

# Phil Grabsky

*Fine-art filmmaker*



EOS Goya Visions of Flesh & Blood Steadicam Shoot at The National Gallery, London  
© EXHIBITION ON SCREEN, David Bickerstaff

Phil Grabsky is a documentary filmmaker and the director of Brighton-based Seventh Art Productions. After producing a number of films about the lives of great composers he went on to launch Exhibition on Screen – cinema documentaries based on major fine art exhibitions.

**Everyone thought it was a crazy idea** when I first mooted it in 2009; who'd go to the cinema to see an art exhibition? But live screenings of theatre and opera were just taking off and I really felt audiences would go for it.

**I'd been making films about the arts for TV for years** so when I initially approached the National Gallery, they knew me and trusted me, even if they didn't entirely get what I was trying to do. The timing was perfect because they were about to open the biggest Leonardo da Vinci exhibition

ever seen.

**After we'd made Leonardo Live**, I persuaded the Picturehouse chain to show it and 40 of their 41 UK screenings sold out. There were people sitting in aisles. That's when I was convinced we were onto something.

**For lots of viewers, it's a way to see a major exhibition in a relaxed, immersive atmosphere.** You're not being interrupted or jostled; your view isn't being blocked by someone in front of you. The films offer a perspective on the works that you can't always get in galleries. One artist I know said he saw things on that 20ft screen that he'd never have noticed with the naked eye.

**The curators love it** – these are shows they've often been working on for five years or more and yet they will only be open for a few months. We



EOS Renoir\_Martha Lucy & Barbara Buckley at The Barnes Foundation  
© EXHIBITION ON SCREEN, David Bickerstaff



Claude Monet, 'The Artist's Garden in Argenteuil', 1873  
© The National Gallery of Art



Pierre-Auguste Renoir: Bather (Baigneuse), c. 1890, The Barnes Foundation

give them a longer life and help bring the show to people who'd never have been able to make it in person. A woman in a wheelchair came to one Komedia screening and left in floods of tears at being able to see an exhibition she had assumed would be off-limits for her.

**The films often drive people to visit galleries as well.** People get reeled in and although they might not see that exhibition in person, it will often inspire them to go and see the next thing that's on.

**When I was making a film about the life of Mozart** I was very struck by a letter he wrote to his dad. He said that everything he wrote was for two audiences; the audience who really understood the

complexity of what he was doing and the audience who were just going to whistle the melody the next day. It's exactly the same for every film I've made. You have to do a lot of research, underpin every single word by evidence, but in a way that my 14-year-old son or my brother who's not interested in art will understand.

**It's boring to proclaim that everything is a masterpiece.** We want to show why Rembrandt painted, and how. We want to know where he sourced his materials, who was commissioning him, the luck, the parenting, who he was stealing ideas from; none of these great figures exist in a void.

**You do have to be careful in which names you choose.** I turned down Delacroix at the National Gallery because we knew it would end up being too much of a loss for us. I'm also not sure Raphael would be a big enough draw. But we're doing [Hieronymus] Bosch, who is perhaps not an obvious choice, just because I really want to do it.

**I'd love to do a major female artist** but it's tricky because who would it be? Frida Kahlo maybe. Historically there are fewer names and even when you get to contemporary art it's a challenge. But there are fewer contemporary artists of either sex that can compete with the Goyas and Caravaggios.

**We're in 42 countries now,** which you can definitely spin as a success story, for Brighton and for Britain. *As told to Nione Meakin*

**Exhibition on Screen's Renoir, June 1st; Monet To Matisse, June 4th and Goya, June 8th at Ropetackle Arts Centre, Shoreham, all £12**