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Melanie Daniel, *Only Four Degrees*, 2019, oil on canvas, 77 x 120 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kelowna Art Gallery.



ESTRANGED ENCOUNTERS

The Hallucinogenic Nature of Melanie Daniel

by Robin Laurence



When the COVID-19 pandemic locked down international borders last spring, Melanie Daniel returned to her childhood home in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. More precisely, she and her husband and two children moved into a basement suite in her parents' house, on a blueberry farm at the outskirts of Kelowna. As she describes it, much of the surrounding area is agricultural—orchards and vineyards—but her parents' property also abuts First Nations and Crown land. The view from Daniel's studio window, a converted garage she has used over

the years during extended family visits, is of a pine forest. She may see coyotes, deer, black bears and the occasional moose passing by. Over the years—and not surprisingly—natural elements have made their way into some of Daniel's vivid, unsettling and at times alarming paintings. Their presence there, however, speaks not so much to iconic Canadian landscape traditions or to mere nostalgia as to a mood of alienation and estrangement.

The unusual route that Daniel took back to her temporary place of refuge goes a long way to explaining that mood. She had just

completed a three-year term as the Padnos Visiting Distinguished Artist at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, when the pandemic struck. Prior to that, she had lived for more than 20 years in Israel, where she has established an acclaimed career, with numerous exhibitions of paintings, sculptures, drawings and videos to her credit, along with an impressive number of awards and honours. Her art has also been exhibited in galleries and art museums across the United States, and she has been the recipient of prestigious fellowships there. As well, Daniel's CV documents her participation in solo and group exhibitions in Sweden, Germany, France, Denmark, Switzerland and New Zealand. Sadly for us, it is in her native Canada that Daniel is little known and infrequently exhibited. Not until her show "Goin' Where the Weather Suits My Clothes" opened at the Kelowna Art Gallery this past fall did I learn about her work and her career, gleaned information and insights from a distance, by phone, email and visits to her website. As I write this article, social contacts and local travel are still severely restricted and I have yet to meet Daniel—or see her art—in person. Still, I have been both amazed and moved by her creative

practice. Her recent paintings evoke a similar queasy and at times hallucinatory relationship with the natural world as those of Kim Dorland, Peter Doig and Daniel Richter. (She cites the early influence of both Doig and Richter, the former for his "idiosyncratic narratives" and the latter for his "sense of impending doom.") Distinctively, however, Daniel's paintings may also incorporate elements of armed conflict and social unrest, reflective of her years living in Israel.

Daniel's current exhibition, an abbreviated version of a large solo exhibition at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in 2019, takes on the dismaying subject of global climate change in a strangely oblique and highly imaginative fashion. Daniel has created futuristic narratives in which human beings struggle to reclaim their lives in the aftermath of environmental disasters such as hurricanes, droughts and wildfires. Their efforts, however, appear to be doomed by the benighted optimism or sheer absurdity of their undertakings. In her painting *Only Four Degrees*, 2019, a lone figure, stranded in a devastated tropical setting, attempts to power up his computer using storm-strewn pineapples. In *Honeygrind*, also from 2019, a young person, her face obscured by her raspberry-pink hair, skateboards



1. Melanie Daniel, *I Lost Myself*, 2020, 40 x 40 inches. All images courtesy the artist.

2. Melanie Daniel, *Here Strolls the Pretender*, 2019, 50 x 50 inches.



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through a drought-ravaged scene in which a defunct waterslide and swimming pool are backgrounded by scorched, severed and phantasmagorical vegetation. In the pool, emptied of water and tagged with graffiti, two apiarists attend wooden beehives, their activities seeming to land somewhere between hopefulness and futility. When this painting was first exhibited, the beekeepers, clad head to toe in protective clothing, were likened to astronauts on an inhospitable planet. Today, they suggest medical researchers and health care workers wearing PPEs as they struggle to contain the pandemic. This reading seems uncanny in its anticipation of events but is not without its holistic logic: the devastation of the natural environment, whether through destructive agricultural practices or global climate change, braids together the die-off of pollinators such as bees and the emergence of new and deadly viruses. The inhospitable planet those beekeeping “astronauts” have landed on? It is our own.

