

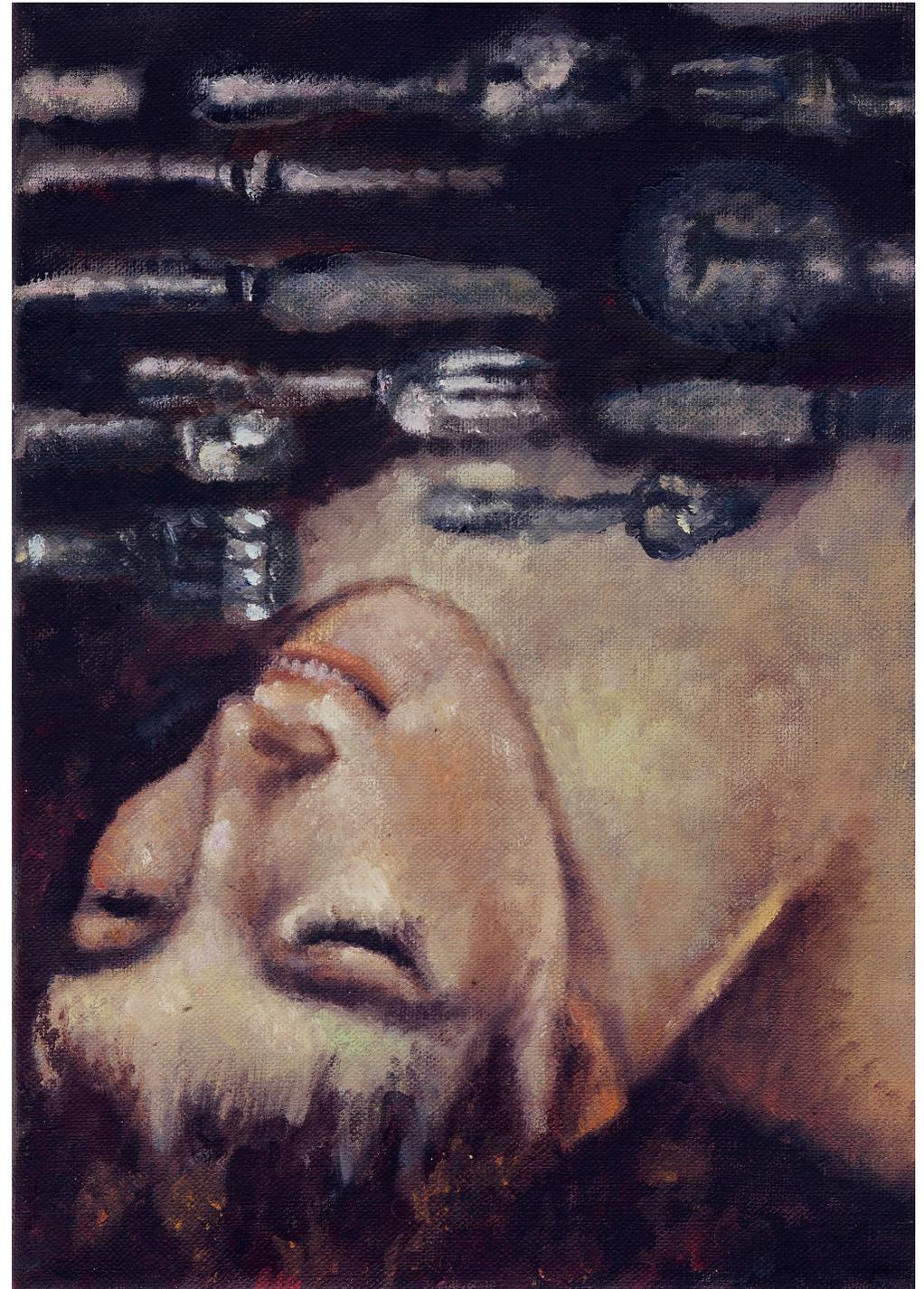
ISSY WOOD

IN CONVERSATION WITH SARAH MCCRORY



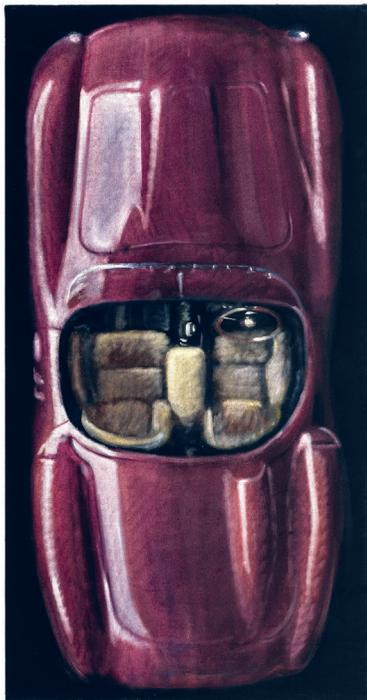
Including imagery as diverse as car interiors, antique jewellery from auction house catalogues, dislocated body parts from medical manuals, and figures from historical painting, the subjects of Issy Wood's paintings are seemingly disconnected, yet reveal a unique, humorous and at times melancholic outlook. Painting on discarded clothing or directly onto velvet stretched like canvas, Wood at times makes bold statements, for example evoking the masculinity of a leather car interior faced with a woman's leather jacket, a garment that acts as a protective skin against the outside world – or, as she points out, against the guys who drive those cars. Small, handbag-sized canvases include sketches and visual notes to become part of a larger narrative. Wood's writings take a form that flits between prose, blogging and observation, as likely to reveal an abstract thought as to underscore a feeling at a particular moment. This summer, on the eve of her exhibition 'All the Rage', artist and writer Issy Wood sat down with Sarah McCrory, Director of Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, to discuss the ideas and inspirations behind the work. Her first major institutional exhibition, the exhibition featured over 25 new paintings and an installation of paintings on unwanted clothing on a rail suspended in the gallery. Goldsmiths CCA, in southeast London, opened in September 2018; part of Goldsmiths College, it has an idiosyncratic programme, to date having shown artists including Mika Rottenberg, the Chicago Imagists and Scottish humorist Ivor Cutler.

ABOVE — Issy Wood, *Light layers/go, Daddy 3*, 2019
OPPOSITE — Issy Wood, *Untitled (Skipping dinner after Courbet)*, 2019





Issy Wood, *Yellow jacket (big sigh)*, 2019



Issy Wood, *Actual car*, 2019

SARAH MCCRORY: Perhaps we can start at the beginning, with the title of the exhibition, 'All the Rage'.

