

PERSPECTIVE

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Duster

A SUN-BLEACHED WORLD OF MEMORY, MYTH AND MOTION

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A lone payphone rings on the side of a two-lane road in the blank heat of the endless desert—no highway, no signage, only a red mirage humming on the horizon, screaming toward the camera. A “Rally Red” 1970 Plymouth Duster fishtails to a stop beside it, engine ticking in the sun.

This opening, the inspiration of showrunner J.J. Abrams for the series *Duster*, gave me everything I needed to start to build this world—a place where velocity meets the road’s refusal to end, where purpose collides with the endless changing unknown. And at the heart was the machine that would carry the characters through it all—built for escape, but bound by need, memory and the ties that tether them to home—the Duster.

Imagining *Duster*

The spark of J.J.’s idea and showrunner LaToya Morgan’s captivating scripts led me to think about four main design principles I would use to form our approach; first, space—not as character, but as a charged arena—a pressure trap waiting to trigger emotional release. Next, motion, which can liberate or entrap. Then, style—the Southwest not as a place, but a dream, built from dreams of expansion or harsh realities of displacement. Finally, color as protest—a way to pry open nostalgia’s sepia lens and let the true, primary hues scream through space

I don’t believe space is a character—characters have agendas of their own. Space, as designed, is instead a stage: a measured field where dreams, delusions and dangers play out. Space can cradle a

secret or broadcast a threat; it can compress a soul or let it breathe. It can let characters be themselves or hide what they choose. And in *Duster*, the stage is forever shifting. It’s 1972—when the myth of the American frontier still coated the Southwest like dust, yet the asphalt of modernity and the brightly lit conceit of Americana and road culture had already begun to seal it over. The sets would be dynamic—the series would always be on the move, and each setting, even if never returned to, had to be the part of a road trip memory the audience would share with the characters.

Motion

My earliest memories of the Southwest are flashes caught from the back seat of a childhood station wagon: sun-warped motel signs, hand-painted gas station signs, totem poles, the primary color streak of a hot rod tearing past. Nothing ever sat still. That sensation—vistas and mesas interrupted by bright signs of life—buildings and cars glimpsed at eighty miles an hour—needed to be what made the design of *Duster* to not only be about place, but about pace as well. Our sets needed to feel provisional, like brightly painted mirages we were watching our characters approach, exist in, or many times, escape or outrun.

