

# CHANNEL SURFING

Melanie Janisse-Barlow



2023 / Dodge / Acrylic on canvas.

The formative years persist in memory like a channel. You can flip to it, an archive that exists in the ether, a ghost station playing only the hits (and some of the misses), always teetering on the cusp of razor-sharp and faded gossamer, where you can surf amidst the music, the apartments, the kitchen parties, the clubs, the art, the people... For **Melanie Janisse-Barlow** all of this overlaid footage existed — *happened* — in what she calls “the gritty, beautiful, problematic place of Windsor and Detroit” in the 1980s and 1990s where she felt “free, and also awkward, but together.”

The border cities of Windsor, Ont., and Detroit, Mich., of the late-twentieth century were more than a whole mood, “they were at once wonderful and terrifying,” Janisse-Barlow recalls from her Windsor-based studio, where the paintings that comprise *Channel Surfing* have formed out of the ether of clove cigarettes, Flock of Seagull haircuts, pawnshop guitars, candelabras, and moodiness. “It was a place without safety nets, but there were older girls who would dress you up in their clothes and take you to the Leland City Club, or Changez, or The Shelter when you were underage and teach you the ropes of such an unstrung place.”

One of the obstacles Janisse-Barlow was running into with finding an entrée into the *Channel Surfing* project was a lack of source material beyond pure memory. In a time that predated cellular technology and digital cameras, few people kept a photographic record of the scene. Enter **Nancy Drew** — pillar of the Windsor underground music scene, fashion icon,



2023 / *Faded* / Acrylic on canvas.

and hairstylist whose salon chair was the local test lab for what was cool, and what would be cool. When Janisse-Barlow arrived on the scene as a younger teenager in the 1980s, Drew was already established, the lead vocalist for the long-running Windsor psych rock act, *Luxury Christ*. In the months leading up to *Channel Surfing*, Janisse-Barlow sat down with Drew, who shared the photographic archive of Windsor's early punk and New Wave Scene, through the grunge and indie pop years of the 1990s, she has collected with her husband, Rob Brun.

This archive was the access point into the project — the quieter entry point into a very raucous scene to which both women belonged. It happened over a quiet afternoon at Drew's dining room table, with vegan snacks carefully set out along with the albums.

Rendered in acrylics, India ink, and Beam paint on canvas and panel, the *Channel Surfing* paintings range in size from five-feet-eight-inches

to smaller twenty-by-twenty-inch portraits and are notable for Janisse-Barlow's nimble colour pallet, interpretive linework, spare mark making, and emotional response to spatial rendering. A woman named Donna (now unlocatable) plays a guitar before appliances and a laundry tub in a basement practice space. Her sojourn in the band *Do or Diatribe* was short lived, but the energy of the basement band practice in the image is unmistakable. The blue 1979 Dodge B100 van belonging to the artist's future husband, musician Andrew Barlow, sits rakishly curbside, during a brief reprieve between gigs, Barlow making an appearance himself in a portrait, caught in mid-conversation with a cat perched on his shoulder — both polaroid images found while Janisse-Barlow was cleaning her basement. A woman peers out from between garishly painted fingernails, macabre and playful, in a candid moment before one of Drew's hair shows where she would create some of the seminal looks of the time. A chandelier floats above a hair show after-party, the flocking of the wallpaper a verdant, mossy constellation that also tips a nod to the strange forgotten luxury of Detroit — a place both Drew and Janisse-Barlow have drawn creative inspiration from for decades. *Luxury Christ*, with Nancy Drew front and centre on the mic, performs at *Changez by Nite* — hallowed ground for Windsor's live music and dance party scene.

"There is a vibrational quality based on what was happening then, and what is happening now," Janisse-Barlow says of the paintings. "It was a time when Windsor was magical and fun, but also a time when both women found themselves a scene unlike any other. We were all rebelling against something and in our lesser moments, against each other. A mosh pit of

circumstance."

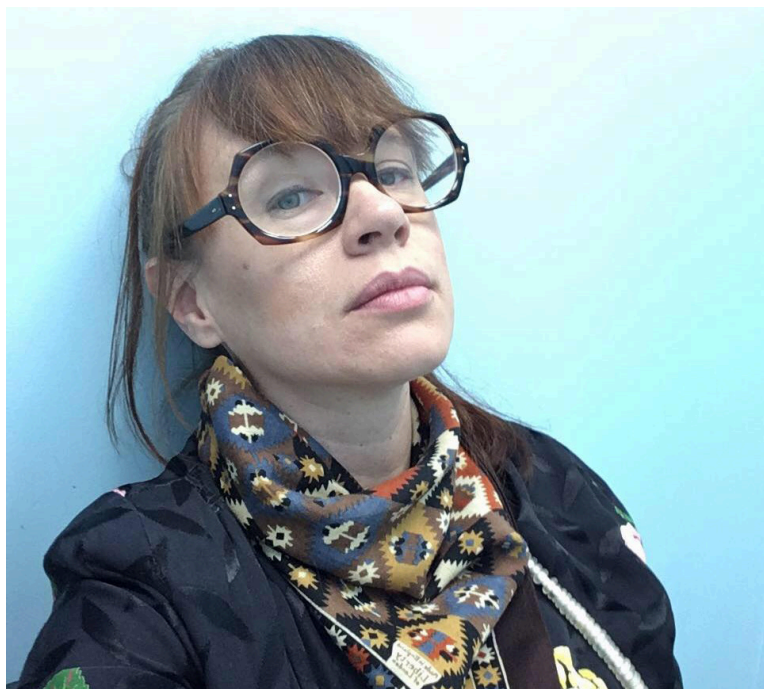
*Channel Surfing* arrives at an interesting time for the arts and arts communities. The loss of loft spaces, studio closures, and divisive politics are a clarion call to reframe the moment to, as Janisse-Barlow says, "remember ourselves in the spaces where we collected to be artists." *Channel Surfing* is not a critique of the loud and dominant, but a gentle reminder of the women who came before her as an artist taking her first tentative steps into the scene, at the time not noticing the specifics, but observing "the freak kitchen party of Windsor back then," and finding her unique way into and along the memories and feeling-tones of the moments from her youth.

"This project is restorative," she says. "I want to add to the conversation, to give back and give justice to some things that Windsor should love and cherish."

The project is expected to be an ongoing practice, culminating in a larger exhibition, location to be determined.



2023 / *Stratocaster* / Acrylic on canvas.



*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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