ISSY WOOD: 'All the Rage' was one of several contenders (some of the others have wheedled their way into the painting titles), but it won out in the end because it manages both to refer to anger (my anger, a worldwide anger) and to be a phrase my mother might use to describe something trendy. I think the word 'rage' comes from the Medieval Latin *rabia* via the Old French *raige*, which links it to insanity and rabies, too.

SARAH: You're a painter and writer, and this exhibition includes new works on canvas and also on velvet, containing different themes, ideas and motifs that relate to different aspects of your writing, family, relationships and interests...

ISSY: The biggest experiment will be that I'm showing these clothes that I have painted on. They are sort of failed eBay purchases, or clothing purchases that I made in some kind of insomnia haze – so painting on them was making the best of a bad situation. They feature motifs from the larger work, but they are also kind of outtakes.

SARAH: Often when people use their own clothes in their work it becomes slightly autobiographical, but the fact that these are the clothes that haven't quite

worked or that don't suit you means they're almost a portrait of you, without being accurate – they're the things you've discarded.

ISSY: Or the things that for some reason didn't adequately fit my body. It speaks maybe to my taste in the negative: for dysmorphic or aesthetic reasons I have chosen not to wear [these items] but instead have painted on [them]. Like most things, [making these] started as a practical necessity or maybe even a joke, and it has achieved more and more seriousness as I continue to make them, while still keeping maybe some of the humour. I don't know if they're funny to look at. It'll be interesting to see what they look like on the rail, because they've been in the studio nailed to the wall for months now. So that's the experimental aspect of the show – I know my way slightly more around hanging paintings in a gallery or a space that's not my studio...

SARAH: I guess there is already a challenge at the CCA because of the idiosyncratic spaces: two of the galleries are quite conventional white cube spaces, but one gallery is a metal water tank, a whole room literally made of iron.

