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Interview: Georgia Hudson

Emily Caston

Georgia Hudson is a director and artist, born and raised in London. Georgia established her career through making music videos such as Pink's What About Us (2017). In 2019 she was awarded Director of the Year by Shots for her body of work. Recognised for her emotion-driven storytelling, Hudson has made award-winning commercial films for Nike, Beats, BBC, Zalando, Budweiser and O2 amongst many others. She has collaborated with a range of musicians including Loyle Carner, Tom Misch, MØ, Jorja Smith, and Lenny Kravitz. Her short film Temper and poetry book Orange Eyes were released in 2021. Hudson is represented by production company Park Pictures in the UK and USA.

Interview conducted on Zoom on 9 September 2022; transcribed and edited by Emily Caston.

For the commercial process, the advertising agencies will have written about four million ideas for their client. The client will have said, “Alright let’s do this one,” so then the agency brings that idea to three directors of their choice. Each director has a conversation with the agency to help understand their idea better. The level of engagement varies. Sometimes agencies put the lion’s share of the ideation into the director’s hands—which can make you feel like you’re shooting an arrow into the dark, because they know their client better than you ever could. Good agencies write good ideas.

As a director, you get hired for your point of view. I have a natural way of expressing, framing and choosing things; I’m not always aware of exactly how or why I do it. My job is to employ my taste and make decisions. When I’m pulling together the team, choosing locations, choosing the cast and so on, I go with what feels good and what excites me; I use my intuition. The whole visual experience becomes an expression of what feels right to me and of who I am. What I create is an inevitable summary of everywhere I’ve been, everyone I’ve met and everything I value! That’s why I make sure I do a lot of *living*. I’m always working because I’m a creative, so I’m often writing, painting or walking about collecting ideas. But I’m not always directing: I try to do only there to five big commercial jobs a year so as not to overwhelm my time.

When an agency allows you to do your job and really trusts you, it creates a great outcome. The Nike “Stop at Nothing” film I made represents what I believe in; it’s courageous, honest, strong and robust. It’s packed full of personal touches, like having Renaissance cherubs painted onto the motorbikes. On a film for O2, a collaboration with great creatives, I had a young man dancing in front of an oversized moon—that’s absolutely my flavour: heightened, romantic and magical.

On a Superbowl job I did a few years ago, I was hired by an agency to do my thing but then they wouldn’t listen to my suggestions and seemed to be overwhelmed by their client...

this situation becomes a recipe for mediocrity. It is very painful to see work come out that looks like a distorted echo of myself. I made it, but I didn't really get to make it. Some battles are to be fought and some are not. Ultimately, it's up to the people who hire me to take my direction or leave it. It is a part of my job to be resilient to these creative mutilations and keep on going.

I came up making music videos. It was an effortless fit for me. My inclination has always been towards atmosphere, poetry, beauty, a good sunset ... I love precisely articulated moments of sensation. For me, a singular movement in a dancer's body with the right lighting and clothing is perfect, I feel something vast. That is my shorthand, that kind of communication—and it is really useful. As I get older, I become interested in all sorts of storytelling, in formats where you can hold two conflicting ideas simultaneously. My interests are growing. *Temper* is a short documentary film I made about the human condition. That shows a part of who I am and how I think. I'm very proud of it.

A lot of my work is technically proficient. My Nike "Stop at Nothing" spot was both very techy and very human. It shows my hybrid style. I can do cool vibey stuff with emotional atmosphere, and also crazy camera VFX things. A new Superbowl ad of mine come out yesterday, "Zero in the Way of Possibility" for Bud Light. There is a restaurant scene where the floor cracks apart which we did all in camera, very satisfying. It was an incredibly short six-week turnaround from conception to air date; we work very hard on jobs like that.

Some of the work I've done over the last couple of years still hasn't come out, including a Tourist Board ad for Morocco. I've also just completed some beautiful work for the Winter Olympics for Delta. For VFX, I often work with Time Based Arts in the UK or Blacksmiths in New York. With the commercials process, the agency can take the post away from the director's eyes and the wrong company can mess up your job at the final hurdle. It's important to me to work with people whose taste I really rate so I can hand it over in confidence.