Daniel’s brilliant, non-naturalistic palette forges a paradoxical relationship with her future-fiction narratives. Instead of, say, the relentless rain of the first *Blade Runner* movie or the obscuring smog of its sequel, Daniel’s paintings imagine environmental collapse through a spectrum of psychedelic pinks and blues, acid yellow, DayGlo orange. These colours, along with an expressionistic painting style that jumbles abstraction and figuration together, are strategic, attracting our curiosity, drawing us into the imagined narratives and painterly propositions rather than smacking us on the head with dire prognostication or documentary realism. As with the best science fiction, we are engaged in a kind of metaphysical exploration of the human condition and the address of existential questions of survival. Utopian impulses and dystopian outcomes are weighed through the positing of disastrous scenarios and curiously unproductive attempts to rectify them.

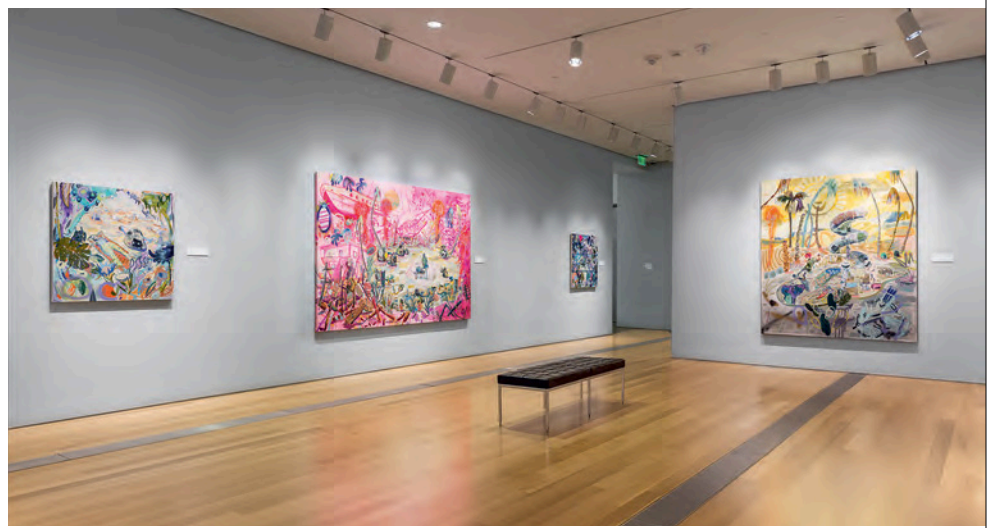
“The paintings always start as abstractions with many spills, stains and marks, just to get me going,” Daniel says. “Then I build up the mark-making and I use obvious objects like trees to connect the marks to the narratives.” In the mix of thick impasto, thin washes and representational devices, she adds, “There’s an overall push for disintegration.” Because of the explicit narrative content of her most recent works, however, her approach has become less intentionally chaotic. “By creating hallucinatory storylines just beyond reach, I want to imbue a sense of displacement that is both strange and recognizable, leaving room for the viewer to create their own parallels and associations.”

A succession of themes in Daniel’s earlier work are suggested, again, through real and imagined states of crisis and conditions of alienation. “Late Bloomers,” a series shown at the Asya Geisberg Gallery in New York in 2019, poses human beings in a blighted world, engaged in DIY tasks that are optimistic and absurd at the same time. Here, however, it is the socio-economic order that seems to be under attack, although within the unsettling context of strangely mutating natural forms. In *Guerilla Ice*, 2018, for instance, a blue-haired youth pedals an independent ice cream cart past the flaming remains of a corporate ice cream truck. An unexpected element of this show was Daniel’s creation of mixed-media sculptures based on the brilliantly hued, oddly shaped vegetation depicted in her paintings. Similar fantastical sculptures have shown up in her Kelowna exhibition, too, suggesting crisis-driven hybridity or adaptation. Survival of the weirdest.

“Lotus Eaters,” a series of unsettling paintings from 2014, juggles Canadian landscape tropes with clichéd outdoor activities—individuals insinuating themselves into scenes of evergreen forests, chilly lakes and rivers and northern lights. Their attempted accommodation to their setting includes the gathering of firewood, the making of campfires and the assembly of wooden supports for tents or teepees. There are hallucinatory references here to the Group of Seven and their kin; these places seem haunted by Tom Thomson’s restless ghost. Still, an aspiration towards oneness with nature is undermined and, again, there presides a sense of alienation. In a number of scenes, twisting and looping vines, marked with yellow circles and dots, resemble venomous tropical snakes. Serpents have invaded the garden. Here, we see the emergence of some of Daniel’s disorienting formal strategies: unexpected colour combinations, skewed perspectives, “anarchic” elements of abstraction butted up against representational forms and figures. Something of her youthful experience as a tree planter on clear-cut mountainsides is evident in recurring motifs of lifeless stumps and severed tree trunks stripped of vegetation.