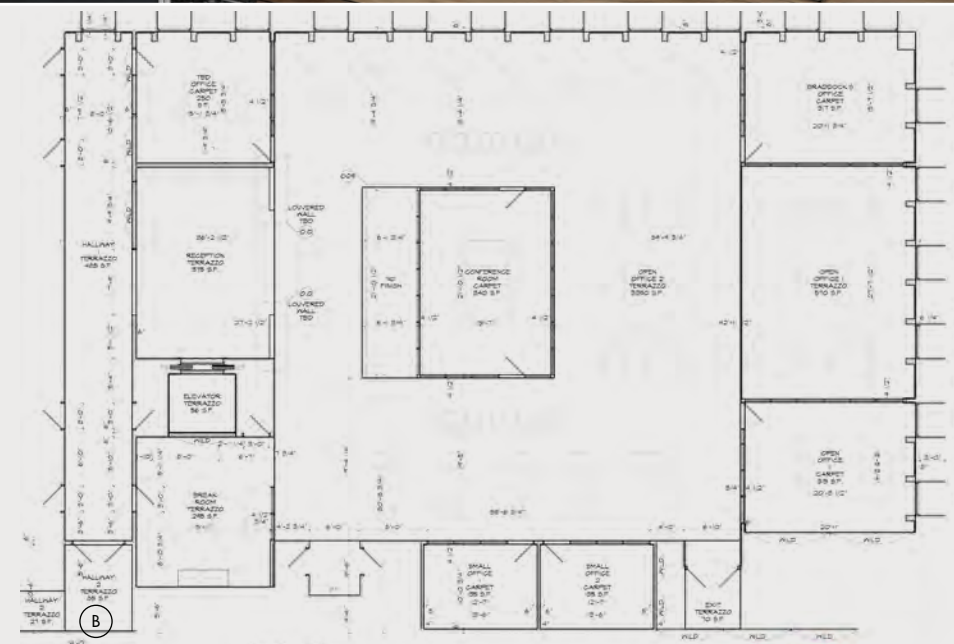
Style

Every period show and every designer walks the line between verisimilitude and stylization. Tip too far into photorealism and you reproduce yesterday’s imagined wallpaper; lean too hard into stylization and the artifice eclipses the actors.

A. CAN’T MISS DINER. SET SHOT ON HISTORIC ROUTE 66, ALBUQUERQUE, NM. ILLUSTRATION BY SVEN JOHNSON.

B. NACHOS CON DIOS. SHOT ON HISTORIC ROUTE 66, ALBUQUERQUE, NM. ILLUSTRATION.





I wanted textures, colors and spaces authentic enough to evoke memory, yet arranged with intent, always rooted in the characters and story to build a world oscillating between memory and motion, fact and fable, just like the Southwest in the 1970s.

Color

Film and television love to fossilize the 1970s beneath rust, avocado and harvest gold. Digging through the roadside archives of my favorite 1960s and 1970s photographers, I found a truer memory: unapologetic primaries—traffic-signal red, mailbox blue, caution-stripe yellow—burning against stucco neutrals. The Art Department papered our walls with William Eggleston's abandoned places and old signs, Stephen Shore's motel courts and diners, Ernst Haas' motion blur and saturation, Ed Ruscha's gas stations and

billboards, Hockney's bright, graphic optimism. There were definitely winces about a primary palette of only blue, yellow and red at first. But once I shared concept art, reference photography and even paint decks from cars of the era, the idea clicked across the board. What emerged was a new color story for a period too often flattened into secondary color shorthand. We wanted different, bold, graphic and emotionally charged.

Starting on Stage

Duster follows Nina Hayes—the FBI's first Black female field agent—as she collides with Jim Ellis, a grief-haunted getaway driver. What starts as a modest cops-and-robbers drama, balloons into a conspiracy story told on a national scale, dragging the viewer from sun-bleached desert roads to all the way to the White House. This series would be going out into the world a lot, but first we had to start with the biggest set of the show.

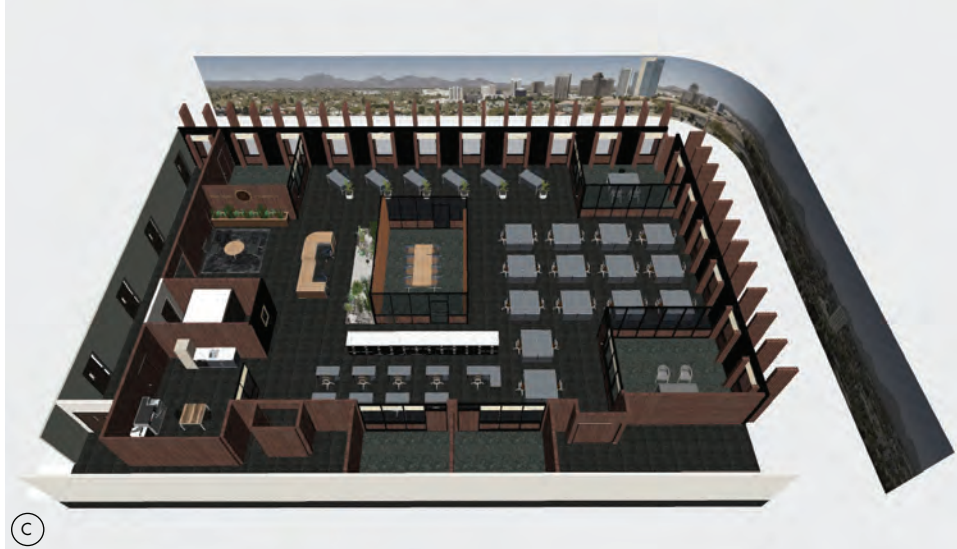
Of all the sets designed for *Duster*, none carried the conceptual weight or technical complexity of the Phoenix FBI field office. It wasn't just an office. It was a pressure chamber. From the beginning, I gave myself a challenge: to subvert the audience's expectation of what a 1970s FBI set should look like and really make it work for the journey of the lead, Nina, recently assigned to Arizona by her own cunning design. In Hayes' narrative, she's surrounded by a system that wasn't built for her. A world that wants her visible for optics but silent. The set had to make that emotional geography real. So, the design started with something radical: a glass room at the center of the set. Not off to the side, not boxed in—dead center. From there, the crew built outward. All around that glass room, we installed articulating wood shutters—adjustable louvers that allowed us to shape light and shadow, but never truly conceal. They offered the illusion of privacy without the reality. And that illusion was essential to the design. Nina's presence unsettles the institution, and the space had to reflect how precarious her position really is. She can't hide—not from her colleagues, not from the institution, not from us. Her solitude would be framed in every reflection.