ISSY: I like that it's very difficult to be in that room, partly because of the temperature changes and the way it deals with its own access to light. And so I thought maybe it would be nice to have something

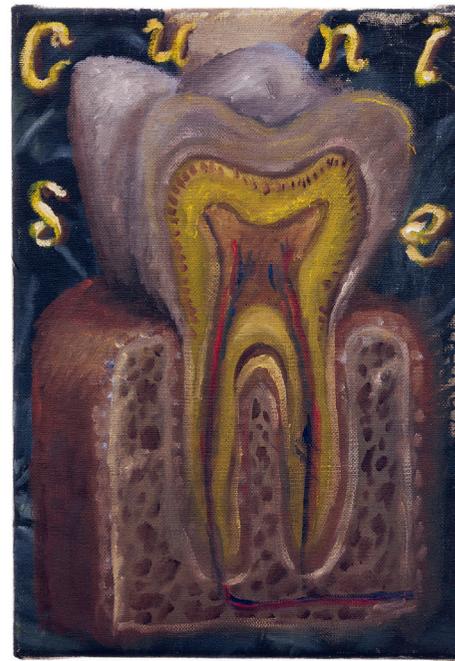
'desirable' like velvet in such a room. I guess I'm always keenly aware of how luxurious velvet is, and so I feel I can settle some inner battle by showing [the velvet paintings] somewhere where it's really difficult to be. There'll be four large-scale velvet works, larger than I've made before, I think.

SARAH: Yeah, some of them are about 3 metres wide. And what about the very specific kinds of themes that run across those works?

ISSY: They are bigger versions of ideas I return to regularly, but on velvet. There's one work that's a leather jacket and another that's a different jacket sliced in half, making use of the seams. I always think of that as quite a natural division line, again making the best of a bad scenario – taking practical necessity and turning [it into] something that maybe looks slightly more creative. The other two [pieces] are car interiors, which are a relatively new development in the velvet works: working according to the colour of the velvet and making the interior of a car that colour.

SARAH: What is your interest in the leather jackets and the interiors of the cars specifically?

ISSY: I think they come from very different places. The jackets were sort of a joke with myself about painting, alluding to painting a fabric on a different fabric; what it's like to render leather on velvet, or a



Issy Wood, *Incidental (with letters)*, 2019



Issy Wood, *Untitled (Seder at Nick's parents' house)*, 2019

technical fabric on velvet, or even painting a velvet jacket on velvet – it has an uncanniness to it.

SARAH: It's interesting to me that these are mostly women's leather jackets, which provide a kind of daily armour as exteriors, versus the interiors of cars that have a very masculine feel. But they are *inside* [the cars], so they're not really protective in the same way. There's an interesting interplay.

ISSY: Something to do with privacy, and armour and a kind of defence – or a shell or second skin, depending on what you want to protect yourself from... maybe the kind of guys who would drive the cars that I am painting! I tend to hint at the idea of armour in the titles a lot; that's normally my way of verbally working through what a painting is. Maybe [the jacket pieces] represent a kind of woman, a divided woman. I think of the cars as quite a masculine environment. The car advertising images I work from and the real cars I photograph all seem to be for or driven by men. The car is an escape for a man, its where one can experience a kind of freedom – or at least that's how advertising sells a car: a way to get away from the wife and kids, just you and the open road, a sort of urban cowboy. It's fun to try that on for size, to see what it would be like to be a man for whom this is a desirable object.

SARAH: What are your plans for the other spaces?

ISSY: One room will gather together, for the first time, every painting that I have in the studio or have made in the last year or so that involves one of the proxies I use for my mother. So there's Joan Rivers, and there are Sphinx heads. A lot of these Sphinxes bear an amazing resemblance to my mum – something about the way the cars and the hats they wear look a bit like her hair! Joan Rivers, before her plastic surgery, looked a lot like my mum. So, gathering these characters and a few other miscellaneous faces. They're a way of painting a portrait of my mum without having to go to her image directly.

SARAH: Yes, at the same time! And the final room? ISSY: We've gathered together a lot of small paintings, the ones that were made into a book previously by my gallery Carlos/Ishikawa. They're a key part of the process of how the larger paintings got made – in lieu of a sketchbook, really. They are tiny things on cheap canvases, and they have really low stakes, but I think when the pressure's off in these works, I sometimes show my best self inadvertently, and some of them have become special by accident.

