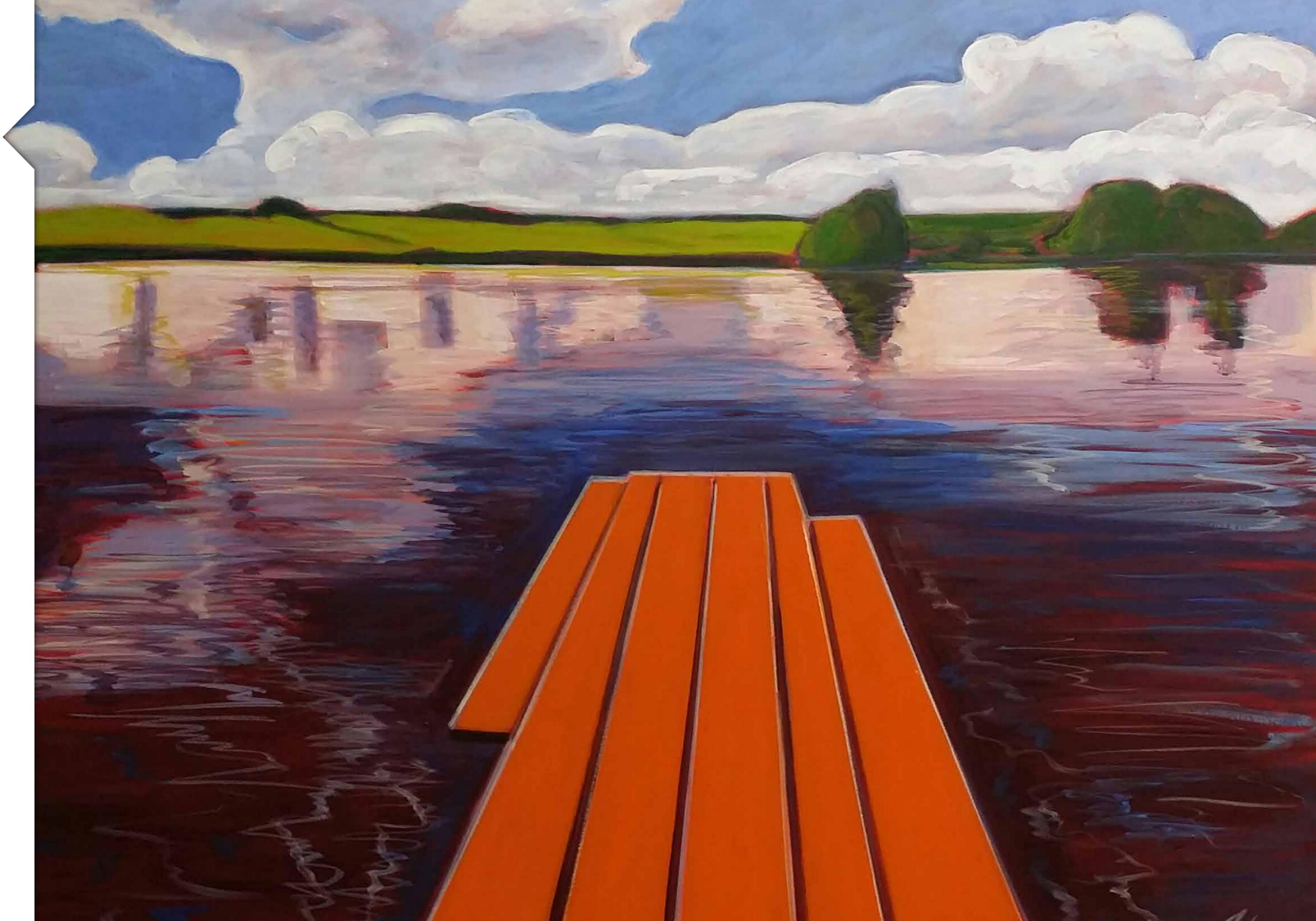


Artists to Collect

Melissa Chandon





# Road Trip

written by Lorie Lee Steiner

Part abstract realist painter/part urban archaeologist, Melissa Chandon delves below the surface of the everyday; avoiding excess frills to create an unfettered view of Americana with a Pop Art twist. In her world, a '50s vintage car with sharp chrome fins tows a turquoise camper. Vibrant retro gas pumps stand in a row. Shadows stream from a silver Airstream trailer... As is so obvious in her paintings, the pleasure of travel on the open road is high-octane fuel for her art.

Many of us remember weekend jaunts in the back seat of the family station wagon when we were kids. But Melissa's experience was so much more... in essence it was school-on-wheels.

"Road trips were my parents' passion," she recalls. "They saw the American landscape as a means of educating their five children – exposing us to the humanity of highways, small towns, truck stops and KOA Campgrounds all across the US. To this day, I find cars, gas stations, motels, billboard signs fascinating – and I feel it is important to document this era of American history before it disappears."

Even as a three-year-old, Melissa had an undeniable passion for drawing. Perhaps it was the fact that her family relocated so often when she was growing up that made her subconsciously



want to record what she saw. "We lived all over the US," she says. "This gave me the time to discover roadside vernacular. It was then that I knew, in some way, I had been profoundly influenced by all the moving, and road trips... discovering my visual horizon along the way."

