

NIROSHINI

"ELLEN, YOUR JOB IS EVERYTHING
THAT NOBODY ELSE WANTS TO DO"
~ ROBERT BENTON

Interview

HOLLYWOOD PROPERTY MASTER

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT
VANILLA SKY
NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

ELLEN FREUND

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MINI MAGAZINE

AWARD-WINNING HOLLYWOOD PROPERTY MASTER, ELLEN FREUND

Ellen Freund's role as a Property Master is a testament to the meticulous craftsmanship and attention to detail required to create immersive television and film environments. Her work, particularly noted on the critically acclaimed series "Mad Men", showcases an unparalleled dedication to authenticity and visual storytelling. By carefully selecting items, such as the whiskey glasses used by Don Draper – *making sure they are etched, rather than lasered for authenticity, on thick glassware, that has weight to it in the hand and the "feel" of it when a sip is taken* – Ellen not only contributes to the character development but also anchors the narrative firmly in its iconic 1960s Madison Avenue setting. This level of detail enriches the viewing experience, allowing audiences to journey back in time and fully engage with the period's unique social and cultural nuances.

Her portfolio which includes work on notable films like, "A River Runs Through It", "Vanilla Sky" and "Night at the Museum", speaks to her versatility and commitment to her craft.

When Ellen joined the "Mad Men" team in 2009, she brought with her a wealth of experience and a deep understanding, of the importance of props in storytelling. Her contributions to the series went beyond mere decoration; they were integral to the show's success in capturing the essence of the 1960s.

Through her dedication and expertise, Ellen has not only elevated the role of the Property Master but has also set a high standard for historical accuracy and narrative depth in television and film. Her work serves as a reminder of the power of detail, in creating authentic captivating worlds that resonate with audiences long after the screen fades to black.

Born and raised in L.A.

I was born and raised in L.A. My mother was a New Yorker, my father a third generation Angeleno. My father, Gareth Freund, was a film editor so the film business was a part of growing up. The nature of freelance film work is insecure so I was aware of my father's fear of not enough income and how working relationships dictated how your career would go. However, he was successful. He did a lot of great things. He was an apprentice editor for John Ford. He also worked on the American comedy series *I Love Lucy* (1951) and other TV series with production company Desilu.

There were times that weren't as good and he struggled with ageism when he was in his 60s – he was working mostly on commercials – and directors were in their 20s and didn't want an “old guy” as their editor. Film productions go through phases and at that time, “youth” was favoured. It was a bit like the rise of MTV – the same happened in the commercial industry; everything became more visually erratic.



Oscar-winning cinematographer Karl Freund and Ellen's father, film editor Gareth Freund
I love Lucy (1951)
Photographer unknown

"My father jokingly called him his honorary uncle".

My wanderlust and fascination with all things...

My father and mother married in 1948 and they furnished their first home with Eames furniture. They had Japanese lanterns and an Eames potato chip chair and lounge. This mid-century style, extended into the house that they built in West Hollywood, where they remained for 70 years.

They were major art collectors and travellers. They would collect wood turned bowls, ceramics and Mexican art. My family loved art, architecture, travel and history. I remember, my father had a 1957 Porsche Speedster and myself and two brothers would squeeze into the back, with our mother and father in the front and go somewhere up coast, the desert, Mexico or San Diego – to a museum or do architectural activities to broaden our cultural horizons. These experiences are to what I credit my wanderlust and fascination with all things. My passion for cooking came from my mother's father.



A glimpse into the creative world of Ellen's mother and father's home in West Hollywood
Photographer Ellen Freund



Ellen's mother and father's home in West Hollywood
Photographer Ellen Freund



Ellen's mother and father's home in West Hollywood
Photographer Ellen Freund



Ellen's mother and father's home in West Hollywood
Photographer Ellen Freund

Siblings...

My eldest brother was in visual effects. I got my younger brother a job set dressing on Vanilla Sky (2001) but he hated it and became an engineer. He actually helped develop the battery system that ended up in Tesla – a crazy inventor! He's just really good at figuring things out and has made props for films I've worked on, such as the canned ham on Mad Men which had to be the right depth and open with a key – we flew one in from Norway but it wasn't right so it had to be built. In All the King's Men (2006), Anthony Hopkins is teaching Jude Law as a young boy and the ballista in the scene is also built by my brother.



