



LET HIM GO

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Illustration by Matt Williams, from The New Yorker

The design journey on *Let Him Go* was about seeding subtle visual cues along the way as George and Margaret literally and figuratively drive toward their stubborn fate in North Dakota. Leaving the idyll Montana ranch life for flattened barren conflict, the grieving heroes on this path travel a mundane neo-western map marked with quiet early sixties Americana. Director Thomas Bezucha and I worked carefully to create a visual landscape that was unassuming, banal, and sparse. It is a film about a marriage. Kevin Costner and Diane Lane rightfully fill the frame from start to back. It was my job to nest their emotional lives in a realistic arc that was humbly reserved. Inspired by the photography of Eggleston, Shore, Leiter, Fred Herzog, and Todd Hido, *Let Him Go* was about the west in a utilitarian frontier sense. A colleague of mine once said the designer has "3 seconds to set the table for a scene, then get out of the way." I took this to heart on *Let Him Go*, and knew that Thomas and cinematographer Guy Godfree understood the aesthetic approach to the underlying psychology of this film in similar terms. We wanted to sit quietly in it with our craft, and let the cast do the heavy lifting. I think our design approach married wonderfully with the filmic goals. As a result *Let Him Go* works as a dark, boiling study on the ties that bind, grief cycles, and the sometimes tragic resigned depths of a committed married life.



BLACKLEDGE RANCH.

The Blackledge home is a modified location, with a big focus on Margaret's kitchen. Kitchens are the hub of ranch life, and it was key that we define an idyllic simple world of promise, family, cleanliness, and a counter point to the kitchen of the other matriarch of the movie, Blanche Weboy, at the film's violent conclusion.



BLACKLEDGE RANCH.

The deeper bedroom, office, flashback bathroom, and living rooms — all indicated after James' death— are all sparse, melancholic, empty nests, and fired spaces.



The Blackledge property symbolizes rugged Montana family: representing humility, heritage, law, order, and a dedication to the land and animals — generations of blood in the soil and stubborn resilience.

DALTON.

Dalton is the fictional home of the Blackledge family. It's the beginning of our journey — green was a key color, representing seasonal cycles, post-war optimism, and then the faded dreams of a life lost. There is a lovely echo of Ang Lee's Brokeback Mountain in these scenes because we used the same apartment complex in the town of Fort Macleod.



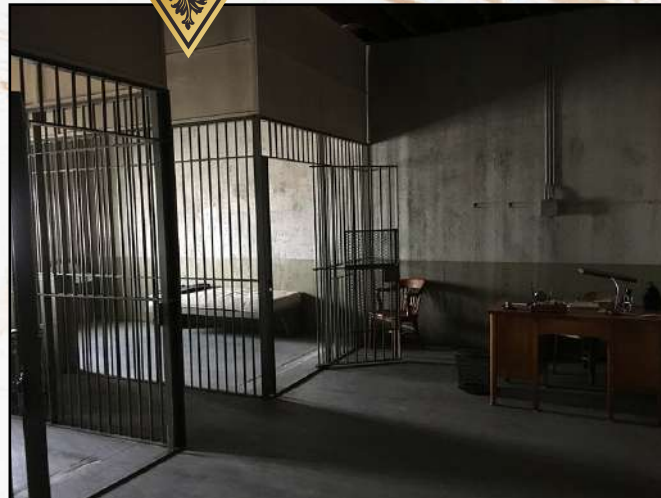
FORSYTHE.

Forsythe is a dark pit stop for George and Margaret. It's the first indication with leathery mood and light that their path is headed into darkness and conflict.



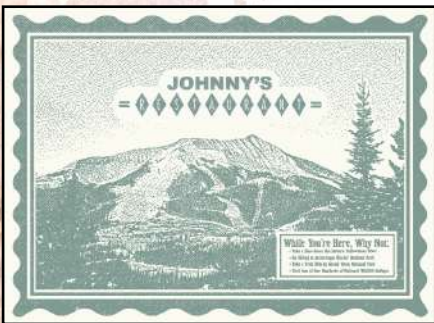
BENTROCK.

Bentrock's Sheriff's Department plays as a safe haven for former Sheriff George Blackledge, and serves as a nod to the western genre as a whole with its warm muted colour palette, jail cells, and old world gentleman's approach to inquiry and morality. I wanted this sequence to feel briefly like a Howard Hawks movie.

