

In the Service of Simplicity

By Matthew Lloyd

The great French director Robert Bresson once said that style is everything that is not technique. In the age of digital-image making, it often seems that nothing could be further from the truth. The more we, as cinematographers, are made to adapt to new formats and imagers, the more these tools begin to dictate what can be done with the look of a picture and how we begin to affect images to accomplish certain effects.

When director Todd Cole from the Director's Bureau in Los Angeles approached me with a project for prolific fashion designers Rodarte, he immediately wanted to avoid all of the technicality that comes along with modern cinematography and return, in spirit and result, to a much simpler form of capturing a story visually. The irony, of course, was that this particular concept contained a host of very specific technical challenges that required thorough planning and technique to accomplish.

For several years now, the fashion industry has been commissioning some of the most sought-after commercial directors to make visual content that feature the newest lines of clothing, but further attempt to capture the narratives and aesthetics that inspire the brand. It's a strange hybrid production as you are trying to display a product in an appealing way but also go

further to capture the essence of the visual elements that go into developing a look for an entire line. Certainly a captivating experience for a cinematographer.

The impetus for the *The Curve of Forgotten Things* film was two fold. Aesthetically, Todd was inspired by the colour and light of northern California and the tone of 70s American films such as *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. On the opposite side of this was the very magical, otherworldly narrative that he had envisioned – a young girl slowly transcending the space/time relationship of the story by morphing in and out of clothing and spaces until returning to the source of her energy at the end of the story.

The casting of young actress Elle Fanning was a huge part of how this story was captured. She has such a powerful presence on screen and was able to portray beautifully the supernatural playfulness Todd was after. Additionally, our location was perfectly suited to the style of the piece. The Baldwin Heights Oil Fields in south Los Angeles offered the perfect blend of industrial wasteland and rural beauty, something between the opening of *Red Desert* and *Grey Gardens*.

The house in the story actually exists and is completely surrounded by oil pumps. It's such an interesting contrast that exists between this structure and its surroundings. We scouted the location numerous times before production to determine solutions to the host technical and effects issues we faced. The time-lapse opening sequence was especially problematic, as we simply couldn't dig a hole deep enough on top of this oil patch to make the shot work. We ended up digging a much wider and shallower hole and framing a lower angle as to not accentuate it's shallowness. In the end, Elle's small figure made the whole seem quite large.

The house plays an important role in the story. Much of our scouting was spent figuring out how to map out the effects and costume changes. The premise of the film is that the model is morphing from outfit to outfit as she passes through the various chambers in this house, which is vaguely familiar. It was certainly the intention to make the house feel magical and alive. We knew all along that some visual effects were going to be necessary to make the story work. But again, Todd's mandate was to serve the simple beauty of this relationship between the girl and her environment, and the effects really had to sell that magic.

Todd and I spoke at length about a lot of Jean Cocteau's work, specifically *La Belle et la bête*. That movie has magical effect shots that were all accomplished in-camera or with optical printing. With that in mind, we ended up producing a number of the transitioning wardrobe shots just by using the architecture and simple camera work to hide the edit. For the more complicated shots, like Elle disappearing into the wall, the producers reached out to a great team of VFX artists at Public VFX in Los Angeles. They were so great to work with, both on set and in post. It's rare to find effects people that understand genuine simplicity and understatement, but I think the guys at Public created a couple of very delicate and beautifully rendered images that don't stand out as effects at all.

In addition to the host of technical issue we were faced with, our producers at Funk Factory Films and the Director's Bureau pulled off a miracle scheduling and making the shoot work in the time they did. Due to Elle's age, and her busy schedule, everything we shot with her was done in one 10-hour day. Eventually we photographed the time lapse and the end credit sequence on that day as well. Most of the opening sequence was shot a couple of weeks later by Todd and myself. Working in such a constrained schedule, our production designer Pete Klein and the hair and makeup team really had no time waste. Kate and Laura Mulleave (who make up Rodarte) personally fitted Elle for all five outfits. When it came down to it, we really only had 20 minutes in between each scene to do makeup, hair, wardrobe, light and dress the set. And with a small crew, it meant everyone moving super fast. But Todd was so prepared and trusting in everyone's work that it all went reasonably smoothly. For Todd, the simpler the better.

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The whole job was shot using two Red MX cameras, one configured for Steadicam and one for handheld/studio. Our Steadicam operator, Dana Morris, is truly one of the best young operators in LA. His work was so critical to that early walking sequence. The incline was very steep, and his beautiful operating helped capture the lightness and effortlessness with which Elle's character approaches the house. Once inside the house I operated everything myself, which I don't necessarily love doing but due to the speed we had to move, I felt it most appropriate. For lenses we used my favorite set of Cooke Pan-Chros from The Camera House in L.A. They have such a great set of these lenses, in their original housings, which is becoming more and more rare. We shot them as wide open as possible to accentuate the flaring and blooming that the glass has naturally. The image has a wonderful soft quality all achieved without diffusion or netting.

