

Calum Macdiarmid: Commercialism and Creativity

Calum Macdiarmid, fresh from the Aesthetica Short Film Festival's screening of his award-winning short film, *82*, talks to [Fliss Turner](#) about aesthetics, art, and why he clings to expressionism

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I cannot claim any substantiality with regards to my experience of the Independent Film Industry. There was perhaps the one time I ventured to a local artsy theatre to watch the bizarre *The Gospel of Us*. My only recollection of the performance was of Michael Sheen traipsing around Port Talbot bellowing secular inanities atop a skip. Forgive the hint of trepidation that accompanied me to the Aesthetica Short Film Festival. However, it was here that I became introduced to the work of Calum Macdiarmid, independent artist and director. Amidst the batch of short films, Calum's new venture *82* carried a heart-racing momentum of tension which belied the undercurrents of dark humour. From a sequence of short films, ranging from the bad to the bizarre, *82* leaps forth stridently with a quality which is unquestionably of its own.

Growing up in Clapham, Calum graduated from Kingston with a degree in Animation and Illustration and it is doubtless that the years in South London, "with all sorts of adventures going on in council estates, clubs and bars" lay the foundation for his triumphs in the enigmatic world of independent film. In 2011 he was named Best Newcomer at the Rushes Soho Shorts Festival. He succeeded this with an Audience Award at the festival this summer. Needless to say, with accolades bearing innovation and popularity, he must be doing something right. The concept of abstract integrity, however, has not always been at the heart of Calum's career. Following his graduation from Kingston, he worked as an illustrator for *MTV*. He later went on to establish himself as a director and animator for Channel Four, Living TV, Bravo and Virgin 1.



As my conversation with Calum continues, it becomes more apparent that the road to artistic autonomy has been a lengthy and fractured process. "I somewhat found myself on a sort of corporate merry-go-round. Film requires so much faith, you can't just turn up and say, "Hey, I'd like a million pounds for a commercial, so just go ahead and put me down for that". You need to jump through hoops." This is perhaps the most prominent aspect of Calum's work ethic, a nonchalant awareness of the ramifications of the film industry and what is required to achieve artistic independence.

The suffocation of the corporate world, it seems, would have certainly taken its toll on his ingrained artistic nature. "About halfway through my career I was very unhappy with it all. It was something that I think I had to do to make a living but at that point I needed to make a living which was creative with a worthwhile compromise. But it became apparent that I was really wasn't enjoying that". This is the point of contention all artists must navigate with regards to the industry. Often it is not for personal gain, but a necessity to extend the boundaries of their work and Calum infinitely poses a pragmatic approach to the aid of his commercial experience.

Calum's work with MTV allowed room for expressive freedom whilst he became somewhat reminiscent of his time at university "We were using stop frame animation and would be filming something after drinking all night and come in all hungover, so it was very much like being a student again." The industry, it seems, failed to impose on his artistic style on which he hasn't compromised; establishing the teetering line between the abstract and accessibility. Calum doesn't falter in accrediting a proportion of his success to his experience as a commercial director. However, it was his movement to other channels which began to stimulate the artistic aspects of his career and established the realisation that he needed to escape from commercial industry. Credit must be paid to those who allowed him to sidestep a future of baneful compromises. The production company *Great Guns* spotted his talent three years ago and have since supported his short film work whilst continuing to use his commercial creations.



There was perhaps no singular defining moment of reckoning when contemplating his future, simply an acknowledgment that art was his calling. School didn't bear an awful lot of inspiration aside from his art classes, "I was like "What, I'm allowed to draw?!" I'd be given some charcoal and would be like wow this is insane, this is education and I get to paint and draw which is the easiest thing in the world." Yes, an artistic career was apparent, not spurred on by a hunger for celebrity status or extravagant paycheques but by a self-recognition of his own flair. Calum's degree from Kingston laid the groundwork for commercial production which inadvertently enabled his later transition to short film. A less established and acknowledged form of cinema, short films are normally made independently, non-profitably and on minimal budgets. Loyal followers of the scene rely primarily on film festival viewings.

With such a constrained time scale to work on, impact is essential. The director is presented with the opportunity to reach levels of acute intensity. Such emotive encounters are not always as accessible in feature films. This is acknowledged by Calum not only as an artistic device, but necessary in the marketing of a competitive industry. With short films being shown in batches of ten or twenty a spirited approach is needed. "Automatically you're competing against other people and that instantly makes me want to up my game and make one which stands out". Ruthless this may be, but the Achilles heel of this director lends to him a consciousness of determined fineness, exacting in the uncertainty of his work. "It's perhaps one of my greatest strengths which is very much being unsure of myself and not always quite being entirely confident with my work or who I am. So I'm always seeking that extra bit of approval". Whilst many artists may confine their work to themselves, Calum actively instigates the help of his friends within his work which seems to lend him a genuinely amiable quality that distinguishes his character and the quality of his work; conscientious, dedicated and innovative.



Whilst the CV may say "director", it is indubitable that his work cries out "artist". Film has allowed Calum to surge through the constraints of simply putting paint to paper. He manipulates the fluidity of light and beauty whilst lacing it with the thorny world of psychiatry. His first film *Worship* was based upon the work of his father, a psychiatrist and enabled him to further his character development, all the while establishing an essence of provocation with his audience. Most significantly, it has allowed access to the distinctions which have induced his success, an exploration of the "...conscious and the subconscious. There's a kind of murky world there which is full of imagination and it frees you up to create imagery and ideas which I might not normally have had". Entering the torrents of the human mind has clearly enhanced the complexities and distinctions of humanity to endear his work to the independent film sector.

The film industry is no doubt a ruthless business which only lends a portion of itself to the artistic disposition. Calum is evidently in no denial of this fact. "For many people they'll be developing character roles to work out how profitable this film could be and to be honest you'd be mad not to think about that". In no way however, does this seem to belie the soul of his work. "There are still certain niceties which help me still believe that it is an art form and I try to cling onto that, the slightly more expressionistic and artistic side of the work that I do." Therefore he clings. It takes an awful lot to establish a rapport between the intangible modern art world and humdrum lives of folk avidly conjoined to a world of iPhones and Facebook where the internet reigns supreme. Here is art which is being produced on a medium and technique which endeavours a certain appeal rarely found in the often peculiar cultural world. Perhaps this is what we need. We require a bridge between the uncanny and the aesthetic charm of film. Either way those six short minutes, on a nonchalant Sunday afternoon in the tourist laden precinct of York Minster, considerably altered my perception of cinematic art, if only because it appeals to my short attention span.



Pictures courtesy of Calum Macdiarmid



One comment

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16 Nov '12 at 5:42 pm

Opportunistic plug for '82':

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2225668/>

<http://film.britishcouncil.org/821>

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