All the King's Men (2006)

Anthony Hopkins is teaching Jude Law as a young boy
Photographer Ellen Freund

Ballista built by Ellen's brother David

Advertising design wasn't a good fit for me...

The Art Center College of Design, finalised in 1976, under the visionary guidance of American architect Craig Ellwood, is nestled in the landscape of Pasadena, California. At just 17, Ellen studied at the prestigious institution, where her peers were almost double her age.



The college is in a very old town, with a strong architectural history – really lovely homes. It was known for turning out everyone in the advertising business: the best commercial photographers and automotive designers at that point.

Originally however, I wanted to go to a craft-centred art school but my parents wouldn't allow it.

Advertising design wasn't a good fit for me, I didn't like the rigidity. I made it through but ended up transferring into film because it was less rigid – not because film was what I wanted to do. When I ended up in film, initially as an assistant editor in London, my parents were hysterical, as they felt the industry was too insecure.

I took them to a screening of *A River Runs Through It* in 1992. It was the first time they'd ever seen a movie I'd worked on which was fairly deep into my career – 12 years. They just never liked that I chose to go into this insecure industry.

Robert Benton...

Robert Benton who wrote the screenplay of Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and directed some fine motion pictures, turned to me one day and said “Ellen, your job is everything that nobody else wants to do”.



In 1998, Ellen was working on neo-noir thriller film Twilight, directed by Robert Benton. It starred Paul Newman, Susan Sarandon, Gene Hackman, James Garner, Stockard Channing and Reese Witherspoon.



Robert Benton is a brilliant man. Twilight was a wonderful stylish film but they didn't know how to market it. It was a movie for adults but in the 90s, the world was all about youngsters. The headline in the L.A. Times for Twilight's review, was something like “Geezer Love Triangle” – it was questioning why people wanted to see a film, that didn't have young people starring in it.

I loved working on those medium budget films. I loved telling a story and working with people who could do that. Other medium budget stories, such as 1994 thriller “Nell” or 1995 comedy “Home for the Holidays” – those movies had my heart.

On Twilight it was a small, warm group; they were all so lovely. There was a memorable day, when we were waiting for clouds to clear. We were filming at a beautiful house, where Mexican actress, Dolores del Río and Cedric Gibbons who was an American Oscar-winning art director had lived. We were shooting for a week and whilst waiting for the clouds to clear, we all sat around the pool and Susan Sarandon began to ask the entire crew, about their first sexual experiences! They even pulled Paul Newman out of his trailer to join in. Monty Westmore, who'd won a Best Makeup Academy Award, well, his story had us in tears. The stories told were sad, funny and happy and the fact that Susan spontaneously created the quiz, is what makes an experience like that so special.

One is none...

Ellen's role is both crucial and comprehensive in the world of film. Tasked with the responsibility of sourcing, creating and managing all props used in a production, her job is to ensure that every item seen or not seen, perfectly complements the narrative, setting and characters. With a dedicated team by her side, Ellen transforms scripts into tangible worlds. She also plays a pivotal role, in ensuring that the actors are proficient, in using the props they interact with, mirroring how these items would be utilised in real life. Moreover, Ellen's remit includes a critical focus on safety. Every prop introduced into a scene is thoroughly checked, to ensure it poses no risk to the cast or crew.



There's a saying "one is none" – meaning if you don't have two of everything, you're going to be in trouble. Sometimes I risk it!

A prop is classified as whatever the actor interacts with. This includes, what touches the body – glasses, watches and wedding rings, weapons used, vehicles – although this can fall under transpo now. However, every detail of the vehicle – license plates, hanging car fresheners, if the character has a wardrobe of clothes in the back of the car – this all falls under props.

There are mixed lines with set dressing and costumes – often it requires discussion among us.

