

CRAFTING AWARD-WINNING SET DESIGNS

WITH ART DIRECTOR LAUREL BERGMAN

Owen Shapiro 00:04

Welcome to Kino Society with Owen Shapiro. Welcome back to Keno society. On today's episode we have Laurel Bergman, a production designer and artist who comes from a strong art director background. Laurel has contributed to many of the most successful feature films of the last decade 2012 Godzilla 50 Shades of Grey mission impossible for and she has worked with the industry's leading actors, producers and acclaimed directors. What's more, Laurel's contributions have been recognized by the Academy Awards, the BAFTA Award for Best Picture and the Art Directors Guild Award. Let's get to know Laurel and her work a bit better. Hi, Laura, welcome to the show.

00:47

Hi.

Owen Shapiro 00:48

So clearly, with your extensive professional experience, it's necessary to start this interview from your very beginnings. How did you find your interests in our direction and production design inside film industry?

00:59

Well,

Laurel Bergman 01:00

I started in sculpture and installation, really. But I think it was, you know, before that, just in general having an unwavering spirit of curiosity. And you know, wanting to live a full version of myself, I stumbled into film, really, and it just there's a world opened up for me. And it's been growing ever since. You know, it's about being brave. And it's about examining what's uncomfortable, which, you know, film is all about that. It's about reading constantly, which I love to read, and, you know, embracing multiple views of one story. And, you know, I'm constantly reminded every day that there are people doing great things, and it inspires me to participate alongside them.

Owen Shapiro 01:48

So you have training and experience in industrial and architectural design, right?

Laurel Bergman 01:53

Yeah, um, you know, I did, I did get my degree in sculpture and installation, and then, you know, sort of developed my architectural side of things, because I was sort of gearing towards, you know, studying sculpture to integrate with architecture. And until I ended up, you know, with film, and it all came together, really, in a job I didn't even know existed when I was younger. So I'm very, you know, I'm happy to have found this, this media, you know, I've always been interested in how fine art and architecture and the outcome of you know, immersing someone into a new environment provides a new perspective and ways of seeing or insight into our own narratives. And light, color and composition, have always been in my toolbox for as long as I can remember. So production design was a natural progression of this expression.

Owen Shapiro 02:44

So how did you end up finding?

Laurel Bergman 02:46

Well, I had student loans I needed to pay back and I needed a job. That's, that's the simple answer. And I found a shop that was building things. And it seemed like a natural fit with, you know, all my hands on experience. And then I met, you know, going on set and then meeting the paint coordinator and telling him about my, you know, art background and fine art painting, he said, Well, come join the paint department. So I did that. And then I joined the sculpture department, and I was on, you know, the floor in the construction department, doing sculpture. And then through all that, I joined the props department, because I was making mechanical things and machining and mold making and, and all these things. And so I've really, you know, I've really explored all those sort of practical sides of making a film from the art and production design side of things, which I think is rare. I've, I've since learned, as you know, many people just sort of stumbling into the art department. And, you know, they don't have the practical hands on experience. So I feel fortunate, really.

Owen Shapiro 04:03

So how do you think that going through all these departments helps you in your career in your career Do you have today?

Laurel Bergman 04:10

Well, it gives me an understanding of how to make things, you know, what can be made, and where to where to fit all the departments together? Because, you know, in the art department, we start orchestrating every department together, how they, you know, everyone ties into each other and how we need only to work together. So it really built the foundation for a fluidity of communication that I'm, I am grateful for

Owen Shapiro 04:42

when it comes to your specialties, art direction and production design, immediately to mind. Can you describe the difference between each role and how they're different from other

Laurel Bergman 04:51

production design is you know, you have to talk the director about you know, what the story is behind everything. And each item you dress into a set tells that story and a history. You know, a production

designer, someone who takes a script or a story and builds worlds around that story. And we translate these worlds into a visual language and cinematic storytelling. And we're, you know, designing beyond just a set, it's moving art. And the art director, in turn, sort of works in parallel with the production designer, and takes all the details that are required to build the set and just expand them and gets, you know, gets the project going. They're like project managers. So you have to, as an art director, you kind of have to know how to step your toe into the production, design, look and feel and all this sort of emotions and, and you know, all the language that needs to be told, but at the same time, you need to flip it around and actually physically build it and understand how to do that.

