

## Melissa Chandon: A Vision of American Suburbia



Melissa Chandon, *Swing*, 48 x 48 inches, Acrylic on Panel, 2013

Melissa Chandon's painting *Swing* manages to say something profound about people without actually depicting any of them. Chandon's ongoing project as an artist—the construction of an enigmatic and profound vision of American suburbia—deals with human aspirations by depicting the places and objects that surround them. “The suburban home represents the dream and its trappings,” Chandon observes. “The cars, the pools and the boats are its closely related fetishes.”

With human figures notably absent, Chandon's paintings generate a kind of spare poetry, allowing the vestiges of American presence to broadcast their evocative strangeness. For example, the empty swing in *Swing*, which carries connotations of carefree play, floats in front of a house whose glass doors and window reflect the surrounding landscape: a prim suburban mirage watered by a single ghostly lawn

sprinkler. Just who lives in this spare, blue shadowed tract home with its manicured lawn? And just where is the implied tree that the swing should be hanging from? Chandon's paintings, like those of Edward Hopper or Giorgio de Chirico, have a dreamlike quality—enhanced by their subtle disconnects—that moves their subject matter from the mundane towards the metaphysical and aspirational.

Chandon, who was born in the 1950s, was one of five children. Enchanted by images of America glimpsed during family roadtrips—of highways, hotels, truck stops and campgrounds— Chandon grew into a sharp observer of American culture and its vestiges. After earning her BFA (in painting and philosophy) from Santa Clara University in 1975, Chandon left her art behind to become a mother and a working professional. She worked as a designer in Seattle and then spent 11 years as the head of marketing for a travel agency with duties that included leading field seminars to meet artists.

Since Chandon was not painting while her children were growing, she found herself increasingly frustrated by the lack of a creative outlet. That changed suddenly when she pulled out her old college paint box in 1996 and began auditing a painting class at UC Davis taught by Wayne Thiebaud. "Don't ever give up," he urged. Thiebaud also advised Chandon to edit her work—to break it down and then build it back up—and under his mentorship her painting blossomed. Chandon eventually entered an MFA program at Leslie University College of Art and Design (she graduated in 2011) where an "amazing" group of advisors guided her as she experimented with video and found her true subject material: "I dug down and came to understand that my work was centered in family and family experiences," Chandon recounts.



*Post Modern House with Ocean View, 48 x 48 inches, Acrylic on Panel, 2013*

As Chandon's body of work has matured, her subject matter—which has included vintage cars, travel trailers, boats and barns—has taken on an increasingly abstract character: "I consider myself to be an abstract realist painter," is how Chandon frames it. Paintings like *Post Modern House with Ocean View* gives some idea of the formal refinement she has moved towards. With its bold linearity, emphasized by a red roofline and shaded grey curbs, there is a definite geometric rigor present, but with a Pop-influenced sense of "coolness" layered on top. Chandon's boldly outlined ranch house, with just a ribbon of blue ocean looming on the horizon, is a condensation of the American dream that hovers in the zone between myth and reality.



*Cool Pool at 2PM*, 72 x 72 inches, Acrylic on Canvas

*Cool Pool* is an edgy painting (literally) in which geometry, architecture and flow meet and have a kind of conversation. The brushy turquoise of the pool, highlighted by just a hint of dim light, seems constrained by the assertive red tile edge that borders it. There is an essential idea animating this juxtaposition: that human beings have a way of containing and reforming nature for their own purposes. "Climb in if you wish," the painting seems to say, "nature is almost under control here." Maybe that is what a *Cool Pool* is: an ironic re-purposing of something that is essential to our survival. Saying that Chandon has a feeling for artificiality is something of an understatement.



Melissa Chandon, *Variation on a Case Study House*

Chandon the scholar/painter makes her presence known in *Variation on a Case Study House*. Keenly interested in the history of postwar American architecture—“It all began with Levittown”—Chandon is interested in the aspirational side of the Case Study houses, which were experiments in affordable utopianism for the masses. “My work is so rooted in the history of the times I grew up in,” Chandon observes and her urge to simply in painting resonates well with the modernist urge to reduce and clarify. The Case Study house she depicts, which has no basement or attic, is an essay in clarity: rigorous, clear and without wasted space just like Chandon’s best paintings.

In Chandon’s view “every house has a story,” and the implications of that maxim—that architecture (and objects) can generate narratives—are at the heart of Chandon’s work. So is the idea that the act of painting is an act of rediscovery and appreciation: “I try to take common things and make them treasures.” Interested in the future and very much aware of the environment challenges we now face, Chandon’s art is rooted in a kind of principled optimism that is characteristic of her generation.

By looking carefully and thoughtfully at the vestiges of American culture—and by opening up questions about what she has seen—Chandon has come to understand

the character of American culture as well as any portrait painter. Seeing what people build and surround themselves with can be just as revealing as staring at their faces.

- John Seed