



*Shell Games*, 2022. Acrylic on Canvas, 36" x 48"

# SHELL GAMES

## Melanie Janisse-Barlow

Many of us have a rolodex of images we have encountered that are emblazoned into our memory. These images can be of important memories from our everyday life or powerful scenes that call out to us from the ether of our cellular devices. We may not remember whether one is a photograph we have seen, or an impression that has come from life itself. Either way, their power and their aura render them larger than their dimensions. We return to them often, because they are images — possibly thousands of images — that please us. They speak to us in a way we may not even be able to articulate.

Windsor, Ont.-based painter **Melanie Janisse-Barlow** has her own cache of these images. They have become stuck in her consciousness and have created throughways into her painting practice. The act of bringing them from the privacy of archive and restoring them to a place of seeming authenticity is the sleight-of-hand process Janisse-Barlow explores in **Shell Games**, her new series of paintings to be shown at **Art Toronto** (Booth C28) at the **Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Oct., 27-30, 2022**, and at **Galerie Youn** in Montreal for a solo exhibition, **Dec. 1-20, 2022**.

"It always struck me that there is a lot to be said about what is fleeting, what is permanent, what is lost, and what is gained," Janisse-Barlow said of the process of taking these largely contextless but oddly adjoining images and rendering them in acrylics on canvas and panel — essentially implicating the aura German critic Walter Benjamin foresaw in the ever-accelerating age of technological reproduction of art by way of re-encapsulating them from the ether of her mind into painted works.

Patrons browsing in a gallery form the backdrop as a figure approaches the viewer in a platinum swirl of sequined fringe. A figure in an Eeyore onesie oversees a pumpkin carving event at a now demolished artist studio. A poet sits in quiet contemplation, her gaze cast down through the round frames of her eyeglasses, a tarot card tattoo visible on her bare arm. The artist herself, in an extravagant floral-print outfit, shares a light moment with a barista in a café. A flower planter studded with countless seashells looms over the viewer from its perch on a grand American porch on Mackinac Island. The images are disparate, but oddly connected. They are breadcrumbs to something.

"I have a difficult time explaining why these images are *the* images," Janisse-Barlow says while discussing the series. There is a vibration to them

— an atmosphere. They all strangely resonate together in my mind along some continuum of colour, shape, sensation, tone, theme. I like that the theme is slippery. That slippage is part of what draws me to the urgency to create some analog for them."

The paintings that comprise *Shell Games* exude a presence, even if that presence is flawed; they examine the plurality and reproducibility of images as they pass effortlessly and instantaneously through our experiences, our devices, and our minds. Janisse-Barlow explores what happens if she stops that process and uses the slower medium of painting to reinvigorate the image, in effect restoring these impressions to the transient and liminal aura of the authentic.



*Pumpkins on Fraser*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 66" x 66"



*Sight*, 2022. Acrylic on panel, 20" x 20"



*Sleight of Hand*, 2022. Acrylic on panel, 20' x 20'