Owen Shapiro 06:01

So can you describe a typical day as an art director and production designer?

Laurel Bergman 06:04

Well, typical day is waking up at 435, depending on, you know, what, what time call is, and getting to the set at least an hour earlier. Just making sure that everything is in place, all the departments are there, everyone has their, you know, required shopping list of what plays that day. And, you know, you stay there, you make sure it's all you know, all good. And then you wait for the director and the DP to show up and start blocking the set. So within that, you know, I usually stick around and make sure that they can they get the first shot off, and they're happy. At that point, I peel away, get my car, drive to the next location, because you're always, you know, five steps ahead of production. So usually it's either back to the office, or you're on to, you know, the next location that might be playing tomorrow. You know, if you're in the next location that playing tomorrow, then you're you're making sure that everyone's on track, and then we're going to be able to deliver the next day. Then back to the office. And then checking in, you know, what are the new drawings on the table? What are the what are the graphics, department needs, what information and just sort of weaving that that all together, and you know, it possibly maybe by that point, you need to cut, get back in your car and drive back to set because there's a lunchtime meeting, because the director and all the heads of department who are on set can't leave and you need a meeting about what's planning in the future. So that usually, you know, happens halfway through the day during the shooting, shooting crews lunch, and then you know, make sure they're okay, again after lunch, and then you know, continue continue the same really,

Owen Shapiro 08:01

have you encountered any more severe problems? Or things that's really wrong and says, oh, heck, yeah.

Laurel Bergman 08:12

You would, you wouldn't be in film? if, if, if you haven't faced any of those? Yeah, I mean, of course, there's, you know, I've experienced on the revenue, you know, we had an entire service access road washed out and you know, stranded crew that day. You know, you name it weather is usually part of what makes things extreme or change changes the schedule on a dime. At that point, you know, if you if you can get the crew back to either another location or back to stage for a cover set. So you can lease, you know, get them get something out of your day.

Owen Shapiro 08:55

Yeah, The Revenant seemed like a very tough film to film.

Laurel Bergman 08:59

Yes, it was, it was. It was definitely different. But well, well worth it and very rewarding in the end.

Owen Shapiro 09:09

Yeah, the end result ended up losing. I liked the movie. And a lot of people did.

Laurel Bergman 09:16

Yeah, that's, that's the nature of film.

Owen Shapiro 09:19

So could you describe a typical day as an art director?

Laurel Bergman 09:24

Yeah, so an art director, you know, mostly in light. If it's your set that's playing that day, then you open set with the production designer. So you you know you're there an hour early with the production designer, and making sure everything's good if the shooting crew is needing sort of more art service base decision making, you know, the production designer who needs to move on to the next set will leave the art director they're on set to just make sure that everyone's okay, but again, you know, they peel away and go back to the office. And, you know, check in with the set designers making sure that you know, whatever revisions or you know, new drawings are being created are ready to show the designer. And, you know, also, you know, graphics and whatnot. And then also just, you know, following up with all the details with all the different departments,

Owen Shapiro 10:24

so what about eight days of production design?

Laurel Bergman 10:26

Well, the day as a production designer was same thing as an art director, but a little more intense. But again, you know, like, You're, you're always the persons are, is always sort of in connection, and in good, you know, sort of dialogue in communication with the director, you check in with the director, and, you know, and producers, and just making sure that they're sort of vision or, you know, sometimes they can't have a chance to call or email or whatever. So, you know, a conversation just to check in with them, to make sure that, you know, you're in tandem with their vision. You know, it's just that relationship is, is pretty much distinguishes the production designer.

Owen Shapiro 11:13

So production designer has more work to do. Definitely,

Laurel Bergman 11:17

yes. And no, I mean, it's all, it's all a lot of work. It's just a different sort of level of conceptualizing. Yeah,

Owen Shapiro 11:27

wait, which of these two production professions most fascinates you?

Laurel Bergman 11:32

Oh, production design, I love it. My natural sort of ability ease are very conceptual, and just really sort of painting the picture alongside, you know, the other artists, the director and the DP. I feel fortunate that I get to do this.