After the props have been collected, we have a "show and tell" but first I show the Production Designer so if they hate something, we take it out of the mix. I care that whatever I do, matches with what they do, to create a seamless world. I like to have the whole team listen and someone will take notes. The more information everyone has, the stronger we'll be as a team. I want them to care. One thing I can do, is make everyone care about how things look, how accurate and finished they are – and to not cut corners. As well as this, I will always speak with the Director of Photography, as they will often have thoughts about colour, reflection, shine and size.

Okay, the comb is in my pocket...

Detail is everything. What the actor carries in their pocket; whether you see it or not, gives them the “feeling” of being that character. When an actor for example opens a desk drawer and sees what should be in that drawer, this level of detail helps with their character development. It goes down to the finest detail, such as whether the handwriting is correct, whether the paper is authentic and crackles in the right way. It’s the history of the character – the books they have on the shelves; sometimes I go with an actor to a bookstore and ask what they’d buy. For written props, depending on the era, I always insist we hire a typist because you can tell the difference – it marks the paper – it doesn’t sit on top of it.

In *Mad Men*, Director Matthew Weiner said, “I want Don Draper to have a comb in his pocket”. I went up to Jon Hamm and said, “Matt wants a comb in your pocket” and showed him a selection of combs. He hovered his hands over the combs and said, “okay, the comb is in my pocket”. He just “knew” the comb was in his pocket. To this day, I don’t know if Matt knew that happened!

*Sometimes, I have to make a
Director feel like something
is their idea!*

Sometimes a prop is specific. For example,
the lighter on Mad Men – that lighter is
exactly what was needed. The only creative
input I personally had, was to make it brass
instead of silver so it had that patina – and
the typeface. I had to find the perfect
typeface and make sure it was stamped
because the difference would be obvious.

The cross that Al Pacino wore in Danny
Collins (2015), stored cocaine in it – I
developed that idea with a jeweller.

Sometimes a director will have a strong
opinion and others won't care. Occasionally,
I have to be the bearer of reality, of how
something will work. Sometimes, I have to
make a Director feel like something is their
idea!

