

**Interviews**

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## An hour with... Issy Wood

The American-born British artist on walking away from a pop career, painting her heroes, and establishing an unshakable sense of self



Kathryn Bromwich



Suki Dhanda  
*Photograph*



“Welcome to the inside of my brain,” says artist Issy Wood, gesturing to her sprawling east London studio. All around, mad, beautiful things litter the space: a small forest’s worth of house plants, an electronic keyboard, a towering assortment of porcelain toby jugs, miniature nuns and anthropomorphic vegetables. Hundreds of her paintings are strewn across the floor, each more dazzling than the last: lush car interiors to creepy dolls, seductive cigarette packets to stainless-steel food processors.

The 33-year-old has just come back from a work trip to Qatar (“Mayfair in the desert”) and she takes out her phone to show me pictures of tiny camel-riding robot jockeys – an ethical if unsettling replacement for children trafficked from Bangladesh for the purposes of camel racing.

The art world, with its nefarious intermingling of money and power, has brought her to some strange places, from which her studio feels like a peaceful, self-contained haven. Since graduating from Goldsmiths, followed by the [Royal Academy](#) in 2018, Wood’s witty, sensual figurative paintings – alongside her equally distinctive music and blog-writing – have gained her a faithful following and the attention of some high-profile mentor figures.

Much of the press around Wood frames her in the context of two famous men who have taken an interest in her work: the art dealer Larry Gagosian and the music producer [Mark Ronson](#). Gagosian bought several of Wood’s paintings at a show in New York and hoped to sign her to his gallery, an approach Wood declined following a fraught meeting at the Paris Ritz, during which Gagosian reportedly suggested she take ketamine. (Wood is sober and Gagosian says he would “never make such a suggestion” and denied he takes ketamine himself.)

Of Gagosian, she says now, “He was a very lonely person during the pandemic and my interactions with him can never be separated from that time.” She met Ronson in 2019 and signed to his Zelig label, but two years and two EPs later she terminated their contract due to her unease working with a major label, which involved ungenerous profit splits and patronising marketing demands, such as posting sultry selfies on social media.

“I felt like a loser,” she says of her time at Zelig, matter of factly. “I failed miserably at my music career on his watch.” She shrugs, looking down at the paint-spattered table in front of us. “I feel like the vibe is that I’m a ball-buster or something. But I don’t read stuff about me any more.”

Walking away from those opportunities, I suggest, must have taken bravery. “The way I see it,” she says, “is that this career wasn’t meant to happen to me.”

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Signed by contemporary art gallery [Carlos/Ishikawa](#) before graduating, she has been able to make a comfortable living with her art, a privilege she does not take for granted. “This is not the background I come from.”

Born in North Carolina to British parents but brought up in the UK, Wood's adolescence was marked by eating disorders and body dysmorphia. "I was very mentally ill. Everyone was braced for me to die. Anything that happens after not dying is like playing with the house's money. So probably not brave, maybe just reckless."

There is a compelling directness to Wood, a willingness to get to the crux of what is being discussed rather than skirting politely around the edges (when I ask about her self-portraits, she is forthright: "Sometimes I'll notice that I'm trying to make myself look hotter than I am – so I've been trying to channel Rembrandt's self-portrait in the [National Gallery](#), where he looks like shit.")

As fans of her music will know, she is also very funny, blending vulnerability with a bone-dry sense of humour. Dressed simply, makeup free, she appears totally focused on the work, with a dedication that has in the past bordered on the obsessive.

For years she painted and made music deep into the night, not allowing herself any downtime. "I didn't know how to sit with my own thoughts without working in some fashion." After an intervention by Carlos, she started to take better care of herself: meditating, going to therapy, taking days off, lifting weights in the gym to help with chronic back pain. The day we meet marks the one-year anniversary of her giving up smoking. "My body's grateful to me for being a little more sensible."

Wood's motto, inspired by a gold sticker once handed to her by a Hare Krishna, is "Work smoothly, lifetime peace". It has served her well: she has been doing just fine without the support of famous patrons.



Wood's work: DC sober, a painting of a crushed Diet Coke can, is currently on display at Art Basel 2026 in Hong Kong

Her paintings, which she makes on linen, clothing or black velvet, sell for hundreds of thousands of pounds at auction. Last October, she painted Charli xcx for the cover of *Vanity Fair*, the magazine's first art-themed issue in almost 20 years. Charli now owns the four paintings Wood made of her, though her schedule meant that she could not sit for her in person, which Wood appears relieved by. "I haven't met any celebrities who I've felt really good about meeting."

Which brings me, slightly awkwardly, to my next question: about [Lena Dunham](#), who directed the video for her song [Both](#).

"That was a 'don't meet your hero' situation of the highest order," says Wood with a nervous laugh. "Anyone who has met or hung out with Lena knows exactly what I mean. I still have a lot of love for her work: I'm a young millennial - she did *Girls*, she's a genius. But there was maybe six months where I degraded myself to be her friend - I gave her chances I would never give any other people, because it's fucking Lena Dunham. I don't feel good about that. You feel like you betrayed yourself slightly, and that's completely on me."

At least the video was great, I say. She shakes her head. "I thought it was absolutely terrible. We weren't left with enough footage, and I had to edit it myself. It was a wild time."

Luckily, Wood is well versed in separating the noise from the outside world from what happens the moment she picks up a paintbrush. "I'm remarkably good at leaving a lot of my own bullshit at the door of my studio."

*Issy Wood's solo exhibition Fish, Fish, Duck will be at [Kistefos Museum, Norway](#), from 9 May to 11 October*