Building the Visual Concept of a Movie with Samuel Lisenco

Owen Shapiro 00:04
Welcome to Kino Society with Owen Shapiro. Welcome to Kino Society. In today's episode we have Sam Lisenco, a production designer and actor known for his work in movies such as Frances Ha, If Beale Street Could Talk, Uncut Gems and Good Time, welcome to Kino Society Sam. So what exactly did you want to become a production designer,

Sam Lisenco 00:31
I went to film school and had latched on to some creative friends who were making stuff that I really believed in, I did not I knew I didn't want to be a director. But they didn't. At the time, they weren't teaching production design in most film schools around the country, not even as an elective. So I sort of presumed since I didn't have internal impetus to be a director, but I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker in some some capacity that my role would be best suited being a producer. So early on with some of the short films that may my buddies were making, it made logistical sense for me to kind of be in charge of creative necessities for upcoming elements of all the shooting stuff, but also kind of the driving force behind tomorrow's preparedness. And as the content we're making got bigger, I started to realize that the logistical aspects of day to day production didn't, I didn't find them as enticing as the creative aspects. And so I started to naturally fall into a more aesthetic driven role. Still in this kind of coordination sphere, and it wasn't until maybe a year or a year and a half out of college, when we were considering ourselves professional filmmakers only in that we're trying to figure out how to pay our rent doing it, that I decided, oh, well, there's a subdivision of film production that speaks to me. And that's something that I can I can try to get better at. And so I, I took, I took whatever jobs I could on, quote, unquote, real sets, you know, as RPA, or lead man or set dresser or whatever I could just to kind of understand the logistics behind what being a designer actually meant, and hoping that it would make me a better filmmaker, when I returned to make movies with my stupid friends.

Owen Shapiro 02:18
So where did you go to school,

Sam Lisenco 02:21
I went to Boston University, where I grew up in New York, and I was dead set on going to NYU and I had gotten in. And then in the 11th hour, I had a radical change of heart and decided that it would be best for me to leave New York for a while and experience another city. So I went to Boston University, and that's where I met, initially met Josh safdie. On the street, there was kind of this subconscious radar, that I was a displaced New Yorker, he was a displaced New Yorker and became we became fast friends, and we wound up becoming roommates, and also had all the same film classes together. So we started, I'd say, probably the middle of sophomore year, we started spending all of our time together, just trying to figure out how we can make stuff.

Owen Shapiro 03:01
So what is a average day at your workplace? Well,

Sam Lisenco 03:07

it varies, it would be a cop out answer to say it varies from job to job, because I feel like anybody who engages with film and has to create various worlds from movie to movie would feel that way. But I think what's more interesting about the job is that it varies from the start of production to the finish of production. So early on in the process is kind of an information gathering period. So for the first two to three months of the preparatory period before photography begins. I'm really just delving into as much research as I can Wikipedia and Google Images and Library of Congress and Getty any secondary or tertiary resources that are available BVA private museums to research whatever the subject matter of the script is. And it sort of reaches a point pretty quickly, where I'm engaging with a director oftentimes, before the cinematographer begins. So one hopes that I get to a place in which I can talk at some level of specificity about whatever the subject matter is of the script. So it's very, it's a very heavy research period initially. And throughout that process, I'll be working on a lookbook. And just clarifying for my own personal edification, and for my ability to communicate later on to the rest of the art department, but also with the filmmakers engaged on an earlier basis, what I think this movie should look like and being very clear about what I don't know yet, so that we can get to a place where we we all have a shared vision, generally speaking of what the movie should should one day be as we get closer to production, it becomes a little bit more logistical. So the back half of the prep period before photography starts would be a lot of materials and finishes and approving architectural drafts and overseeing the process of gathering all the materials necessary for execution, working with the prop master and you know, doing show and tells with the director, just just making sure that at bare minimum, one would hope that the first week, two weeks, two and a half After weeks of photography is taken care of enough that you know, we're there's forward momentum building the sets, you know, checking on the on the build sites, that kind of thing make any last minute tweaks and then when we shift to photography, and this isn't true for every designer, this is just my process, obviously. But when when we get into physical production, I kind of in some capacity and I use this word this phrasing with, with the utmost respect for for the cinematographer and director and anyone else who's out there on set making the movie, but in some capacity, I'm sort of like a tomorrow director, I'm just worried about what's coming up for the crew so that when they arrive on set, any creative or aesthetic consideration has been exercised ahead of time enough that they have the tools they need to make the movie. So that may mean something as simple as the couch is going to go on the side of the room because I have a feeling that the cinematographer, when he was talking about the wide shot is going to want to be on the other side of the room and he's gonna want to look this way. It may also mean this color is gonna look terrible. With the costumes tomorrow, we have five hours, we got to repaint this wall. And it may also be oh my goodness, we showed up and they're doing construction across the street, we got to get the location manager to try to grease the wheels a little bit with these guys so that they can shut down construction tomorrow. But basically, when photography starts, I try to I'll show up at the call time for the shooting crew. A walk through the day's work with the director and cinematographer make sure that they feel comfortable, stick around for the first few shots and then usually I kind of peel away to be left alone to go deal with tomorrow's tomorrow's work.

