

**Melanie  
Daniel**

**Goin' Where  
the Climate  
Suits My Clothes**



# Goin' Where the Weather Suits My Clothes

An essay by Robin Laurence

*Time rushes on, in ways that humans have never before contemplated. That famous picture of the Earth from outer space that Apollo beamed back in the late 1960s—already that's not the world we inhabit; its poles are melting, its oceans rising. We can register what is happening with satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?*

– Bill McKibben,<sup>1</sup> American author, educator, and environmentalist

Melanie Daniel is a gifted artist who approaches her sombre subject—the disastrous consequences of global climate change—through oblique angles and unexpected strategies. Absurd futuristic scenarios, skewed perspectives, a paradoxically brilliant palette, and complex visual incidents abound in her large-scale figurative paintings. Partnered in this exhibition with her mixed media works on paper, surreal sculptures, and collaborative stop-motion animation, Daniel's paintings ask us to consider a future beset with environmental catastrophes such as hurricanes and drought. The narratives she depicts are fraught with fictional contingency, tuned to that most sensitive device of which McKibben writes. Daniel does not confront us with desolating scientific facts and figures but instead uses her imagination to engage ours. "I don't want to paint death and destruction because nothing would be left,"<sup>2</sup> she says. Significant to the fictive narratives she creates in paint is the public exhibition of her work, an important stage for her visual expression. "Museums and galleries," she tells us, "are secular cathedrals in which we convene for a dose of the existential or to see another reflection of our own true face."<sup>3</sup>

Daniel's highly detailed and psychedelically coloured paintings are constructed by lodging multiple representational elements on layered grounds of brushy abstraction, often alternating passages of thick impasto with thin washes of pigment. In seeming contradiction to the monumental scale of her canvases, these techniques undermine or destabilize the usual tropes and techniques of, say, history paintings. The complexity of both concept and execution make it difficult for our eyes to settle on a single image or narrative device amid the environmental wreckage and strangely mutated vegetation. The narratives here are oddly notional, often depicting futile or benighted attempts to mitigate the destruction and reclaim a degree of—what?—the familiar, perhaps.

In the post-hurricane scenario of *Only Four Degrees*, a lone figure in a clearing attempts to power up a computer using pineapples he has gathered from the surrounding devastation. In *Civic Planning*, a group of dazed and hollow-eyed individuals of diverse age and ethnic background are positioned between a forest stripped of life and a table-top tableau of miniature (and again ethnically diverse) forms of shelter, “puzzling over how to rebuild civilization.”<sup>4</sup> What looks initially like a scene of cooperation and togetherness actually speaks to the reverse, that is, to the ways in which climate change has further amplified existing social and economic inequalities. Climate-driven disasters, Daniel reminds us, have had a far greater impact on poor peoples and nations than on the privileged inhabitants of the developed world.

Among the complex imagery in *Honeygrind* is a small apiary in an abandoned pool, an apparent reference to the global die-off of pollinators such as bees and bats. In this work, a young skateboarder navigates a drought-stricken environment of defunct amusements, obsolete graffiti and dead or mutating vegetation. An arresting aspect of Daniel’s practice is her three-dimensional realization of the mutated or hybridized vegetation depicted in her paintings. Working with papier maché and found materials, including lengths of discarded metal, she has created an array of unlikely organic forms, sculptures that both intrigue us and, as in the best future fiction, unnerve us.

Again, rather than confronting us with doom-laden facts, figures, and documents, Daniel deploys elements of irony, absurdity, and paradoxically cheery colour in a manner that unsettles our expectations. Even the title of her exhibition, “Goin’ Where the Weather Suits My Clothes,” is steeped in irony, borrowed as it is from the lyrics of the song *Everybody’s Talkin’*. Written in the late 1960s, the song expresses a yearning to escape urban angst and social alienation by retreating to a semi-tropical paradise.<sup>5</sup> Since the song’s release, half a century ago, global warming has dangerously accelerated while humankind remains resistant to acknowledging this threat to all life on Earth, much less to averting it. The paradisiacal retreats of our popular imagination are beset already with the catastrophic extremes of climate change to which Daniel’s future fiction alludes: rising sea levels, hurricanes, floods, mudslides, droughts, and wildfires.<sup>6</sup>

Something of this equation—disaster and denial—is suggested in the ink drawing, *Mirage*. Here, a young family wearing bathing suits and gas-masks seems to be melting in waves of extreme heat while running across a beach. This image is one of a series of works on paper, some of it handmade, in which Daniel has chosen volcanoes as metaphors for climate change denial. They are her response, both amusing and alarming, to the political and corporate leaders who may acknowledge global warming is occurring while denying that it is human-induced. Viewers can imagine their blathering: “It’s all about volcanic eruptions—something vastly geological, beyond our control and certainly unrelated to our consumption of fossil fuels.” An image of a gas-masked figure lounging atop a ridiculous stack of plastic pools and another, of a figure with her head inside a volcano, employ the black humour of political cartoons. Other works, such as *Goodbye Sun* and *Ash Mountain*, possess the power of prophecy. Daniel created them in another time and place, long before living through a Kelowna summer when the skies were smothered in smoke from, yes, climate-change driven wildfires in Oregon and Washington State.



