

# THE FRASER AVE. SERIES

Melanie Janisse-Barlow



2022/Cheryl Smoking/ Acrylic on canvas/5'8" x 5'8"

By the time you read this, 7 Fraser Ave. will be all but gone. Evacuated and developed into something else. The miracle of what it was — what it fostered and represented in Toronto's Liberty Village for more than 30 years, though... that is what will persist, liberated from the accidental incubator of a warehouse space, and loosed on the world. The artists, the merchants, the denizens who referred to themselves as "Frasies" or "7 Fers" celebrating in myriad ways the roles they played in on of Toronto's most iconic enclaves of art, creativity, and bohemian living

One such celebration is the **Fraser Ave. Series**, a new series of paintings by Windsor-based artist **Melanie Janisse-Barlow**. These canvases are psycho-geographic explorations of a space Janisse never resided in, but a space that through frequent visitation and contact played a crucial role in the early years of her artistic practice in Toronto — an ethos she can't shake despite the intervening decades.

"I'm trying to get to the bottom of some kind of idea of freedom I worked within — that I got to live," says Janisse-Barlow, who herself lived and worked in warehouse spaces in Montreal, Detroit, and in Toronto's Sauroren Lofts. "These weird, old warehouse spaces, and that they're disappearing. They are not suitable for habitation and not supported anymore. And there aren't that many of them left."

The 17,000-square-foot of 7 Fraser Ave. was purchased for about \$150,000 in 1985 by Mario Noviello who says he naively fell in love with a dilapidated building and proceeded to studiously avoid wielding authoritarian control over the premises for thirty-seven years as he built out the quirky, beautiful spaces within. Painters, sculptors, filmmakers and musicians lived and worked cheek to jowl with plumbers, a lighting workshop, a bicycle repair business, and a kink studio. It was the kind of place where characters and events as singular as a hermetic military stop-motion artist and a hallway chainsaw fight over shared Internet were just part of the vibe. And the parties, it goes without saying, are the stuff of local lore.

“There was one death, one birth, at least one wedding, a lot of relationships started, a lot of relationships ended,” says Noviello of the culture he unwittingly helped foster amongst the often precarious and “illegal” residents of 7 Fraser Ave. with his laissez-faire approach to management. “There were a lot of very dysfunctional people, a lot of very cool people... it was a counter-culture unto itself.”

In “Pumpkins of Fraser” jazz singer and long-time 7 Fraser resident Genevieve Marentette (aka Gigi) stands in the warehouse’s infamous common room—part crash pad, part late-night potluck, part salon of ideas. She’s wearing an Eeyore the donkey onesie. It’s the last Halloween for residents of 7 Fraser and the common room table is covered with pumpkins waiting to be carved. Whimsical and thoroughly haunted, it’s a moment meant for residents to get together and celebrate the season,

the moment making its way into Janisse-Barlow’s transformative hands.

“It felt like the end of an era of industrial loft living in Toronto,” says Marentette of losing her home and creative space. “It was a sad loss for the community that lived there in very end — a community that was very organized and felt like a family, and still does to this day.”

Similarly, “Cheryl Smoking” depicts an early morning in the 7 Fraser unit of actor, writer, and musician Jake Vanderham. Cheryl Jean (another long time ‘Frasie’) sits in attentive repose, draped in fabric, head wreathed in smoke; the panes of the windows behind frosted in early light. “It was during the packing up,” Vanderham recalls of the days following the evictions. “The doors were always open and Cheryl just came in her housecoat and sat down in front of one of those twelve-foot single-pane windows and started smoking.” He picked up his camera, the capture of his friend as the diaspora-like future of everyone at 7 Fraser sets in becoming the basis for Janisse-Barlow’s interpretation.

“I have a very deep investment in exploring these images of a kindred experience of these warehouse spaces, through another person’s perspective, as I have lived this way for most of my adult life,” Janisse-Barlow says.

Some of the painting’s near-life-sized dimensions are a signature size for Janisse-Barlow, the same size having been used for her celebrated **Lafayette Series**, which explores the idiosyncratic interior and people of Lafayette Coney Island in downtown Detroit. “It’s an ask of the viewer to come in a little closer,” she says of the arresting size of her pieces. “There is an intensity.”

The intensity of creation, the intensity of community, the intensity of chosen family, and the intensity of loss. It was all encapsulated in the lives and works of the people who inhabited this single-storey strip of warehouses at the end of a dead-end street hard by the Gardiner Expressway. And this is the story Melanie Janisse-Barlow is telling with her paintings: that the beauty of what made 7 Fraser Ave. so special is that it ever happened at all, and that the values and liberties of warehouse life continue even after evacuation.

*(Some images in the series will be highlighted in the salon of Galerie Youn at Art Toronto, 2022 and more large works will be on offer through the gallery.)*



2022/Gigi and the Pumpkins/Acrylic on canvas/  
5'8" x 5'8"



*Melanie Janisse-Barlow.*

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, Melanie Janisse-Barlow (BA Communications '92, Concordia University, Montreal; BFA '00, ECAIDU, Vancouver; MFA '14, OCADU, Toronto) has work in private collections around the world. Her works are in permanent collections in both the **Fisher Building** and **Chroma** in Detroit, Michigan. Works from the *Fraser Avenue Project* are slated to be presented at **Art Toronto 2022** with Galerie Youn. She has been invited to be the artist in resident at **Platform Detroit**, and works from this tenure will be exhibited at **Chroma**, Detroit, curated by Peter Cummings in the fall of 2023. Her ongoing *Poets Series*, a self-curating/practo-poetic series of portraits of Canadian poets, has gained national media coverage in Canada and the US. *Ship of Fools*, an installation on a 24-foot Shark sailboat, was performed in Toronto and on Lake St. Clair for the **Media City Film Festival**. Commissioned works include a portrait of The Honourable Justice Edward Ducharme for the **Superior Court of Ontario** chambers. Her work has been represented by **Luft Gallery** in Toronto, and she has authored two collections of poetry: *Orioles in the Oranges* (**Guernica**, 2009), and *Thicket* (**Palimpsest Press**, 2019).

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