That rolling panorama of influence was steering Melissa down a somewhat unpopular career path. At least from her father's way of thinking. After graduating high-school, she told him of her intention to major in art and philosophy. To which Dad responded with worries about the stability of her future. In the end, the determination and resilience he had instilled in his children would serve Melissa well. Today, she is in her element, as a successful painter and art & design teacher at the University of California, Davis.

## Live/Work/Teach

Positive reinforcement at an early age is a wonderful confidence booster. Melissa still remembers her first days in high school, and her art teacher telling her she was talented. Combined with the realization at a young age that she had a great memory for colour, the artist inside her came alive and continues to thrive. Her paintings are a study in retro-pleasure. A cool splash of holiday nostalgia; a trip down the fast-lane of shadows and light.

She notes, "In the late 1990s, I studied with renowned American painter Wayne Thiebaud. He was my mentor for five years. He taught at University of California Davis for quite some time and just recently retired. When a job opened up there, my longtime dream became reality.



Having earned my MFA from Lesley University in Cambridge, MA in 2011, I applied to UC Davis and was hired in the Design Department. I teach a class called Colour and Form. This class is an investigation into colour theory and composition, as it relates to art and design. I teach about 100 students per quarter. It is very exhilarating to know I can share my accumulated knowledge with them."

An artist's studio reveals much about their distinct personality and often has a profound influence on their work. Melissa has painted from several studios over the years, her last in Sausalito with a view of the Bay, which she says was "my best so far. I wanted to discover the beauty of the ever-changing sky and water, reflections of boats and the clouds." But, after working there for four years, she started teaching at the university, and commuting turned out to be a nightmare. She currently has two studios. One is a live/work situation with access to a kitchen and her garden. The second is in a structure downtown; walking distance from the museum and restaurants, with many other artists working in the building. Melissa appreciates the value of community, as the life of a painter is often a solitary existence.

Some precious items have traveled with her from studio to studio as a familiar source of comfort and inspiration. "My Buddha, saved love notes from my family, shells that my sister has given me over the years on special outings, a few handcrafted signs that say "breathe". I'm inspired to paint when I see a beautiful work of art; a long-cast shadow; a vintage car driving by on the freeway, shining in the sunlight. I also love the challenge of painting for a show. It's exciting to think about filling the space of a gallery with a visual narrative, a story that I hope the viewer will enjoy and get."

#### **Take me away...**

Melissa has gathered her cross-country vision of Americana firsthand – from growing up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to working on the family ranch near the coastal mountains in northern California, to urban life in Minneapolis, New York and the Bay Area. She is now happy at home in northern California, where she belongs to several museums and is part of a non-profit







art community called The Verge. An avid partaker in discussion, learning and collaboration, she describes her passion for travel and exploration as “food for the soul. I love when artists are painting paintings that take me to another place, transport me to another world.”

Melissa’s favourite contemporary painters at this moment are Kehinde Wiley, James Kerry Marshall and graffiti artist Banksy. Other influencers are Bay Area figurative painters Richard Diebenkorn and Joan Brown, and especially strong painters who are women: Joan Mitchell, Paula Rego, Elaine de Kooning and Frida Kahlo. “I have found my own voice through a process of analysis and reduction. I look to a number of 20th-century painters, drawing inspiration from their imagery: the directness of David Hockney’s work of the ‘70s, the romance of Edward Hopper, Wayne Thiebaud’s delight with colour and surface, and the intriguing abstraction of Richard Diebenkorn.

When asked for her advice to artists just starting out, Melissa draws from her own past. “Never give up. Really... I have met a few people along

the way that have influenced my beliefs. The most important being – never give up on your dreams. I know it sounds cliché, but it’s true. The practice of an artist is a life-long pursuit. I like to rest in that knowing that I am getting better as I go along.”

#### **Painting the Past**

Melissa notes that it’s hard to describe her work by just talking about it. “Seeing it in person gives a stronger and better portrayal. I think it reproduces well digitally, but there is no comparison to standing in front of a painting and feeling how your body responds to the work. This of course is true for any work and not just mine.”

Before the actual work begins on a new collection, there is much research to be done and a lot of time spent in the public domain. Most often, Melissa’s images are painted from the view of other individuals and not her own photographs. She prefers working this way because it allows her, as the maker, and her audience to see the world through someone else’s point of view. The painting process is achieved with a double





primary palette. "I mix all of my paints before starting on a show. I discovered this several years ago. I like how it pulls all of the work together. I begin with a simple drawing, then do an under painting so I can begin to see what is happening. Then I paint the actual painting, always editing, deciding what needs to stay and what can be taken out as unnecessary to the composition."

Melissa isn't averse to painting commissions, and will take on hired projects, but she is well aware that they come with an added stress. Along with her own signature paintings, she has collaborated with other artists, and explored time-based media and photography. With the understanding that "the medium must support the idea and the idea must support the medium."

Spare time is not in generous supply, but when it comes time to relax, Melissa opts for the simple things that really matter. Dining with

friends, listening to music in an intimate venue, delicious food, fine wine. "Fresh veggies cooked in wonderful ways from my favorite organic farm. And, wow, there are so many areas in the world that have amazing wine. New Zealand, South Africa, France, California's Napa Valley and El Dorado County. I have an open mind and enjoy all the varieties. Too hard to choose."

For the rest of us, Melissa serves up delectable images reminiscent of carhops, drive-ins, juicy burgers, fries and thick chocolate shakes. A blast from the past, based on a philosophy we wholeheartedly agree with... "Life without visual art is unimaginable."

Melissa Chandon is represented by:

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