



Sitting at a garden table overlooking sweeping distant Tauranga harbour views, Susan Harrison-Tustain looks the picture of serenity. And she is. Now 50, Susan muses that her breast cancer diagnosis 11 years ago seems like another lifetime. She remembers it however, as being the impetus for finding direction for her art.

"I felt a lump and booked in for a mammogram and ultrasound; the man who did the ultrasound told me I had cysts," she recalls. In fact, Susan had a tumour in addition to the two cysts, but it would be eight months before this was confirmed.

"There was a miscommunication between the medical staff I think, a big mistake," she says. "When I was finally diagnosed I was told one night and went in for a mastectomy the following morning.

"If it hadn't happened so quickly I might have made some different choices, but at the time all I wanted was for [the cancer] to be gone. Maybe I'd have had reconstruction... there are lots of maybes. While I was waiting to be taken to surgery my husband, Richard, leant over and kissed me and then he kissed my breast and after the surgery he did the same thing. To me, that was acceptance. He has been my rock," says Susan.

"I could only imagine what she was going through and I know how important to a woman's self-esteem her body is," says Richard. "It was difficult enough for her without her worrying that I was finding it difficult too."

Susan was 17 when her mother died of bowel cancer. "I also had an aunt who died of ovarian cancer so I think the fear of cancer was always at the back of my mind," she says. "The thought of losing my hair was the worst. When it happened, I wore a wig, but it was so hot one day I ripped it off and



REAL LIFE REALISM

Artist Susan Harrison-Tustain specialises in naturalistic realism – not just in her paintings but also her view of life

PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON YOUNG

didn't wear it after that. The reality was less difficult than the fear."

The couple have two children: Shelley, who was 15 at the time, and 18-year-old Glen. "We were also building this house... we moved four times during that year, and I wrote a book and had a major exhibition," Susan recalls.

"In the beginning I felt as if I was being dragged along by the current of a river with no control over what was happening," she says. "But then I thought, *it's not that deep, I can stand up.*

"Taking my power back helped me more than anything. I armed myself with enough information to make informed decisions. I realised I had been wasting my 'well' time – it was like a revelation. I knew where I wanted to go with my art and I decided that because of the possible lack of time I'd go for it."

Susan is self-taught and paints with an extraordinarily detailed and realistic technique. "A lot of my work is serene, pensive and thoughtful, and most of it is timeless," she says. "Being ill gave me a new appreciation of time. Previously I took for granted the vastness of the sky and ocean. Now everything has a new depth."



Before Susan became ill, she had been approached by an American publisher about writing a book on her painting technique.

"At the time of my diagnosis I decided I would turn it down but my literary agent talked me around and I'm so glad he did," she says. "He said, 'Susan, people try for years to get a book published in New Zealand let alone the US!'"

The book *Glorious Garden Flowers in Watercolor* (North Light Books, \$57.95) has gone on

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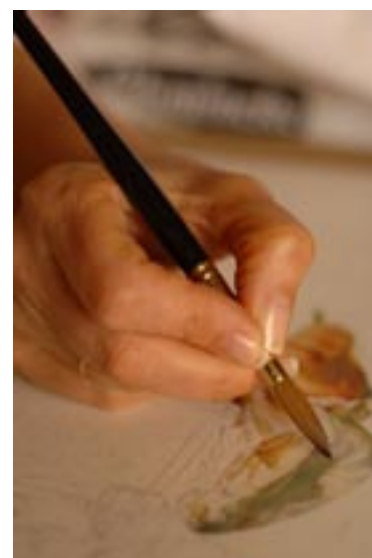
to become a bestseller of its type and has put Susan's work on the international stage.

"I started believing in myself and pushing the boundaries," she says. "It's been amazing."

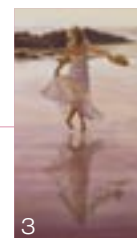
Susan's paintings now command from \$2500 to \$45,000 and people come from all over New Zealand and Australia to attend exhibitions.

"There's a huge international swing back to realism in the art world," Susan says. "I wanted each painting to mean something and capture the emotion that inspired me to paint it. My diagnosis gave me the drive to find something deep inside that may never have reached its potential otherwise."

Susan is now working towards her next exhibition in October 2007. Her daughter Shelley is a recurring subject. "Shelley worries that I've had breast cancer but we've learned to laugh about it. We used to go to a yoga class and one day we had to stand on our heads... my prosthesis dropped out and sat wobbling like jelly on the floor! We cracked up laughing and everyone else did too. If you take the lead it paves the way for discussion and everyone feels comfortable." ■



Top: Both Susan and her husband Richard enjoy gardening. "He has been my rock," she says. **Right:** Susan has written a book about her self-taught painting technique which is very detailed and realistic.



own a limited edition

Susan is offering *Next* readers the opportunity to own a limited-edition, signed and numbered giclée (a high-quality print reproduction produced on 300gsm archival-quality artist's paper) from her Ocean Series. For each giclée sold before December 31, 2006, Susan will donate \$50 to the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation.

1 *Message in a Bottle* giclée, 530x300mm, \$600

2 *Oceans Apart* giclée, 530x373mm, \$600

3 *Dancing 'til Dawn* giclée, 530x300mm, \$600

For information on Susan's other paintings, visit her website at www.susanart.com