



UGLY/BEAUTIFUL

# THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF DARE ME

BY MICHAEL BRICKER, PRODUCTION DESIGNER.

**A.** THIS HIGH SCHOOL WAS CHOSEN BECAUSE IT LOOKED LIKE A FACTORY AND BECAUSE IT HAS A 1960S OPTIMISM THAT NOW FEELS WORN OUT AND LEFT BEHIND. PRODUCTION STILL.

**B.** THE COLOR PALETTE AS WE GET CLOSER TO THE GIRLS—ACID GREENS, BURNT ORANGES AND DIRTY MAGENTAS. EVEN THE STRIPES IN THE BACKGROUND WERE ADDED—THE BLUE AND BURGUNDY OF THE TOWN AND SCHOOL. PRODUCTION STILL.

*“We had so many great conversations about the Rust Belt—how rarely and how inaccurately it’s portrayed on screen. That faded palette, the rotting industrial shimmer, the white skies. All these hometowns that aren’t a bustling suburb nor a rural small town. Instead, Sutton Grove is one of those thousands of former “company towns” that are slowly fading away—a ghost of industry past. The kind of place where parking lots, 7-Elevens, shuttered factories are where teens have all their seminal experiences.”*  
Megan Abbott, author and showrunner of *Dare Me*.

When I was first sent the pilot script for *Dare Me*, I was sure that I wouldn’t like it. And yet, as I scratched the surface, my own presumptions and prejudices were quickly revealed. I’ve never been so glad to be so wrong. This was a visceral, tearing, Middle America mystery that inverted every expectation of what it meant to be a high school cheerleader. There were no stereotypes here. The characters in Megan Abbott’s *Dare Me* look back at the reader, square in the face. I quickly devoured the book on which the series was based and connected immediately with two aspects of Megan’s visual storytelling—her descriptions of the deteriorating Sutton Grove and her unflinching

portrayal of the high-flying women, each with their own facades, cracks and lies. There was texture on every page and the story provided so much depth for meaningful, thematic and richly dark production design.

## The Town

Although the pilot wasn’t explicit about it, for me, Sutton Grove felt like the Midwest—a once—promising manufacturing hub that industry had abandoned, leaving scars and broken promises on every street corner. I knew this place. I grew up in the Midwest, and I was excited to learn that both showrunners Megan Abbott and Gina Fattore also had history there. I think we shared a love/hate understanding of the place—a desire to escape, and then, as soon as you get out, a pining nostalgia to return. Most importantly, we wanted Sutton Grove to feel like a familiar place with real stakes. This ugly/beautiful contradiction is one of my favorite things about the Midwest, the too—bright fluorescent Walmart next to a decaying downtown. Massive power lines cutting through the landscape. And as Megan mentioned, we wanted to feel the loss of Sutton Grove’s former industrial heyday.





B

When the camera went wide, the city needed to feel vacant, as if it was once larger than it is today. This hollowness and depth became a core visual theme for the team, as it reflected the loneliness that all the characters were battling, and it emphasized the mysterious tension bubbling beneath the surface. As such, photographer Gregory Crewdson was a key reference for the production, for locations and eventually lighting, together creating an eerie tone that was at once beautiful, noir and unsettling. We wanted the audience to always feel that something terrible was about to happen.

With Steph Green at the helm as the pilot director,

the narrative of the pilot was explored by mapping out where key plot points needed to happen within Sutton Grove. This culminated in an imaginary ‘drive’ through the city that placed the outdated Sutton Grove High School near downtown, Coach’s house within the 1960s original suburbs, and Lanver’s Peak with a bird’s-eye overlook of the entire valley. All the pilot locations were plotted along this drive, giving a logic to the city, and most importantly, orienting our characters socially, economically and thematically. As new locations emerged over the course of the season, they were quickly placed within this fictional city, helping determine where to look for them within the

**C.** RESEARCH IMAGE. UNTITLED (SLEEP WALKER) FROM *TWILIGHT*, 1999, GREGORY CREWDSON.

**D.** PRODUCTION STILL SHOWING HOW THE RESEARCH MANIFESTED ON SCREEN. AND IMAGE FROM THE PILOT, LIGHTING AND FRAMING BY DP ZOE WHITE.



