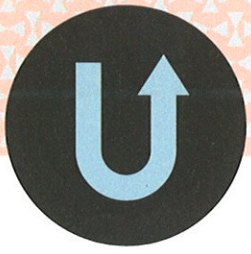


UPPERCASE



*a magazine
for the creative
and curious*



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PLACES/SPACES



*mary
prlain*

SET DECORATOR
new york city

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOS BY
JENNIFER CAUSEY

How did you get into set decoration and props?

I acted in the theatre as a child but always had my eye on everything else going on around me. My mother was the registrar of the natural history department of The Oakland Museum in California. They have a history and an art division that I spent hours wandering around in. I was influenced by many things there: art, colour, paint, old fashioned stoves etc. Anything that wasn't from a department store. At home we had an extensive array of art books. My friend's mom was a hippy ceramicist with a kiln in their garage. She hung out with artists like Robert Colescott and people who worked for Sam Francis. She introduced me to foreign films shown in Berkeley and that developed my film eye (and I watched a ton of TV). My acting faded but I continued creating artificial realities through set design in college. Later in regional theatre I worked in the property departments, making quill pens, aging books etc. I was also a scenic artist but once in New York City I got swept up by TV commercial work and TV shows. I was accepted into The Lester Polakov Studio briefly before working professionally through the film unions IATSE local 52 and United Scenic Artists 829. I did print work later on. With a fellow scenic we painted the walls of an apartment in the famous Dakota building. If you stand on 73rd Street and look up you can still see our work through the windows! So, basically I guess I grew up around objects and colour and their use in the moving image.



What is the best thing about your job?

I know this will sound mad, but, the best part of my job is all the free food. And there is a lot of it. No, seriously, I believe the best part would have to be the search for what is needed for each script or TV spot. For every job that needs something ordinary there is always something more unique like, say, an origami flower or a macro mini spy microphone. The search goes beyond Google and I am always out at prop houses or flea markets as well as using the usual sources for whatever is needed. I also have myriad off beat places I use for things. My whole game plan is set by what the script says and what the production designer has designed. I have to use those guidelines and work together with the rest of the art department and set dressing crew to make a great set or a great prop work.

What is the most challenging?

Well, every job comes with its own set of challenges. Weather can really ruin my day if I am out on the streets trying to get a taxi in the rain buying a last-minute prop, or I spent five hours wrangling some special gag for a TV show and the night before it's to be used the writers want something completely different. It seems that it's either a time thing or a script thing or a budget thing that can cause the most stress. You just have to go with the flow.

What would be your dream job to prop and design sets for?

Well, anything that takes place between 1913 and 1970. Maybe 1939 Poland before the War. I like European backdrops but it might also be great to do some really fabulous MGM-style film. Studio back-lot stuff all the way! Yes, I prefer period details but hardly get to do it anymore since leaving the theatre. (Music videos are different, anything goes there. I've done many.) I can incorporate antiques into a set when the character might have that sort of flair. Or use all 20th century modern stuff when a set has to be clean and linear. Most commercials that sell

certain products just want a nice fresh background or "eye wash" so the frame won't be too busy. The product being sold is usually front and center. Everything is determined by the ad agency or director and the production designer. I'm just the messenger.

What is your favourite era to dress a set for?

Again, I really don't get to choose, I just show up. I'm lucky if there is a flashback to 1950! The script and characters determines the time period and what is used. Or with a commercial, the storyboard concept by the creative at the ad agency. In New York it is very easy to do the 1970s. There are a bunch of sources for that kind of stuff. Also, with all the amazing antique furniture showrooms in NYC, films set at the fin de siècle are also very doable. We have great upholstery and drapery shops, too, that can make any period authentic.

Being around so many interesting things from all different time periods, do you have any favourite things to collect for yourself?

That's a tough one. I have a large library of books of period styles and furniture and printed ephemera. Books on textiles, patterns, Gio Ponti's designs and a book on the History of Wallpaper, so I basically have an eye on many different things. But I guess I would have to say that I like a good graphic design; a Paul Rand poster, the logo on an English candy bar. Eastern European designs like the shape of a Soviet era enamel coffee pot. Things that remind me of places; old travel maps and souvenir post card books from the former USSR. Russian animation and/or packaging is always a heart-stealer for me. Old matchbooks with cheap three-colour printing process and block shadow lettering. Plastic or metal tin press toys from Chinatown wrapped in rough, grey cardboard boxes sealed with copper staples and nestled in excelsior. I may do sets filled with Knoll furniture but my 113-year-old apartment would look silly dressed in Corbusier so I tend not to do at home what I am often asked to do for my job.



