyes and long, flowing hair, wearing only heels and crop tops bearing internet memes: "Mercury Made Me Do It," "Shut Up and Have Some Vodka," et cetera.

When I went to Roq La Rue Gallery to see Manitch's work before her show opened, when it was still being edited and arranged, a *T-Shirt Girls* drawing was there. Later, Manitch told me she planned to cut it because she's moving away from that series, but that if she cut it, she'd be acting against the advice of her dealer, who wanted more girls on the walls.

It's the job of dealers to know what the market wants. But I think on some level, Manitch knows that the *T-Shirt Girls* are not particularly special, and that her work could die by a thousand shallow repetitions fueled in part by the same misogynistic double standards she documents and defies so openly in the pieces she seems to care the most about. She's not letting that happen.

I think this because she recently made a commanding work that is nothing like a nude or a T-shirt girl. It took her a very, very long time to make, and while it is very much about a person in a woman's body, there is no body visible in the piece at all. There is only a voice, blazing in big, bold, white capital letters rising up like ghosts from a smoky, florid Victorian background. It's at Tacoma Art Museum.

What Manitch did to make this work was hard. She labored over the four-foot-wide white roll of paper for days, wielding the 0.5-millimeter mechanical pencil. The heel and inner thumb knuckle on her right hand took on the appearance of shiny aluminum, as if her skin were slowly giving way to a robot future, as the graphite built up and couldn't ever entirely be washed away during the 44 days.

The drawing is 30 feet long. Hung all the way to the ceiling in the tallest gallery at the museum, it looks like a scroll unfurled, a message preserved and sent across a distance. The pencil marks on the white paper form large words in bold font, hovering over a decorative pattern that from a distance looks like a trail of smoke. From that same distance you can make out the words clearly, most of the original punctuation removed: "LISTEN I GET LIQUOR IN MY MILK I GET LIQUOR IN MY COFFEE AND IN MY ORANGE JUICE, WHAT DO YOU EXPECT ME TO DO, STARVE TO DEATH?"

Manitach found that quote in an online story about the 1930s Hollywood star Frances Farmer. The writer says that's what Farmer retorted to a judge after she'd been hauled into jail for being drunk, disorderly, and fighting with police. He asked her why she was still drinking. Farmer had never been a good girl, in the sense that pleasing other people was not a priority. In high school in West Seattle, she wrote a contest-winning essay called "God Dies" and joined left-wing causes.

But because she had a contract with Paramount Pictures, she tried to please her public. She took the amphetamines the studio threw at her to stay skinny, maintain the starlet image, pin her body down. Still she drank. Actors who drank were rogues; the drunken actress was put in jail, in mental asylums, in the custody of her own mother.

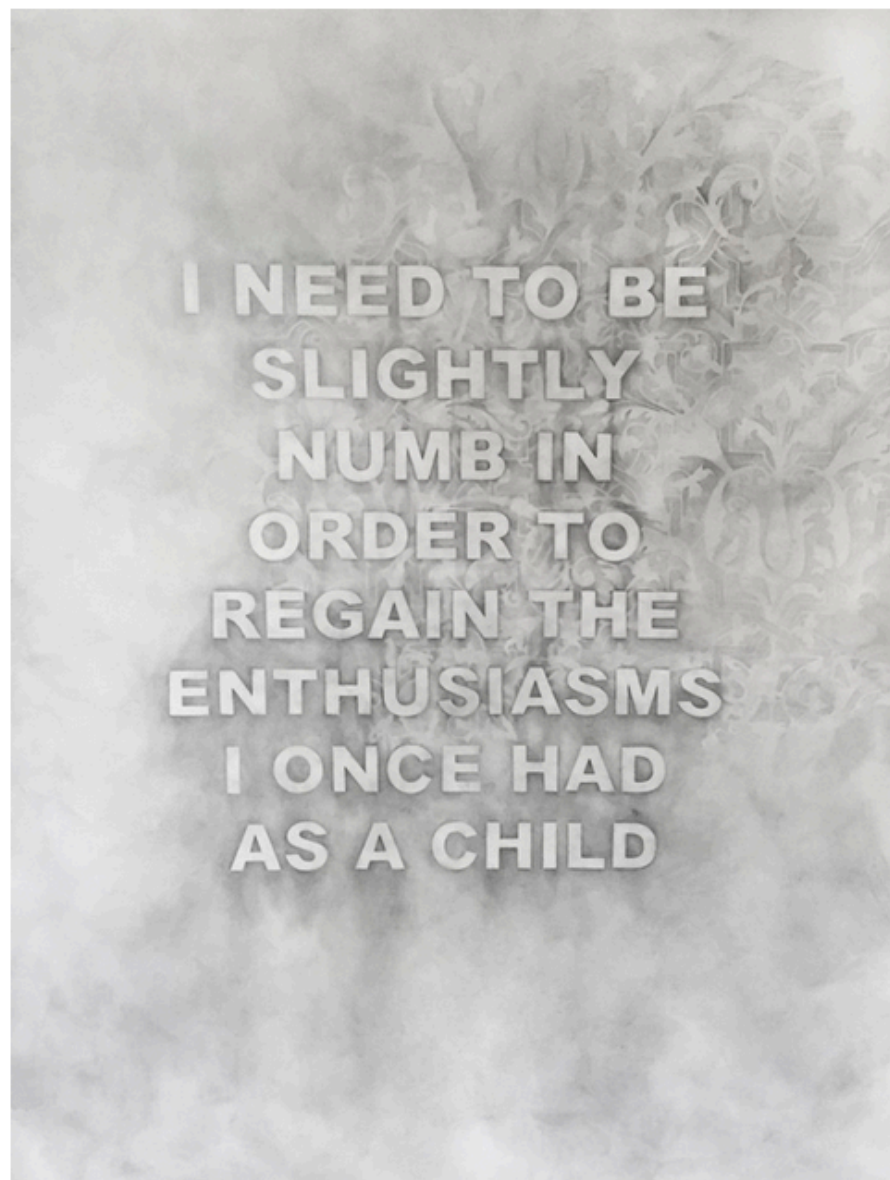
In 1982, Jessica Lange played Farmer in a sensational movie. Kurt Cobain wrote a song about her, "Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle." Manitach called her drawing of Farmer's court testimony *Frances Farmer Defends Herself*. It's dangerous to work with an icon, but Manitach's tribute to Farmer reminds me of Seattle artist Gretchen Frances Bennett's also emotionally complex renderings, in staticky pencil marks, of the grainy videos that represent Kurt Cobain now.

