When Sundance approached me to write an article about the Red Road I was flattered but a little surprised. I then spoke to publicity and they said “we’d like you to talk about your challenges on the show” and that suddenly made more sense! The Red Road is a project of blood sweat and tears for sure. A very well written script, very smart creative producers and a talented director like James Gray sounds perfect, then of course there was the shooting on location in Georgia in the summer for what was New York/New Jersey in the fall, and the “no money and no time” combo... and a pilot going straight to series!

We began the project by taking a research trip to an area at the border of New York & New Jersey, where the story is set. Coincidentally it is where I grew up and I was quite excited to do a project set there. I am so grateful that Sundance felt it was worth sending us. It’s always great to be able to absorb the details of a place by standing there and to see what the director responds to or is inspired by.

While driving through an area of the Ramapo Mountains James Gray spotted a mask of President Reagan nailed to a telephone pole. That began a discussion of photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard’s images that became one visual theme of the show. We also noticed how apparent the textures of weather were in this region; the pocked asphalt where puddles form, the damage to the streets from snow and salt, the raised foundations to protect from flooding. These textures, and the subject matter of the scripts, made me think of the photographs of Jacob Riis. Those black and white photos with the textures of tweeds and wools, bead board stripes and wallpapers, age and grime became another inspiration. The other ever-present theme was the forest. Reading Aaron Guzikowski’s script the feeling of the mystery of the forest and the strength and graphic of trees was very moving. James kept asking the question “what happens in the forest” how do we visually show what happens in the forest? What we eventually tried to do was to use weather to show the world alive and create a common experience of that weather. James invited the DP, Ivan Strasburg, and myself to his house for dinner to discuss the look of the show. Ivan was unable to make it but James and I hit a common cord talking about painters and decided for palette to look toward Caravaggio for the Native American group and the Fauves for the Whites. It was important to James from the beginning that all characters be sympathetic and real. We wanted their worlds to be real too, but to be considered, not purely observational.

We had our first Atlanta scout right on the heals of the NY research trip. That is when reality set in and we knew it would be a tough haul balancing conceptual inspiration, respect for the setting of the story and the reality of what we really had to work with. All the other “creatives” spent 2 days in Atlanta and headed back to LA or NY. I stayed behind to work with the location manager in Atlanta.

We decided pretty quickly not to build on stage for several reasons. I think the best reason was that the story was so involved with the earth and our relationship to it and to each other that camera had to be able to pass interior to exterior seamlessly which we could not afford to do on stage. That created another challenge in finding locations close enough together that the shooting company could make their days and that we could hold for the pilot and the episodes immediately following. It was a continuous challenge as things were so far apart. What turned out was that we built and dressed each interior that we found. We found shells in differing stages, so what wasn’t spent in location fees was then spent in art direction. It gave us enough control to have a shot at actualizing some of the concepts we’d discussed.

While scouting I assembled a local art department and was very lucky to find Rob Simons as my art director and Kristie Thompson a decorator I had worked with in LA. While they were scrambling around measuring and shopping I began our concept boards. The Red Road is about two culturally, racially and economically different groups of people living in the same area, sharing a history of conflict. So I went with two separate boards built around two palettes incorporating many of the ideas we had discussed. The Native American world would have rounder shapes, warmer tones, subtle contrast, and natural textures. The browner skin would emerge from this palette with light - Caravaggio. The white world would have straighter lines, brighter mostly cooler unnatural colors, contrast, and smoother textures. A world separated more by color than light - Fauves. We would use pattern on pattern to emphasize the entwined nature of the worlds. I added screen doors everywhere and added layers of screen. We used typical window screen, armature screen, woven wire pet screen and expanded metals. We aged the screen with spray 77 to fill the holes and tore the screens, all to add to the many layers that obscure a person’s perception.

