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Interview: Juliette Larthe

Emily Caston

Juliette Larthe cofounded Prettybird in London with Kerstin Emhoff and Paul Hunter. As an executive producer she brought a multidisciplinary working manifesto and culture to the start-up. Larthe works as a producer and executive across not just screen advertising but feature films, multimedia brand content, immersive, experiential art works, music content, short- and long-form content, live installations and fashion shows. Juliette's work has earned her numerous awards across the globe, including Grammys, British Arrows, UKMVAs, MTV, Clios, Cannes Lions, Kinsale Sharks and D&AD awards. Juliette campaigns for equality and diversity in the creative industries, supporting mentorships with ELAM, Creative Equals and also works with the charity End Youth Homelessness. She has been Head of the Jury, Jury President or Jury Member for the British Arrows, UKMVAs, Kinsale Sharks, D&AD and Ciclope. Prettybird's London roster includes directors Ashley Armitage, Tom Beard, Bradley & Pablo, Jason Bock, Margo Bowman, Calmatic, Daniels, Jora Frantzis, Nisha Ganatra, Isabel Garrett, Rami Hachache, Paul Hunter, Jodeb, Eloise King, Jess Kohl, Matt Lambert, Salomen Ligthelm, Tom Noakes, Max Malkin, Melina Matsoukas, Rafaela Carvalho, Sophie Muller, Matt Piedmont, Ian Schwartz, Tim & Eric, Joseph Wilson, Vellas and Yousef.

Interview conducted on Zoom on 18 January 22; transcribed and edited by Emily Caston.

In London we attract and create lot of moving-image art forms, commercials, music films, social media and installation work. Sophie Muller has just made some beautiful Alexander McQueen films, editorial conceptual interpretations of the collections capturing the mood behind the designs. They wanted a plethora of lengths, 60s, 30s, 3 minutes and tons of 15s and 6s. Sophie's clouds were the launch of the show all over Times Square in New York, Beijing and London Piccadilly.

Prettybird was unusual for working in these different art forms and media to begin with, but not anymore. As a producer, I've always worked in and with fashion and art; with artists like Jake and Dinos Chapman, Nick Knight, Jessie Kanda, and Weird Core. But there's more demand for artists and art work now because the market has changed. One of our directors has had his work exhibited in the Tate but didn't tell us when we signed him because he thought it would put us off. Today it's quite rare to find creatives who concentrate in just one field. Here at Prettybird we do *creative production* of all kinds. We are developing two–three features at the moment as well as all our short form and multimedia installation work.

Music videos and advertising were an amazing way for me to get into the industry. I am slightly ADHD and for absolutely anybody with that kind of mentality, short form is a great place. The number of different people you need to talk to, the range of different ideas you have to engage with and the amount of research you have to do... Short form takes a certain type of brain. It's the same in writing—for some writers, poetry is best, for others short stories or

novels, and for others it's screenwriting. Some people are able to translate their ideas across the spectrum, but others want to dive into one form in particular and stay there.

Quite often when I'm talking to new directors or talking to people who are disparaging about short form, I use Borges's *Labyrinths* to explain it. I talk about the bit in *Birdman* [Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014] when he's about to jump out the window holding the book by Borges. It's a collection of incredibly short stories, some not so short. Literally in three paragraphs you can be going down a wormhole in your brain that you didn't know even existed. It makes you up-end the scales of existence and start exploring human thinking. If you can do that in three paragraphs, you can do that in short form. Short form is not less important because it's short. That would be like saying a short story is shit or a small painting is rubbish. It's like saying that Modigliani's maquettes are not as good as Henry Moore's or Frink's gargantuan ones because one is bigger and one is small.

People sometimes talk about the concept of a commercial as a story with a beginning, middle and end, but that is just a construct made by one type of person in our society because that is where the stories have been guided and made from. Who knows if a story actually has to have a beginning, middle and end? Who said it had to have the beginning or a middle? Why can't we dip in and out? Why can't we change it? Why can't it start at the end or begin in the middle? You can move things around and still have something that's enticing and exciting. Films are so much more interesting when we get to interweave different peoples stories and different ideas and creations.