Standing in front of *Frances Farmer Defends Herself*, close to its 30-foot towering presence, look for the smudges where Manitach's body pushed the particles of graphite into each other with her warmth for all those hours. She left marks as ephemeral as sand as she went along, marks entirely unlike slick, retouched movie posters, with bodies flattened and pressed and pinned and fixed into an image.

Farmer's words boom and whisper at the same time. She's making a double-edged defense, lashing out—"Listen," she starts—in the service of communicating how subservient and obedient she is. She *gets* liquor in her milk. Someone else is giving it to her. Someone else tells her what to take.

And the body into which all this liquor and milk and coffee and orange juice is flowing is missing in the drawing. That body that was constantly photographed, and that determined the course of its occupant's torment—Manitach takes it off public view. She replaces it with an authoritative stencil. She disembodies the sex symbol (a hungry public devoured the mussed jailbird and the polished starlet alike) and releases her into the ether, like a deity dictating from on high. The words appear at the top of the scroll, and you cannot miss them; this voice does not need to say "listen" to be heard. Manitach made a delicate drawing as solid as a tombstone and bigger than the architecture that tries to contain it, as it spills from the wall down onto the floor.

The mad thicket
of smoky,
snaking vines
behind the letters
is where the
unspoken hides
out. Manitach
based the design
on a 19th-century
French wallpaper
that she twisted
and interlocked
as she went
along, forming a
mad thicket that
evokes an ornate
front gate sealed
shut by
overgrowth.
Manitach told me
she hadn't
noticed that the
piece might be
about her own
mother until her
sister pointed it
out. She told me
that her own mother starved herself to death, trying to stay thin.



What Manitach did to survive her family was speaking in tongues. Her father was a Charismatic Christian minister in Texas. The one place her body wasn't repressed and regulated was when she was expected to perform at church, to speak in tongues, writhing and moaning. Her early works were inspired by 19th-century experiments on women deemed "hysterics," diagnosed as sick, bad females, yet asked to perform.

Based on medical illustrations of diseased body parts, Manitach drew the spreading blooms, the storms of ripples and folds, of syphilitic vulvas from back before there was a cure and the disease progressed that far. I loved the love and care and *hours* she'd spent caressing infected, shamed "private parts" until they came vehemently into view. Farmer presented a syphilitic persona, you might say—overheated, florid, taboo-breaking.

As Manitach gets older and farther from Texas—she stands on her own success and local fame now, both as an artist and as a writer for *City Arts*—she has less to resist. The show at Roq La Rue is made up of text-and-wallpaper drawings that are the same format as the Farmer drawing but small-scale and with phrases from the web (some aren't, but the shoutiest overtake them in a din).

Spending hours tracing and drawing dumb internet aphorisms is its own comment about how much time we devote as laborers constructing our online identities using quick phrases. They make me feel like I'm watching my favorite team winning while playing somebody else's sport. The show is called *Nothing Left to Say*, but I'll keep listening.★

Related Locations

[Tacoma Art Museum](#)

1701 Pacific Ave, Tacoma, Washington 98402

[Roq La Rue](#)

532 First Ave S, Seattle, WA 98104

Related Events

[NW Art Now](#)

Tacoma Art Museum, Tues–Sun. Through Sept 4, \$14

[Amanda Manitach: Nothing Left to Say](#)

Roq La Rue, Wed–Sat. Through July 30