

“Once you spot Hadleigh Castle, you know you’re back on home ground...”

We meet Damien Robinson, Southend-based visual artist working with new media, including image, sound and vibration.

| WRITER Damien Robinson | PHOTOGRAPH Anna Lukala



Did you always want to be an artist?

As a child I was always messing around with making and drawing but also writing and singing and just playing really. I wasn't particularly good at any of them, but think I was fortunate to grow up at a time when I could be a child and experiment (ok, mess around) rather than working out any kind of career plan. But the pull towards art became stronger in my mid-teens and my family encouraged me to go for it; my uncle (a very talented man) had to give up his hard-won art school place at 16 years old, to support his mother financially when his father died; both his sons became artists. So I had strong family support in an environment that would have otherwise been discouraging.

You lost your hearing (became deaf) when you were 17, which is a life-changing experience. How did that affect what you wanted to do for a living?

I had a long convalescent period with lots of rehab but also remember being told to accept I would never get a job, and as a result thinking I might as well go for what I wanted to do, and eventually applied for a Foundation Course, where being immersed in a wide range of disciplines helped me understand this was the way forward for me. Although that college had never had a profoundly deaf student before, they'd had hard of hearing students and were up for the challenge. Ultimately they were more accessible and with a much more positive attitude than the much larger & better-funded university where I took my degree. Like most artists, I've worked in related fields to support my practice (pay the bills) and I've experienced both overt and covert discrimination.

But I've also been lucky to meet and work with the people I think of as my 'allies', who have broad enough perspectives to see that working in a different way – for example, working with BSL interpreters in meetings – is just different, not automatically difficult. That said, the joke I make that 'the worst thing about being deaf is the paperwork' is a truism, and dealing with access requirements to enable me to work cuts significantly into time for my own practice.

Essex seems to be a real magnet for artists and culture. Why do you think that is?

We've got access to the capital and resources there as well as (comparatively) less expensive housing and work space here (though I would think there are very few who are in any 'secure' position). But we can also turn our back on it, look out to sea, look up and see skies, walk across fields and through woods. I'm East Anglian by birth and upbringing so although I lived in London for quite some time, I always felt somewhat hemmed in, and while I know some great people and organisations there, once you spot Hadleigh Castle, you know you're back on home ground. Essex seems to also absorb artists & mix them with its own creative communities rather than 'outsider' artists becoming the "stormtroopers of gentrification". So far anyway...

When you work for yourself, it's incredibly difficult to 'book' time off; I imagine there's a kind of guilt attached to downtime. What do you do to relax?

I come from a family of voracious readers, and those genes have been handed down to me. So I'm lucky to work with Focal Point Gallery's

Education Team as I can also nip into the library after working with them at the Forum. I picked up a love of films from my parents and spent a lot of time in my late teens in virtually empty cinemas watching (subtitled) foreign language films. It tends to be DVDs now, with subtitling for deaf people so you understand why a character suddenly gets up and crosses the room (oh, the phone was ringing...), and pondering the challenges of subtitling ambient sound and sound effects rather than words (the BBC have editorial guidelines on subtitling and when it is permissible to subtitle a sound phonetically rather than in words; "Lions roar" versus "Rrrrrrgghh!").

Who would you most like to collaborate with in the future? And what's next for you creatively?

I'm currently talking with the wonderful Walter Reid, who I've worked with before on projects like the Chimerascope which was developed for the "Journey to the Podium" 2012 programme, and develop some of our thinking around the combinations of old and new technologies. Although those works had particular project aims, our underlying approach aimed to examine the gap between real objects and the increasing move towards expression through digital and online identities, which we now take for granted. I know that when I work with children they'll be fascinated by a real compass or a spirit level, but dismissive of compass app on a phone. Touching and handling something helps them question how it works ("how do they get the bubble into it?").

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