Exponentially STRANGER THINGS

BY CHRIS TRUJILLO, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

Stranger things have undoubtedly happened, but they've been few and far between.

Nothing essential has changed in my creative approach to *Stranger Things* since our first season. Back then, we were a relatively ragtag bunch of indie outsiders shocked that Netflix had decided to roll the dice and give us a crack at making this improbable project on essentially our own terms. It's a testament to the Duffers' tenacity and vision that we've managed to continue making exactly the show we all had in mind, for all these years.



As Production Designer, my goal has always been to ground my design choices in character building and faithfulness to the "reality" of the world I am creating. With *Stranger Things*, it has been essential for me to cultivate an aesthetic that doesn't distract the audience by drawing attention to itself, but rather informs the characters and their stories by giving weight and realism to their world,

A. MAX MARVELS AT VECNA'S VICTIMS IN THE MIND LAIR. (ON STAGE IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL. no matter how deep we dive into genre-bending artfulness or period playfulness.

I knew from the start that *Stranger Things* was a project I would want to see through to the end. So, I approached designing it with the intention of maintaining a visual continuity such that all the hundreds of sets across all the seasons feel of a piece, all the product of that initial inspiration. Grandiosity aside, I do like to think that any two random stills from any two random seasons can be juxtaposed comfortably together. It might be a working–class living room, festooned with Christmas lights, next to a decommissioned missile silo repurposed to house a sci–fi sensory deprivation tank, but, if I've done my job well, they exist in the same world.

Any success I have had in achieving my longterm goal of a unified aesthetic across the seasons can be credited to a couple of crucial factors that have made this show a rare treat for a Production Designer. Firstly, the Duffer brothers have always been gracious collaborators with an incredible amount of creative control over their show, thanks in large part to Netflix's unfailing support and faith in them. This arrangement has spared us the soul-crushing, art-killing pains of a "corporate creative process." Secondly, I have been lucky enough to have a great deal of continuity in my core group of collaborators within the Art Department.

A. THE GANG PILES INTO ARGYLE'S PIZZA MOBILE OUTSIDE OF THE BYERS' NEW HOME. PRODUCTION STILL.

B. JOYCE SELLS ENCYCLOPEDIAS FROM HER MAKESHIFT HOME OFFICE. (ON LOCATION IN NEW MEXICO). PRODUCTION STILL.

C. JOYCE AND MURRAY HASH IT OUT IN THE BYERS' NEW LIVING ROOM. (ON LOCATION IN NEW MEXICO). PRODUCTION STILL.

D. MIKE AND WILL RECONNECT IN JONATHAN'S NEW BEDROOM. (ON STAGE IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL.

Fittingly, the two most essential members of that core group, Jess Royal and Sean Brennan, have been making their bones with me since the good old days of no-budget passion projects. Jess Royal, the set decorator since season one, is my creative conscience. Her painstaking devotion to detail and her unwavering insistence that every set, no matter how minor, should get the same carefully layered life, has allowed us to maintain an impossibly high standard of period specificity, creative continuity and integrity. Sean Brennan, the Supervising Art Director, joined us season two. The exponential expansion was beginning then, and I needed a creative partner with both logistical genius and an intuitive sense for good design. Sean has ensured that the Art Department has stayed a bulletproof hub of interdepartmental information

flow and a lean mean construction machine, cranking out carefully considered and beautifully crafted sets at every scale. To this day, every set our Art Department produces starts its life as an informal conversation between Jess, Sean and me.

As alluded to earlier, the production team set out to create season one with a surprisingly long leash and not a lot of preexisting protocols in place. Perhaps that was because our show was comparatively small, and Netflix had very little riding on it. Perhaps it was because Netflix, not being an uptight conventional studio, truly did have faith in our instincts, but either way, I was never subjected to the tedious backand-forth approval process of creating concept art, getting notes from above, addressing those notes and then being beholden to the "approved" concepts. My process of selecting locations, designing, presenting and building sets on *Stranger Things* has always been a series of conversations with the Duffers, the cinematographers, location manager, and the core crew, accompanied by lookbooks, napkin sketches and wild gesticulations.