A. PHOENIX FBI OFFICE. ILLUSTRATION BY SVEN JOHNSON.

B. PHOENIX FBI OFFICE. PLAN.

Next, I decided I did not want any hallways to escape to, no corridors, no exits. There's no retreat. Nowhere to go but forward. Nina is always on display—never quite allowed to belong, yet too substantial to ignore. She has arrived at the center of the bureau's operations, but is at the center of its scrutiny. So technically, the build was one of the show's most demanding. The entire 7,000-square-foot set was visible from any angle. Every surface had to be camera-ready from any direction. Instead of linoleum, hanging fluorescents and painted panels, we used marble, terrazzo, glass and concrete. Lighting it required over three hundred individual coffered ceiling sections; each rigged for independent control. This gave the production pinpoint accuracy—letting us isolate Nina in a pool of fluorescence, or have the lights full blast when all eyes were on her.

The conference room and office are metaphors, they are a prison of transparency—an inverse panopticon where power does not hide behind walls, but watches from every angle. And in the middle of it all stands Nina: still, determined, bearing the full weight of being first and seeking revenge.



As there were no hallways or interior walls, the design team had to think carefully about how we would accomplish seeing out almost two hundred feet of windows that looked out on a period Phoenix. This wasn't something you could find in a stock or archival library. What resulted was a mini-production of its own to create a 189-foot day/night translight—an effort almost as complex as the interior set, brilliantly led by Art Directors Paula Dal Santo and Madie Hays. The first step was boots on rooftops. We hired a location team and photographers from Phoenix to gain access to a series of buildings that would have roughly matched the elevation and sight lines of the set. From seven rooftops, they shot

C. PHOENIX FBI OFFICE.
SKETCHUP MODEL BY LUKE
FREEBORN.

D-G. PHOENIX FBI OFFICE.
SET PHOTOS BY JAMES VAN
EVERS/HBO.



Downtown
Phoenix

Midtown
Phoenix

Camelback
Mountain

Initial Comp V1.1



panoramic stills of Phoenix. This photography gave us a starting point, but it would obviously need to be altered significantly. What we captured was modern-day Phoenix—so most of it had to go. The team digitally removed the post-1972 buildings and other intrusions. Then came the harder task: reconstructing what would have been behind them in 1972.

That meant deep research—referencing historical maps, city directories, local archives and even personal photo albums. The Art Department had to reconstruct historically accurate buildings and landscapes behind the modern elements we had removed. Then, we added the atmosphere: a layer of golden 1970s smog that sat low over the city.

