

## **ADRIANA SERRANO - CREATIVE STATEMENT, MAY 2026**

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As a Production Designer, I am committed to creating authentic environments that both serve a specific story and are visually engaging. I am responsible for developing the visual design concept from the script, creating breakdowns and budgeting for the art department, presenting designs to directors, scouting locations, and collaborating with department heads throughout pre-production and production. Through those choices, the audience can be fully immersed in the story. I am particularly interested in how the authentic representation of culture functions in film storytelling.

### **My Journey from Art Installation to Production Design**

My interest in the use and transformation of space started in my last years of undergraduate Art school in Bogota-Colombia. In my installations I studied the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, and how the perception of the piece could be transformed by the physical environment. My art pieces were immersive with a strong conceptual and cinematic feel.

After graduating from art school, I moved to New York City in 2000 to continue exploring my interest in the creation of immersive spaces. I was accepted into the MFA Program for Set Design and Technical Construction at Brooklyn College, a highly selective program that accepts only two students per semester. Before making my way into film, I spent three years as a Production Designer for episodic television in Colombia, work that demanded designing and overseeing large crews with fast turnaround while managing substantial construction departments. My first feature film as a Production Designer was *Entre Nos*, filmed in New York City. The film received significant recognition upon its release, including a Special Mention at the Tribeca Film Festival, the Jury Award at the Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival, and the Audience Award at the Newport International Film Festival. It was photographed by Bradford Young, later Oscar-nominated for his cinematography on *Arrival*. On *Entre Nos*, I developed a defined color palette that Bradford and I wove throughout the film through the sets and lighting. This experience sharpened my instincts about how production design and cinematography are fundamental to each other and must work in tandem to create a visually impactful film.

### **From Hollywood to Austin**

In 2009 I relocated to Los Angeles, where I built a sustained freelance practice over the course of a decade, working across features, television, commercials, new media, and music videos within the Hollywood system. That period taught me how to lead art departments of widely varying scale, from three-person crews to full studio departments. Over the course of my time in Los Angeles, I Production Designed more than sixteen features, eighteen shorts, and seven television series, in addition to music videos and commercials. In 2013, following the premiere of *Afternoon Delight* at the Sundance Film Festival, I was approached by APA Agency for representation and was accepted into the Art Directors Guild which were two milestones that marked my full establishment within the professional Hollywood system. Key projects from this period included *Afternoon Delight* (Directing Award, Sundance Film Festival), *Arcadia* (Crystal Bear, Berlin International Film Festival), *The Scent of Rain and Lightning* (Grand Jury Prize,

Nashville Film Festival), shorts produced through HBO Access, series for ABC and Netflix, and *The Obituary of Tunde Johnson*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival.

In 2019, I joined the faculty of the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin as an Assistant Professor of Production Design. That same year, *The Obituary of Tunde Johnson* had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival and served as the opening film of the Austin Film Festival. *Deadline* praised the film as a refreshing portrayal of identity, noting that its artful and sensitive depiction of a modern American teenager was unlike anything seen before.

The years between 2020 and 2024 were among the most disruptive in the recent history of the American film industry. The COVID-19 pandemic brought production to a complete halt in March 2020; though limited work resumed that June, the industry operated under severely restricted conditions for well over a year. Before a full recovery was possible, the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes of 2023, the most significant labor action Hollywood had seen in decades, shut down production continuously from May through November, roughly six and a half months. The simultaneous intensification of runaway production, as studios relocated shoots abroad in pursuit of tax incentives and lower costs, further contracted opportunities for American crews. The fact that I continued to produce work reaching major festivals, national distributors, and streaming platforms throughout this period reflects both professional resilience and sustained industry demand.

### **Getting It Right: Cultural Authenticity in Production Design**

As a Production Designer, I am acutely aware of how the design of a film shapes an audience's perception of "The Other" on screen. I am meticulous about avoiding superficial or stereotypical representation, especially with underrepresented cultures. This has been a consistent commitment throughout my career and one that has made my work stand out.

*Afternoon Delight* takes place in Silver Lake, a trendy neighborhood in Los Angeles. The neighborhood's culture played a crucial role in the film's narrative. Rachel's home and character (played by Kathryn Hahn) was designed to fit the culture and tell her complicated situation. Stay-at-home moms have been stereotyped many times in films, so it was important to craft her as a woman with many layers showing the complexity of her situation. *The Devil You Know*, was written and directed by Charles Murray, known for his work on *Sons of Anarchy*, *Luke Cage*, and *Criminal Minds*. I created a believable environment around a middle-class Black family in Los Angeles. The film was distributed by Lionsgate and released nationwide in AMC theaters and on streaming platforms. In *The Obituary of Tunde Johnson*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in Fall 2019, I built a convincing portrait of a wealthy, coming-of-age Los Angeles world grounded in the protagonist's Nigerian heritage. In *Las Hijas de Rosalía*, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2025, I wove elements of Bolivian visual heritage into the design of the central domestic spaces, grounding the film's intimate relationship between the mother and their daughters.

*Jagged Mind*, directed by Kelley Kali and produced by Hulu and Disney+, presented perhaps the most research-intensive cultural design challenge of my career. The protagonist is a Haitian American woman living in Miami. I undertook sustained research into Haitian visual culture, artistic traditions, and material history before making a single design decision. That research culminated in the curation of a body of work by Haitian and Haitian-influenced artists for a

fictional gallery that functions as a recurring, symbolically central location in the film, a design choice grounded in cultural knowledge.