The 2000s with directors like Ringan Ledwidge and Dougal Wilson were really about narrative with the story and characters, but we're moving away from that now. Today's work doesn't have to have a traditional beginning, middle and end any more, it can be like a poem. It's the difference between *Gladiator* [Ridley Scott, 2000] and *Moonlight* [Barry Jenkins, 2016]. Both are significant and powerful, but *Gladiator* is really obviously written by a white man and directed by a white straight man. It has a very traditional structure. I like the 90s and 2000s directors, but they were in the marketplace for such a long time because as white straight men they had the loudest voices with huge production and marketing machines. There were other directors in the 1990s and 2000s whose voices didn't get heard. You could count the number of female directors in short form on one hand—Fatima Andrade, Sophia Muller, Kate Garner, Corinne Day towards the late 90s, Floria Sigismondi. In the 90s, Tarsem [Singh] was one in a million.

When you talk about “branded content” you're talking about all kinds of different genres and forms, not just commercials. It's Luca Guadagnino's feature films. Everything is branded content unless you're funded by publicly funded organisations like the BBC or the British Film Institute. Branded just means that someone else is giving you money and they are going to benefit from the publicity to their brand from the film that you make. It could be a feature film or a series or short form. The question is, are you as a company looking to work with a brand in building that, or will you go down the old-school finance route?

I wouldn't say the future is branded content, but I think the future has to be looking at the big platforms that now control our visual market like Apple, Netflix, Disney and Amazon. Obviously, platforms like YouTube and TikTok do show commercials. But the main big streaming platforms like Netflix don't have any kind of short form accessibility at the moment: they don't do advertising. So, we have to now look towards more brands spending the money on creating long-form narrative drama work rather than just short form. Long form is not as

quick or seasonal for the brands. Last year we created a series with Prettybird directors Bradley and Pablo working with Channel 4 and fashion house Balmain to create a new TV series called *Fracture* [2021]. It was the first fashion branded entertainment drama series Channel 4 had ever made, and it was the first time a fashion house had partnered like that. The wardrobe of the cast featured Balmain's Fall 2021 designs in each of the five eight-minute episodes. That series was the first of its kind and is a case study of what's possible.

The script for *Fracture* was written by a C4 writer because C4 needed a writer with experience of long form and scripting TV series. Agencies are essentially "writers rooms" within short form. We need to expand that, so agencies can get experience of writing long form, and writing longer pieces. An example of a longer piece that's been made is the series that The Daniels did for Gap [Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, collectively known as Daniels]. They did an Instagram micro-series for GAP in 2015 called "Spring Is Weird". It was a series of 30-second and one 60-second, ten spots in total, which went out as a whole story with a cast Jenny Slate and Paul Dano. The Daniels' first feature was in Sundance in 2016 and they've just released their second one. I think the feature film industry is much more positive about working with directors from short-form advertising these days. The British Film Institute appreciates working with directors who have worked in the short form because not just because their reference decks are so extensive and beautifully put together, but also because they have work that showcases their capabilities. Advertising directors are also really good at getting their ideas across. As a result, there is no typical career for any director anymore.

Nisha Ganatra is another director who's extended the short-form genre. Her piece for Libresse "Wombstories" [2020] began as a 90-second script from the agency but became a three-four-minute short film when she was brought on board. She worked closely with the agency creatives at AMV to create a fundamentally powerful and important visual representation of what it feels like to have a womb. The wombstories spots were created by a female team. Kim Gehrig directed others in the series recently. If you compare "Wombstories" with what had gone before in sanitary advertising, it's groundbreaking. AMV's piece for Bodyform "Blood" [2016] which was directed by Jones and Tino was sickening. It got a lot of attention because it was the first time that red blood was used in a sanitary commercial [previously, blue-coloured liquid was used]. But it compared menstrual blood to the bleed you get when you fall down running in a forest. I'm sick of seeing periods and wombs shown in that way. Every single human being was born from a womb. A womb is much more than blood. AMV said that they tried to get a woman director to make the "Blood" piece for them, but they couldn't. And they couldn't because back then, if a woman directed a sanitary spot, she'd get pigeonholed. The script for "Blood" wasn't strong enough to take that risk.

Producers and directors want to be doing a 60-second spot. You know there's going to be a certain level of expectation if the client wants a 60. You know that everyone in the company has talked about it and is behind it and wants to make something fantastic. You feel like we're all in it together, and it just feels like a *Challenge Anneka* situation.ⁱ When they ask for a 60, they've put some serious thought into it and they want some serious thought from you, and they want something of quality. It's going to be a good collaboration and shoot. We don't make that many fifteens. We have done a few. It's just I haven't got any directors in that right now. We're doing a 30 and actually the client has loved it so much we extended to 60. We've also done a 60 that the client loved so much we got to two minutes and they paid for two minutes on air; you know, that's happened three times now. Not many scripts go out at 120 seconds anymore, I mean not from an agency. When it starts off there's obviously going

to be 60 and a 30. Or sometimes the client would like to do a 60 but maybe we'll never get to 45 or the client has only bought 30 seconds.