But Phoenix isn't only a skyline. Just like *Duster*, it's a city defined by the geology that holds it. So, the background was extended further, adding the signature craggy hills and stone-ridge lines that frame the desert basin. The translight wasn't just a background for windows. It had to hold up in every shot and lighting setup, across glass reflections, and in night scenes with orange sodium vapor light thrown onto the concrete columns the crew built on

the exterior of the stage set to give a real element between the window and the backing.

What was created wasn't just a backing of Phoenix. It was Nina's destiny—a landscape where she came to get revenge and find justice. From the moment she walks in, the city is there, looming—looking, judging, expecting. It doesn't blink. It doesn't shift. It doesn't care. It's part of what traps her. The power of that set was its duality: a space of supposed openness that revealed every inequity. It was a chamber of judgment that she would eventually claim as her dominion.

Out of the Stages and Into the World

Once the Art Department established the emotional and architectural DNA of the FBI set, it was time to expand outward—into the world beyond glass and steel. Our base of operations was Albuquerque, which would stand in for Phoenix and, in many cases, the broader American Southwest. And in that transformation, our secret weapon was Shani Orona.

Shani, the location manager, was a quiet powerhouse. Her ability to see potential in overlooked architecture was a huge asset, and she

A. PHOENIX FBI BACKDROP.

B. PHOENIX FBI BACKDROP IN PROGRESS. BUILT AT CINELEASE STUDIOS, ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO. SET PHOTO.

C. PHOENIX FBI BACKDROP. PRODUCED BY JC BACKINGS. SET PHOTO.



was an amazing collaborator. Albuquerque is a city that hides its history in plain sight—strip malls built over motor courts, mid-century signage swallowed in beige stucco. She helped peel it back, not only by finding practical locations but by intuitively understanding the feeling I was chasing. I didn't want postcard-perfect spaces. I wanted environments that felt lived-in, forgotten, ghosted by time. Her work wasn't just logistical—it was emotional too.

Route 66, Albuquerque's long-forgotten commercial corridor, became the show's backlot. Once a radiant artery of mid-century Americana, it had been weathered by decades of decline, of mid-'90s sprayed faux stucco covering true architectural gems—lunch counters with steel awnings, neon-lit motor inns, curbside gas stations. We found many locations that the supremely talented James V. Kent and his team raised from ruins and transformed into sets that shined. A shuttered 1950s diner—a cannabis dispensary and barbecue joint in its more recent incarnations, was restored it to its former glory and became the Can't Miss Diner. The crew sourced original booths, uncovered photographs from a



1920s owner, and staged hot rods to glint through every window. A defunct gas station swallowed by weeds and graffiti became a charged junction where storylines collided. A '60s modernist building, now a gaudy pawn shop, became a backdrop for Jim's pickups and drop-offs.

But *Duster* wasn't confined to Albuquerque. As the show's emotional and narrative scope widened, so did our geography. Over eight episodes, the series traveled across the country to create and recreate iconic American locations: Howard Hughes' suite at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, Elvis's honeymoon home in Palm Springs, a South Philadelphia street frozen in Nina's 1950s childhood memory, and even Nixon's Oval Office.

D. CAN'T MISS DINER. GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY ALAN CHAO.

E-F. CAN'T MISS DINER INTERIOR. SET SHOT ON HISTORIC ROUTE 66, ALBUQUERQUE, NM. SET PHOTOS.

G. SOUTHWESTERN LODGE EXTERIOR. SET SHOT ON HISTORIC ROUTE 66, ALBUQUERQUE, NM. SET PHOTO.





homes. These omissions were deliberate. Instead, their emotional journey is revealed through seeing their shared or inherited spaces, like Jim's childhood home, a sprawling mid-century relic transformed by his stepmother's relentless kitsch decorating. It was a house in conflict: Spanish tile under shag carpet, florals fighting geometry, grief concealed by pattern. A place for Jim to depart from, not come home to.

