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This piece has been nominated for [Best Commentary/Critique](#), single entry at the 2021 LA Press Club Awards!

When I was young (perhaps a little too young), I remember watching VH1, MTV, and Bravo! reality shows on sick-day afternoons or with my 20-something-year-old babysitter after school. Through these shows, I was fed a version of Los Angeles by the entertainment industry that was a shrink-wrapped well-crafted commodity presented as “real life.” I now know that it isn’t. Over the past few years, what once was just the glistening facade of Hollywood and early 2000s celebrities basking in eternal sunshine in my mind became a real tangible city after I moved there. Memories of real people and places seeped into these preconceived notions, overtaking them.

But nostalgia is a powerful thing. The recent Netflix reality show, *Selling Sunset*, brought the memories of glamorous shrink-wrapped Los Angeles flooding back. Over its three seasons on Netflix, *Selling Sunset* follows the lives of the beautiful predominantly white women working for the [Oppenheim Group](#), a real estate brokerage owned by twin brother bachelors on Sunset Boulevard. Brett and Jason Oppenheim are the bald duo who run the brokerage and occasionally chime into conversations. Then there are their ladies—the real estate agents: Mary Fitzgerald (also Jason’s ex); Heather Rae Young; Christine Quinn; Davina Potratz; and Maya Vander. They are joined by newcomers Chrishell Hartley (now Stause) in season one and Amanza Smith in season two.

Much of the show moves at a leisurely pace. Sitting at desks that look like they were made of airplane wing scrap metal, the ladies type and chat away. They guide clients through different expensive properties throughout the city with grace. In between house tours, lunches, and office

drama are B-roll drone shots of Griffith Observatory and pedestrians in WeHo with delightfully vapid music. It is almost as though the producers initially wanted 2015 pop hits from Adele, Miley Cyrus, or Panic! at the Disco, but instead opted for their royalty-free knock-offs. The lyrics only make sense about half the time, but maybe they weren't expecting anyone to listen that closely.

But it is actually fitting that the show's undercurrents are filled with nameless idols and tunes. Yes, it takes place now. But at the same time, it feels as though it is in an alternate universe, one unaffected by the pandemic or politics that seems to dominate our reality today. Even when I was younger, these reality shows seemed unaffected by the housing crisis or other timely woes—Jeff Lewis was still *Flipping Out* homes and selling them!

While many young people are facing large student loans and record unemployment rates, [millennials](#) accounted for half of all home loans across the nation in 2020. A group once considered consistent renters (who could maybe afford a house if [they stopped eating expensive avocado toast](#)) now have more reason to stay home due to the pandemic. Conditions are ripe for cities and towns with more space than places [like New York City](#) to welcome new residents. Or for younger people to move into [a TikTok House](#) to party in and gain followers from while waiting for the pandemic to die down.

Ironically, *Selling Sunset* sells to everyone except these emerging markets since its most recent season finished filming in 2019. Many of the clients are looking to start a family or for bachelor pads. In one episode, Brett or Jason (I cannot tell them apart unless the subtitles are on) announced that it was one of their best years to date. Regardless of the year, it seems their market—the upper class—is clear and unperturbed. It seems that the company's image is specifically to cater to those looking for a piece of the idea of the Hollywood Hills to call their own. Part of buying and selling a home with them is the experience of luxury with it—be it by popping a bottle of the brokerage's branded wine or utilizing their “concierge” service to renovate the house before selling it.

Watching people buy million-dollar luxury homes from my childhood bedroom feels like a voyeuristic indulgence. It is a cruel parallel to the harsh reality that Los Angeles has a [large unhoused population](#) that continues to grow. Yet here I am, watching someone tour a new home with one of the largest rooftops in the Hollywood Hills. And they sell it—the house and the idealized life one could live in it. They also sometimes express negative perceptions of their properties, commenting on dated fixtures or excessive street noise before tours while cameras roll. By the end of the first season, I was nitpicking these homes I have no right to criticize given the fact that I could probably barely afford to breathe on one.

While the show is technically about houses, it is more about the lives of these ladies in and out of the office. Seasons two and three end in weddings, and another girl is close to getting engaged. Their banter is rather banal, and much of the drama revolves around their love lives, being late, and name-calling. Some ladies play more active roles in this drama than others, yet no one is safe from its effects. It seems that any out-of-the-office experience serves as a backdrop for a fight, even if it is a business affair.

One of the biggest drama instigators of the show is Christine. She wears bold, flashy outfits, even when she is just having a glass of wine on the couch with one of the other ladies. Nearly every episode features a shot of the signature red Louboutin heels that she frequently dons. She is bathed in bright pink Balenciaga and sparkles, offering a level of iconographic and controversial fashion sense akin to that of Paris Hilton in the early 00s.