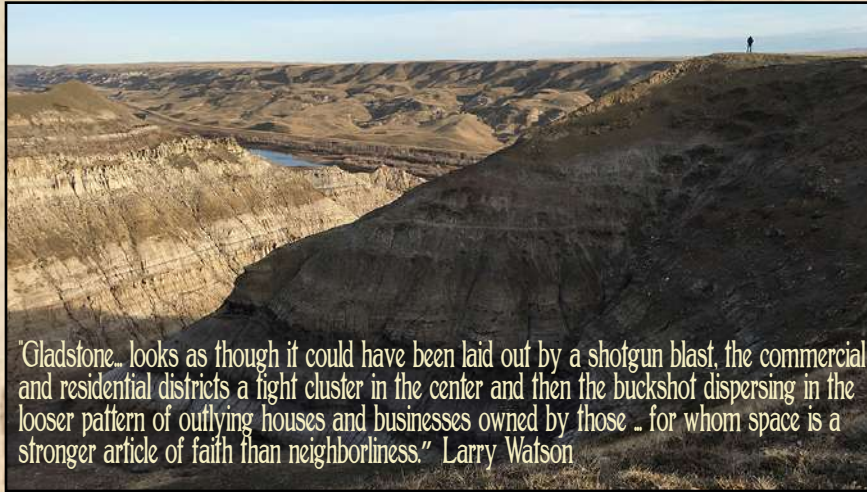


BENTROCK.

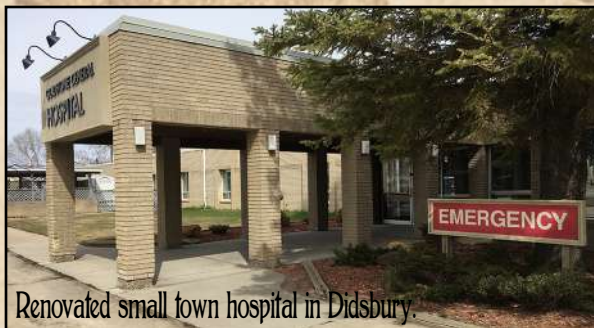
Fort Macleod transformed to 1963.



GLADSTONE.



"Gladstone... looks as though it could have been laid out by a shotgun blast, the commercial and residential districts a tight cluster in the center and then the buckshot dispersing in the looser pattern of outlying houses and businesses owned by those ... for whom space is a stronger article of faith than neighborliness." Larry Watson



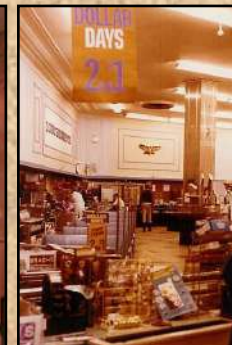
Renovated small town hospital in Didsbury.



Bill's House is an uncomfortably clean wartime home. You feel like he just hid the body in time.

MONTGOMERY WARD.

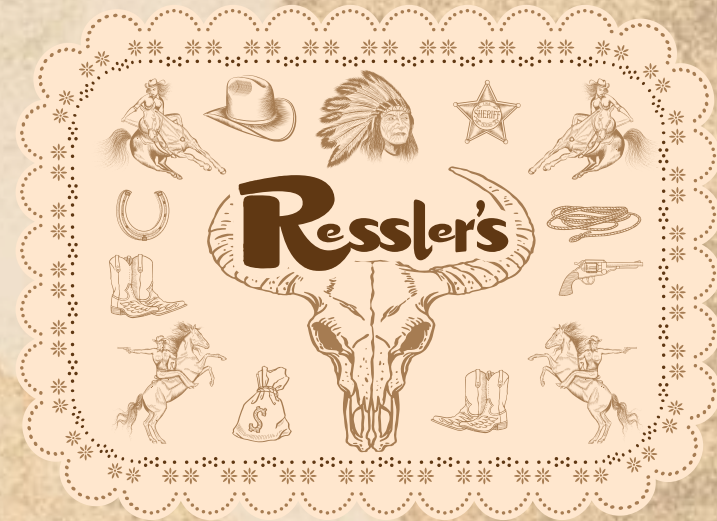
Creating a 1963 department store in a vacant High River commercial space was one of the trickiest design challenges. We wanted the store to feel expansive, like the new corporate America pushing west, but still be a welcoming modern place of security for the fearful and abused Lorna. It is the last place in Gladstone, under the public eye, she was free of the Weboy clutches.