SARAH: There's space in the smaller works – and maybe the clothes as well – for you to try out jokes and one-liners, but also motifs that then lead into, or are keys into, other work. They unlock other ideas that may seem frivolous but then end up being

valuable. It's interesting how you use humour: it feels like a lot of your work is about making *yourself* laugh, perhaps? (*Laughter*)

ISSY: It's an undervalued pastime!

SARAH: It's totally valid! But I can see those jokes in the work, and then they go on to be much more than just a moment or key – they hold their own in the room.

ISSY: I couldn't tell you the criteria I use to decide what gets left as a one-liner and what becomes a slightly more serious and developed work. But I guess if you tell a joke enough times it really does stop being funny, so maybe I'm more willing to leave some of them behind. Humour, and I hope this comes across in the writing too, is the best way to access really bad things. It's something my family do a lot: they make very good use of humour to skirt around a subject that you can't access directly. In that sense the small paintings deal with more real stuff because they sort of sneak up on me. I make several a week.

SARAH: Actually, my next question is about pace. You're very prolific, you make a lot of work...

ISSY: It doesn't all leave the studio!

SARAH: No, of course not! I know there's a lot of self-editing and a lot of trying things out.

ISSY: Yes, and that's an aesthetic choice in itself – deciding what stays and what goes.



Issy Wood, *Car interior/go, Daddy 1*, 2019

Issy Wood, *The underdose*, 2019

SARAH: Do you think that sometimes the pace that you make work allows you not to procrastinate around ideas – almost giving yourself the space to make work as a stream of consciousness?

ISSY: Like automatic writing...

SARAH: Something like that.

ISSY: Yeah. And the choosing of the images, and not wanting to think too hard before I start painting. I think I only deal in extremes – either doing something almost pathologically quickly or over-analysing to the point of paralysis, not just in the studio but in my day-to-day life. So it has to be either/or, and in the studio, where I really want to have something to show for my day, it has to be quite quick. Also, I want to know whether something is going to work before I talk myself out of it. If after two hours something isn't working out then I'll change it, and that's a lesson learned for next time or a challenge to be set for the following week.

I've worked at this pace ever since I started painting around five years ago. I've wanted to try out as many different paintings as possible just to see where I'm at. Maybe because I was an athlete as a teenager and I was always very into moving around a lot. Painting is also my favourite thing to do in the world; I do it quickly because I love doing it and I want to do as many as possible.

SARAH: Can you talk a little bit about the reference material that you use in your work? What comes from memory and what comes from physical sources? And what about things you look at that doesn't make it into the actual work? I think my question really comes from you mentioning that you're going to a Manolo Blahnik talk tonight – that makes total sense.

ISSY: When I studied at the Royal Academy [of Arts], I had access to auction house catalogues because of the RA's proximity to places like Christie's and Sotheby's; and now I also have a friend at Sotheby's who puts together those catalogues. They're catalogues of objects that for whatever reason aren't really seen except for during a two-hour afternoon day sale, and they go from one private hand to another private hand, sometimes the product of a divorce! They're photographed using an advertising language – you know, 'buy me' – and I guess it's fun to take my murky palette and meet that crazy shininess halfway. It's fun on the velvet to deal with white, in terms of glinting watches for example.

In terms of sources, the auction catalogues have bled into online archives for auction houses; and then [there's] actual family heirlooms or soon-to-be-heirlooms; mixed with attending decorative arts museums in whatever city I'm in and going to look at

those objects first-hand. For me at least, what's from life and what's from memory can all come together, and the paintings are where all of that gets very muddled; did I really see that somewhere? Or I'll find something in an auction catalogue and think, 'Shit, my granny has one of those', and then I'll make a hybrid of the two – to sort of deal with someone else's divorce via Sotheby's and then to deal with my own grandmother. But it's by no means photorealistic. Inevitably it does get slightly skewed.

SARAH: You take something where part of its desirable nature is its symmetry and its elegance, and then you twist it. Like a silver tureen or a piece of jewellery – it's as if you hide one side of the painting when you make the work, so that it's just quite wonky and off-kilter.

