

# Blue Velvet Crush

Issy Wood won hearts and minds in her 20s with her oil on velvet paintings and unedited diary pages. On the eve of her next decade, the reclusive artist is defining her place in the contemporary pantheon as an in-demand painter, an underground pop musician, and an accomplished memoirist. By Kat Herriman

**ISSY WOOD STARTED PAINTING** because she couldn't avoid it anymore. She was 22, attending the Royal Academy of Arts in London, and larping unconvincingly as a videographer and sculptor until an honest observer intervened. "One tutor was like, 'What on earth are you doing? You have to carry on painting. I know it's embarrassing, but you have to suck it up because it's the only thing you're good at right now,'" she recounts with a smile. This advice drives the London-based artist's work every day as if she was making up for lost time through painting, as if the years that she hadn't painted had been simply frittered away. This means that "a great day, an ideal day, a dream day" dawdles mostly on the taut velvet stretches upon which she lavishes in oil her shadowy and tense images of everything luxurious throughout time. If all goes well, this self-imposed 10-to-5 in the studio then turns into a walk home and pre-dinner writing session on her blogspot. Songwriting arrives as dessert. Cigarettes are peppered liberally throughout. On this diet, Wood has put out six EPs and one album in two years, in addition to multiple exhibitions, art fair booths, and four books. Her daily output puts busy (and me) to shame. Even the pauses—like the artist's bi-annual-ish pilgrimages to New York; anticipated dinners with fellow foodie, gallerist, and confidante Gordon VeneKlasen; or her recent field trip to the Fondazione Prada with her forever dealer Vanessa Carlos—have a nagging urgency to them that shines through the veil of self care. Creation is coping, not impulse. "It takes a lot for me to not feel depressed," Wood explains. "Painting and music [and writing] don't do it. Maybe the trifecta doesn't even fully cover it, but what kind of medium can I stretch myself to next without having a stroke?"

Just shy of 30, Wood has a shoved in a career that most painters would kill for: Institutional shows around the world; a deep connection with her OG gallerist; and a spot on the storied Michael Werner Gallery's roster as one of only two women. She is the wunderkind who has taken the misfortune of early fame and refashioned its notoriety into a sustainable career. In other words, a career finally worthy of Wood's own ferocious commitment. This

fall, she will have her first solo show at Michael Werner—and in New York in general.

When we speak in June, she doesn't know which works will be included in the final show. Wood is someone who makes 100 paintings to only show a fistful. She bins or paints over the mistakes, and keeps the best for herself—in part to protect them from the auction fits and lascivious men who think buying them will get them closer to her, but also as a rainy day fund for her and friends. Wood is as edited and practical as she is prolific and generous. "I try to be extremely picky all the time, because saying no is often my greatest power," she says. Wood says no to portraits, to staged appearances, to exhibitions, even when she has two shows waiting in her studio for the right suitor. It is this string of refusals that affords her a fig leaf of privacy, a trembling luxury that many in the era of autofiction and self-branding don't possess. The result has been that rather than being chased or celebrated for her biography like her figurative peers, Wood has been able to maintain a critical distance from gender and age, releasing her language from the shallows of identity into the infinitely dark pool of somebody. "I like the idea that some people might think they were made by a man or in a different period of history," Wood says. "It's why I love being an artist versus being a full-time musician. You actually don't even need to go to your own openings if you don't want to." This is not a figure of speech for Wood. Because Issy Wood doesn't only sound like a rockstar, she moonlights as one. In 2019, she turned a bad breakup and a "remedial grasp of guitar" into a label deal with music producer Mark Ronson.

The same ambiguity that has proved to be an asset in her career in contemporary art has hindered her entrance into mainstream music, where persona and image remain a prerequisite. She let the social pressure of pop professionalism draw her back onto Instagram, but the mounting compromises led her to eventually leave Ronson and return to self-publishing. Her latest album, *My Body Your Choice*, didn't suffer for it; it arrived with all the bells and whistles of pop intact, including a

music video directed by Lena Dunham that stars Hari Nef decked out in the musician's paintings of clocks. Wood doesn't abide by half measures. She is all the way in; swimming out beyond the buoys, fearlessly plumbing the same sparkling depths that you hope don't drown her.

Wood's diary, which she publishes into thin, raw volumes with her gallery Carlos/Ishikawa, reads like Jean Rhys's novel and Eve Babitz's memoir put in a blender and topped off with some Cookie Mueller bits. It is in these pages that one finds the most forthcoming version of Wood—the one that isn't available in the dark plush of her paintings or the sentimentality of her songs. Across mediums, her humor remains intact but in her writing, it has other tributaries to go down including insecurities, self deprecation, jealousy, and en plein air observations of strangers.

The fourth volume of these diaries, "Queen Baby," arrived this past August on the heels of the Michael Werner show, and is as unfiltered and skin contact-heavy as previous editions. It covers all the way up to this past March and stretches back into high COVID-19's doldrums. It is here that we finally get to see under Wood's hood—the engine of anxiety and excitement, dread and admiration, that propels her world of constant creation. The beat is brisk and skipping, collapsing time like her paintings, holding our throats like her songs.

During our virtual studio visit, the conversation migrates organically to the late Lee Lozano, a hero of Wood, whom she places atop the tree with Goya. When we finish speaking I am compelled to return to a confession from Lozano's masterwork ("Dropout Piece," begun circa 1970) that has been reverberating in my head since I put down my "Queen Baby" galley: "I want to start trusting myself & others more. / I want to really believe that I have power & complete my own fate."

Wood is one of the few people I know really working in earnest on her fate. The only way I know she's making progress is that her early images used to feel like their author believed in interchangeable parts. Now no one would make that mistake.



PHOTO BY DAMIAN GRIFFITHS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST CARLOS/ISHIKAWA, LONDON, AND MICHAEL WERNER GALLERY, NEW YORK

Self-portrait of the artist, Issy Wood (2022).