

Q&A: Mike Watson

Creative Director, Wunderman Thompson London

10 answers to 10 questions that let us peer into the mind of one of the world's leading creative directors.



Mike describes himself as: Human. Man. Husband. Father. Brother. Son. Zimbabwean. South African. British. Wannabe. Gamer. Mentor. Innovator. Geek. Sponge. Verbose. Pithy. Creative Director. To which can be added, Bloody Nice Bloke. Caples juror.

Here's a photo of him at The Caples Awards 2022. Perhaps his Gold for HSBC is in the rucksack?

You're a Chief Creative Officer with all the pressure that the job entails. Do you have a side-hustle? What do you do as a counterbalance the demands of your workplace?

I don't have a side hustle but I'm passionate about cooking over fire. Meat, fish, veg, pizza, it doesn't matter what it is. I find cooking relaxing, and cooking over fire more so. It's the ritual of it all. Chopping the wood, lighting the beast and then waiting for it to reach the right temperature for whatever you have planned. And that's where the fun starts, keeping the fire alive, timing everything, and seeing how far you can take an ingredient before it tastes like charcoal. Burnt guacamole is delicious.

If you hadn't ended up in advertising, what would you be doing instead?

When I was at school, I got a part-time job helping a small production company during the holidays. I spent most of my time lugging lighting around dusty African vistas in 40-degree heat. It was hard work, but I was fascinated by the process of filmmaking and loved every minute of it. If I hadn't stumbled into writing after studying art direction and animation, I'd probably have ended up working on a set somewhere. Or found my way into any other part of the industry that involves bringing stories to life.

In your career, what one piece of personal work are you most proud of?

The 'We Are Not An Island' campaign for HSBC UK is my favourite. With Brexit dividing the United Kingdom down the middle, we reminded the country that it couldn't separate itself from the world. Not

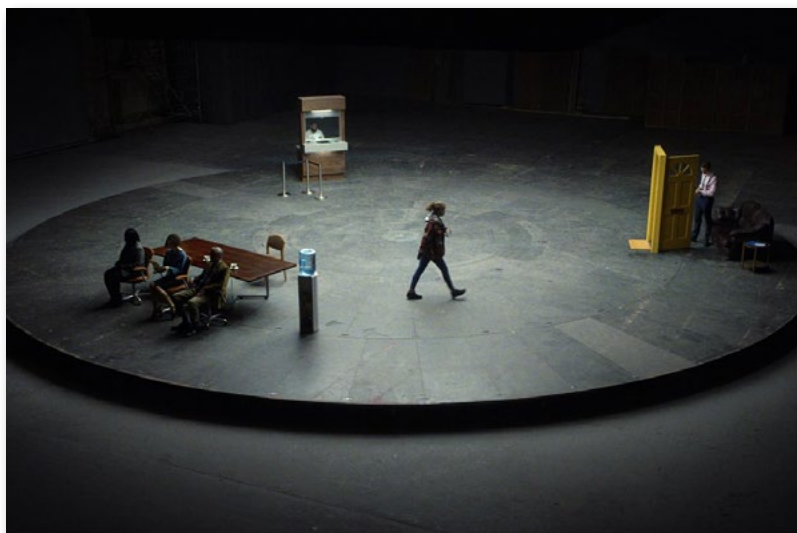


only did it touch a nerve in culture, but it also increased sales across HSBC's product line by 40%. It was a bold idea for a company whose sole purpose is to mitigate risk. In fact, the idea died in an early round of presentations. We brought it back and created one of the brand's most successful campaigns.

'Not An Island' won Gold for Best Copy at The Caples Awards 2019. [See the campaign HERE.](#)

What work has your agency/team produced you're particularly proud of?

I'm proud of the work we're creating for HSBC UK that helps give vulnerable people their financial independence back. Over the last four years, we've helped reconnect the homeless to society through our Homeless Bank Account and 'Vicious Circle' campaigns. And more recently, we've been promoting how the bank can help people escape domestic abuse situations through our Safe Spaces and Control campaigns.



HSB 'Vicious Circle' won Gold at The Caples Awards 2022. ([View HERE](#))

What recent work have you seen from another agency (or agencies) that you would really like to see entered into The Caples? And why?

'A British Original' for British Airways by Uncommon Studios. The campaign is simply elegant and proves that a few words can paint a thousand pictures.

The Last Photo campaign for CALM by adam&EveDDB. The idea behind this is simple yet devastating. It highlights how suicidal thoughts can hide in plain sight. The ads show the last photos and videos of people who took their own lives. You can't help but feel something when you look at it.

Are awards important?

Awards are important for the morale of an agency but only if they mean something. When I started working in advertising, there were a handful of award shows you could enter. Winning at any of them was a sign that you were doing ok. Today there are so many awards shows that it feels like the reason they exist has diluted their value. It is no longer about celebrating the work; it is about the entry fee, the cost of the table at the show, and the fee for buying your drinks when you are there. At some, you even pay extra to see the work itself. I've also been to a few shows where gold is decided based on the number of votes you receive on the night. So, the more tables you buy, the better your chances. It's pay-to-win, you may as well just print a trophy and slap yourself on the back instead. If you want to know if your work is good, be more selective with the awards shows you enter. That's what's important.

What does it mean to you to be a juror of The Caples Awards in 2023?

It's a privilege to be part of the jury. The Caples has always been a good benchmark for Cannes. If you win here, you should win in the south of France. That's probably down to the freedom of not having to award anything if you feel that nothing is good enough. Only the work, and how it makes you feel, matters. With such an eclectic mix of judges to bounce off, I think we're going to have a lot of fun debating and picking the work that will perform well in the year ahead.

The Caples is free to enter. Is this brave. Or very, very stupid?

On the one hand, making the Caples free to enter is a stupid idea as it opens a gateway for any chancer or self-nominated creative director to enter tonnes of mediocre work. On the other hand, it's genius because it levels the playing field for those smaller shops and start-ups who may not have spare funding to enter awards shows.

If you could have five creative luminaries sitting around your kitchen table, having a drink and a chat, who would they be? What do you think you'd talk about?

I'd have David Abbott, Dan Wieden, Barbara Nokes, Indra Sinha and Neil French over for a drink and a natter. A bunch of writers getting together... we'd probably end up talking about art direction or what one word we wish we could change in a past piece of copy. Regardless, I'd be gleaning as much wisdom from them as possible.

Impossible question. But what is your one all-time favourite piece of advertising, the idea you most wish you'd done yourself?

What a question. There are so many great ideas out there to choose from, but the one that I wish I had come up with is Nike's Just Do It. It's short and sweet, but it's a slogan everyone can relate to. Only you can push yourself beyond your limits. A human truth told simply.