Owen Shapiro 06:35

So what kind of creative conflicts Do you get into with the directors and photographers etc.

Sam Lisenco 06:41

I mean, that varies wildly based on the crew dynamics and the personality of the filmmaker. And to a certain extent the level of specificity of their vision going into it. You know, some directors are more visual than others. And you want to try to fill out a situation in which you're giving them the leeway to communicate their aesthetic value set without inhibiting that process. You know, I've worked with some directors who have a vision of very, very considerate and specific vision for what the movie should be. And you don't you don't want to buck that unless there is a consideration that they haven't verbalized, in which case it becomes a discourse. I've definitely fought with directors before. But I think as long as it's for the betterment of the final product, the truthfulness of your interpretation of what the movie needs to be not necessarily the script page, then I think it's always for the greater good in the long run. But you know, on a micro level, it could be as simple as wall color, or wallpaper or rug treatment or a piece of furniture or something and a grand scale, it can be as heavy as a general misdirection for a location pick, you know, I'm going down the road of picking options for locations with the location manager to present director and they're way off base, even though I was very confident that that was the direction we were headed in, you know, it can it can lead to a space where you don't feel like you're on the same page. So I think, you know, it's really just about getting to a place where you're having this sort of a static love affair with the director enough that there's a shared language so that they can trust you enough to leave you alone kind of sketch in 80% of the movie so that they can then dictate the rest.

Owen Shapiro 08:10
So how do you think production design has evolved over time?

Sam Lisenco 08:14
Well, I think it's a very cool professional of a sudden, I think it was it was underrecognized Some time ago. That's not to say that it doesn't get swept aside a little bit, I think in in terms of the average viewer, but I think for people who can really digest cinema as an art form and break it down into its pieces, it's sort of a golden age of production design. And I think that there's a couple of converging factors that have created that environment, one of which is the fact that we've really kind of been subjected to a good decade now, film school, having replaced, you know, sociology and psychology for creatively minded people who didn't know what they wanted to do with their life. So there's a lot more filmmakers out there than there used to be, which is forcing those who are really passionate about it to think creatively in new ways. And I think that that's opened up new conversations about what individual departments are capable of. So in in that regard, I think there's a much deeper pool to swim in. And it's drawn a lot more attention to production design. But you know, it's also in perception, especially with access to the internet where people can pull stills and digest imagery in a way that they couldn't a generation ago.

Owen Shapiro 09:17
So are there any projects that you made that looking back on you like the most or that you enjoyed the most while making them?

Sam Lisenco 09:26
I think if you and the team that you're working with are really emotionally engaged with the fiction and and really, it's kind of what I'm starting to mention before but if you are, if the Venn diagram of your of your perception of the movie is shared enough with the director, cinematographer producer, it can be a

really rewarding experience and it varies from movie but I've had life experiences that have been tied, intricately tied in every facet with the fiction that was being made, you know, for example, I designed the movie eighth grade. On that film, you know, we, the director, Bo Burnham, and the producer, and the cinematographer and I shared a house. And every day we would make the movie. And then every night, we would cook dinner together and talk about tomorrow's work. And it became this kind of summer camp experience where we spent this summer in this house in the woods, trying to figure out how best to achieve this fiction in a respectful way. And so you walk away from this experience, having made this thing that you're proud of, but also having shared the experience of making it and that varies from movie to movie. So I think, given the career trajectory, and taking into consideration the fact that the access to financial resources I've had has changed from, you know, obviously, the movies I'm doing get a little bigger sometimes. And it's allowed me to do grander things aesthetically, but I don't think that there's anything necessarily that I would have changed going back. Like, I think that I've been very careful to make the kinds of choices that I think I would be proud of 10 years later, when I approached the day to day more, I don't look at a movie now thinking, you know, this would be great if I did it right this second, it's more like it, I'm not going to be proud of this thing. When I'm looking back at everything I've done.