C



D





**A.** THE BLUE OF BETH'S WARDROBE IN CONTRAST WITH THE BURGUNDY OF THE HIGH SCHOOL GYM. PRODUCTION STILL.

**B.** THE COLOR PALETTE WORKING TOGETHER. THE BLACK AND BURGUNDY OF THE CHEERLEADING UNIFORMS. THE DRAB MILITARY UNIFORMS AND THE POP OF CHEETOS ORANGE IN THE BACKGROUND. PRODUCTION STILL.

**C.** BOYS LOCKER ROOM. INTEGRATED PRACTICAL LIGHTING GIVES THE SENSE OF BEING UNDERWATER. PRODUCTION STILL.

**D.** SKETCHUP RENDERING SHOWING CONVERSION OF THE GIRLS LOCKER ROOM INTO THE BOYS. DRAWING BY LIANE PREVOST.

**E.** MODEL RENDERING OF HIGH SCHOOL 'FISH BOWL' BY SHIRIN RASHID.

Toronto area, the show's production hub. This often included Hamilton, Ontario, a nearby metropolis cut from the same cloth as Detroit and Gary, Indiana.

Knowing how important these location choices would be, a workflow was developed where location options moved exclusively through the Art Department. This allowed me to calibrate both the authenticity and creepiness of the world, and being from the Midwest, to ensure everything felt right. We challenged ourselves to give traditionally 'ugly' and 'boring' locations more energy and electricity.

### The Athletes

I've often heard that *Friday Night Lights* isn't about football, and in many ways, *Dare Me* isn't about cheerleading. But where *Friday Night Lights* leaned into the heart of Middle America, *Dare Me* jumps headfirst into its darkness.

When I pitched the job, I knew these girls were nothing like how cheerleaders were typically represented on screen. They were not objects. They were not idiots. They were athletes and warriors. They were tougher than the boys, and

frankly, certainly weren't cheering for anyone but themselves.

That said, they were extremely aware of their power, of what they looked like, and how they could weaponize the cheerleader stereotype. The tools of Production Design were used to highlight these core themes in *Dare Me*, manifesting with two overarching approaches for color. I really liked the idea that as the audience looked closer, the girls would start to reject the gaze—that there was this Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger awareness in looking back. As such, as the camera got closer, I wanted the bright colors to turn ugly, toxic and disgusting. Beauty up close can be abject. A zit covered in glitter. The show embraced a sickly-sweet palette—cheesy orange, gummy bear cherry, acid green and radiation blue—colors that make one feel sticky and gross. Pink was banned.

The bright ugly palette was used primarily for props and wardrobe, burgundy and royal blue permeated more of Sutton Grove itself, particularly the high school. Because of Addy's loyalty to cheer, she was connected with the burgundy of Sutton Grove High School. Beth, the wild card, longing for escape in her



Jeep, was aligned with royal blue. These colors fight for attention on screen, each marking their territory as alliances shift among the girls.

Steph and I knew that the network and the studio would have an opinion on the school colors, and of course, the cheerleading uniforms. I gulped and pitched black. It seemed right to me, almost military, to show that this chaotic group of girls could band together under the stadium lights and be total badasses. They shared DNA with *Black Swan* or *Bronson*, not *Bring It On*. Black, with added burgundy and silver, immediately tells the audience these girls are fierce, ruthless fighters. Their uniforms are the color of their bruises, not their makeup.

In addition to the cheerleaders, a group of military recruiters are featured throughout the series. The toxic drab green of their uniforms was also integrated into the Production Design, particularly in Sargent Will's apartment and coach's house. At Will's in particular, both green and black were used to show distortion, reflection and void, culminating with the crime scene itself. Blood in the dark looks black.

### The Fishbowl

Much of life in Sutton Grove centers around the high school. For the pilot, other than the locker room and coach's office, the high school was shot on location. For the series, extensive school hallways were added to the set so that more could be filmed on stage. These builds were designed around voyeurism and looking, concepts that Steph established in the pilot, and that were continued expertly by series producer-director Jamie Travis. The characters were constantly looking at each other, suspicious, giving side-eye, sneaking a look. The girls locker room was designed with mirrors, half walls and open clothing racks, making it difficult to hide anything. The girls can see everything, and even coach French, from her office, had a thin view into the locker room if the doors were cracked.

