

## Document

### **SIMPLY NIAGARA**

*HER SUBJECTS HAVE QUIETED THEIR ANGER IN A NEW SERIES  
FROM THE DETROIT BAD-GIRL ARTIST*

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In 14 small square paintings, women's faces bask in ethereal landscapes of turquoise and violet and tart red and pale yellow.

Their hair curls around them, evoking a 1920s flapper chic.

A graceful cursive script dances across collages of antique postcards and delicate Chinese paper, as if garnishing a vintage dream.

Nowhere in these paintings can the viewer spot guns or breasts or anger.

Can this really be Niagara? Niagara of the early punk band Destroy All Monsters and post-punk group Dark Carnival?

Bad-girl Niagara? Sex goddess Niagara? Detroit icon Niagara? The Niagara known for painting women in control, for depicting chicks as mad as hell?

Yes. Oh, yes.

**READY TO DEBUT** her first C-Pop Gallery solo show in 2 1/2 years Saturday, Niagara has retained some of her most charismatic qualities (audaciousness, seductive mystery and baffling nocturnal instincts) even as she and her art have evolved.

It's a change, but there's also continuity - Niagara says of the women in her new paintings: "They're still mad. They're just drugged."

Oh.

And there it is.

Look closer, and the girls have the same intense, don't-screw-with-me eyes and the same pouty, maraschino cherry mouths as those brash, pistol-wielding, cigarette-loving ladies she painted in the 1990s.

In some senses, Niagara has also gone back.

The portraits of drugged women resemble a few paintings of female faces done in the mid-1970s that hang in the living room of her six-bedroom, metro Detroit house.

They also recall the collages she used to put together while studying art at the University of Michigan in the 1970s. (She dropped out after two years; "What else would you expect someone like me to do?" she says.)

C-Pop founder Rick Manore likes to say the new work speaks to a more introspective side of Niagara. Like her past efforts, this new series will probably polarize people, he says, but adds "it's much better than being lukewarm."

Niagara's reaction to her changes?

"If I keep getting stupider and stupider, I know I'm on the right path," she says.

Huh?

"It's simplicity," she explains. "The simpler and stupider it gets, the more truthful it is. I feel looser, not so constricted."

More freedom?

"Definitely."

**HER FAMOUS** images of dominant women have bored her. And she finds it restrictive and time-consuming to paint such clean, hard edges.

"This is insane, this is insane," she says, petite hands flying toward an eye-popping green and purple painting in her studio titled "A Fatal Cocktail Party." "This is what I used to paint?"

Her opium series, on the other hand, lets her drip paint and blur colors and mash things together.

The paintings explore the escapism associated with drugs, and in some senses, she romanticizes illegal substances. She admits to having tried a lot of them - codeine, morphine, but not heroin ("I was in a band; it was all part of it.") - and says she is still a proponent of them, as long as they spur some sort of creative state.

This may not be the most responsible view of drugs, but neither were her girls

with guns. But the art, she says, does reflect an aspect of her, including the part of her that is still waiflike with a sweet personality and a certain amount of ambiguity.

**NIAGARA SO DOES NOT WANT** to be labeled or categorized or viewed as ordinary that she refuses to disclose her age or her birth name - Niagara came from an old nickname her sister bestowed because her extensive crying resembled the giant waterfall - and only grudgingly admits to being married to Garry Henderson, known by all as the Colonel. (She prefers to call him her paramour.)

The Colonel, who manages the business side, says he didn't like Niagara's new work at first but that people's visceral reactions have changed his perspective.

Along with the opium paintings comes "Beyond the Pale" (9mm Books, \$50), a book she describes as not coffee-table but cocktail-table. It's more than 170 pages chronicling the decades of Niagara's artistic and musical creations.

It is, in essence, a visual memoir.

So, does this mean people can say Niagara is, gulp, all grown up?

Niagara, seated on a velvet sofa in her living room, lets out a "Ha!"

She gets up. Paces.

Then, she flops back onto the burgundy velvet.

"That would be great," she says. "That would be so great."

"Because I would have fooled them."

(SIDEBARS)

'In Opium Dreams'

Opening reception and book signing with Niagara

7-11 p.m. Saturday

C-Pop Gallery

4160 Woodward, Detroit

Exhibition closes Nov. 30

Free; 313-833-9901

[www.niagaradetroit.com](http://www.niagaradetroit.com) and

[www.cpop.com/gu/index.asp](http://www.cpop.com/gu/index.asp)

## NIAGARA'S ART AND MUSIC OVER THE YEARS

### Music

\*1974 to 1976: First phase of Destroy All Monsters, referred to as the Noise Band - Niagara is lead singer.

\*1977 to 1983: Second incarnation of Destroy All Monsters, referred to as the Punk Band - includes guitarist Ron Asheton of the Stooges.

\*1984-present: Niagara is lead singer for Dark Carnival, managed by the Colonel, who is Niagara's husband, Garry Henderson.

### Art

\*1990: Niagara's first art exhibition (accompanied by a rock show) at Industry in Pontiac.

\*1991: First international art exhibition in Sydney, Australia.

\*1996: C-Pop Gallery opens in Royal Oak (later moves to Detroit) and begins representing Niagara.

\*2001: Niagara leaves C-Pop over contract disputes.

\*2002:"Niagaraland," a line of products like panties and shot glasses that carry Niagara's images, gives her art more visibility than ever.

\*2003: Niagara reconciles with and rejoins C-Pop with the show "They Won't Let Me Be Good."

\*2005: Niagara reaches a turning point in her art with the start of her opium series. "In Opium Dreams," which premieres Saturday at C-Pop, will mark the first public exhibition of the series.

### Meet Niagara

Legal name: Niagara Henderson

Married to: Garry Henderson, known as the Colonel.

Pets: A well-behaved but slobbering pit bull named Parker, five rescued cats and the cocoon of a monarch butterfly.

Bedtime: Around 5 a.m.

Doesn't really get going until: 3 or 4 p.m.

Loads up on: Tea of all kinds.

Favorite party places: Union Street Saloon in Detroit and at home, where pal Iggy Pop sometimes jams in her rock memorabilia-filled basement.

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ILLUSTRATION: Photos ROMAIN BLANQUART Detroit Free Press

CAPTION:

Niagara typically favors all-black clothing; her embrace of color echoes the less fierce tone of her latest work.

NIAGARA

"Hey, You, Get Off of My Cloud," a 5-foot-by-5-foot acrylic on canvas from "In Opium Dreams," 2005.

A purse with blades, 2000.

Recorded at the Magic Bag, 1995.

CAPTIONWRITER: The poppies Niagara keeps at her metro Detroit home are an appropriate decoration for an artist whose latest show is called "In Opium Dreams," samples of which are below.

MEMO: SIDEBARS ATTACHED

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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