*“One line” in a script can
cost thousands of dollars...*

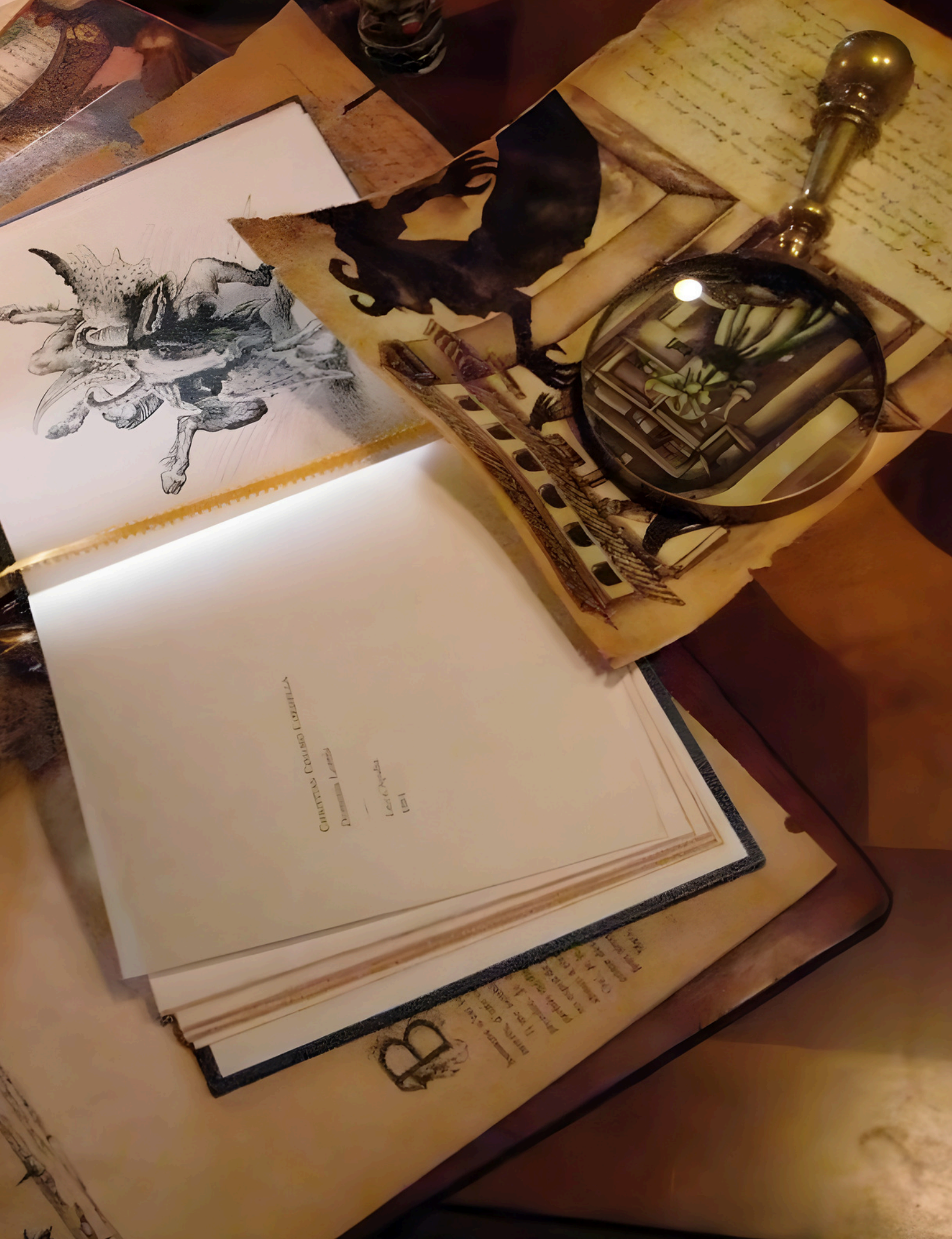
In Interview with the Vampire, Season 2, there was a line in the script that mentioned a flea circus and magnifying glass. I then took that down the road, to creating it into a real item. In this case, it was very complicated. We had a jeweller in England, model maker from mechanics in Prague and painter from Prague. The cake dome paintings, were inspired by back-painted glass. We also had an engineer who created a remarkable divided wooden reveal. This was just “one line” in a script – it cost thousands of dollars – plus love, frustration; all those things that come with creating something.

Sometimes the props have to tell the story and “fill in” the story. In All the King's Men, I spent a lot of time creating a document, that had to tell a part of the story – otherwise it would be lost.

It's all in the detail...

Director Sam Raimi is very collaborative. In *Drag me to Hell* (2009), we created a library of books for the character Rham Jas who was a foreseer and we built all these wonderful books, as if he'd written them. We filled the pages with drawings, that the storyboard artist did and each cover was beautifully created – book bound and stamped.

The Actor Ben Kingsley has such a powerful persona and every detail is big, as he wants the props to “feel” right. He loves this and is a stickler for it! In *Operation Finale* (2018), the characters were forging passports. I prepared an entire room, that was just set up for forging passports; cutting, inking – it was weeks and weeks of work.



Drag me to Hell (2009)
Illustrations: Christian Cordella

*I'm a white Jewish girl from
Hollywood - knowing how to
make a realistic regional
Korean dish, was just
something I didn't know how
to do!*

I have a passion for food in general so I often make the food bigger than anyone thinks it would be. There was very detailed research on series Pachinko (2022) and Mad Men for example. You cannot cut corners – I respect the audience too much and they would know. The food in Pachinko was the hardest to shoot in my career. I'm a white Jewish girl from Hollywood – knowing how to make a realistic regional Korean dish, was just something I didn't know how to do! I therefore hired Soo Jin Kim in Seoul who was amazing to learn from. I then taught the actor how to make the dish so that the authenticity looked seamless.

I do love that I get to learn new things and make sure the actors learn – for example, how to shoot a gun, use a computer, fill a fountain pen or bake a turkey. Ironically, I hate guns – but at one point built a reputation for being a “Gun Property Master”. It was because I'd put such stringent safety measures in place – and then people wanted to hire me, just for that reason. I might have to get an actor to play a guitar and hire someone to teach them. In Home for the Holidays, I taught Holly Hunter how to gold leaf which was fun!