Owen Shapiro 11:49

Alright, so have you participated in a lot of more iconic films as well, like Godzilla? 2012, and 50 Shades of Grey? How did that feel for you? And which movie of your extensive portfolio? Did you enjoy it the most? Well,

12:07

I

Laurel Bergman 12:10

you know, I think I they're all very different. And, I mean, that's why I love film, because it's, there's no carbon print to get to the finish line. And that's the part I enjoy most, you know, the rapid prototyping the creative flow that that carries it. So, you know, they're, they're all they're all very different. And the, they, the sets are, are very, incredibly different. I mean, I enjoyed The Revenant only because, you know, I was outside for nine months, straight through the winter, and hiking and some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. So, you know, but I did that doesn't take away from, you know, loving, designing things, you know, and doing things let's say 50 Shades of Grey when you're, you know, you're doing high end offices, and you know, looking at all this beautiful architecture and getting to recreate it. So, I find it really I find that question, usually hard to answer because I love all of it. And, but what I love most is how dynamically different each show is.

Owen Shapiro 13:25

Yeah, petitions are great. The province of Finland more way more into writing, it still looks like a movie. You haven't watched it? I have I've seen it. I've seen it. It's

Laurel Bergman 13:38

you know, okay. I mean, realistically, the What I love most about 50 Shades of Grey is a that movie came out in theaters, right at the end of when I was filming The Revenant and I was tired and I was you know, exhausted. I was just beyond that point. And I my friend of mine said okay, now I'm dragging you out. We're going to the cinema. So we're going to go see 50 Shades of Grey because you worked on that and I want to see it so fine. I'm like okay, fine, we will go see it. So we're sitting there in the theater and I'm already a little fried and watching this film and watching it all unfold all the all the hard work unfold before my eyes and in that moment, I realized it's all just ridiculous. Like, it's just you can't there's a part of you that that needs to be passionate about what you do, but you can't get so caught up that it just you know, it destroys you. So it was I love the 50 Shades of Grey for that because it really sort of took me outside of myself and realized how silly it all is,

Owen Shapiro 14:49

is definitely a silly movie.

Laurel Bergman 14:55

Hey, but it made a lot of money.

Owen Shapiro 14:56

So made a lot of it's got two sequels as well.

Laurel Bergman 15:00

Yes, exactly. Yes, I, I had to read all three books because you got to design for the future. So when we're designing the pentose, you know, you got to make sure there's a service access door by the elevator, because in Book Three, you know, he runs away. And I remember finishing the first book, and I hurled it across the room, and I was like, I'm never gonna get that time back.

15:25

But

Owen Shapiro 15:26

I have not read the book. If it ends, like the movie, and it's really bad if the first movie

Laurel Bergman 15:33

sequels Yep, goes to show you that, you know,

Owen Shapiro 15:39

so how did you get hired in all these movies,

Laurel Bergman 15:41

it's really about community really, and, you know, you build a community of people that where, you know, they sort of know your strengths. And you know, depending on also the availability of you know, who's in town. You just, it's, it's like anything, any kind of work, you slowly build a reputation. But the trick is to get your foot in the door, and to do a good job and just be open minded. And not, you know, close to anyway.

Owen Shapiro 16:18

I mean, actually, the last interview I had, the person I was interviewing said that word of mouth is the most important thing.

Laurel Bergman 16:27

Yes, absolutely. 100%. Yeah.

Owen Shapiro 16:30

So you're particularly interested about bringing in new technology inside the filming worlds? Could you tell us more about this?

Laurel Bergman 16:37

Um, well, I mean, look, what they did on Mandalorian, you know, in the volume, I love technology. And I love new inventions and new ways of doing it. I mean, it goes to the old sort of tricks that they used in filming with Charlie Chapman of, you know, perspective, all that sort of, sort of tricks of the eye and, and new developments. I find fascinating, I have a very mechanical technical head. And so I really gravitate towards exploring new ways of doing things.

Owen Shapiro 17:15

So do you think that's improvements in technology can bring forth a lot more illusion of film and make way for different kinds of storytelling as well?

