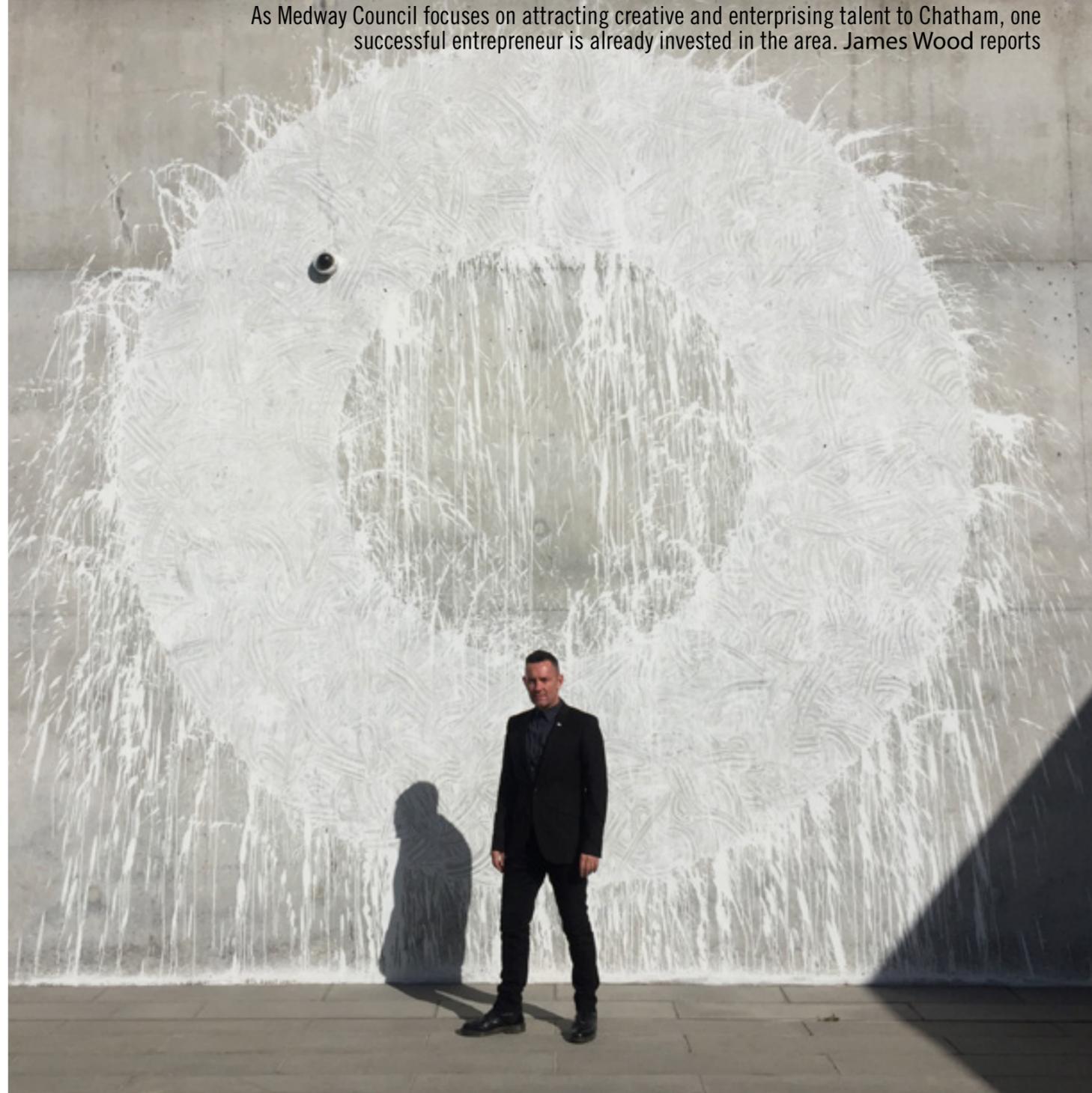


SCENE CHANGE

As Medway Council focuses on attracting creative and enterprising talent to Chatham, one successful entrepreneur is already invested in the area. James Wood reports



Chatham-based film-maker Simon Williams has worked with some of the biggest production companies, galleries, fashion labels, artists and bands in the country.