Owen Shapiro 11:05
At the same time, is there any one or a few projects that were the most tedious or challenging

Sam Lisenco 11:11
every single project, you know, in this kind of persona and capacity of bringing life to this dead script? I think every picture poses incredibly, if you're doing it right, every picture is a nightmare, every picture you're in, you're in a wartime position. Certainly there are movies in which the scope of the movie doesn't necessarily align with with the budget. And that becomes a different set of challenges. I also think existing relationships, aisle makers can be tricky to navigate. You know, I've been making movies with safty brothers for between 15 and 20 years now. And we fight like cats and dogs. But it's only because we've known each other so long. And we've experienced each other's range of creative impulses in such a deep way that, you know, there's no bullshit and we just get straight into fighting. So that can be very hard sometimes, because I know, I know that I know their methodology so innately that it goes straight to Bluffs, and that can be very stressful. On the flip side, there have been times with other filmmakers where I just met them yesterday. And so I'm walking on eggshells, because I don't know how best yet to inject myself to to bond with them without alienating them. You know, there have also been times where I've had an inherited a movie that had begun prep with a different designer, and you have to be considerate of the fact that that that may have forged a relationship with a filmmaker where anything the private says will be considered wrong, because I'm coming in in which an aesthetic language has already been established with somebody else. So I think it's really more about kind of feeling around in the dark, to best gauge how much of a pain in the ass any particular movie is going to be. Because they're all they're all nightmarish. If you're doing them right, to a certain extent, you know, even if you're having the time of your life.

Owen Shapiro 12:52
I mean, like with the safety brothers movies, so productions are really, really good. So I guess the fighting does pay off. Yeah, I

Sam Lisenco 13:03

mean, it's always for the betterment of the of the final product you hope, you know, it's never it's never just fighting for the sake of fighting, I think it's more the frustration of giving a shit so much that you're willing to, you're willing to throw yourself on some kind of philosophical sword in process. And that can that can get pretty draining. Certainly, you know, as it is, with a lot of outdoor filmmakers, I've had the very good luck, I think comparatively to a lot of other designers in my age range, specifically, of having worked with primarily our tourist filmmakers, as opposed to kind of studio guns for hire. And I think in that regard, there's a certain level of assumed respect that you approach any creative conversation with them with because they've proven themselves as having vision in the past. And so you want to be able to nurture that and understand their process. And that process shifts from from person to person, how best to engage that so I can definitely lead to some like intense moments from movie to movie, but it you know, hopefully it never comes to blows. So

Owen Shapiro 14:02

what's your favorite parts of being a production designer?

Sam Lisenco 14:06

To be frank, I might I love being left alone, to try to digest the world and execute it before the the shooting crew has shown up. So for me, the moment in which the set is fully dressed and lit, but nobody gotten there yet. You know, it could be five minutes before call time on the day of it could be the night before, when it's really only the director and the cinematographer that I've seen it. But those are the moments that I think I get the most enjoyment from the craft because in that space, you've created this dimensional fictional world that is fleeting, it's temporary. It's only for the purposes of documentation on screen, it's not permanent. When the call sheet goes out and the shooting crew shows up the next morning inevitably it gets shattered to a certain extent because the you know, the grips are going to have to move that bad so they can put the lights down there and the sound guy is gonna have to push his his cart of equipment right behind that closet door that you so carefully ate a jar. But there's this kind of beautiful window quiet right before the movie happens when you're standing there alone as a designer with a decorator oftentimes, and just going through the script in your head to try to figure out any potential outcome that could be at the request of the director or an actor or thinking about you know, it, could the actor want to open the store? Should we put things in this drawer there, there aren't enough magnets on the fridge. They've been here 20 years, there should be magnets on the fridge, that kind of thing to get into that headspace is in some ways, I think, similar to an actor's process. And for that I just I like the solitude of being in that environment without having anybody else around

Owen Shapiro 15:42

you at the same time, aren't there? Isn't there an entire crew that's working on production?