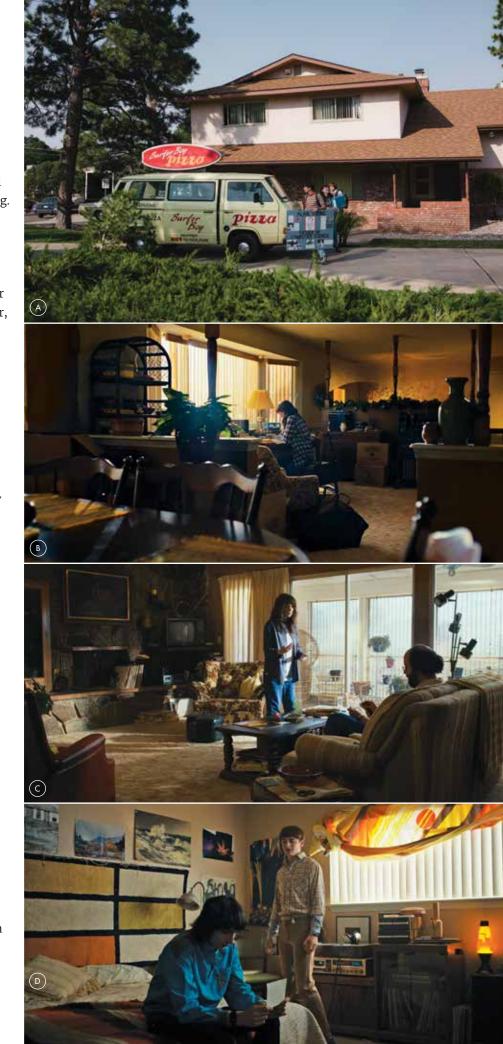
The shorthand we developed in those low-stake early days has carried us through even this most recent behemoth of a season. The exponential expansion from season to season was paced in a way that has allowed us to expand the crew slowly and efficiently, preserving our informal intuitive approach while allowing us to continue delivering even the most minute details with great care. At points during the production of season four, the show had three separate crews working in three different parts of the world on dozens of sets simultaneously. Even so, Jess, Sean and I managed to oversee all of it directly, with the tireless help of just a few trusted Art Directors (John Snow, Chris Yoo, Eric Johnson) and Jess' intrepid assistant decorator Amy Darcey. It's necessary to note here that the crews in Lithuania and New Mexico were truly exceptional. It goes without saying that the crew in Atlanta is family. There is no Stranger Things without them.

Stranger Things 1, 2, & 3 were undoubtedly the only possible preparation for *Stranger Things 4*, but nothing could have truly prepared us for what became nearly two full years prepping and shooting, not counting the COVID hiatus. It was, at times, a

grueling ordeal; flying directly from a former KGB interrogation room in the bowels of a Lithuanian prison, to a sprawling American missile silo complex built in a warehouse in Atlanta, and then straight onto New Mexico to artfully place fifty or sixty junk cars in a sunbaked arroyo to create a Southern California car graveyard. Endless iterations of that sort of Production Design pinball were the hallmark of season four. It was exhausting. It was incredible! The sets we produced are the finest, fun-est, most fully realized of my career. I've never watched my work on screen without consistent cringing until now. Not necessarily because these sets are objectively the best I've ever designed, though I think they might be, but, rather, because I know we gave it everything we had and were performing at the height of our hard-earned collaborative powers.

My greatest affection has always been for the seemingly most mundane sets. Domestic interiors are where the storytelling starts for me. The greatest strength of *Stranger Things* lies in its cast of indelible oddballs, and creating their personal spaces is how I am able to contribute most directly to the story telling.

