

Tabitha Denholm aims to move cinema in the right direction.

A League of Her Own

Words by Sydney Oberfeld
Photography by Margo Ducharme

It takes a special kind of light and charisma in a person to transcend a screen, and yet Tabitha Denholm can, even when the British director is Skyping from her Los Angeles home. Perhaps it's the wave of sheer excitement that sends her hands flying into the air when she recounts her then creative partner, Florence and The Machine, getting signed to a record label—a turning point in her career directing music videos, documentaries and commercials. Or when she acts out a telephone call with a male executive, frantically shouting into a pink hairbrush in her hand: "Does anyone know any female directors!?"

She's used to that kind of obtuseness. When she pitched the concept for Women Under The Influence, a collective she founded that's dedicated to supporting female-directed cinema, the response she received was, "Aren't there only, like, five women directors?"

In conversation, her gentle blue eyes often wander in thought, sifting through her experiences as a woman in the film industry—a world she never deemed attainable growing up in Berkshire, a suburb of London, because maybe she too thought, there were only, like, five women directors. Adopted into a puritanical Scottish family, Denholm was not exactly encouraged by her parents to pursue a career in the arts, though an interest in film had always been present. She eventually signed with a modeling agency in London and entered the early Shoreditch rave scene. Amidst the confusion and lack of direction customary for someone navigating

their early twenties, she met a woman Denholm calls "feisty," named Mairead Nash; together, they formed a DJ duo, Queens of Noize, in 2002. This chapter, which began in 333 Club in Shoreditch, spanned over 10 years.

After a chance encounter with singer Florence Welch, "in the toilet of one of their clubs," Denholm says, she started doing creative direction for her band, which led to the ultimate catalyst for her career: a Florence and The Machine music video. "Suddenly, it was the first time I'd actually really known what I wanted to do, and I was 33," Denholm says.

In 2014, after making the move to Los Angeles where she continued to direct music videos for artists like Haim, Jennifer Hudson, and Jessie J—and land major commercials for the likes of Gap and Louis Vuitton—Denholm launched Women Under The Influence via Instagram. She was inspired by stories of pioneering filmmakers such as Frances Marion, a director and screenwriter who wrote over 200 films, and who was, as Denholm puts it, one of the founders of Hollywood that nobody's heard of.

Hoping to give visibility to female directors, Women Under The Influence explores work that defies traditional clichés and tropes often associated with female-driven stories. During the collective's event in March, director Ana Lily Amirpour screened her latest fashion film for Kenzo, a "dystopian, cannibal movie," Denholm says. A screening of Janicza Bravo's darkly comic debut feature film







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Lemon (2017) and a conversation led by cinematographer Babette Mangolte on feminist filmmaker Chantal Akerman's work were also among Denholm's most cherished events from that time.

"Women's interest' is my most hated phrase," Denholm says, adding that she wants Women Under The Influence events to be about stories that push boundaries and traditional female narratives—ones that are unique to a woman's experience but are not forthright in their connection to today's civil discourse. "The fact that I'm doing it is the political act, and now, do you want to talk about my film? When we're doing the screenings, it's about work," she says.

Denholm credits the #MeToo movement and Time's Up, along with grassroots organizations such as Women In Film, founded in 1973, for the industry's recent shift in perception. Prior to these, Denholm explains, she was guilty of perpetuating the problem. She would take the work she could get and never question if the sound person, for example, was a woman. Now she always questions: Who else can do this job?

Female-directed films like Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), a story about a sassy girl who doesn't get killed or married off but simply carries on, is a narrative Denholm deeply identifies with. There's *Morvern Callar* (2002) directed by Lynne Ramsay, a film that captures what it's like being in your own head as a woman, and Lisa Cholodenko's *High Art* (1998), an indie drama about a relationship between two women. "It's that sensibility of

you not being a symbol or standard for another idea that comes naturally to a female director," she says.

Producing events for Women Under The Influence is all about being curious. When Denholm took a trip to Orkney, off the north coast of Scotland, to visit family, she wondered if there had ever been a female director from the town. Sure enough, a woman named Margaret Tate had made independent films her entire life. She directed her first big feature film at 86 years old. These female creatives have always been there, Denholm reflects—it's just about lifting the lid to see what the mainstream understanding of the history of cinema has kept capped shut for so long.

The patriarchal overtone of the group's name nods to the ever-evolving industry that female filmmakers are fighting to navigate, and it serves as an homage to the women who came before them. Denholm borrowed it from John Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence*, starring Gena Rowlands in a performance she describes as one "where you feel like you've seen a woman." But Denholm also enjoys the double entendre indicating it's a collective of drunk women (this hasn't helped much with alcohol sponsorships, she notes).

"We still get slightly sidelined by being fed a lot of strong, exciting female characters written by men because that's what we're used to," Denholm says. "I love *Thelma & Louise*, but I think that when a woman makes the story, you don't go off the cliff."