Little Birds in 2-perf format

When director Elgin James, a participant in both the Directors and Screenwriters Labs at the Sundance Institute, was looking for a talented and experienced cinematographer to shoot his feature film *Little Birds*, he found what he was looking for in Reed Morano. She is an award-winning graduate of New York University who had photographed two 35mm indie features in the previous year. Over the past decade she has also photographed documentaries, television series, commercials and music videos.

Little Birds is the story of a teenage girl who yearns to escape her staid, stagnant life in the remote and barren Salton Sea region of Southern California. She convinces her friend to venture into the exciting world beckoning from Los Angeles. Along the way they learn some hard lessons and test their friendship.

James looked to tap into Morano's previously displayed talent for handheld, naturalistic imagery. "Right from the first conversation, we were on the same page about the lighting and the look," she recalls. "We wanted naturalism, but with a cinematic quality. We referenced William Eggleston photographs, and movies like *Badlands* (1973) and John Ford Westerns. Regarding format, the possibility of digital had been raised, but I knew that film and a 2.35:1 aspect ratio was the best way to capture the desert location."

At first, the debate was between a digital format and the Super 16 film format. But Morano investigated a third option: 2-perf 35mm, which results in a 2.35:1 aspect ratio and uses half the amount of film stock that standard 35mm uses.

"The cost of 2-perf is not that much more than Super 16," she says. "I knew that with film I could move quickly, light with fewer units and do less tweaking. Film has real blacks and you don't have to worry about noise. On digital, exteriors tend to look flat and digital lacks the texture of film."

Morano diligently explored the possibility, and engaged the help of Kodak, Panavision and Deluxe Labs to make it happen. The film was photographed with a Panavision Platinum and a G-2, both set up for 2-perf. She chose KODAK VISION3 500T Color Negative Film 5219 for night interiors and exteriors, and KODAK VISION2 200T Color Negative Film 5217 for daylight interiors and exteriors.

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The location was another crucial aspect of the visual storytelling. "I loved the script, but I was unfamiliar with the Salton Sea area," says Morano. "It's a strange, surreal landscape that was very desolate with harsh sunlight. It was a great metaphor for their lives."

Half of the shoot was done in the heat of the desert, the other half in Los Angeles with a seven-months pregnant Morano handholding the camera throughout the 18-day shoot.

Mobile home interiors were filmed in actual trailers in Chatsworth, California. "Our production designer Todd Fjelsted and his team created certain color themes that James had requested in different trailers to underscore story points," she describes. "There is a scene in one girl's trailer, which is decorated with neutral wood tones, brown and beige. In one scene, she pulls out a bright red kimono that had belonged to her mother and wraps it around her neck. It's one of my favorite moments in the movie. The film's rendition of that red kimono was pure, rich and painterly, as opposed to digital red, which can be terrible. Digital still cannot render some colors in the way that the eye sees them."

Once the girls arrive in Los Angeles, the imagery becomes more agitated, contrasty and colorful. Composition is more claustrophobic and the editing has a faster pace. Colors at night tend toward an orangey sodium vapor hue.

New Hat Post in Santa Monica transferred the images. Their procedure is to scan the images at 2K resolution and to use those files for dailies as well as for the final color correction. "In real life, not everyone has a bounce or an eyelight following them around," says Morano. "We wanted real darkness, not movie darkness. The challenge is to make things look realistic without interfering with the storytelling, or preventing the audience from feeling the actors' emotions. Colorist Michael Mintz understood that, and it was there, even in the dailies."

Key Data at a glance

Director	Elgin James
Cinematographer	Reed Morano
Cameras	Panavision Platinum and a G-2
Film stock	KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 KODAK VISION2 200T 5217
Image transfer	New Hat Post
Colorist	Michael Mintz