The Byers' home has always been a standout example of setting as an extension of story, and this season was no exception, despite it being an entirely new house in a different part of the country. Though this kind of character home interior is normally one the show would build on stage, I felt that in this instance, we might be better served by a fully practical location that would allow continuous interior/exterior action. So, we scoured the suburban foothills around Albuquerque in search of a period-perfect suburban home in a neighborhood that read as Southern California with an interior that would accommodate our characteristic camera work. We found exactly what we were looking for, a splitlevel time capsule, unchanged since the early '80s with even the original lighting fixtures and door and window hardware still intact. We improved the interior geography by opening a few archways and passthroughs, painted and papered the walls, dressed it with what the Beyers brought with them from Indiana, supplemented with whatever Joyce and the kids would have shopped in the local





A. MAX RUNS BACK TO HER NEW TRAILER HOME. (ON LOCATION IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL.

B. HAWKINS' POLICE RESPOND TO A CALL OUTSIDE EDDIE'S TRAILER. (ON LOCATION IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL.

C. MAX LEAVES FAREVVELL NOTES IN HER NEW LIVING ROOM. (ON LOCATION IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL.

D. CHRISSY FEARS THE WORST IN EDDIE'S LIVING ROOM. (ON LOCATION IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL. thrift stores, and voila: the Byers are in sunny SoCal.

Back in Hawkins however, Max's life has taken a decidedly darker turn. To create her new "neighborhood," the production took over a large swath of an existing trailer park outside Atlanta that had been cleared out by a tornado a few years before. You can't make this stuff up. We brought in a dozen trailers of our own and brought the place back to grim reality. Max's trailer, one of my personal favorites this season, was finished, interior and exterior, on location, which allowed for great realism, much to the chagrin of the shooting crew, who didn't exactly love being trapped in a trailer park for days and nights on

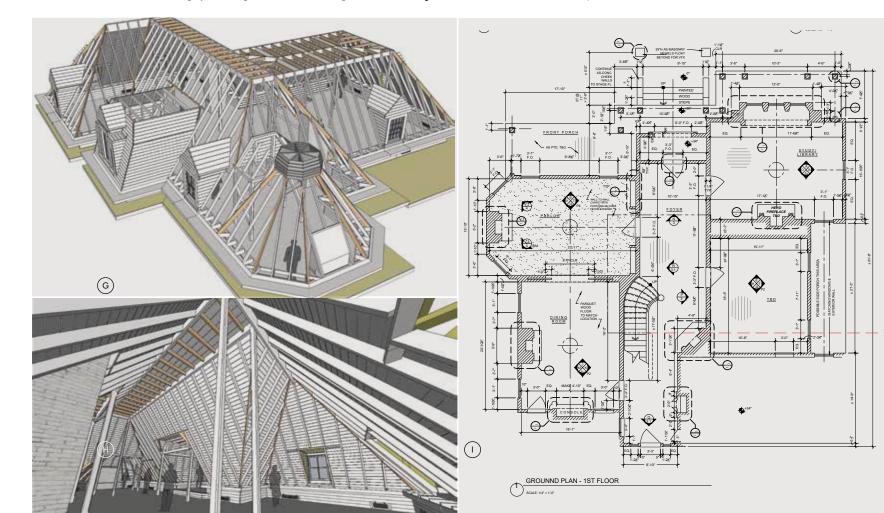
(c)

end. Across the street from Max lives Eddie Munson, local metal head dungeon master, and important new addition to the Stranger Things gang of misfits. Eddie's interior trailer was built in duplicate on stage to accommodate otherwise impossible interdimensional back-and-forth, allowing for one of the trippiest tricks we've ever pulled off with the interplay between its upside down/right side up versions.

The Art Department explored the opposite end of the domestic architectural spectrum as well. The Creel House, our take on the classic "haunted house," lies quite literally at the dark heart of season four. We traveled near and far in search of the perfect location and ultimately found it in Rome, GA. The house, a Second Empire Victorian mansion with a mansard roof, had such a uniquely imposing air that we committed to traveling nearly two hours to shoot practical exteriors. On stage, we painstakingly recreated the intricate interior details of the three-story masterpiece down to the hand-carved bookcases and mantelpieces, ornate newel posts, and the beautifully hand-painted wall safe. We invented our own labyrinthine layout for the upper floor and attic to accommodate the extended explorations and climactic showdown that take place there. The house appears pristine in a series of 1950s flashbacks, and then is seen dark and infected in the Upside Down, but it's true glory, and some of the best scenic work I've ever seen, is in its fully dilapidated, presentday look. It wasn't enough, though, to have the Creel House in the past, the present and the Upside Down. In keeping with the exponential expansion of our world characteristic of season four, we pushed it into full psychological abstraction, making it the exploded architectural framework of Vecna's mind lair, possibly the most fantastically horrific set in Stranger Things history, a testament to the formidable skill of our sculptors and a beautiful

example of how seamlessly visual effects can extend a practical set.