### **Designing for Emerging Voices**

Working alongside emerging directors who possess distinct and powerful voices and whose films challenge viewers on multiple fronts has been challenging but also deeply rewarding. The great majority of indie features involve working with first-time feature directors with ambitious aspirations and limited industry experience. My work is fundamental in helping these productions look and feel like bigger productions. I am consistently guiding directors and producers into making decisions that are going to work on camera. Most of the films I have worked on have gone on to reach major festivals. This is something that has directly informed my practice as an educator. I am passionate about teaching students how to elevate the visual quality of their projects.

### **Expanding the Frame: Documentaries, Commercials and New Technologies**

Along with my narrative work, I've worked on production design for non-fiction, both documentaries and commercials. In January of 2023, I designed the sets for the recreations of a documentary about the life of Yogi BhaJan, directed by Joanna Forscher and produced by Film-45. All the sets were designed for natural settings in Wimberly, Texas, with dancers performing in the foreground. As a Production Designer, I was faced with the challenge of navigating construction in Austin, as well as designing abstract sets that would complement the natural surroundings and align with the story being told. This TV series premiered at SXSW in 2024 as a part of their TV Spotlight series. I also Production Designed a commercial project for Indeed, that I needed to translate concept images generated in AI into five different physical spaces constructed on a studio set. This project connected my research into how new technologies are affecting and transforming Production Design.

*Indeed, Career Scout* offered an opportunity to explore how AI-generated imagery is being integrated into the conceptual design process during pre-production. While AI tools are increasingly used to develop and communicate visual concepts quickly, translating those images into physically constructed environments remains a largely unsolved challenge in practice. This project gave me a firsthand opportunity to navigate that translation and to understand both the possibilities and the limits of the technology at the point where the digital meets the physical.

*Las Hijas de Rosalía* presented a different kind of technological challenge. The design called for grapefruit trees at different stages of growth, so the foundational set elements were built on location and a VFX team was contracted to extend and transform them digitally in post-production. Even as tools like Unreal Engine expand what is possible in virtual production, physical set construction remains essential to creating convincing worlds.

As a Production Designer I must ensure that my vision aligns with the director and the producer while working within a specific budget. What fascinates me about this work is the capacity to create in service of a story by identifying words on a page and translating them into physical reality, all while thinking through how to execute a vision within a specific window of time. I also must ensure that period accuracy, cultural representation, and costume all cohere within a unified visual logic.

## **Collaboration, the Crew, and Working as an Educator**

Production Design is never a solitary practice. It is constitutively collaborative with directors, cinematographers, costume designers, VFX teams, stunt coordinators, and the art department crews I assemble and lead. In independent film, budgets are lean, schedules are compressed, and the gap between a director's vision and the resources available to realize it falls on the design department to bridge. That context demands the capacity to develop a complete visual language quickly, to hold that language under pressure, and to find solutions to unforeseen problems without compromising the integrity of the original design concept. On every project, whether a Hulu streaming feature, a Lionsgate theatrical release, a festival short, or a commercial campaign, I solve problems that the budget did not anticipate, and the schedule did not allow for.

Since joining the faculty of the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin in 2019, my position at UT has been fundamental to my continued development as a working production designer, keeping me relevant to my students and active in my field. I have never understood my practice and my pedagogy as separate activities. They are in continuous and intentional dialogue, each shaping and sharpening the other. UT research grants have directly supported my professional practice by covering travel expenses that keep me competitive for projects beyond Austin. These projects give me new knowledge and experience that I bring directly back into my courses. My active professional network has allowed me to connect students with local productions. I have been able to hire students directly, giving them professional experience alongside their academic training. I push my students to do extensive research, to resist stereotypes, and to understand that how a space is dressed is never just an aesthetic decision, it shapes the audience's perception of the story.

## **Looking Ahead**

I am actively attached as Production Designer to *Body Shop*, a feature film directed by María Mealla, selected for the NALIP Media Accelerator (2024) and the PGA Create program (2024), and a finalist for the Tribeca-AT&T Untold Stories initiative (2023). The project is currently in pre-production, with the proof of concept scheduled to film in the summer of 2026 and the full feature projected for production in 2027. I am also pursuing opportunities in episodic television and other long-form narrative work through my agency. The film industry in Texas is growing, and more opportunities are coming to the state.

At UT Austin, I intend to keep improving the integration between my Production Design courses and other production classes, so that students continue applying what they learn in the classroom to live productions, raising the quality of film work coming out of the Radio-Television-Film department. Staying current with emerging technologies, including virtual production and AI-assisted design tools, remains an ongoing priority, both for my own practice and for what I can offer my students. I constantly aim to keep connecting students with the industry as building a network while a student is vital to their success. I am also developing a body of personal research at the intersection of film, installation, and interdisciplinary practice, examining how designed space actively shapes different narratives.

Across twenty-plus years of practice, I have come to understand Production Design as something that shapes profoundly how stories are told and whose stories are visible on screen. I aim to continue deepening both my practice as a creator and my commitment as an educator in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at The University of Texas at Austin.