The whole job was photographed in 4K HD at 24fps. Todd and I both felt that so much of these types of projects rely heavily on over-cranking as a way to sell the mood. This didn't interest us much, and we decided to keep everything normal speed. In dealing with the native R3D format out of the Red, I used the Red Rocket system integrated with DaVinci Resolve to grade all the dailies and transcode them to Apple Pro Res 4444 where they lived all the way through the process. I have found doing this

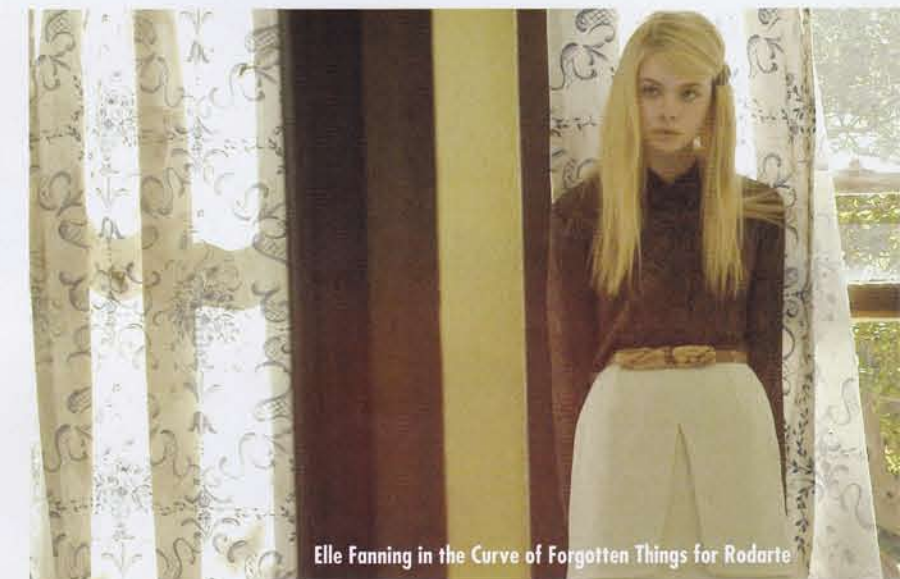
first pass on the Raw material very helpful to set the tone of the footage and not let anyone get used to something that is going to change at the end. The reality is that if DOPs don't start managing the initial delivery of these digital formats to the post side, the control of the image is completely out of our hands. Final grading was done at New Hat by renowned colourist Beau Leon, who did a marvelous job at finessing the final look.

Of all the scenes in the film, the ending "orb" sequence, as it was known, offered some of the most interesting challenges. Early on Todd came to me with the Weather Project by Olafur Eliasson that was installed at the Tate Modern in London. He asked me how we should go about creating a "sunset in Big Sur trapped in a barn." His intention was to have Elle's journey culminate in a return to the force of nature from which her being came (or something like that). He really wanted to feel this orb as "weather" or "nature" as opposed to a "light." It was about the energy and not the effect.

We worked with Source Maker Lighting in Los Angeles to try and figure out what the smallest helium balloon we could operate in this space was. It ended up being the smallest helium balloon in existence at 4.5 feet (or so I'm told), which was shipped in from New York. We had a 2x5K Tungsten Globes in there on a variac modulating between 40 and 80 per cent. The goal was to create a certain pulse to the scene. We also hazed the room to try and capture the rays emitted from the orb. The barn was an original structure on the property, so the crew had to work quickly to block a million holes where the haze would escape. Additionally the backside of the barn was dressed with large solids to try and give a sense of continuous space behind the orb. Public VFX added all the streaking and flares after the fact to further enhance the effect.

All in all, it was just a real honour to be asked to collaborate with such a talented group of people. Elle, Todd, Rodarte, Public, Funk Factory and Deerhunter all brought so much to the table that it really inspired the rest of us to go that much further. I think that if I learned anything from Todd and the whole experience it was how to exercise restraint and not get fixated on novelty. Even though we are making a dynamic project with all these great "cool" elements and technical challenges, it all really has to be in the service of simplicity and enhancing the subtly of the world you are trying to create. I think that the type of aesthetic Rodarte has developed up to this point was a perfect backdrop for Todd's filmmaking and proves that fashion film/commercials can really explore a lot more visually while still capturing the spirit of the line and the creativity behind it.

To view Todd Cole's *The Curve of Forgotten Things* by Rodarte, please visit: nowness.com/day/2011/2/8/elle-fanning-x-rodarte-by-todd-cole



Elle Fanning in the *Curve of Forgotten Things* for Rodarte