Exploring the quotidian and expanding the show's Season four also draws the audience far outside the world above ground to cast it in a new light is, in domestic discomfort zone of haunted homes and itself, a very satisfying challenge, but *Stranger* neighborhoods. The show dove deep into several Things always demands that we push below the iconic commercial spaces essential to the American surface, behind the curtain of power to where '80s. Rink-o-Mania seems at first a roller-skating the conspiracies are real. To answer three of wonderland but quickly darkens into a Carrie-esque this season's biggest questions, we went deep nightmare in neon. Family Video is an Easter eggunderground, literally, and the results were some laden homage to the beloved bygone video stores of of our largest most elaborate sets to date. my youth. Surfer Boy Pizza speaks to the regional pizza chains of the past and serves as the spiritual Question One: What happened to Hopper? home of Argyle, another unwitting new member of He is found gaunt and freezing in a Kamchatkan the gang. Naturally, it proved a perfect setting for prison camp. To create the far reaches of Russia, one of Eleven's psychic expeditions in an improvised the production went to Lithuania, where we turned



sensory deprivation tank, in this case, a deep freezer. **E.** THE CREEL FAMILY

MOVES INTO THEIR "HAPPY" NEW HOME IN ITS 1950S ITERATION. (ON LOCATION IN ROME, GA). PRODUCTION STILL

F. THE CREEL HOUSE INITS DILAPIDATED PRESENT-DAY ITERATION. PRODUCTION STILL.

G. & H. THE CREEL HOUSE ATTIC. MODEL VIEWS BY THOMAS MACHAN.

I. THE CREEL HOUSE FIRST FLOOR: FLOOR PLAN. DRAWING BY THOMAS MACHAN.



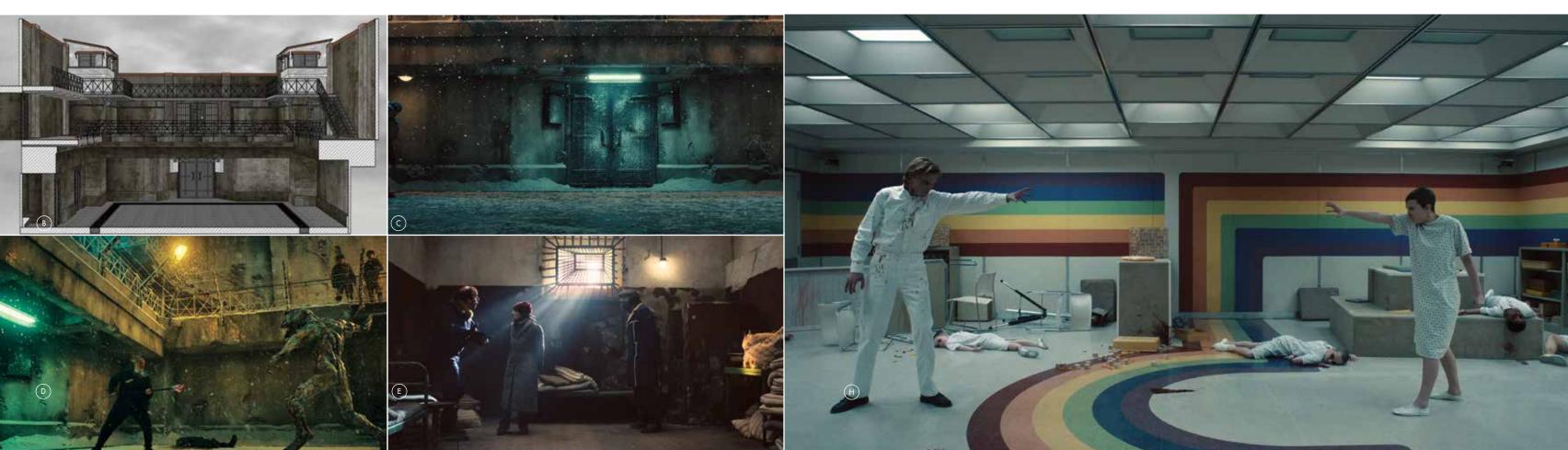
A. & B. DEMAGORGON PIT. MODEL SECTIONS BY JOHNNY THIGPEN.

