

Behind the scenes on the John Lewis Christmas ad



The new John Lewis Christmas ad was a huge collaborative effort between teams in the UK and the US. CR talks to Elliot Dear, co-director on the spot with Yves Geleyn, about how it was done.

The animated commercial, which launched this weekend on British TV and is shown below, is the latest in a series of Christmas ads from John Lewis, and was met with almost feverish anticipation by the media, a rare example nowadays of an advert being something of an event. It is created by ad agency Adam & Eve/DDB and is a sweet story about the friendship between a bear and a hare at Christmastime. As a soundtrack it features Lily Allen singing Keane's 2004 hit *Somewhere Only We Know*.



Elliot Dear on set

Elliot Dear had only briefly met Yves Geleyn before they were asked to work together on the pitch. It is unusual for two directors to be brought together to work on a project, but it was decided that the two combined would offer added weight to the team's proposal. They faced stiff competition: CR understands that the other directors in the mix included Pete Candeland from Passion and Psyop.

Dear is represented by Blinkink, which is based in the UK, and Geleyn by Hornet in the US. The two production companies had recently formed an alliance to represent each others' directors, so as well as offering a double whammy to the agency and client, the teaming up of the directors showed that the two companies could work well together. "It was to fortify that alliance," agrees Dear, "but also because we were up against bigger boys, two showreels are better than one. We've got similar sensibilities, similar tastes in terms of aesthetics."



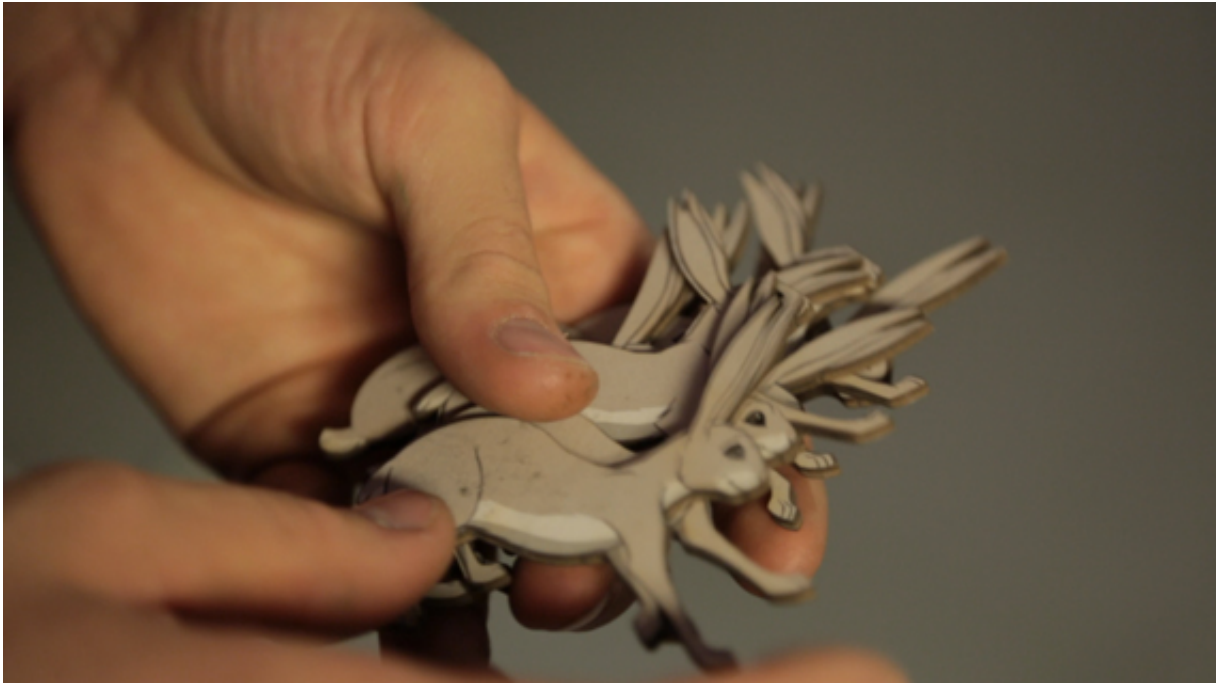
Character drawings for the animation

The pitch was a long process, and the initial brief from the agency was fairly loose. There were references such as Bambi, but the directors were left to propose the exact look of the spot themselves. “It was a lot of decoding of what it was they were after,” says Dear, “because they liked the charm of 2D animation but they liked the nostalgia and the texture and tangibility of stuff that came with stop motion. But we didn’t think they wanted it to be CG.”

The finished ad is an innovative combination of 2D stop motion drawings shot on a 3D set, a process that Dear initially explored as a student, and also in some of the music videos he has created that were shown to the agency as part of the pitch (see more of Dear’s work [here](#)). “I remembered something that I was doing when I was a student,” he explains, “which was to do illustrations, cut them out and place them in front of the camera and make these almost pantomime-y sets with them. Photograph them and then you get lens effects and focal depth and lens flares and things, but they’ve still got an illustrative quality.”



