

## Issy Wood Met Power Players in Art and Music. She Went Her Own Way.

The painter and budding electronic-pop musician has a new show of figurative paintings in New York, and quietly released the LP “My Body Your Choice” last month.

By Joe Coscarelli | Sept. 9, 2022

For the last three years, through art fairs, auctions, a global pandemic and an album release, the British painter and musician Issy Wood has been perfecting the craft of being pursued professionally.

Singled out by collectors, curators and titans of culture from two disparate worlds as a next big thing, Wood, 29, took a strange ride on her own hype cycle, luxuriating momentarily in the fuss and then — for the most part — rejecting it, leaving some fancy bridges smoldering behind her.

As an in-demand visual artist and a D.I.Y. singer uncomfortable with the very different demands of potential pop renown, Wood is now resurfacing with new boundaries after extended sagas — in business, creativity and friendship — with two would-be patrons: the mega-dealer Larry Gagosian, in art, and the music super-producer Mark Ronson, best known for his work with Amy Winehouse, Bruno Mars and Lady Gaga.

Instead of Gagosian, the blue-chip gallery empire that might have been Wood’s champion, her new show of unsettling figurative paintings, “Time Sensitive,” opened Friday at Michael Werner, the more traditional Upper East Side gallery. And rather than releasing her debut album with Ronson’s Zelig label, an imprint of Sony Music where she briefly had a record deal, the wobbly and acerbic “My Body Your Choice” was put out completely independently last month, following the dissolution of her contract.

“If I wanted an older man to hold money over my head, I would’ve gotten back



Issy Wood, an in-demand visual artist and a D.I.Y. electro-pop musician, has been courted by big names in both worlds. Photo by Tonje Thiesen for The New York Times

in touch with my dad,” Wood said dryly over seltzer and Capri cigarettes last week at the cavernous Soho apartment where the new gallery had put her up for the show.

One part self-professed naïf and one part openly savvy maneuverer, she identified as both “tough” and “very sensitive,” displaying both modes as she recounted her recent ups and downs across industries.



Wood's "Sore awards 1." Issy Wood, via Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

Of Gagosian, 77, Wood noted that "to a point, he would say, I love how spunky you are," only for the switch to flip when she decided not to work with him. "Then there's a line where it becomes, Why are you being so difficult?" (Through a representative, Gagosian declined to comment.)

On "Parts," an almost playful kiss-off from her new album, Wood touches on a similar dynamic with Ronson, though it applies to others, too: "You only want the part of me/that smiles and says, 'Yeah, I agree,'" she sings, adding: "I'm more than just a fresh face/I've got problems that you can't pronounce."

It is this rare combination of emotional vulnerability and strategic, biting intelligence that allows Wood to connect across multiple mediums, said Vanessa Carlos, a founder of the London gallery Carlos/Ishikawa, where Wood has shown work since art school.

"Issy really, really resists being commodified and objectified," Carlos said. "Sometimes she might be seduced by something shiny, but very quickly she

can see through things. Her main compass has been integrity to herself and to her own work."

On "My Body Your Choice," made entirely alone at her kitchen table, Wood said she blends "heartbreak songs about actual boyfriends, heartbreak songs about my dad no longer being in my life and heartbreak songs about working with a music label."

Like her figurative paintings, which have been described as "a dysmorphic take on objects we think we know the shape of," her electronic pop sounds nearly familiar, but can crunch or undulate in unexpected ways.

"Embarrassingly, I'm making what I think is pop music, but people describe it as wonky," Wood said. "But I was trying my best! Why is it wonky? That's everything — it's me trying to be normal and failing miserably."

Tying the two bodies of work together are the semipublic blogs that Wood has kept since she was 14. Evolving from the abstract Tumblr musings of a disaffected teenager to raw and searing diary entries in which she dissects her life and career, the writing has regularly been compiled and released in book form by Carlos/Ishikawa. (Sample quip: "Having an angry 76-year-old man tell you how you feel is the new ASMR." Or, after a failed romance: "Men continue to be a waste of moisturiser.")

"It's all one thing," said the dealer Gordon VeneKlasen, an owner at Michael Werner Gallery, of Wood's various projects, all of which touch on "power, sex, class, femininity, masculinity." He added, "She has enough energy to make everything the primary parts of her work."

Born in Durham, N.C., to doctor parents and raised in South London, Wood spent most of her adolescence "in hospitals and psychiatric units for my eating disorder," she said. "Art school was the only path available to me."