Writing about the 2015 series “Piecemaker,” the Los Angeles-based artist and critic Megan Abrahams characterized Daniel’s work as “Emily Carr on acid.” Unlike Carr, however, Daniel’s themes and strategies are as much about her transplanted Israeli existence as they are about her rural Canadian origins, and she has often stitched together signs and symbols from both aspects of her identity. She moved to Israel in 1995 to be with a man she had met while travelling in India. Earlier undergraduate studies in Kelowna, Vancouver and Montreal, shifting focus between the sciences and humanities, had yielded little in the way of creative gratification, never mind direction. In Israel, she started her education all over again, earning a BFA and MFA at the prestigious Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Tel Aviv. There, she was taught and influenced by both Israeli and international artists. Although she had made art since childhood and although, too, she had the example of family members who painted, Daniel had not previously imagined she could pursue artmaking as a career. It was in Israel that she committed herself to her vocation, although it was also important that she maintain connections to Canada through summer visits to Kelowna. While making allusions to contemporary Israeli politics, early American quilt making and her own cultural heritage, the “Piecemaker” paintings juxtapose Arab and Jewish images, Canadian landscape tropes and the occasional American political symbol. In *Patchwork Landing*, for example, an American eagle, talons spread, swoops down on a devastated landscape of decapitated palm trees, strewn logs and rubble. Northern lights shimmer on the horizon.

“Echo Shield,” a series of paintings created during an extended stay in Kelowna in 2012, directly addresses conditions of armed conflict in Israel. Daniel remembers standing in the garage-studio on her parents’ property, looking out the window at a snowy field flanked by pine trees. “I knew at that moment that I would not paint a single tree that year.





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1. Installation view, "Only Four Degrees," 2019, Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

2. Melanie Daniel, *Patchwork Landing*, 2015, oil on canvas, 140 x 160 centimetres.

War was raging again in Israel and I could think of nothing but existential threats," she says. She was overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, anger and sorrow. The resulting highly expressive paintings depict desert landscapes littered with shrapnel, barbed wire, concrete roadblocks. There are satellite dishes, surveillance towers, bomb shelters, too. These works are powerful not only in the directness of their expression but also in the way Daniel's approach to her medium is wedded to her subject. Through a postmodern reinvention of painterly idioms, she deploys a kind of precisionism to depict weapons and military technology, and action painting to represent exploding bombs and missiles. Military flares soar and open like fireworks, like flowers.

That Daniel would paint Canadian forests while living in Israel and Israeli warfare during a stay in Canada says a lot about the alienated condition of the immigrant, about divided loyalties and an uncertain sense of identity. "Immigrants get split down the middle from inside," she says. "You're never truly at ease in your skin, in your new home or when you go back to your old home." As a Canadian of Anglo and French heritage, living (and politically active) in the ancient port city of Jaffa with its mixed Arab, Jewish and Christian populations, making summer visits to Kelowna, teaching for an extended period in the United States, she struggles to "weave those very

separate identities together." The COVID-19 disruptions have added to her anxieties, and she reports waking up in the middle of the night wondering where she and her family are going to live. "You never feel at home in your old home or your new one."

Whether through conditions of war, social unrest, political turmoil or environmental catastrophe, Daniel's human figures continue to hover in a state of estrangement from their surroundings. Yet through a combination of personal mark-making, cultural signs and symbols and peculiarly creative attempts to ameliorate their situations, they work to imagine their way forward, through their existential crises, just as Daniel does. "Being a citizen of two radically different worlds has sharpened my sense of dislocation and strangeness," she says, "but also has given me the ability to adapt in my own way to new environments." Then adding, "This dual mindset is inescapable, especially in my studio practice. If my subject matter or medium shifts, one thing remains constant, and that is a hybrid or dual perspective in all I do." ■

Robin Laurence is an independent writer, critic and curator, based in Vancouver. She has written essays, reviews and feature articles for local, national and international publications and is a long-time contributing editor to Border Crossings.