C. DEMAGORGON PIT. (BUILT ON STAGE IN ATLANTA).PRODUCTION STILL.

D. HOPPER DOES BATTLE IN DEMAGORGON PIT. PRODUCTION STILL.

E. RUSSIAN PRISON ROOM. (ON STAGE IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL. a little-used sand quarry into a frozen wasteland where Hopper and his fellow inmates are laying train tracks under brutal conditions, and we spent some time in a Soviet Era town where we found the beautiful old church that was turned into Yuri's smuggler den. The true coup for the Art Department in Lithuania, though, was Lukiškės Prison, a Tsarist Era nightmare with a very dark history. We shot a few scenes on location inside the multitiered cellblocks and outside in the labyrinth of barbed wire that led to a small side gate in the prison yard, but the inspiration we brought back and applied on stage in the demogorgon pit and its network of contingent underground tunnels and auxiliary rooms was priceless. The "Demo Pit" was a massive threetiered prison yard with cantilevered walkways and elaborate concrete and metal work. We modeled much of its concrete and iron architecture on Lukiškės and in a couple of instances, we directly recreated rooms from the Lithuanian location because we couldn't have invented spaces that were more unsettlingly terrifying.

Question Two: What dark secrets form Eleven's past set this whole mess in motion? Season four finally provided the opportunity to fully flesh out the bowels of Hawkins Lab where Eleven lived her formative years. A few tedious days with a pencil and paper resulted in the psychedelically monotonous labyrinth of hallways and cells that allowed the show to practically achieve all the long disorienting shots of destruction, confusion and revelation that were, for me, the highlight of the season. Arguably the pièce de résistance of the whole season is the Rainbow Room itself. Deep research into institutional spaces designed for children led to the materials selections and custom-built, carpet wrapped furniture elements. I especially love the rainbow mural, the way it starts out stacked in one color order and winds up flipped



upside down after it stretches across the floor in stripes of colored VCT tiles and continues back up and around the wall. The ceiling, though, with its coffered grid of fluorescent lighting, inspired, oddly enough, by the administrative offices of a high school I scouted in New Mexico, was maybe the best money the show has ever spent.

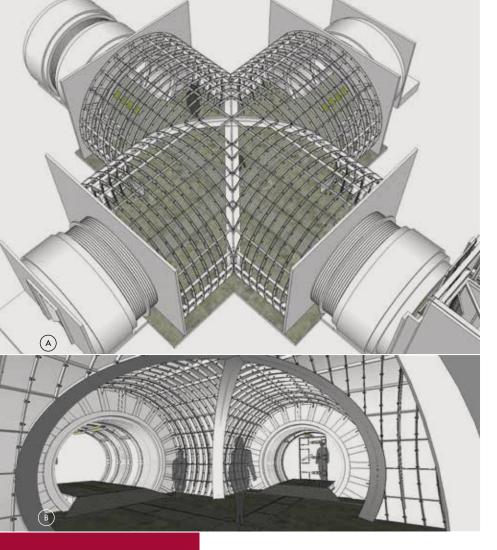
Question Three: Will Eleven ever get her powers back?

