



## Real Life: A Professional Essay

Truth is, Julie Lovett makes me laugh.

Right off the bat, Julie Lovett wants you to know that Julie Lovett is a professional photographer. ‘Hi there, my name is Julie Lovett and I am a professional photographer’, she deadpans to camera. Hers is a ‘story-based’, ‘action-based’ and ‘painterly’ practice, working with what’s at hand: ‘milking clusters and the *plein-air*’.<sup>1</sup> Besides this sharply observed professionalism, her humour mines the subtle comedy of daily life, and how we perform ourselves.

Comedy and tragedy tend to come as a pair, and Lovett understands how the comedic belies deeper, sometimes colder truths. Through video, performing and painting, Lovett’s work is finely attuned to the world around her – to what ‘real life’ is. What is the real life of Julie Lovett the professional artist? Lovett toys with the complex idea of authenticity – is what we see the whole story? But she is no unreliable narrator. There is never the intention to trick or to wrongfoot. I’ve wondered if her work might be a kind of realism. But if it is, it is a realism that understands the inherent artifice of art-making – something that lies between performance and a life. She doesn’t hide, but nor does she put it all out there. You have the sense of watching Julie Lovett trying to make sense of things in real time, with all the attendant stops, stumbles and repetitions. Occasionally, too, there’s a knowing nudge at the fourth wall.

Lovett’s recent exhibition *The truth always comes out in October* (2019) at PS<sup>2</sup> in Belfast comprised six loosely episodic monologues to camera, alongside sculptural elements and props which had appeared in the videos. Filmed between Belfast and County Kerry in Northern Ireland, where Lovett grew up, the exhibition oscillated between the two contexts in an expanded act of self-identification. The whimsical video titles, such as *By late morning, those who eat breakfast perform better both physically and mentally* (2019) and *In your mid 30s activity and performance will become more problematic* (2019) reference those affirmations found in outmoded self-help books, but also something curiously prescient to today’s online self-improvement culture. Each video is from a fixed camera source, only lightly edited. Lovett repeats herself quite a bit. The aphoristic quality of her phrasing, and her playful approach to cliché, suggest that the easy explanation can only ever really be a partial truth.



In the second monologue, Lovett seems to be practising the art of confidence. *I am perfectly at ease*, she wants us to know. She stands at the entrance to her studio, effortfully conveying a relaxed body language. We never quite settle on inner truth or artifice. She waves us in, ‘this is where all the magic happens’. Lovett quickly dismantles the image of the artist as genius, constantly struck with inspiration. She also seems to enjoy the awkwardness of the studio visit set-up. Is she delivering a sales pitch? In another video, Lovett reappears in the shot with a paintbrush tucked behind the ear. Despite the seeming editorial looseness of the six videos, watch closely and they loop back into one another. In the first monologue, the camera pans to one of Lovett’s paintings on the wall that hangs next to a ticking clock. The visual gag – what does an artist do all day? – effaces something more universal. Was Leonard Cohen right? Are we all just looking for something to do between meals? Lovett may be an artist, but she still watches the clock, still breathes the same *plein-air* as the rest of us.

Lovett draws from conventions we all seem bound to encounter at some point – the studio visit, the job interview. ‘I have a wide range of skills’,<sup>2</sup> she lets us know, while running a figure of eight around her parent’s farm courtyard, positioning life as a kind of eternal treadmill. A dog lolls around in the foreground, a car drives right through the shot. The minutiae of home life can intrude on the images we have of ourselves out in the world. Not a great deal happens in these videos, but there is a subtle accumulation of small details, and an emotive complexity just below the surface. That feels like real life to me.

Lovett recently moved back to Kerry, and from here is exploring the act of ‘moving to the countryside’. Is a professional artist in the city the same as a professional artist in a rural setting? In a series of Instagram takeovers of PS<sup>2</sup> and Freelands Foundation (2020), Lovett homes in on the dynamics of small-town life, continuing her use of the video diary as an artistic format. These short clips have more of a fly-on-the-wall feel to them. In the first video for PS<sup>2</sup>, she satirises the artist ego. ‘Does he not know that I am an artist?’<sup>3</sup> Lovett trills, as her brother tinkers in the garden, interfering with her carefully constructed video composition. With this, all the inherent tensions of how to transplant a life in Belfast into a new environment with very different concerns creeps in. Lovett doesn’t supply the whole picture, but she doesn’t need to. These are gaps for us to fill in if we choose.



p.100: Julie Lovett, *Take me to the countryside, solve all my problems and make my life easier*, video (still), 2019  
top: Julie Lovett, installation view, *Remain upright. Hide all facial expressions. Don't check your watch*, video (still), 2019 and *In your mid 30s, activity and performance will become more problematic*, video (still), 2019, *The truth always comes out in October*, PS<sup>2</sup>, Belfast, 2019  
middle and bottom: Julie Lovett, *City studio laughing series to be continued in the country*, video (still), 2020



top three images: Julie Lovett, *Collaborating with the father by building shelves from Lidl / Lidl's*, Go Pro video (stills of work in progress), 2020  
bottom: Julie Lovett, *6am cycle to the woods, beating the traffic, looking for the fog*, Go Pro video (still of work in progress), 2020

The unresolved and episodic nature of Lovett's videos intertwines the process with the outcome. For Lovett, the research is the work is the process is the product. Take her final post on PS<sup>2</sup>'s Instagram: a watercolour of toilet rolls, strategically – or randomly – placed in a series of locations around her home and the local town. Is this painting a prop? Is it the 'real' work, the end product? Or are the videos that precede it where the work is? Lovett upends, or at the very least complicates, the idea of the object as the end result.

Lovett's repetitive approach is something of an oscillation between different states, phrases, objects and contexts. She seems to alternately accept and push back from the conditions she finds herself in. She has a heightened consciousness of her immediate present and surroundings. But just as you think she has settled on something, we pivot to another shot, or a quick turn of phrase reveals what we saw wasn't the full picture. There is the recurring theme of the double in Julie Lovett's work. The real and the performed. The professional and the personal. The rural and the urban. The process and the product. I wonder if that double is the artist known as Julie Lovett and Julie Lovett herself.

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- 1 Julie Lovett, *Being physically comfortable on the job (Part 2)*, video, 2019.
- 2 Julie Lovett, *ibid.*
- 3 Julie Lovett, *Freelands 2*, video, 2020.





Julie Lovett, *Attempting to capture my house in the distance from the perfect angle with the perfect fog on the way to the woods*, photo series (work in progress), 2020

In the countryside of Kerry, I am adapting my practice to recreate ideas of common artistic working conditions which I previously practised and played out in the city of Belfast. Focusing on ‘the artist’s studio’, I have taken the traditional idea of a physical studio space and mentally positioned it on to the confinements of Castlemaine, my home village.

Through conscious planned activities, such as durational recordings of daily morning cycles to the woods and attempting to capture the perfect photograph of my house in the distance, to carrying out domestic farming duties with my father, these new performance and filmworks focus on responding to my own circumstantial frustrations by fictionalising, layering and compiling repetitive past and present narratives, incidents, local happenings etc. into the dialogue and production of new moving image works.

By treating the village, its natives and landmarks as an expanded artistic space, I am aiming to push the possibilities of what collaborating and self-made opportunities can be in an Irish country village.

*Julie Lovett*