Change happens slowly, but we are seeing that change now. Our brains were so trained educationally to like a certain type of visual, it is taking time for us to see differently. But there's Emanuel Adjei's film for Sevdaliza, "Shahmaran" [2018], which is outstandingly spectacular. There are some really fundamentally powerful pieces short form coming through that break, that mould, like Jenn Nkiru's *Brown Skin Girls* with Beyoncé [2020]; there's all of Melina Matsoukas work, I really like what Isamaya Ffrench is doing with the image, her creative direction, and our own Theo Adams—his collaboration with Sophie Muller has been phenomenal. Sophie's brain is like forever expanding and growing, exploring new territories. Matilda Finn, Georgia Hudson, Raine Allen-Miller, there are quite a lot of young female directors doing phenomenal work.

Today there is space for other voices, and we have to trust them. Trust we must or we will lose our audience. We have to trust the audiences today who no longer want to be spoonfed. Kids today have got massively sophisticated, unbelievably intuitive educated brains when it comes to visual media. This generation grew up with screens. It's second nature to them. I'm not interested in the way past generations thought we should do things. The most fantastic work is being done today by people born without limbs who have got multi-millions of followers, people who do not conform to old ideas of beauty, people who have recovered from drugs and alcohol, people who have no teeth, people who have been side-lined throughout history by conventional and all media. It's like they did not exist.

Films like Melina Matsoukas's "You Love Me" for Beats by Dr Dre [2020] don't treat the audience like an idiot. We need to get past telling people how to fix things as well. We need to get into the emotional place of what how it affects our communities so that we can identify with them. Most humans on the planet really don't like being told. We like suggestions, you know, we like to be given an idea of the direction we might go in, we don't want to be told. Salomen Ligthelm has just done an amazing piece for the Winter Olympics IOC "Stronger Together" campaign [2022] which is coming out next week—he is really such an exciting filmmaker. I love Kim Gehrig's work, especially her short films: she always brings something fresh and new and enticing to the work that is really clever and brilliant. I loved her *New York Times* spot "Life Needs Truth" [2020].

The pandemic affected us in a number of ways. It came along at a time where there were a couple of directors who we'd already had been working with for a year or two here at Prettybird. Because they were here and available, their careers started improving immensely because they got opportunities that prior to the pandemic they probably wouldn't have had: they were young and able to think on their feet which meant they could come up with solution-based approaches to situations, to the challenges Covid created. They were also really striving to make films strong enough to put on their reel, films which meant something to them.

Because of the pandemic we also streamlined our work processes in a way that was really good for us. Whereas before everyone was always coming into the office at different times and we had office catch-ups only twice a week, we now have a group call in the UK every day. Now we all know what everyone is doing, so that helps align and divvy up projects and it makes it a much more efficient workflow system. Although we're not all in the office so much, the juniors still go in regularly because it's harder to teach people when not in the office;

the younger and the newer generation need to be around people and learn and watch—that goes for schooling and university too.

We always did socially conscious work, but the pandemic has given us an opportunity to do a lot more of it work because it's been so busy. Brands have really got on board with this. There is slightly more money invested in this kind of work, but still not enough. You still get massive global conglomerates and corporations asking you to do something for pride month or Black History Month but the budget they'll give you is less than a music video budget. They'll often want one of our directors because they fit the inclusive remit, and they'll exploit the PR from this, but don't have the budget to pay properly.

It's important to us that a brand is doing something socially progressive, but we also need a budget, and clients vary. John Lewis is a company that is progressive ethically with a company structure coming from the right place. Sometimes it's just about getting a director who we believe is incredibly talented but the world hasn't caught up with that yet. The majority of our directors at Prettybird come from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, so we are always looking for opportunities to build their careers. They are not just underrepresented because of gender or colour but sometimes because of invisible disabilities—two of our directors are registered disable. It does come down to the crux of the idea but also the question, who is this commercial going to benefit? Who are the people watching it? Sometimes we've been asked to make something really cool but then asked to do a very controversial edit for a market like Poland or Czechoslovakia. Then I write the letters to the Polish APA and to the agency.