Recent ambitious exhibitions, shaped by ecocriticism<sup>7</sup> and juxtaposing contemporary and historic art, demonstrate how artists not only register and respond to their own age's understanding of the natural world but also, in a sense, shape it. As Canadian viewers may observe in the "iconic" landscape paintings of the Group of Seven and Emily Carr, the belief prevailed, less than a century ago, that vast nature could withstand or heal itself from any injury inflicted by mere humankind. Although logging and mining operations were already underway in northern Ontario at the time Group members were famously advancing their nationalistic vision of wilderness, they chose to ignore or overwrite their impact. Carr's depictions of the West Coast rainforest fully embraced a notion of the Romantic Sublime, of natural grandeur in the form of towering trees and godly light slanting through dense vegetation. And, yes, while later in her career, Carr did depict scenes of logged-over tracts of land—and even anthropomorphized trees as suffering beings<sup>8</sup>—she focused on new growth and the forest's ability to regenerate.

Daniel, who grew up in western Canada and who, when a university student, worked as a tree-planter in the wake of immense clear-cuts, is burdened with a much bleaker, 21st-century vision of the environmental devastation we have wrought. Still, her art is testament not only to that devastation and to the existential questions climate change poses but also to her belief that humanity can—must—act. In a sense, her art is akin to tree-planting, a hopeful if somewhat surreal note pitched against a loud chorus of destruction. Still, she is under no illusion that the products of her anxious imagination can, in and of themselves, effect change. A museum or gallery, she tells us,

*... is a grand stage for addressing any issue and the ultimate way for an artist to be seen. But activism in the arts is only a catalyst or provocation at best. It is not a replacement for electing sane leaders or the actual day-to-day grunt work and sacrifice that people do to make our world safer and livable.*<sup>9</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. Bill McKibben, "What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art," *Grist*, Apr 22, 2005, (<https://grist.org/article/mckibben-imagine/>).
2. Melanie Daniel, artist statement, October 2020.
3. Ibid.
4. Melanie Daniel, in an email interview with the author, October 30, 2020. Unless otherwise stated, all direct and indirect quotes from the artist are derived from interviews conducted by telephone and email between October 24 and October 30, 2024.
5. Composed by Fred Neil and recorded in 1969 by Harry Nilsson, *Everybody's Talkin'* was the theme song to the John Schlesinger film, *Midnight Cowboy*. The song became a popular hit and has since been performed and recorded by numerous musicians.
6. Concurrent with the opening of her Kelowna Art Gallery exhibition, Daniel is exhibiting a series of "antediluvian" paintings at the Mindy Solomon Gallery in Miami. Titled "After the Flood", the show imagines a future world in which humans cling to life "in hybrid forests and on rising seas."
7. An acclaimed recent example is "Nature's Nation: Art and Environment," organized by the Princeton University Art Museum and on view there October 2018 to January 2019, then travelling to the Peabody Essex Museum and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.
8. Carr called the ragged tree stumps that loggers left behind "screamers."
9. Daniel, artist statement, October 2020.

Robin Laurence is an independent writer and critic based in Vancouver, BC.

## Biography

### Melanie Daniel

Originally from Victoria, Melanie Daniel grew up in Kelowna, British Columbia. After studies in Canada, she completed her BFA and MFA at Bezalel Academy, Israel. She was a professor at the Bezalel Academy of Arts in Jerusalem, and was recently the Padnos Distinguished Artist-in-Residence at Grand Valley State University, Michigan. Daniel has had numerous exhibitions in Israel and abroad, including solo exhibitions at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel; Grand Rapids Art Museum, Michigan; Asya Geisberg Gallery, NY; Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv; Ashdod Museum of Art, Israel; Shulamit Gallery, Los Angeles; Kelowna Art Gallery, BC; and Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv. Her work is included in collections such as the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Harvard Business School, and the Brandes Family Art Collection. She has received press in publications such as Maaek Magazine, Artnet, Newsweek, Frieze, Haaretz, CBC and CBC Radio-Canada, The Huffington Post, Beautiful Decay, and the Artists Magazine. Daniel is the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, a New York Foundation for the Arts Grant, the 2009 Rappaport Prize for a Young Israeli Painter, a Creative Capital Grant, and the NARS Foundation Residency in New York City.



Melanie Daniel, *Goodbye Sun*, 2019, ink on paper, 15 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Melanie Daniel, *Ash Mountain*, 2019, ink, acrylic pencil on paper, 25 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.



foreground: Melanie Daniel, *Late Bloomers*, 2018, papier-mâché and found materials, varying sizes. Collection of 13 sculptures, Courtesy of the artist.  
background: Melanie Daniel, *Only Four Degrees*, 2019, oil on canvas, 77 x 120 in. Courtesy of Asya Geisberg Gallery, NY.



Melanie Daniel, *Civic Planning*, 2019, oil on canvas, 42 x 54 in. Courtesy of Asya Geisberg Gallery, NY.

# Melanie Daniel

## Goin' Where the Climate Suits My Clothes

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cover: Melanie Daniel, *Selfie* (detail), 2019, ink, pencil on paper, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.