With this idea of looking, I was reminded how the girls not-so-covertly spy on coach's house in the pilot. How even at home, with that big picture window, coach French and her family can't hide from scrutiny. In a roundabout way, this all got me thinking of Will's fish tank, which was described



in the book. Then it clicked. I drew a fish tank in the middle of the high school hallways. Solid walls became glass, creating an unscripted central space that allowed the camera to move through and around the school hallways, increasing depth, and more importantly, increasing the chances for characters to watch each other. Blocking-wise, series directors had a new location to stage scenes inside, with the interior of the fishbowl (which became its name) giving the illusion of privacy and inviting voyeurism. Together with director of photography Dagmar Weaver-Madsen,

**F.** SUTTON GROVE HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAYS, SHOWING THE 'FISHBOWL' ON THE LEFT. WOOD, METAL, BRICK, TERRAZZO AND CEILING TILE PATTERN WERE ALL INSPIRED BY THE HIGH LOCATION USED IN THE PILOT. SET PHOTO.

**G.** PRODUCTION STILL SHOWING THE VIEW ACROSS AND THROUGH THE HIGH SCHOOL 'FISHBOWL.'



**A.** MATT FRENCH LOOKS OUT FROM THEIR HOME. PRODUCTION STILL.

**B.** COACH'S DINING ROOM WITH A CHANDELIER DESCRIBED IN THE BOOK.

**C.** COLETTE'S BEDROOM. SET PHOTO.

**D. & E.** VINTAGE WALLPAPER IN COACH'S BATHROOM. HER HUSBAND IS CAUGHT IN HER VINES.

**F.** FLOOR PLAN, WILL'S APARTMENT AND HALLWAY. DRAWING BY SHIRIN RASHID AND ANNA LUPI.

**G.** WILL'S HALLWAY. SET PHOTO.

**H. & I.** WILL'S FISH TANK AND THE HIGH SCHOOL FISHBOWL, BOTH CLOUDED OVER BY THE END OF THE SEASON. PRODUCTION STILLS.

the Art Department mapped out the windows and integrated practicals such that the entire maze of hallways transitioned from natural to artificial light. From high ceilings to low. We pulled architectural language from the high school location, including wood paneling, cinder block, terrazzo and high gloss lockers, so that the series felt congruent with the pilot, but more importantly, carried the beat-down, under-funded vibe of our midwestern city.

### It All Clouds Over

The visual theme of the fish tank is part of both coach's house and Will's apartment and became a useful metaphor for unifying the design of the series. The Crewdson picture window established in the pilot put coach's world on display, while the vertical mullions served as prison bars. She had trapped herself inside a hyper-perfect house that she could control. The bedroom was designed to feel like an upscale hotel room, lifeless and anemic with nothing out of place. The private quarters of the house were built on a soundstage to emphasize the textures and room adjacencies, while the public parts of the house, including the epic back deck, remained a location.

There are plants in this fish tank as well. And I liked thinking of coach French as poison ivy or kudzu, an uncontrollable force that infects whatever she touches. She finds a way to grow in the cracks. Coach's house is full of viney textures and patterns, from the sheets on her bed and the ceramic lamps on either side, to the curtains in her living room and the wallpaper in her daughter's room. The bathroom in particular, with its hypnotic 1950s chromium green wallpaper is both seductive and toxic, and in keeping with the uniform color palette. I intentionally created unrenovated and outdated spaces throughout the house, showing a decaying core beneath coach's manicured top layer. For me, these visual themes culminate with the epic chandelier found by set decorator Patti Cuccia, a heavy set of tentacles looming over the dining table. Another reference pulled directly from the book.

As the story progresses, these design strategies and colors converge at Will's apartment, part of a large 1970s concrete apartment block building. Again, location was key here, Will should feel high up, apart and isolated within a building that was undeniably creepy and intense.

