



Max Wittert

# HOW TO SELL A SUNSET

Christine Quinn is, in her way, an embodiment of Hollywood

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CITY OF ANGELS

JAN. 7, 2022

**I**n an early episode of the most recent season of *Selling Sunset*, Chrishell Stause, a former soap opera-actress-turned-real-estate-agent-turned-reality-show-real-estate-agent, is out to lunch with a few other girls. She orders shrimp. When the plate is set in front of her, she hurls a groan of disgust like she just found a dead racoon in her purse. She has never had shrimp served to her with the shell, legs, and head still attached. She didn't realize shrimp had bodies. She refuses to eat it. "I can never eat this again," she says.

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The next episode, she goes to another restaurant and orders shrimp again, this time asking the waiter if it comes with "the feet on it, or...

feetless?” The waiter assures her that the shrimp are not served with any evidence of their former lives as animals. “Great, I’ll have that,” she says with a wide smile, showing off her baleen. When confronted with the reality of what she’s been eating her entire life — that it is an animal, with legs for moving or typing or whatever shrimp do — Chrishell vows, perhaps hyperbolically, to never eat them again. But when given the option to curtain off the truth, she happily obliges in lieu of enjoying her succulent, pink curl of protein. For how relentless everyone on *Selling Sunset* is about defining their own truth, they never miss a chance to box it up and shelve it when convenient.

Reality shows are always more show than reality. At best, they are carefully choreographed by producers to wrench extreme reactions out of their casts; at worst they’re largely scripted. But, much as with pro-wrestling and *Vogue* “73 Questions” videos, we suspend our disbelief to enjoy the spectacle.

Rarely is the artifice so layered as it is in *Selling Sunset*, a reality show about Los Angeles women who aren’t from Los Angeles selling houses in a neighborhood that isn’t really a neighborhood to people who will never live in them. It’s a reality show about the unreal, a story about stories. It’s fitting given the subject matter — in the world of L.A. real estate one must always spin the truth.

## ***SELLING SUNSET IS A***

# REALITY SHOW ABOUT LOS ANGELES WOMEN WHO AREN'T FROM LOS ANGELES SELLING HOUSES IN A NEIGHBORHOOD THAT ISN'T REALLY A NEIGHBORHOOD TO PEOPLE WHO WILL NEVER LIVE IN THEM.

Real estate is Hollywood's primary source of income. According to **Forbes**, L.A. has \$1.7 trillion in real estate, which last year yielded \$17 billion in tax revenue. The Hollywood sign itself was originally installed as a temporary real-estate development advertisement, reading "HOLLYWOODLAND." The "LAND" crumbled, the city abandoned it, and Hugh Hefner came to its rescue to raise money for its restoration. Over the years, ownership of the sign passed from private hands to the city of L.A., and its many rehabilitations have resulted in every inch of it being eventually replaced, so that the sign that stands today is, in no atom, the same as it was when erected. HOLLYWOOD removed itself from LAND (the terrestrial, the grounded, the touchable), got a facelift with the money bestowed upon it from a Midwestern man with a porn empire, and exalted

itself as a symbol of the American dream — the one it's been telling the world since the very beginnings of film and television.



Christine Quinn is the star of *Selling Sunset* and, in her way, an embodiment of Hollywood. A botox mirage of an oasis in the desert of Southern California — neither realtor at an agency, nor actress on a show. She's a platinum blonde juggernaut of Hollywood Hills real estate, brazen as a coyote, with waist-length hair extensions that tumble off her head during prenatal yoga.

In Season 3, she married a tech millionaire; in Season 4, she becomes a stilettoed pariah. The central struggle of the season is how to extract her from the team. She technically doesn't need a job at the Oppenheim group, and the presence of her new baby awards her innumerable excuses to not concern herself with the emotions of other people. She's rich with money she didn't earn, vocally self-absorbed, obsessed with "loyalty" and maintaining her rank in the O office, and, as mentioned, has synthetic hair. (Remind you of anyone? Yes, I am of course referring to Nicole Kidman.)

Towards the end of the season, Christine goes to see a "mindset coach." She tearfully says, "I just... I mean, like... there's a lot about... like, my actual past, of growing up, people don't know and they never will know. So, for me, I don't like the past. And I don't want to live in

that place that I used to live in when I was a child.” The mindset coach responds, “Isn’t it ironic that you keep attracting people who can’t let go of the past, and are poking at you? You feel the pain of your past being recreated.” As her lies in this season of *Selling Sunset* begin to crack in the red-hot kiln of her co-stars’ fury, Christine must choose to stand staunchly against the evidence, or disappear.

Christine’s primary efforts on camera are to strongarm her own backstory, and to forge allegiances with old friends (the hapless and quivering shriveled carrot, Davina Potratz) and fresh acquaintances (Vanessa Villela, the malleable newcomer). We are a tribal species, and one’s command of her own agency reaches beyond her access to wealth. Who is in, who is out, who is valuable, and who is rejected are such mighty motivations that sometimes it takes a bit of truth-cajoling to reset relationships in our favor. We’ve all told little white lies to keep relations steady, and some of us have even gaslit multiple cast members of our own production in a clumsy effort to maintain an iron grip in a semi-fictionalized version of our irrelevant office jobs.

