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COOLS

**MANUELA SOTO DRAWS SELF-LOVE WITH LINES AND INK
ELYSSA GOODMAN – JULY 20, 2018 – LIFESTYLE**

The illustrator and tattoo artist draws for body positivity and self-acceptance.

“I think I’ve always been trying to find new ways to do things that I’m not supposed to be doing,” Manuela Soto says. “Like trying to go out of every box and go in there and fuck it up a little bit.”

Soto rests her hands on the table, one inked with an angel but both bearing long, neon green nails that occasionally click together. The illustrator and tattoo artist has become known for her anime and hentai-inspired, body positive drawings of women in the last few years. She moved to Los Angeles from Switzerland recently, but is in New York as part of a 10-city U.S. tattooing tour she does every year.

In addition to her tour, though, she also has a exhibition, “Meant to Be,” up at the Lubov gallery in Tribeca, in which she’s showcasing a series of sketches, watercolors, prints, and more.

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Soto's work actually evolved from self-portraits she had been doing since she



was a teenager as a means of coping with depression, body image, and the trauma of sexual abuse. “Like, ooh, I’m cute now, this is my inspo, and I’m like Lara Croft and Sailor Moon and Sporty Spice,” she says of the experience drawing these self-portraits. “I’m a big mix of all of this.”

Coming from Switzerland, known for its sleek graphics and clean design, Soto felt out of place as an artist. “Everything is so perfect [there],” she says. “Like typography and the architecture and everything is so straight and clean but I don’t feel that way. That’s why for me being in LA and New York is so exciting because I can be like a little gross doing my

thing,” she laughs.

After art school, where she studied illustration—students had to take on faux clients, like a supermarket that wanted drawings of Easter bunnies, and she was not into it: “For four years, [it] was like training, perfect paintings and do like realistic faces and fucking watercolors and working for the supermarket like fake jobs. It was horrible,” she says—Soto was bored and broke and wanted ink, so she purchased a tattoo gun. While at first she was self-taught, she eventually was brought in to learn tattooing at legendary tattoo studio Sang Bleu by owner and creative director Maxime Plescia-Büchi and has been tattooing and making art full-time ever since. Interestingly, it’s something she never thought she’d do—tattooing styles like tribal armwork didn’t speak to her, but the idea of what you

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could do with tattooing did. “Like it’s so powerful,” she says. “It’s in straight contact with somebody. Like, you in there, with them. Like it’s a soul to soul connection. It’s so powerful, but you need to give choices to people.” And as Soto came up in tattooing, she found people wanted lots of different kinds of choices and she put her voice to work.

Soto’s first flash sheet included Sailor Moon but, having spent time in Tokyo, she wondered how she could push the visual further. She loved the drawings and colorings of the bodies depicted in hentai, but was uncomfortable with the way the genre treated women. “They’re always crying, they’re always almost getting raped, so I felt like, I connect with this so much and I love those codes [visual



signifiers], but can I flip the message?” she says. “I started using the tears [and] things, and turning it into something positive.”

This “something positive” became an act of love not just for herself but for the women who would become her clients. Also inspired by L.A.’s Chicana style of fine-line tattooing, these drawings of women with thick hips and lips who are unafraid of their own bodies started as self-portraits. Soon Soto had women coming to her asking for their own portraits done as well. The exhibition at Lubov shows portraits Soto has done over customers the years, tracing paper

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sketches nailed to the wall along with an occasional watercolor. Her women finger themselves, “love” written at the separation of their legs; they sit on the city skyline or the Brooklyn Bridge, luscious, round behinds grasping slim slices of thongs; they have long claws that hold money and credit cards and bling; they wear Chanel earrings or hoops and they say “Drop Dead” or “Mega Babe” or “Worldwide Soto” and they are not scared of you. At the center of it all is a large silkprint self-portrait of Soto herself in a bikini, an ample chest, money tucked inside the straps of a thong, a cell phone pressed to her ear.

“I’ve been angry and trying to get revenge and fighting sexual abuse and now I’m going through, ‘Oh, like can we actually grow through this and can we get better?’” she says. Producing these drawings has been especially important in accepting and forgiving herself, and she loves that she’s able to help other women do that, too. “So now that’s all I do, I do tattoo self-portraits of women that feel like they need to reconnect with themselves,” she says. “That’s the best, that’s me inside. That’s so beautiful. Like, I’m so happy.”

Soto owes some of her success to Instagram, she says, having joined the platform around the same time that the “no school” movement—one in which people grew their artwork, whatever form it took, without formal schooling—took off. People wanted to see work that came from outside traditional schooling, and there she was. Now she has nearly 90K Instagram followers and the platform has allowed brands to reach out to her for collaborations, like the popular streetwear brands Left Hand LA and Dimepiece, both of whom she worked with in 2017.

Soto’s show at Lubov comes down this weekend, but she’s already got her next slate of projects ahead of her. She’s especially excited about Tender Force, a girl group like “Powerpuff Girls but grown, talking about real shit like sex health, mental health, real stuff,” she says. Many of Soto’s followers are young girls, and

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she wants to be able to be there for them and communicate with them. She's also interested in designing more clothes, hosting open art classes, and getting into art direction. It might sound like a lot, but Soto isn't concerned.

"I'm very positive," she says with a smile. "I got really good angels. They take care of me."

<https://cools.com/artist-manuela-soto/>

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