At the Royal Academy in 2016, Wood was plucked by Carlos, who was drawn as much to the artist's Tumblr as to her paintings. But by Art Basel Miami Beach in 2018, Wood's large scale oil renderings of car interiors, painted on velvet, had become sought after, ushering her into a class of young artists whose sales market and attention share would explode in tandem. This year,

one of her paintings topped half a million dollars at auction, a windfall not for Wood or her galleries, but for those flipping the work on the secondary market.

Wood has done her best to ignore the noise, but there has been plenty of it. Most days, after meditation and two morning smokes, she paints during regular office hours at her London studio, taking breaks to chat with Carlos at the gallery next door.

“We’ll talk about the insanity around how desperate people seem to be for my work right now and some of the deranged and frankly abusive emails from collectors, from advisers who want their cut, from people who put my work in auction,” Wood said. “Rich people don’t like being told no — most of them are men and they especially don’t like being told no by women. It offends everything they’ve worked to attain.”

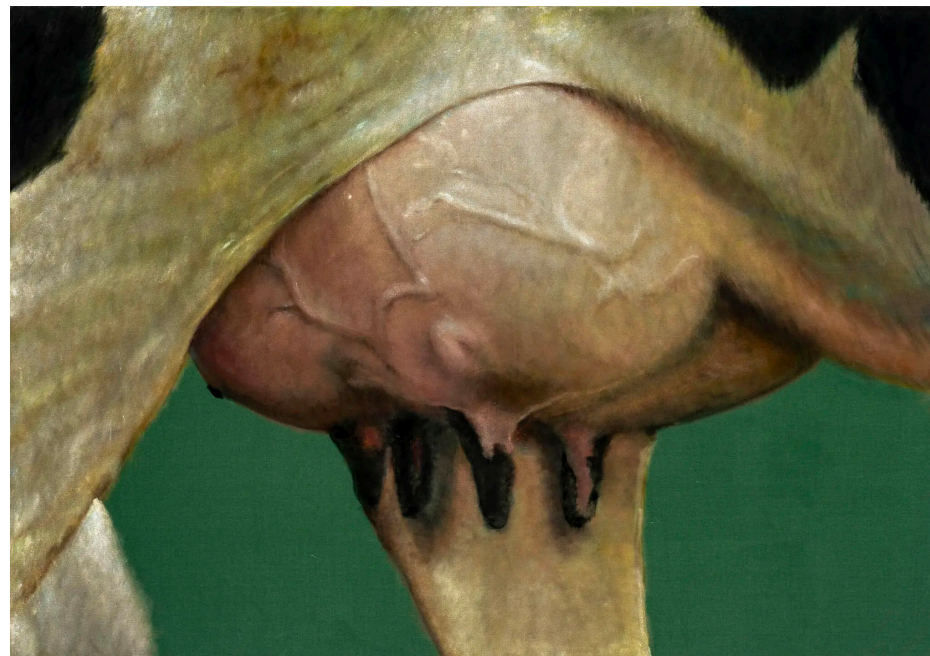
Music, which was supposed to be a haven, happens at night. While Wood had messed around in a band as a teenager, she returned to songwriting in 2019 following a breakup. “Art had very much become my job,” she said. “Music became my hobby, and it was like a secret.” Then a friend offered at a party to send Ronson some of Wood’s early demos.

“I knew him as the guy that put loads of horns on things,” Wood said.

The producer soon visited her in London — “He said, this could really be big,” she recalled — and began loaning her equipment, which Wood took as a creative challenge. She didn’t know Ronson had a record label until he offered to sign her, and even then, failed to realize it meant a deal with Sony as a corporate partner, she said.

“I thought it was going to be like joining a gallery: It’s just a handshake and then you’re on the thing,” Wood said. She retained a lawyer on his advice.

Used to the 50-50 splits of the art world, Wood was aghast at the lopsided terms of a typical major-label recording contract. “I feel like I arrived to that record deal in the strongest way possible — a bit older, a bit wiser. I was 27 rather than the 17-year-old version of me, desperately mentally ill and confused in every way,” she said. “And I had a very lucrative career, which meant I didn’t need much from them.”