ELEPHANT PROPS
elephantprops.com



Mary's secret sources

There are many talented set decorators and prop people in New York City and Los Angeles and each coast holds different resources. We all have our secret places but I think we are all in agreement when I list these NYC go-to places that are essential to almost every job:

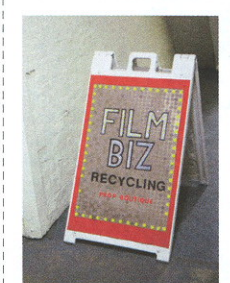
For rentals on the East Coast, **State Supply Equipment and Props** for everything from sports trophies to old boom boxes and kitchen sinks. **American Foliage** for all your fake forest and landscaping needs. **Film Biz Recycling Prop Shop** is a place to buy or rent leftovers from TV and film shoots. The first real green prop house in New York. Everything that is at Film Biz has been donated by production companies diverting tons of waste from landfills every day. **Elephant Props** is a small tabletop rental company that specializes in glassware, dishes and beautiful trays and assorted painted surfaces. All perfect for use in food photography and kitchen sets. Online, we love **Bridge Furniture and Props** and **Mod Prop**. With their entire inventories online, it makes sourcing faster. **Eclectic Encore**, another prop house, has also gone online while still maintaining their three-story showroom. For period light fixtures one stop propping at **City Knickerbocker**.

The Brooklyn Flea Market as well as the Flea Market in the Garage on 26th Street in Chelsea are also great places to find that perfect thing. Especially if you have the time to shop there. Atlantic Ave. in Brooklyn has a great antique row with a few 20th Century modern places like **Bright Lyons** or **The Horseman Antiques** that tends to have every century covered.

As for theatrical weapons, I couldn't conceive of doing a police show without the great guys at **Weapons Specialists**. Their knowledge and expertise saves us a bunch of screen time. Need a rubber knife or plastic AK-47? Look no further. They will even make it for you. **Brooklyn Model Works** is another great place for fabrication. They'll make giant Alka Seltzer tablets or custom make almost anything. And if we can't find exactly what we want chances are we can find it online or in Chinatown!



AMERICAN FOLIAGE
americanfoliagedesign.com

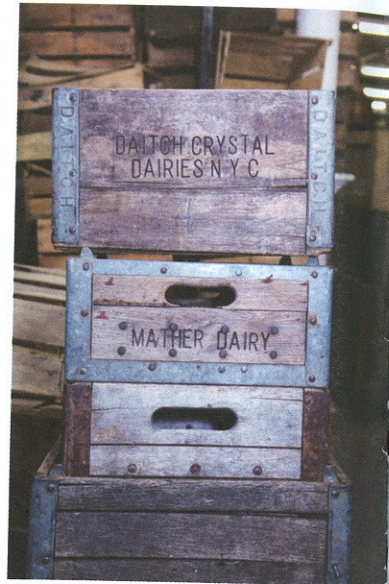


FILM BIZ
filmbizrecycling.org





STATE SUPPLY
statesupplyprops.com



Mary's favourite places in NYC

CHINATOWN: **The Mee Lun** Joss store. Joss is a form of paper trinket that is burned as an offering to dead relatives. The Joss can be a suit and tie or a set of straight white teeth or a gold watch, all made out of paper to be burned for the dead. The designs are amazing and creepy at the same time. Mee Lun is filled to the rafters with everything you need for these ceremonies.

to time travel and do research off the computer screen. I like **Fort Defiance** restaurant in Red Hook. Simple wood paneled décor against white walls squeezed into an old corner storefront. The place is intimate and timeless with a hint of New York Harbor a stones throw away. Yummy breakfast, strong coffee, simple dinners.

UPPER EAST SIDE: **The Carlyle Hotel** lobby: Art Deco fabulousness. The Bemelmans Bar inside the Carlyle is also a time capsule with charming, painterly wall murals by Ludwig Bemelman of Madeline book fame.

The Garment District, too, what is left of it, holds pocket-sized shops selling sewing supplies and vintage ribbons. In 1900, women wore wide brimmed hats decorated with French ribbon or German-made felt dusted flowers. Some of these notions can still be found there.

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN: The old **Williamsburg Savings Bank Building**: intricate Moorish-Deco clock tower with amazing tile work inside. Similar to the tile inside the Woolworth Building in downtown Manhattan. Limpid blue mosaic tile that shimmers like the sea. The bank mosaic tile depicts the signs of the Zodiac constellations.