ISSY: I hope not in an affected way...

SARAH: No, it's good, it's on the edge of 'how on purpose is that?' Now I know your work very well, but I remember when I very first saw it, thinking, 'Is that just someone who doesn't care about symmetry, or is that someone who can't paint in that way?' I've always liked that discomfort in the work.

ISSY: Well, I'm someone who's very suspicious of symmetry. Like when you see someone with a really perfect face, you just think... I wonder! And having seen so much plastic surgery and the pursuit of

Issy Wood, *The invoice*, 2019

symmetry... I suppose I'm questioning how well I know the shapes of these objects, as well, and that strange translation from what I meant to do and what actually happens.

SARAH: There are a lot of medical objects in the works.

ISSY: Increasingly, I think. It's maybe more prevalent now than ever, because I've been writing about my parents and thinking about the objects I had around when growing up. My dad works in surgery and my mum's a paediatrician, so our household ephemera was medical journals and anatomical models and strange pharmaceutical-branded pens and pencil cases. Growing up around this... There's a visual vernacular to medical and pharmaceutical design, a kind of mixture of the practical and the gruesome as well as the very emotionally uninvolved. Thinking about a body with such a level of sterility, and how efficient my parents are at talking about a body as though it has no one inside – I think I've internalised that in both healthy and unhealthy ways. As in, I'm not in any way squeamish – but I could even do with a little more squeamishness.

I feel like that speaks even to how I would render a Renaissance figure or one of these women in a 16th-century painting I've snapped in a museum and decided to steal for whatever reason. Maybe there's a

slight mistrust, or a biological or medical approach to it, that isn't entirely emotional or sexy.

SARAH: You're making a book to go alongside the exhibition, your second book of writing from your blog. The first book unlocked a lot of your work for me in a really interesting way. You're an amazing writer, so perhaps you could talk a little bit about the form your writing takes and how you go about it, and what's in the new book.

ISSY: It always makes me so happy when someone has read the writing, it's always unexpected. I wonder whether there's some prejudice against artists trying to write – I guess because it doesn't always go well!

SARAH: Artists' writing comes from an amazing place. The rules aren't there – there's a freedom. ISSY: Which is a blessing and a curse. Peter Wächtler is an amazing writer. Carroll Dunham wrote an essay in defence of the 'Late Renoir' show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for *Artforum*, and it's such a good piece, and you can tell it's written by a painter. But my writing doesn't really deal with art at all; I'm not making reviews or summations of my own paintings, I'm not really talking about art directly...

SARAH: It's autobiographical; it's prose.

ISSY: It's personal but it's not diaristic. Again, like with the mum/Joan Rivers/Sphinx references,

I like to outsource to other characters as a way to surrender responsibility for what they are about to do. I can also have other things happen to them that I wouldn't want to happen. It's partly cowardice, partly screenwriting.

SARAH: Maybe, rather than cowardice, it allows you to be more honest. You're not constrained by what you might do to other people or what they might do to you.

ISSY: And I can take five friends, take a character trait from each and make them into one person.

SARAH: One horrific monster. *(Laughs)*

ISSY: One very confusing, very clever person who's great to eat dinner with! A little bit like a painting: I'll take 'this' from yesterday and I'll take 'this' from a 16th-century painting, and I'll...

SARAH:...see if the twain finally meet.

ISSY: And if it doesn't work I'll try something else. I think people who were born around my time can look at [images] one after the other and feel completely indifferent about the history behind one and the lack of history behind another. But then I also know so many painters who have the weight of history too much on their shoulders, and they're really not having a very good time. I never wanted to be that kind of painter. I would never have got anything done.

A full programme of talks and events can be found at www.goldsmithscca.art.

The exhibition *If UR Reading This It's a Late: Vol. 1* by the American artist Tony Cokes will open at Goldsmiths CCA on 29th September, running until 12th January 2020. Following that is *Transparent Things*, a group exhibition featuring 15 artists, based on the first page of Vladimir Nabokov's novella of the same name.



Issy Wood, *Idea for a trust fund*, 2019



Issy Wood, *All the rage 2*, 2019



Issy Wood, *Will he*, 2019

All images courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London