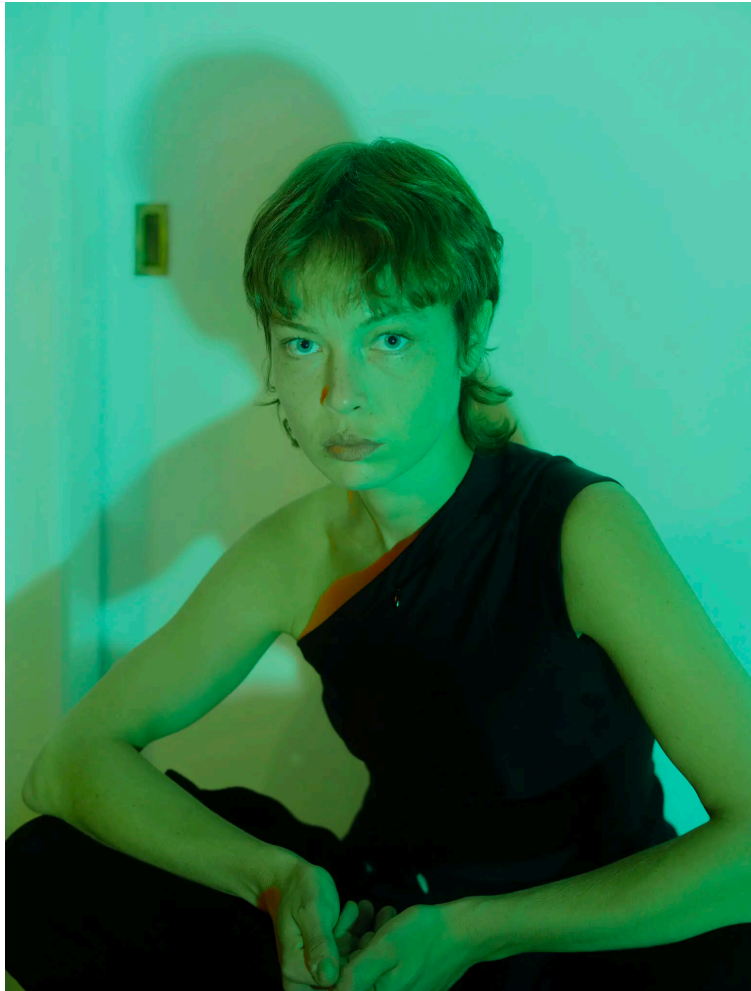
The artist's “Stock, live.” Issy Wood, via Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

Still, across the rocky release of two pandemic EPs with Zelig (which she took to calling Zony), Wood found the requirements of her new job to be both mentally taxing and borderline absurd. The label fretted about being sued over her videos and album artwork, she said, and set her up with a social media manager who tried to teach her about hashtags. (“I was born in 1993, I know exactly what a hashtag is.”)

Although Ronson could be generous with his feedback on her music, she found him difficult to pin down when she had questions; because of Covid, she had never met anyone else involved in her music career, including the manager Ronson had helped her hire.

Emotional and physical distance turned to hostility, and then the unceremonious end of the pairing. “He made sure that I always knew that he was doing me a favor,” Wood said. “That he’d won an Oscar for his





“Embarrassingly, I’m making what I think is pop music, but people describe it as wonky,” Wood said. Photo by Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

songwriting and I very much hadn’t.” (Ronson, in a brief statement, said, “I have a different recollection of our professional history but I wish her the best and the continued use of my HBO Max login.”)

The rupture with Gagosian after a prolonged cat-and-mouse game was of a “similar flavor,” she said. “After all I’ve done for you ...” Wood parodied, beating her fist on the table.

She recalled upsetting the dealer at their final business meeting when she questioned who would shepherd her career when he died. After Wood retreated to the bathroom to escape Gagosian’s frustrated disappointment, she said, he texted her that “the other galleries you are considering will go out of business long before my demise,” accidentally sending it three times, which cut the tension. Later, she wrote about the episode in detail.

This week, at Michael Werner, things were more tranquil. As Wood and her new gallerist, VeneKlasen, attempted to arrange the paintings, Wood compared the sweetly awkward negotiation to having sex with someone for the first time: “What do you even like?”

The art being considered included a textbook-size depiction of a birth control container and a zoomed crop from “Mad Men” the size of a small swimming pool. Wood’s main instinct was to subtract. But even as the party, the sales, the reviews and maybe even more music loomed, the focus, once again, was on the work.

Joe Coscarelli is a culture reporter with a focus on pop music. His work seeks to pull back the curtain on how hit songs and emerging artists are discovered, made and marketed. He previously worked at New York magazine and The Village Voice.

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