That question is answered definitively in the depths of a missile silo. After exhaustive research into the various types of American missile silos, the Art Department decided that a mashup of *Atlas*

F. HAWKINS LAB. GROUND PLAN DRAWN BY JOHNNY THIGPEN.

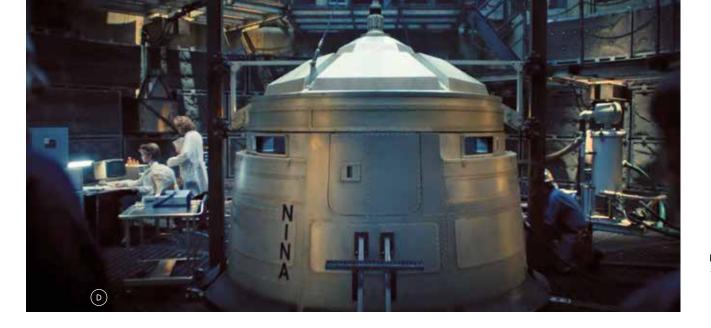
G. HAWKINS LAB RAINBOW ROOM (ON STAGE IN ATLANTA). PLATE SHOT.

H. NUMBER ONE AND ELEVEN FACE OFF IN THE RAINBOW ROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.



and *Titan 1* silo elements would best suit our creative agenda. Declassified technical specs allowed for a very high level of architectural accuracy. After our super slick, Death Starinspired Russian base from season three, it was very important to me that we lean more in the aesthetic direction of aliens and fully embrace the gritty reality of a decommissioned derelict military installation. So, we strove for the claustrophobic weight of the real spaces, staying as true as possible to accurate dimensions and materials and using quite a lot of steel in the process. The crew built the set as one continuous space nearly three hundred feet long, three large rooms connected by two tunnels. We restrained our color palette, went heavy on the ageing, spared no expense on vintage lighting and hardware, and lined the walls of the missile chamber with carefully recreated blast panels. For good measure, we even based the NINA tank on the material style of an ICBM.

I've now officially run on well passed an acceptable article length and have only lightly touched on just a fraction of the work that went



into season four, which seems somehow totally appropriate and inevitable.

To give a truly honest, equitable and accurate insight into the inner workings of my Art Department on *Stranger Things 4* and the real reasons for any success we've had, I would have had to spend most of my word count listing the names of every art coordinator, PA, painter, prop maker, prop master, shopper, Set Designer,

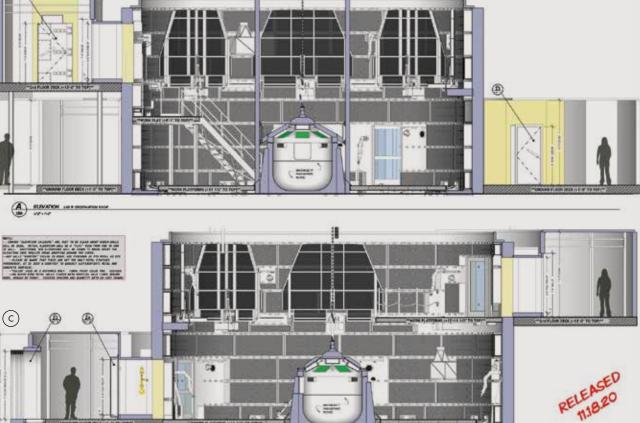
A. & B. MISSLE SILO HUB. MODEL VIEW BY THOMAS

C. MISSLE SILO AND OBSERVATION ROOM. MODEL SECTIONS DRAWN BY THOMAS MACHAN.

MACHAN.

D. THE NINA TANK (ON STAGE IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL.

E, PAPA AND ELEVEN HEAD BACK TO WORK IN THE MISSLE SILO. (ON STAGE IN ATLANTA). PRODUCTION STILL.





leadman, set dresser, Graphic Designer, Art Director, etc., who have been a part of the show through the years. In typical self-important production designer style, I fought the urge to do that, but I strongly encourage anyone interested in the actual truth to spend some time perusing it on IMDb. **ADG**

Chris Trujillo, Production Designer Sean Brennan, Supervising Art Director John Snow, Paulius Dascioras (Lith.), Ainis Jankauskas (Lith.) Art Directors Chris Yoo, Eric R. Johnson, Assistant Art Directors Kevin Crooks, Thomas Machan, John Moredock, Johnny Thigpen, Nathally Botelho (NM), Taura Rivera (NM), Domas Kirtukas (Lith.), Set Designers Vanessa Riegel, Chris Forster, Graphic Artists Jess Royal, Set Decorator