Laurel Bergman 17:27

I think it can, I mean, you got to be careful that it doesn't drive the actual story. And what happens a lot with these new technologies is, you know, everyone gets on board, but people are so absorbed into trying to resolve the issues around the technology that you lose sight of actually making a film, which, you know, that's just the natural progression of things. But yeah, I mean, listen, it's, it's, we're all here doing, we're all interested in this and filmmaking, you talk to anyone that, you know, has been in film long enough. And, you know, we all thrive on this kind of exploration and, and new ideas. It's interesting. It's fascinating. It's fun.

Owen Shapiro 18:21

So as you may or may not know, I'm currently doing an internship with a director and I hope to have a professional career in filming one day, do you have any advice for people like me who want to make it big into the film industry,

Laurel Bergman 18:34

just stay true to your passion? You know, and, and, and keep, you know, the best filmmakers in this world are nothing but pure passion and creativity, and it's tapping into your inner genius that in reality we all possess, I mean, some just have been fortunate enough to understand the value and know how to utilize this gift. But I mean, I've seen directors get lost in this passion, which is okay. But the flip side of the practicality of making a film and managing the people and the relationships you have on set, you know, can get tricky. And usually, it's about the frustration of communication. But your will has to be strong. And you have to believe in yourself. I mean, those are my two cents, at least. I haven't directed before, I believe. So. That's my, my Coles notes for you.

Owen Shapiro 19:27

So you've already built a steady professional career in the film industry as an art director and production designer, what's next for you?

Laurel Bergman 19:36

Just continue, I mean, to really sort of take the momentum and the the skill set I have from, you know, all my art directing and really just sort of changing, changing the statistics of production design. I mean, listen, we have a 16.7% ratio of female production designers out there and you know, and Only 1.5% of

those are racialized women. So, I mean, I see that as a challenge and a need that, you know, that hopefully will change. I mean, there's there's no reason why I can't 2021.

Owen Shapiro 20:18

Almost,

Laurel Bergman 20:19

almost, I think I skipped ahead.

Owen Shapiro 20:23

This year already.

20:24

I just blocked up

20:26

here.

Owen Shapiro 20:29

Yeah, speaking of this, dear being a miss, there is a pandemic across the country recently, how has this affected your workings? The film industry as a whole? Well, I

Laurel Bergman 20:42

mean, as you know, the film industry is put a pin in things, but it's like within the last month, it's it's gotten back to work. But it's not without its challenges. I mean, the COVID protocols, from what I understand for people who are, you know, knee deep into it now are testing once a week and TP and you can't go see the SATs, because, you know, you have to get permission. So there's a big, there's a big sort of dollar amount and time leg amount that is hard to I mean, it's short films challenging enough. So it's really, it's really slowed the process down and, you know, people in the same office have to zoom to talk to each other, which is fine. I mean, these are all really good things to participate in. But it's hard for, you know, driven people in the film industry to slow down and, and not just jump ahead. So I really think that a, I think we've blown through the content, and there's definitely, you know, need out there for more films and TV and, and all that sort of stuff, which is great. I mean, I think that's amazing. But yeah, I mean, listen, we just, we just have to do this safely. And hopefully, we'll find our feet.

Owen Shapiro 22:09

Do you think that any of these safety procedures are going to be kept for even after this pandemic?

22:15

I think that

Laurel Bergman 22:17

I think we've all been educated on how to, you know, just to be mindful of how germs are spread, you know, like, there might not be the m&m jar anymore in the in the craft service room, um, that Miko, but I

think that, you know, I think I think it will have an impact, I think people will, for the most part, returned to normal once, you know, once we get the all clear, and it's safe when we have the virus, because we can't help ourselves. We love to just, you know, get in there and just go go and make films The best way we knew how. But I think that there'll be some slight changes, like maybe on set doing intimate scenes, you know, there could be a new approach to that. We'll see. It'll be interesting.

Owen Shapiro 23:06

So finally, where can my listeners find and connect with you?

Laurel Bergman 23:11

Well, I'm on Instagram at Laurel Berkman, or at my website, Laurel Bergman calm. And that's about it. I keep the social media to \$1 or

Owen Shapiro 23:23

so. That's all for today. Thank you very much for this interview world. Don't forget, you can subscribe to penis society on iTunes and Spotify.

Laurel Bergman 23:34

All right, well, thank you so much. I appreciate it.