When I did P!nk's *What About Us* video, I was also being booked to do my first ever commercial—a series of five films for Under Armour *Unlike Any* created by Droga5 based around elite female athletes like Misty Copeland and Lindsay Vonn. Straight after that, Under Armour booked me again for a collaboration with Dicks Sporting Goods. That moment was a catalyst and happened whilst I was also personally transforming my life. It was a big powerful time for me. It all happened because P!nk had seen my music video for Nimmo *Dancing Makes Us Brave* and Droga5 had seen my video for Loyle Carner's *The Isle of Arran*. Both of them had seen the Glass Animals *Hazy* video which was the first ever piece of work of mine that I had considered to be good.

With the P!nk film, it was one of the first times I got to make something I cared about on that scale, acknowledging the impact of politics on people. We showed the dynamics of individuals as a microcosm for what was happening on a larger scale in America. It was an amazing opportunity. In some ways I have never had a big precise vision for myself, yet I have always felt I could do anything. My career has come from doing what was just in front with me and continuing to be curious.

I've always been in love with the figurative, I did ceramics at art school, I love shape and clay, I love things that are of the earth—our bodies are of the earth. I love dance, flow, Steadicam, it's all the same language to me, fluidity, a water prayer. I think that dance makes accessible the basics of the human condition—our shared experience. It brings us all together. The dance community is made up of loads of people who have led interesting lives and have

found a way to somatically heal themselves through moving their body. Movement is medicine. We can alchemise our experiences through our bodies. You know that these dancers have known things and seen things.

Dance feels like it's a part of my DNA so I'll always want to use it to communicate. I'm very attentive to the choreography for my films. I often ask dancers to self-choreograph around a concept or emotion, and I block it out around the space with them. That's how I did the Misty Copeland Under Armour piece. On a V&A project I'm working on at the moment, I'm working with an amazing young dancer called Max Cookward.¹ There are exciting people coming out for their debuts post-pandemic.

My experience is that clients and audiences want diverse casts. Maybe because I don't do super-corporate jobs that have no social conscience, the casting process for me is typically smooth: clients seem to want what I want. This is definitely not true for the whole of the commercials industry. But I wouldn't tolerate any criteria that was not inclusive, real and respectful. I love working with non-actors, it's about charisma and connection for me.

When I'm directing a piece, I focus on getting coverage for all sorts of different length end products. Most people want a 60-second hero, but will usually want a 45-, a 30- and loads of 15- and 5-seconds as well. My team and I will mainly focus on making the 60, but we need to get flexible coverage for the shorter versions, which means that you need to shoot each scene in a very specific way so it works in multiple end formats. It is a skill. Clients don't really want to make things that are over 90 seconds because people don't have the attention span. The 15s will go out on socials like Instagram and TikTok.

I think it's important for me to recognise that I'm a woman in this industry because it makes a difference. It has affected how hard I've had to work and what muscles I've had to develop in order to communicate to the biased. I'm very aware of others who have faced a lot more obstacles than me on this path and I am passionate about making space for different people and different voices to be heard. At certain points during my career, I was less willing to acknowledge that it had been hard to be a woman here, because to admit that stings. Now I also realise that these experiences have made me a more interesting, stronger person... and in turn a better filmmaker.

I've not had specific role models within the industry but that's because I never intended to become a director. I'm not a cinephile. I love people, I love music, I love culture. I love stuff that is a bomb for society. I'm fascinated by these kinds of things, by psychology and human stories more than I am into the classicism of cinema as an art form. I think that cinema is one of the best, most democratic vehicles for speaking to huge amounts of people, for telling stories that can offer perspective and connection, it is real magic. That's why I am here.

My idols are nearly always women—women with stories, women with children, women with pets, women with lives that have been lived, women who are honest and wild, literary women, women making and destroying, medicine women. I love it when someone makes an example by being courageous, by saying I'm proud to be all the things that I am. Everyone has challenges. To own them is cool. To tell your truth. To be wrong is sometimes wonderful, I don't believe it is necessary to fit in.