I like working with agencies because they know their stuff. But in the past I've had to make a conscious decision to have a conversation with the agency to make sure they and the client would be up for an inclusive cast. I've had to walk away from jobs because of this. For example, in a food commercial, the script might have had a racially stereotyped role for a person of colour and a white person. I've said to the agency, "We'd be up for this commercial if you'd swap the roles around, putting the white person in the racially stereotyped role and the person of colour in the white role." There was that story about Tarsem in the early 90s wanting to book an Indian model for the lead of an Oil of Ulay or Olay commercial. When the agency refused, he said he'd walk off the job. So the agency booked his model but once he'd finished the job, they went off and shot the commercial again with a white model. He put his neck on the line.

That wouldn't happen now. Today we talk about unconscious bias. Back in the 90s it was conscious bias. They were vocal about their bias. Their requests for the type of talent they wanted in lead in their spots were borderline illegal. The industry is more inclusive now than it used to be. Most production companies now have at least one woman and one person of colour on their roster (of directors).

But more needs to be done. To have a more inclusive industry we need more trainees. Many clients have put in Covid mandates about how many people you can have on set which obviously makes it more difficult to bring in trainees. Many of our jobs at Prettybird are 70% or so inclusive with women and people of colour as HoDs, but we need to keep up the trainees to keep that going. You need to "see it to be it": we need the trainees to come in and see that it's possible to do these roles. The better the budget, the more trainees we can bring on. We like to have trainees in almost every department, and if it's a healthy budget of six figures we can do that. Fundamentally, we have to run a business, but we also need to find new people

and train them and give a step up to the younger ones. Even when the script or shoot is weak, you can still make a difference with your representation behind the camera. If you're giving people opportunities and job roles, it's worth it. Inclusive crewing behind the camera is as fundamentally as important as what you're creating on camera.

This change in cultural representation is a bit like a butterfly effect. Individual people, often celebrities like Kayne, can make a start and when more people join in, then it starts to happen. Representation behind the camera is so important. Two years ago, I remember asking an agency to make a financial contribution on a massive job to help pay for the trainees so that I can get a more inclusive crew. The client said no. Now, on a different job I've just had the reverse. I asked the client and agency to pay for thirty trainees so that we can level up on inclusivity in the film crew. They said yes.

What's also helped is a new twelve-hour rule which came in last year from the APA [Advertising Producers' Association]. It means that a production company shouldn't bid for a job which would have to be shot over more than twelve hours in a day. This stops us from taking on jobs without a proper budget. You shouldn't be booking crew for more than twelve hours a day, and all crew get time and a half on Saturdays and double time on Sundays. The purpose of the rule is to try to create better working conditions. Some agencies, though, try to get around this by shooting jobs abroad. For example, yesterday we were asked to shoot two 30-second spots in a single day which is crazy—we'd have to shoot each 30-second in four hours. We explained to the agency producer that the twelve-hour-a-day rule stopped us from being able to do this, and that worked. The UK is cheap in comparison to the USA, and very competitive, so we have a huge amount of work getting shot here. The US were the first people to start complaining about the long hours because it's been so busy out there, but now the restrictions have been brought into the UK as well.

I think social media has democratised the industry in more ways than just having a camera and being able to do it yourself. It's set higher metres for us to hit, and not everyone is going to be able to keep up with that. We've got to be fresh and exciting and different. It makes you ask, "are you going to hold onto the old?" Because the old wasn't that great, and it was a heavy weight. I don't want to hear the world's best opera singer just sing Wagner. I want to hear her sing something Beyoncé wrote. I love what Kay Tempest is doing, reappropriating classics with an all-inclusive non-binary cast, contextualising the dialogue in a way that's appropriate for today. I grew up only educated by one type of mind. Everything I was given and watched came from one type of brain. So, yes social media and social networks have been terrible for hounding, bullying, exposing and sex stuff, but on the other hand they have been fantastic and beneficial for the #MeToo movement, women's rights, body positivity and human rights. It's like a blessing in disguise.

Note

ⁱ Challenge Anneka (BBC1, 1989–1995) was a weekly television show in which presenter Anneka Rice was set a new challenge in each episode to support a charity or community project against the clock and with the help of volunteers recruited on live TV.

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