Sam Lisenco 15:46

Yeah, no, of course. But there's always this kind of quiet moment where oftentimes it's 8pm. The night before it's going to that set is going to get shot. Where your set dressers, your lead man, your set dressing crew have gone home, the art directors gone home for the day, they've closed out the office,

the shooting crew, camera, sound script, supervisor, grips and electrics, they're going to show up at 6am. And right in that window at 8pm. It's perfectly dressed, it's ready to go all the lighting has been roughed in, but nobody's going to be there for 1012 hours. That's right, right, in that space is where I'm happiest I think.

Owen Shapiro 16:21
So do you have any favorites movie or director

Sam Lisenco 16:24
there's certainly movies that I revisit aesthetically that I find inspirational for my methodology in design. And usually that winds up being films that were born out of a practical nature but still are consider it their surroundings. A lot of those winds up being 1970s American films, just because I think the nature of the budgetary restrictions and the creativity behind the writing forced filmmakers to to stop and take a breath and think about what they were executing on film. So films like The Friends of Eddie Coyle, or Paul Schrader's blue collar movies like that really kind of get my creative juices flowing as to what you can perceive as beautiful and execution, even though it might be mundane to the human eye. And then in terms of the spirit of filmmaking to a different degree, it's the more I engage with making movies, the harder it is for me to watch movies and, and purely escape because I think about craft. So for me when I'm, you know, on a Sunday afternoon, when I'm watching, when I'm like dozing off in front of the television, the stuff that I really love is like lethal weapon to or Die Hard with a Vengeance where the craft has been so well executed, that even as a designer who works on Hettie cinema, I don't have to think about the process of escape. I'm just purely lost in the fact that Samuel Jackson and Bruce was have eight minutes to get down to Wall Street or whatever. So for me, it's this kind of dichotomy of digesting meaningful film, trying to figure out what is something that makes an audience feel a certain way, aesthetically, when they're looking at a frame.

Owen Shapiro 17:53
Also think that's movies are mostly about the balance of kinds of media you consume.

Sam Lisenco 17:59
I think that there are considerations to be made in that regard. Like I would never talk ill of film as beautiful as menari, which is not built purely for escapism. But I think that understanding the facets of trope and escapism and how to channel an audience is an integral part of the moviemaking process. And it's something that's universal, it's sort of the equivalent of reading a comic book versus a novel. And there's something kind of mainline in the vein, biological about the Guardian thing of a beautiful girl and a gun. And for me to get to that place easiest is often with a crappy movie that I love, as opposed to a movie that makes me think about the craft. What would you say to someone who wants to enter the world of cinema, I would never say to anyone not to engage with the art form, I would never dissuade anybody from engaging with film. I think that anybody who's interested and has no access currently, or is on the path to learning about how to make movies, the one thing that I think is most important to digest is that unlike most other art forms, not all art forms, but most other art forms. It is a collaborative medium in every capacity. And if you are not comfortable playing well with others, or don't feel like you have the resources to work with other people, then it's going to be much harder to experience what film as an art form can give back to you as a creator. And for me, that's the reason I

am drawn to it. I didn't I you know, I didn't want to be a painter or fine artist or install photographer. I like the creative interaction with other souls. And that got me to a place in film that makes me very happy. So I think that that's the one thing I would give people a heads up about.

Owen Shapiro 19:42
Do you have any current projects that you're working on? Well,

Sam Lisenco 19:45
because of the virus, things kind of got put on hold for a while, but hopefully it's looking like Yes, I'll be starting up a picture in the fall directly by Todd Haynes about Aggie

Owen Shapiro 19:56
How can my listeners connect with you

Sam Lisenco 19:59
my contact Information is online. I have a website, just my name calm, Sam, calm and I'm extraordinarily more accessible than

Owen Shapiro 20:07
I probably should be. That's all for today. Don't forget, you can subscribe to Kingdom society on iTunes and Spotify.