The truth for women generally, not just in art or film, is the question of how we take our power back in any scenario. I'm in a take-no-prisoners mode at the moment. What I don't

want to have to do on set is repeat a direction twice. I've become quite aware of what I need or want and I will be clear because that's a part of my job. I try to conserve my energy on set because it is my creative force and I resent spending it having to overexplain my decision to an older white man, often who I have given the job to. I'm quite thorough in checking that the people we have on set have worked with women and have had repeat bookings from women. Generally, I find the majority of people I work with are fine, but if there is any kind of prejudice revealed, I'm happy to ask them to leave immediately.

Commercials and music videos are amazing democratic art forms that reach so many people. You tell your story or make your point in a short time. There's a skill in being able to explain and communicate something in one small image. It's my desire to be able to communicate to as many people as possible. That's what brought me into this field. I came with a sense that there are important things to say and I am finding ways to say them. I feel motivated to contribute to the world.

I believe that fun is a remedy. Sometimes I think that the point of a job is not to make a film that makes a great statement but to work with your crew in a way that makes a great statement. To enjoy the process, to see what is there in the moment. It's not always about the end product. Sometimes it's about the alchemy between people in a small moment. Human connections between people are therapeutic. Something real happens on sets. People often say "we're not saving lives... it's just a commercial!" But I think we do have the chance to save lives at any moment in the small and big choices we make.

I love the familiarity of working with the same crew. If I'm going through a very busy period I like to work with people I know. And at other times I like to have a collaboration overhaul so I work with different keys. I love creating things with others. There's magic to be found. I always work with the same editor, Paul O'Reilly.² Paul edited my short film *Temper* over four years, and has edited for me since I started directing properly about ten years ago. It used to be the case that my boards wouldn't always land in the edit. I would let him do a first assembly, cry a bit and then we'd move it around to get unexpected magic bits in there, then it starts to settle into the intended shape—the edit is a real process sometimes, I still cry sometimes.

There is often a huge emphasis on technological advancements but what's interesting to me is the huge change in young people's consciousness. People are more awake and aware. Young people are interested in connecting with reality and potential in a very expansive way. I believe in the way young people can see things, I like to pay attention to what they say.

My advice to young directors is to take the pressure off themselves and get on with making something, whatever that is—build up to a pound with pennies. The work I want to do changes because I change. Life is like a Russian doll, isn't it? I think, I'm being the "real me", but then a bit later I find another bit of me that I didn't see before which seems more real. I've always done what's in front of me knowing that it leads to the next, and sometimes that's just the washing up.

When I became pregnant I was scared that I would lose my career but I didn't. Becoming a mother made me a stronger woman. There's no way of hiding from yourself. Love forces you to wake up and grow in painful ways I didn't anticipate. I am a single mother and when my son was about one I decided I had to become a better director to survive. I have worked really hard and really consciously to make that happen. I'm proud of what I've

achieved. I really love my career and it's given me a lot, beyond what I knew was possible. I am motivated by the idea of how what I make affects others. If something I make could touch someone, or support their experience, I am happy.

If you can tell a proper story in ten seconds with only two bodies and a light, you can work with dialogue. I have no interest in directing a telly show just for the sake of it, but I would be compelled to work in narrative for a message I believe in. My work has to mean something and be helpful or else I can't sustain energy for it. I've always done spoken word, and worked with poetry and performance well before I picked up a camera. I would say that nine times out of ten you're better off hiring a music video director over a theatre director for any job you need doing, even if it's just the gardening...

Notes

¹ Contemporary movement artist and choreographer, Cookward was a finalist in BBC Young Dancer 2019.

² Paul O'Reilly joined Trim Editing in 2000 from Stitch and Homespun. He received a D&AD Editing Pencil and Creative Circle Editing Bronze for Nike "Stop at Nothing" (2019), directed by Hudson.

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—, director. “Zero in the Way of Possibility.” Anheuser Busch (Bud Light) / W + K, Park Pictures, 2022.

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