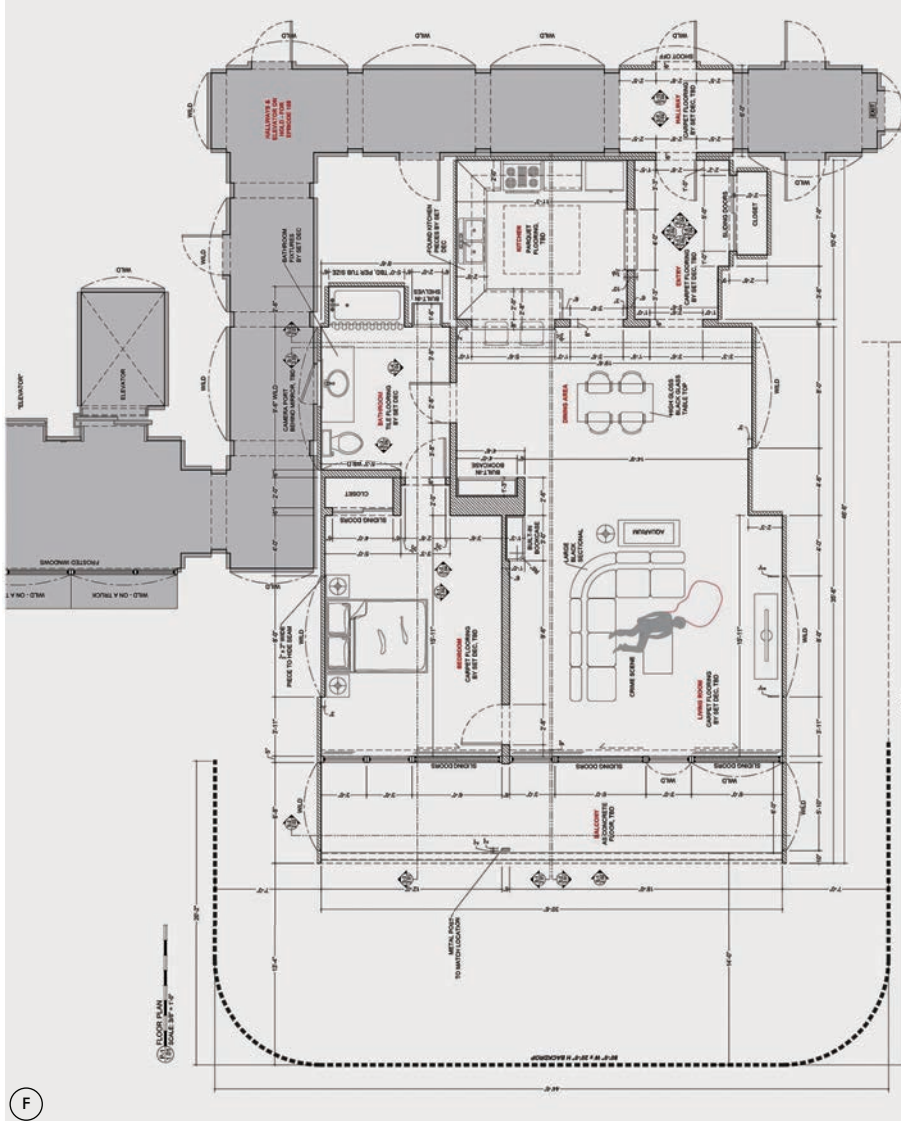
The decaying green poking throughout coach's house is rampant in Will's building—with the hallways and





walls painted and heavily textured with popcorn plaster and bacterial-patterned Anaglypta wallpaper. Everything is black or various shades of drab and khaki. The inky black dining table and sofa mentioned in the book also extended to include the hallway ceiling, a reflective lake of black blood running down every corridor. Or perhaps the surface of a lake. The lighting down the hallway, inspired by the location used for the exterior of the building, reminded me of the hooded fish tank lighting Megan described. This was also used in the girls locker room. The effect in both is that these spaces are underwater, with the characters drowning inside.

And yet within the darkness of this pivotal set, there's a glimmer of beauty in the story. As Will's fish tank clouds over with plants and algae, so too does the high school fishbowl cloud over with Post-its commemorating Will's mysterious death. This is the ugly/beautiful of *Dare Me* that cuts to the core of Megan and Gina's writing, and by transforming the themes in the book into a visual language, Production Design was used to realize a sticky, eerie, glitter-covered, noir thriller that dares the viewer to keep watching. **ADG**



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