The Dusterverse in Print and Paint

Graphic Design was a huge part of creating what I call the Dusterverse. Often, I advocate for re-creating real products from archives or research, but this project had a totally different approach and we wanted to create our own version of brands and corporate logos. Graphics were having a heyday on roadsides across America in the 1970s. I wanted them to feel authentic, even though they were completely fictitious. Honestly, this is one of the harder things to do in films—to make something that's not real but doesn't scream fictional. The show's incredible Graphic Designer, Alan Chao, was an absolute ace at building some of these brands which would be seen throughout the series: Vortex gasoline stations, AstroFudge candy bars, Oro De Carrasco tequila, Hooks and Ladders cereal, Mr. Fizz soda, a board game called Oh No, Armadillo!, Continental Gold cigarettes,

A. BOWLING ALLEY EXTERIOR. VFX SIGN MOCK-UP.

B. SOUTH PHILLY STOREFRONTS. SIGNAGE LAYOUT.

C. SOUTH PHILLY STREET. ILLUSTRATION BY SVEN JOHNSON.

D. SOUTH PHILLY STREET. SET PHOTO.

E. MR. FIZZ GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY ALAN CHAO.

F. NACHOS CON DIOS AD. GRAPHIC LAYOUT.

In total, the crew created well over one hundred environments: a Greek-American wedding venue, a biker bar in the desert, a decommissioned power plant, a small-town bowling alley with an Elvis theme. We had to treat each set like a sand painting—meticulously conceived, vivid in texture, but usually designed to serve a single emotional beat, then wiped away when the story moved forward. That transience was part of the ethos of *Duster*. The characters are in motion. The truth is always elsewhere, forward. Even our most anchored spaces were just stops on the road.

And some spaces told stories not by what they revealed, but by what they refused to show. Viewers never see either of the lead characters'



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Mr. Fizz soda.



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Achieve better burps with a bubbly blast of soda!
Mr. Fizz will put the pep in your afternoon step.

(E)

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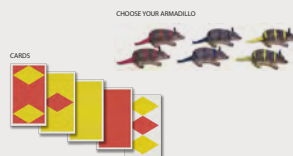
Friday & Saturday
10 a.m. - Midnight

NACHOS
CON DIOS



(F)

BOX DESIGN



(G)

BOARD GAME DESIGN



Graphics by A.C. scale: Not to Scale WPP 01 04.03.23

and a fast-food restaurant called Nachos Con Dios, complete with a poncho-wearing mascot in the shape of a tortilla chip. Alan didn't just design the graphics; he always presented them in the context of an advertisement, a grocery circular or a billboard to create not just a logo or packaging, but a whole concept of a brand—something so fundamental to the show's roadside aesthetic. These weren't pop-culture references; they were collective memory fragments turned into iconography, the kind of branding you could swear you'd seen before on a freeway, even though it never existed.

Because the road is steeped in contradiction—of memory and truth—both a promise and a trap. It

offers the illusion of freedom, but the lines on the pavement always point you back to who you are. So, when that car skids to a stop beside the phone—engine ticking, dust still hanging in the air—the audience is back at the beginning.

But now we know what it means. Now we understand that the payphone isn't a relic; it's a crossroads. That the desert isn't empty; it's charged with myth and memory. That every frame isn't just a shot—it's a frontier: between character and landscape, between longing and arrival, between the lies we inherit and the truths we drive toward. **ADG**

Jonah Markowitz,
Production Designer
Paula Dal Santo,
Supervising Art Director
Madie Hays,
Art Director
Jamie Gordon West,
Assistant Art Director
Thomas Minton, Jean Harter,
James Maloof,
Set Designers
Alan Chao,
Graphic Designer
Sven Johnson,
Illustrator
James V. Kent,
Set Decorator

G. OH NO, ARMADILLO!
GAME. GRAPHIC LAYOUT
BY ALAN CHAO.

H. LAUNDROMAT
ILLUSTRATION BY ALAN
CHAO.



(H)