Beginning as a freelance photographer for Channel 4's archaeology programme, *Time Team*, Williams then produced hundreds of shorts, promos and documentaries during the noughties, including projects for music acts such as Arctic Monkeys – featuring poet John Cooper Clarke – Franz Ferdinand, Lily Allen and Amy Winehouse. Footage Williams shot of the latter performing was used on TV newsreels when she died. The film-maker has also showcased artists such as Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and David Hockney for the Tate Gallery.

It was 2001 when Williams moved to Chatham, a town he discovered and fell in love with on the way back from a short break in Whitstable with his wife. At the time, he was living in London among other artists in Brick Lane, Shoreditch.

"The town was very appealing because for me it was a chance to get more space to work and a bit of distance from the capital," he says. "It was also ideal because it was 35 minutes from the city, 40 from the sea and 10 from the countryside."

After a few months, Williams began to establish a network of friends and contemporaries who also worked in the arts. Among them was Chatham-born Billy Childish, the well-known painter, photographer, artist and musician, who lives nearby and remains a close friend and collaborator today.

In the 15 years he has been in the town,

Williams has noted changes in Chatham: "In the past, people here had a tendency to be quite self-deprecating about where they live, but it seems more and more people are following the same path as me and moving from London where they simply can't afford to be. New creative talent and businesses have brought an energy here in the last few years that I haven't experienced before."

Williams runs O Production, which he established in 2008 with his brother Ted – then a student at the University of Kent – after winning the Medway Design and Culture award that year. Commissions from some of the biggest cultural organisations in the country in the eight years since are testament to the film-maker's talent. These include



FAR LEFT: Williams, who manages O Production, outside a Turner Contemporary mural in Margate. **TOP:** A still from the Chatham Placemaking short. **LEFT:** With friend and collaborator, Billy Childish (left). **ABOVE:** Poet John Cooper Clarke, who featured on Williams' advert for the Arctic Monkeys album, *AM*.

galleries such as Barbican and Tate Britain, some of the country's biggest broadcasters – including the BBC and Channel 4 – and leading record labels EMI and Virgin. Williams' success challenges the ill-founded perception that creative people only triumph in the capital.

With an ever-growing portfolio of work, Williams splits his projects into three categories: the big commissions he works on with O, collaborations, as well as solo work. But it is a recent series of films that has allowed Williams to express his feelings about Chatham through his art.

This opportunity was provided by FrancisKnight, a public art consultancy which has historic ties with the Medway area, having worked to develop Chatham Vines in 2004, a vineyard of 32 Pinot Noir



vines grown hydroponically in St John's Church and commissioning artists to install work at Rochester Riverside.

Medway Council has now charged FrancisKnight with delivering the creative realm element of the £4 million government-funded Chatham Placemaking project to improve the route from the station to the waterfront.

Williams produced five short films, broadcast on a loop on a big screen at Chatham Waterfront, which was installed in 2015 (see details pages 17-18).

Railway Street and Military Road are the focus for these shorts. For one idea, phrases relating to changes in the town were superimposed onto street signs and public landmarks, interspersed with time-lapse shots of the roads and river.

It was one phrase in particular: 'these are our streets', which has been taken on as something of a mantra. As the upgrade of the public realm is implemented, the words will be embedded into the pavement using engraved granite as part of FrancisKnight's commission.

It is a sentiment Williams clearly believes in and through the Chatham Placemaking project, he has learned things about the town he didn't know

ABOVE: An emphasis on the Chatham community has been a key part of Williams' videos.

RIGHT: The film-maker has worked with world-famous clients.

BELOW: Williams has set out to show how Chatham's creative scene is flourishing.



“Businesses have brought an energy here in the last few years that I haven't experienced before”



before – such as discoveries that Vincent Van Gogh once walked through and that Charles Dickens drew on the Medway towns for some of his greatest works – inspired by both its people and the place. Williams says these are the stories that pique his excitement about Chatham.

Evidenced by the increasing presence of new creative startups, Williams believes his hometown is on the up: “Chatham has always had a pulse though,” he says. “But whereas before you had to know where to look, its reputation for innovation and creativity is now really starting to spread.” M