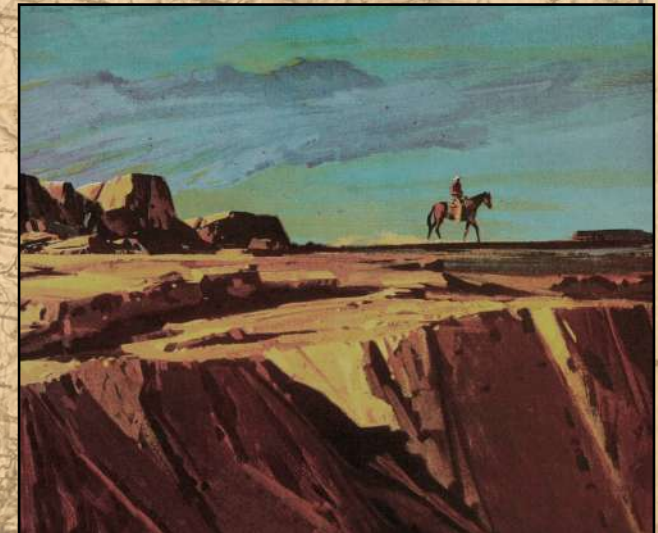
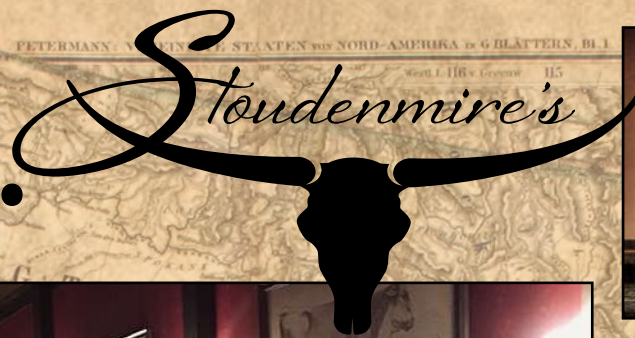
RESSLER'S.



Ressler's is a repurposed cafe location in the small town of Didsbury. We wanted it to have a gloss and shine like old department store cafeterias, with a feeling that lunchtime crowds are the only safe place for Lorna. This room holds an early indication of the burgundy and bruised Webony color theme, and ominously foreshadows the spilled blood to soon follow.



STEAKHOUSE.



George and Margaret have their last wholesome moment together here in this steakhouse we built inside an old heritage building. This central and powerful scene spells out all George's reserved dedication to his wife, and in hindsight, feels extra heartfelt knowing he will literally pay a pound of flesh for his dogged commitment to her prideful campaign to gain back her only grandson.



MOON WINK MOTEL.

"Go careful." warned Peter Dragswolf.

The Moon Wink motel cabin on the periphery of Gladstone, is the violent turn in the Blackledge's road. With exteriors in Drumheller, we built a matching studio interior to better host the lengthy tense performances and fighting to follow. Winking neon, rain, noirish lighting, wood panelling, and a custom lino floor that echoed Sioux first nations symbology mark just a few of the many joys baked into this small but dramatic set piece.



ABANDONED SHACK (PETER).

Peter is squatting in an old abandoned oil and gas service shack at the valley ridge of Gladstone. Pieced together from Dorothy and Indus area locations, the shack is a delightful improvisation of ramshackle found materials and geographic reactions to the work site. This is George and Margaret's place of rebirth and healing. Like many westerns before, the hero needs to retreat to a modest ostracized locale, gather their gunfighting strength, and then slip off back to fulfill their destiny with the wounding villain for their final strike.



WEBOY HOUSE.

The exterior Weboy House on location is a mean and tired folk Victorian shell of a homesteading idea from generations before. It sits in the valley plunked down like a birthday cake, as much a statement from Blanch Weboy as a realistic ranch. I always imagined it as the lair of the villainess, the dragon's den.



One cannot avoid acknowledging Wyeth's painting "Christina's World" or Jack Fisk's design in Days of Heaven when imagining this lonely austere home in the nothingness. It is a reference we could not shake and instead embraced from the outset. In many ways the house is more an idea than a plausible homestead. There are no substantial out buildings, no barn, no fences, and no signs of animals. But it was at the time important for me to have this odd set of power poles leading up out of the valley — pointed back to civilization like a Weboy puppet string.



WEBOY HOUSE.

Interior sets were built in studio, and had to adhere to many script specific needs, while respecting the safety concerns of practical fire, smoke, and tumbling violence between two storeys. This was our very first design puzzle from day one.



WEBOY HOUSE.

From the get-go this film is in many ways about two kitchens, and two matriarchs on either end of an ethical dilemma. Blanche Weboy's kitchen is the grand reveal of the villainess and the crackling tense landing of the Blackledge's fateful exploration. They are no longer in control.



WEBOY HOUSE.

My biggest choice on the entire film was to fight for a practical fire. Director Thomas Bezucha and Producer Paula Mazur were with me the whole way in this regard. Additionally, there was something extra magical about making a sand castle that would be wiped out by a wave in one night of inspired shooting. Watching the Weboy House burn before sunrise, on our last day of shooting, was a catharsis like none other. It was as complex a set of feelings as this film's own melancholia — a bittersweet goodbye. Then we all climbed back out of the valley with the sun.