In the Native American world we had 2 main sets – Marie’s House and Mike’s House. Marie is the matriarch – rooted in her community. The house that we found for her had very small rooms and low ceilings but was situated on a road that felt just like home. It was hilly; the street was narrow and damaged. There was no house across the way from it so we had a good chunk of woods to work with. The woods in Georgia have much heavier undergrowth than the North East but we cleared the low growth and exposed the trunks and it looked quite good. We were able to gut the house because it was in bad shape and the copper had already been stripped out. We raised the ceilings to the roofline, removed some walls and created a visual through line for camera. Then we proceeded to close down the space visually with textures. We left the wood paneling we found in the living room, toned it and added to it; glazed patterned papers, spindled details and dated linoleums. We added some windows and planted a vegetable garden for Marie. The set dressing reflected history, photos of family, and tribe, the pieces were collected from many decades. The kitchen was the center of the house and heavily used, with sauce splattered recipes taped to the cabinet doors.

Mike’s House was the seedier side of that Caravaggio world. We found a house that again had a good setting. It was situated deep in a wooded area and was in some disrepair. The homeowners were slowly remodeling the interior which was disappointing to us. However they did agree to move out and let us do what ever we wanted as long as we put it back in better shape. It had the same wood paneling that was in Marie’s house so we ripped it out and exposed all the great glue texture and layers of color and dirt that was trapped behind it. Unfortunately for health and safety reasons we had to clean up the real age and replace it scenically! Structurally we couldn’t remove walls in this house so we stripped it down to the studs in spots to open up views, leaving insulation and adding visqueen to close them down again. The plastic aged with cobwebs and dust worked in a similar way to the screen layers in obscuring views. This was the set that we played most with masks. It was at Mike’s that we saw Kopus our main and very masked character. It was the first set we shot and I think the most interesting. We had to make a sign specified in the script as “a big bullet riddled plastic bear sign that was stolen from the top of a muffler shop”.

Part of the adventure there was realizing we would just make those bullet holes with a gun or two from the construction guys glove boxes– not with a drill as I’d assumed!

In the white community we had 2 main sets as well, The Jensen house and the Police Station. The Jensen house proved difficult to settle on. We wanted to show a house that was true to the economic level of a policeman and to the region we were depicting. I asked my niece to photograph my brother’s neighborhood in New Jersey that was a mixture of bi-levels and split-levels built in the early 60’s, and we used that as our template. These were the right kind of houses but their floor plans are tight and not easy to shoot. We settled on a split-level house on a corner that had the appropriate mixed textures of wood siding and brick on the exterior and had a good prominent garage, which felt right. Unfortunately the homeowner had painted over the brick exterior and the whole thing was a sad grey. We faux painted the brick back to a pinkish/taupe brick mix and removed the Southern plantings surrounding the house. We replaced all the street signs to match the style in that area of New Jersey and added local NJ/NY newspaper mailboxes to the existing mailbox posts. The interior had a good ground-floor plan but was very tight upstairs. We were able to open up two rooms through a closet and make it just shootable. I went with an acid yellow wallpaper in the entry as the center of the Fauve palette and to underline the tension in the house that was a big part of the story. Circling around that room was a warm grey room with acid accents, a coral wallpaper and a cold ice blue bird cage paper. The birdcage paper was both beautiful against the actress’s skin and indicative of her emotional frailty.

As always there is the location lost at the last minute and of course we had a few. The most difficult being the Police Station as it was a permanent set. In the end we found a space I believe on a Thursday that had to painted, built out and dressed by the following Monday. Here I used as much glass and metal as I could, still keeping a sense of history and a small town feel to the space. The reflections of the glass and metal were colder smoother unnatural textures used to obstruct the clarity of view in this set. We built the evidence room with a variety of metal meshes keeping in the theme. We used my niece’s photographs of nature and the seasons throughout always keeping the theme of a shared world evident.

There were of course so many more sets; Jack’s Apartment that was itself a world of textures, The Mine, which was one of my favorite sets. We found a cave and excavated it and added vestiges of “man’s presence”, of the unnatural in the natural world. It was a simple set but with water dripping from our abandoned pipes overhead and reflected on the scarred rock surfaces it was a beautiful and appropriate image of the two worlds colliding and the damage left.

I’m very happy I was a part of the project. There is a great cast and Aaron wrote great stories. It was a lot of fun to work with people who had such respect for conceptual collaboration and were so talented. It was even wonderful to work so hard because so many people were working just as hard to give it their best. I hope that what we did in the art department supported the story and helped achieve what we were all after. I really look forward to watching the series.