Which seems to be her intention.

The Christine the audience watches on *Selling Sunset* is a character. She often talks on the show and in interviews about growing up as an awkward, tall girl with a normal family. She grew up in theater, and told [Vice](#), “I feel like I’m still performing” when she is on the show.

In a sense, most of the ladies on the show are too. For one, not every realtor is new to some sort of spotlight. Chrishell is a former soap opera star, Amanza was married to an NFL player, and Heather dates a hockey player and later an HGTV star.

They all assume specific roles in the office well. Chrishell plays an innocent newcomer in the early seasons that later finds her footing. Amanza is the protective best friend to Mary, who plays a bit of the ingenue when they show her relationship with her young boyfriend (turned-fiancé-turned-husband) Romain. Maya becomes a mother but feels like the mother of the group of ladies—she often feels like a mature mediator when drama starts. Heather sometimes comes across as a stereotypical “blonde,” and sometimes is distracted from work by her boyfriend. And Davina is a wild card—quiet and awkward and snarky all in one.

Such is the nature of a ‘crafted’ yet unscripted show.

It seems that Christine, however, plays her character to her advantage more than the rest of the cast. Her wedding was a lavish extravaganza, with falling snow, live swans, and two contrasting interior design palettes. She embraces her role as the office villain, with a loud mouth and ego that dominates any conversation. It almost feels like she’s Regina George (with Davina and Heather as her later sidekicks), but with more heart underneath her jaded and jeweled exterior. It is easily one of the more compelling roles—even if it is technically less liked.

By season three, it becomes clear that there is no necessity tying Christine to the job. Her fiancé-turned-husband is a retired tech entrepreneur and even bought one of her listings for them to start their lives together. Even when the office complains about her lavish vacations, she still manages to sell houses and find the fun in planning events. She knows that she is good at it, too. She is there because she wants to be, not because she needs the commission check, and therefore has little risk associated with her behavior that often drives the show.

And all of the ladies want to be there too. Be it just the thrill of selling houses or hoping to provide more for their children, there is a classic cutthroat sales environment buried under the upbeat music and conversations around smoothies. They take their job very seriously, even if the show tries to make the audience feel otherwise. Most of the ladies take it upon themselves to try and sell the brokerage’s \$40 million listing, and Davina attempts to sell a house nearly double the price. She also has her own broker’s license and is experienced in development, yet feels underappreciated by Brett and Jason. By the end of season three, nearly all of the ladies are vying for more responsibilities and opportunities from Brett and Jason, whom they accuse of picking favorites.

Regardless of the character each realtor is cast as, the show finds a way to give each lady dimensions beyond it. Amanza spends much of season three dealing with a custody battle for her children. She sits in a very normal looking park with them in one touching scene, where her daughter expresses pride in her mother's career. Maya has two children with her husband who moved to Miami for work, and by the end of season three, sees if she can relocate while still working for the firm. Mary was a young, single mother who managed to build a life and career for herself and struggles with some of the practical issues of remarrying with an age gap. Heather becomes a step-mom to her boyfriend's daughter and shows a much more mature side by doing so.

And Chrishell, who gets into a few tangles with coworkers for being fake, is open about her former economic struggles and messy divorce from television star Justin Hartley. She spends one episode in her sister's Kentucky home, where she has dinner with her extended family. When back in Los Angeles, Chrishell moves out of her "dream home" in the valley she once shared with her husband into a more modest apartment closer to the office. But it still features a chandelier and a picturesque view of the infamous Hollywood Hills.

Even these glimpses of their real lives take place in the shining stereotype of Los Angeles. *Selling Sunset* manages to give you a taste of this authenticity, but does not let you wallow in it for long. *Selling Sunset* is a perfectly-crafted reality TV show. We know how much of these shows are artifice (and know too well what happens when it [encroaches on life offscreen](#) after Donald Trump's presidency). But *Selling Sunset* makes reality TV feel benign again. No matter how shocking the drama may seem, the audience is never truly terribly surprised. Seasoned reality TV fans have honestly seen worse. But it still scratches the right itch through all of the manufactured gasps and "aw"s it evokes and the cravings to peek into the 'glamorous' life. It hits all of the right beats—of petty and real drama and joy beside a season-long sales goal—that make it an entertaining distraction.

I miss the real Los Angeles and the real people and places I left behind. But watching something so reminiscent of those early 00s reality TV from years ago also feels, in a weird way, like coming home.

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