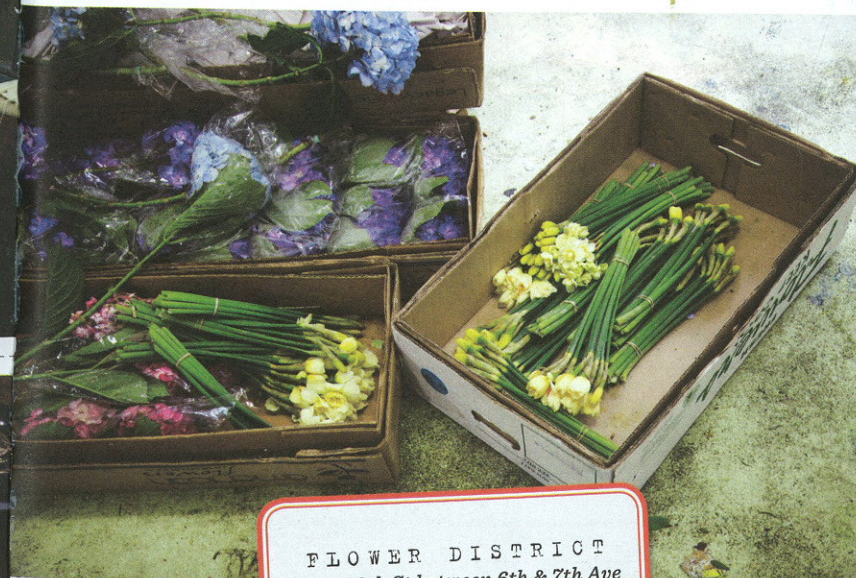
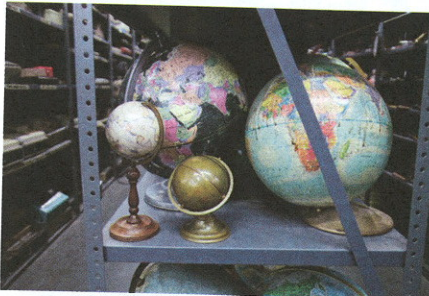
Workingman's Alley in Brooklyn Heights. A tiny mews of red brick cottages surrounding a fountain and fern garden. These houses originally built for the men who worked on the Brooklyn Bridge Construction. The tiny offset brick patterns and tiny stone steps leading to the front doors. A fantasy of masonry.

UPPER MANHATTAN:

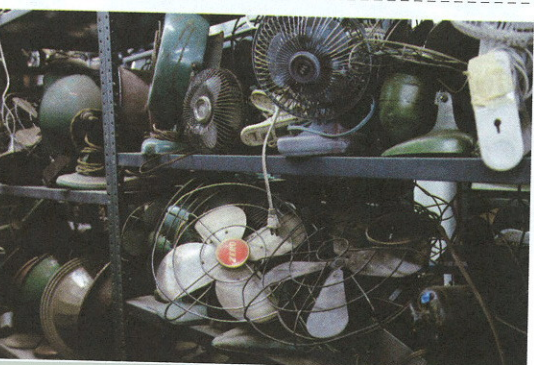
The Cloisters: or I call it "fake Europe". Collections of religious art and tapestries with ancient, cool stone arcades surrounding lovely herb gardens overlooking the Hudson. Gargoyles, bell towers, fountains. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which maintains The Cloisters, has a new Greek and Roman Art wing: a beautiful white arcade with sun that streams in illuminating the ancient statues and art. Marble floors, tiny baubles, ancient blue glass bits and colossal plinths carved into basins fit for the gods.

Eisenberg's Sandwich Shop in the Flatiron District. Everything we do to make a fake New York City diner lives for real is this envelope-sized egg-creamy: stainless counters, soda fountain, swivel stools and chowder board menu. There are many other places but I'll end with Cortlandt and Mechanics Alley. Both gritty and authentic and favorites for film locations and just to wander through. ①

maryprlain.com



FLOWER DISTRICT
West 28th St between 6th & 7th Ave



McNulty's Tea and Coffee in the West Village hasn't really changed much since it opened in 1895. Creaky wood floors, old black metal tea containers line the back shelves, bags of coffee beans and shelves of teas and coffee from around the world. Dimly lit as men work the time-worn wooden counter. This location is a favourite for shooting in. Used many times in commercials and films that want that Old Time thing. Also, Fanelli's Café in SoHo, with tobacco stained tin ceilings and gas lights. Many of the old tenements that line Oliver and Eldridge streets in the more grittier areas of Chinatown. Those building still have the same foyers and mailboxes. It's easy