Some of the finished drawings used in the animation



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The problem was that examples where this technique had been used before were few and far between, so it was difficult to find references to show the agency of how the finished film would look. “Obviously you’ve got to show people that you can do it, prove that you can pull it off, and a lot of the time I think it’s easy to go ‘it’s going to look a bit like this’, but there’s nothing out there. I think there’s a film called *Flatworld* that was done in the 90s and then music videos and bits and pieces that are done in quite a rough way using that technique. But it has never really been done on this scale and with this precision, as far as I can tell. That might not be true – but if it’s out there, we couldn’t find it. So finding references and making people believe that it’s going to work was a really tough part of it.”

The solution to this was for the team to make some animation themselves. They did a test shoot using a bear walk from the Disney film *Brother Bear*, setting him within a snowy set. “We managed to get 20 seconds or so out of a test that was quite convincing and it did what we wanted it to do, which was have the charm and texture of a 2D animation, but then with real light on it so it cast shadows out of this model set and then the world felt deep and textured, which is what we were trying to do.”

This early test can be seen in the making-of film, below. The test took over a week to complete and was shot on a shoestring budget using interns. But the effort was worth it. “I’ve heard that that’s what won it for us,” says Dear.



Photographs showing the front and back of drawings used in the shoot

In addition to the director combo of Dear and Geleyn, the Blinkink/Hornet pitch was given added weight by the presence of Disney character designers and animators who were brought in at pitch stage to design how the animals in the ad would look. The team was looking for a character designer who created animals which were realistic-looking rather than cartoons. They found Aaron Blaise, the director of *Brother Bear* (the film that was used as a reference for the test), who had also worked on *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas* among other classics. “He’s an amazing artist, incredible,” says Dear, “he really understands animals. He spends a lot of his time in the wild, going on safari and life drawing animals and studying how they move.”

Blaise came back with the “most amazing drawings” straightaway. “They were really close to the final ones but because he’d had 25 years of doing Disney stuff, we had to strip a few things away,” says Dear. “Things like quite human eyebrows. Animals don’t have eyebrows but out of habit these guys were giving them human touches. Pretty eyelashes that turn up at the corners – things that would have a slightly Disney feel to

them.” A big part of the process for Dear and Geleyn was getting the look of the animation to feel British, rather than American.

“That was a big must from John Lewis and the agency,” says Dear. “We were saying the whole time, it’s all about restraint, it’s all about restraint.”





Photographs from the shoot showing the set

Dear is a relatively young director, and this was by far the biggest commercial job he had worked on. He'd made his name in music videos and has shot ads for brands, including BT, but it was still an intimidating moment when he found himself asking Blaise to make adjustments to his work. "When I had my first conference call with him I was so embarrassed to be commenting on someone's work," he recalls. "You think, 'who am I...?' It felt ridiculous. I said, 'I'm mildly embarrassed about this Aaron, so bear with me'. By the end of the project we had a good relationship."

Blaise did all the character design for the bear and the hare in the spot, and worked with a team based in Florida, who 'cleaned-up' the drawings once they had been signed off. Back in the UK, Dear and Geleyn assembled a team to work with the drawings and do the colouring on them. "We'd get vectorized versions sent over, because they were scanning them in, so we'd put them into Flash and we had our guys do the colouring and stuff," says Dear. Once the line drawings were coloured in, they would be printed onto boards and laser cut and then given to the animator to use on the 3D set.



Photographs from the shoot

For the set design, Dear suggested John Lee, a veteran modelmaker who has worked on

Aliens and also Fantastic Mr Fox. In fact, Dear had met him when he was interning on the latter film, another testament to how far the director has come in just a few years. “I said ‘let’s get John Lee in, he’s great,’” says Dear. “He happened to be free and was really excited about the project. He ended up doing all the sets. I’d already met a lot of his team already, but I was just the guy emptying the dishwasher when I saw them before ... it was quite sobering.”

The teams on the different continents worked in tandem with one another, with parts of the ad being shot in London while drawings for other sections were still being completed in Florida. Despite the intensity of the process, everyone worked well together, with Geleyn and Dear complementing each other’s working styles. The relationship between the agency and the production team was also successful. A common complaint from directors on animations is that clients or agencies will want changes at the last minute – requests that can take a long time in an animated work. But Dear remembers the process with the agency in a positive light. “The creatives that were working on it were very collaborative and often sympathetic and had a really good eye actually,” he says.



The directors, plus bear, during the shoot

Dear is happy with the final commercial, but it is the collaborative process that he looks back on most fondly. “I think the most valuable thing, I don’t know if it sounds really corny, is getting to work with the people I got to work with and the kind of relationships that got built up,” he says. “I haven’t done a lot of stuff like this, and you just drink it in. Listening to a director of photography talking to their assistant, and watching how they work, getting to sit down and do set dressing and modelmaking with these people who work in films.... Every day it’s like you’re on summer camp, it’s amazing.”

Credits:

Agency: Adam & Eve/DDB

ECD: Ben Priest

Creative directors: Aidan McClure, Laurent Simon

Production companies: Blinkink/Hornet

Directors: Elliot Dear, Yves Geleyn

2D Animation: Premise Entertainment LLC

2D Animation Supervisors: Aaron Blaise, Dominic Carola

Production designer/Supervising modeller: John Lee

Making-of film: Jake Hopwell, Josh Hine

Post-production: Blinkink Studios