On the other side of things, Chrishell is positioned, implicitly, as the protagonist of the show. Part of this is her relative newness to the Oppenheim Group (a classic underdog story), but more importantly, her vulnerabilities are constantly laid bare, making her pitiful to us. Between her abrupt, public divorce and her frequent reminders of her own at-times-houseless upbringing, we are meant to root for

Chrishell because she is, by her own branding, pathetic. But the stories we tell ourselves, that we in turn tell others, are exactly that: just stories.

# WE ARE MEANT TO ROOT FOR CHRISHELL BECAUSE SHE IS, BY HER OWN BRANDING, PATHETIC.

Chrishell's desire to remind everyone of where she came from (i.e., her trajectory and therefore her claim as an American success story) stands in contrast to Christine's wrought, crystalized denial of her own background. Where Chrishell desires to run away from the tawdry, to leave her soap opera background behind, and replace her vulgar vulnerabilities with a feminine fortress of triumph, Christine saunters about in her inexplicable plasticity, embracing the poor taste that other cast members on the show avoid. "Bad taste is real taste, of course, and good taste is the residue of someone else's privilege," the art critic Dave Hickey wrote. To cultivate an image of a protagonist draws more attention to your non-protagonist qualities. Conversely, to propose yourself as a villain can allow for more humane qualities to emerge. The best villains are more than a little relatable, and the best protagonists are at times contemptuous.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that Christine and her husband live in

Hugh Hefner's ex-wife's home, although our self-labeled Dominatrix Barbie is desperate to upgrade. "It's really vertical, there's nowhere to walk... There's nowhere to take a stroller. We have, like, a five-bedroom home that has actual two bedrooms... 'cause I turned everything into, like, closets..." Having lived enough of the high-life, the Hefners chose to downgrade for Hugh's remaining years.

Modesty, however, is an uncomfortable concept to the insatiable, and Christine thrives on opposing it. Given her affinity for animal life (as evidenced by the zebra at her engagement party, the sloth at her baby shower, and her extensions that resemble the mane of an Irish Cob Horse), perhaps Christine would be better suited for the 20,000 square-foot Playboy Mansion. After all, it does have an aviary, an orchard, a koi pond, a zoo, and the perfect locale for Christine's vow renewals: a pet cemetery. Though one could safely assume that even kitty catacombs are at risk of becoming shoe closets, at the whim of her acrylic talons.

It is generally considered garish to possess wildlife in the confines of human structures. Those who are drawn to owning another being's splendor feel that it implies their own. Of course even a hermit crab's legs can buckle under the weight of an ostentatious shell. Having an eye for the grand comes with its own baggage — riding an elephant might make you feel big, but you look awfully small up there. But this is not why we find owning the natural world garish. We claim that the "natural" is universally virtuous. And that the man-made is the antithesis of "nature." Therefore, in possessing it, we sully it. As such,



the very thing that has ruined Christine this season is her decision to be possessed by a man of great fortune.

We try to separate humans from the world they inhabit—the authentic from the inauthentic—but these judgments are as arbitrary as Davina’s choice in pantsuits. One cannot construct authenticity. Dave Hickey also wrote that “Authenticity is something you bump into while you’re backing up to look at something that interests you.” The designation is not a result of some intrinsic quality, but of our language—and of our stories. In our futile attempts to define ourselves, we mold ourselves out of the negative space we leave behind. It is far more revealing to see the state of someone’s bathroom on any given day than it is to see their dating profile.

Chrishell barely comes face-to-face at all with Christine this season, and yet tension continues to build between them. Most of the girls in the O group want Christine to take ownership of her past wrongdoings, but Christine does not even acknowledge the existence of those wrongdoings, or the concept of the past. So how is she to feel shame about either?

The social friction between Christine and the others doesn’t stem from differences of opinion or personality, but rather from existential confusion about what constitutes their shared reality. But there is strength in numbers, which is why at the end of this season, every girl in the office must join forces, hand-in-hand with Chrishell and Mary,

to prove the validity of their truth against that of their foe, the BDSM Amazonian illusionist Christine, in order to send her back to whence she came: her house.

Much like “love,” “health,” “beauty,” and “salad,” the words “real” and “fake” appear to have succinct definitions, but with very little prodding, one may notice how relative these words are to their user’s own experience. Words do matter, though, even in Los Angeles. After all, the Hollywood Hills would not be so magnificent if not for the sign. Selling a sunset isn’t hard — it sells itself. But the thing that makes Los Angeles sunsets as tearily saffron and stunning as they are is, indeed, the smog — the pollution that bends the light, the toxic vapor prisms that choke the throat and lie to the admiring viewer, the city’s own smoky eye. The sky is not really orange. The sky has no color. But we enjoy the spectacle nonetheless.

*Max Wittert is a comedian and illustrator from Los Angeles. His illustration work has been featured in The New Yorker, Marvel, and the New York Times. He released a short cartoon with Nickelodeon called Best Baddies, he performed his one-man illustrated comedy hour on tour across the U.S. in 2020, and he continues to create animation and comics from Brooklyn, New York.*

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