

# Comfort Kills



an interview with Chelsea Gustafsson



“Ghost”, oil on board, 2019

1. ***Tell us a bit about yourself, both as a person and as an artist? What is your creative background, and when did you realize you were committed to a life as an artist?***

I grew up in a small community in rural Victoria, Australia. For as long as I can remember I said I wanted to be a ‘painter when I grow up’. I met a couple of artists through my parents when I was in my teens. They introduced me to clay — hand building and the wheel. They were really isolated, living in a little hut out in the bush (illegally), no electricity or running water. They were the first working artists I really knew and the perfect example of what an artist’s life could look like — absolutely anything. In 1994 I moved to the city to study painting, but I wasn’t great at being a student. I think I wanted to learn traditional techniques but the course was more conceptual. I wanted to be figurative and my teacher was into abstraction. So I found a compromise, painting snippets of rooftops of buildings at night. Very minimalist with sneaky bits of detail. That minimalist background has stuck throughout my work. Just about every painting I’ve done since has an empty expanse for the background, often the dominance of negative space has been as important as the subject. I’ve always painted on the side whilst working various jobs and then a couple of sculptor friends invited me to work for them as their studio technician and I developed skills thinking three dimensionally again. I think this sculptural influence plays out in my work through exploring light and the shadows it casts to help describe a 3D object that’s represented on a 2D surface.



“Green Plastic”, oil on board, 2019

***2. Your recent body of work takes ordinary objects — chairs, or a banana peel — and transforms them into something that seems both anthropomorphic and iconic. Can you talk about this series, and how it evolved for you?***

The trigger for any series I develop always seems to be that which has been weighing on my mind at the time. Often something with a social or environmental base to the theme. In this case idleness and apathy. However, early on in a series there is definitely not a lot of clarity in the meaning of what sprouts. It's not like I come up with a brief to develop works from. It's much more a vibe. Like a dream that has layers of various details, seemingly random and lacking much sense. Idleness and being sedentary have an obvious association to chairs. Society has got busy at sitting still. I don't know if it's because of that our lives are getting more insular, self-centered and apathetic towards global issues or if we're exposed to more things going on outside our immediate environment and community and it paralyses individuals from acting on all the important stuff. I feel like the planet is hitting a crisis point and we're chilling in the armchair posting images of our and holidays and selfies. Although, I don't expect an audience to view my work and get the tangent I've been on to arrive at the destination.

Each subject I paint is the sole hero, sometimes with a couple of accessories dressed into their space but they very much stand alone. I'm always attracted to things that have a contrast or contradiction to them, things that are trashy, ugly or wrong and so they invariably have a unique beauty. There's a French term (or possibly Franglais) that I heard Stephen Fry use to describe a whacky looking lemur (the Aye-aye) once: Jolie Laide, meaning 'pretty ugly'. Maybe this is where the anthropomorphic qualities appear from.

The bananas are simply a playful thing, an image of silliness. I like to paint stuff that makes me laugh — if others are tapping into the same basic humour that's just a bonus.



“Banana Slip”, oil on birch panel, 2019

**3. The texture in your paintings is gorgeous — can you describe the techniques you are using?**

I always throw down a quick ground to be rid of that new white panel staring back at me. Snippets of the ground show through and also add warmth to the finished piece. I paint with oil, which is lush and slick. I’ve played around with mediums but mostly just use a linseed and OMS mix to thin the paint out. In this series I’ve been playing with a contrast to this thin flat surface by laying down the background with a palette knife and letting that rich, buttery consistency of the oil paint show.



“Metung Margaritas”, oil on board, 2019

**4. Are you a full time artist, or do you have a day job? If the latter, how do you balance the two, and find time to work on your art?**

I've always worked and painted. When I had my two kids I stayed home and just painted my head off during the day and did some work for a website in the evenings (which I still do now). I don't even recall how I did this because I don't think I slept for about four years. After this show I'll be looking to pick up another job for some extra income. Being an artist is never a stagnant practice, it's a bit like a game of Tetris, shuffling all the things that have to be done into a formation that fits into each week.



"Feet Up", oil on board, 2019

**5. Is there anything you wish you had known when you were just beginning your career as an artist? What advice do you have for artists who are just starting their journey?**

Good question — I'm not entirely sure what I wish I'd known, I probably wanted to know everything. I think I already knew it wouldn't be a straight path, it would be fairly wonky and full of blind corners. I guess I wanted to know everything would work out ok. But that seems inappropriate because it's not like you reach a point and stop or cruise from there. It's a never ending work in progress. What's my advice for artists just starting their journey ( I don't feel qualified to be offering any advice!)? Don't lock yourself into one idea of what you think you should be doing. Be open to change and diversity.