Roger Corman...

Roger Corman, often hailed as the “King of B movies”, carved a niche for himself in the film industry, that has left an indelible mark on cinema. He introduced audiences worldwide, to the groundbreaking movement of the French New Wave. This movement, known for its stylistic innovations and existential themes, significantly impacted American filmmaking, inspiring a generation of filmmakers to explore more complex and non-traditional storytelling techniques. He was instrumental in importing foreign cinema, to American audiences, introducing them to avant-garde styles and narratives. His knack for recognising and nurturing talent, led to the early career development of many A-list actors and directors. In recent years, Roger has found a new avenue for his cinematic ventures, through collaborations with Syfy.



Early in my career, before becoming a Property Master – *my first Property Master role was on cult movie Cherry 2000 (1987)* – I worked for Roger Corman’s Factory of Filmmaking. It turned out some of the greatest filmmakers in our history. My job was to build the sets.

It was said that he’d seek funding for a 2 million movie... He would finance it and ask for \$990,000 so he’d still have control. He’d “say” it was a 2 million movie but would make it for 1 million. He already made a profit, before he’d made a film!

A memorable event happened one day, where the actress was not told she had to take her clothes off. Roger would buy films that had been made and add 8-10 scenes of sex and violence – and that is what we were doing. As I was the only woman on crew, I had to go into the bathroom and convince her to come back to set. The way I did it, was by saying that I built the set and there would be a lack of a clear reflection, as they’d film into the tiles which were wonky. She agreed to do the scene. This moment speaks to being the only woman – and speaks to the dishonesty of production in that time period, in the early 80s, when the world was a different place and not for the better.

Amusingly, mad Men was easy compared to Pachinko or The Alienist...

Working on Mad Men was the first time I'd ever done TV. I began in the middle of the third season. I went into TV thinking "how hard can it be". I had no idea what the TV schedule was like – the time frame to source and create props is crazy and insane. We would film an episode in 8 days and double up the last day of shooting, with the first day's filming for the next episode so by the time we'd finished, I'd find the next script waiting for me on my desk. Then we'd have 5 days before shooting the next episode and many aspects may have not been in place during that time, such as not having a full cast. My experience of starting out in TV was panic and tears – it was really hard.

Amusingly, Mad Men was easy compared to Pachinko or The Alienist (2018). Mad Men was such a well-oiled machine, we ended up having rooms and rooms of props to draw on. In The Alienist, set in 1899 New York, we had a warehouse of props! The same eventually happened in Mad Men 2. I would go to flea markets or antique fairs and if I saw something for Mad Men, I'd grab it! I know the era so Mad Men was instinctual for me. In The Alienist, in one draft they wanted people riding the subway but the subway wasn't open in 1899 – Sometimes I'm the gatekeeper of accuracy to people's dismay.

It's easy to find collectable items but not things considered as trash. For the liquor bottles in Mad Men, my childhood friend – we went to high school together – raided her parents liquor cabinet! She'd lived in the house since the 60s. Her parents were big party throwers and wealthy. They had a large garage for 4 cars and inside was a wall of cabinets. Her father had bought cases of liquor. Many were unopened and I took the whole lot so that we had enough bottles. There was one particular bottle we had to make.

I curated an exhibition for Mad Men in Palm Springs and helped install one at "Museum of Moving Image" – and that was a dream. Both were so fantastic to me.



Modernism Week: Mad Men Exhibition, Palm Springs 2016
Photographer Ellen Freund

*I don't know anyone's spirit
that can't be lifted by music...*

I don't know anyone's spirit that can't be lifted by music. My niece who is deaf, as a child, put her hand on a flamenco guitarist's guitar and understood what the rhythm was. She actually texted me two weeks ago – she was visiting a friend who was in a hospice, that sadly passed away. The text I received from her said, "I'm playing Walter a story on Spotify which is read by Idris Elba. People tell me that Idris has a very calming voice so I decided to play this to sooth him and offer comfort". She doesn't understand what "soothing" sounds like, yet she chose to do this – I found it very beautiful.

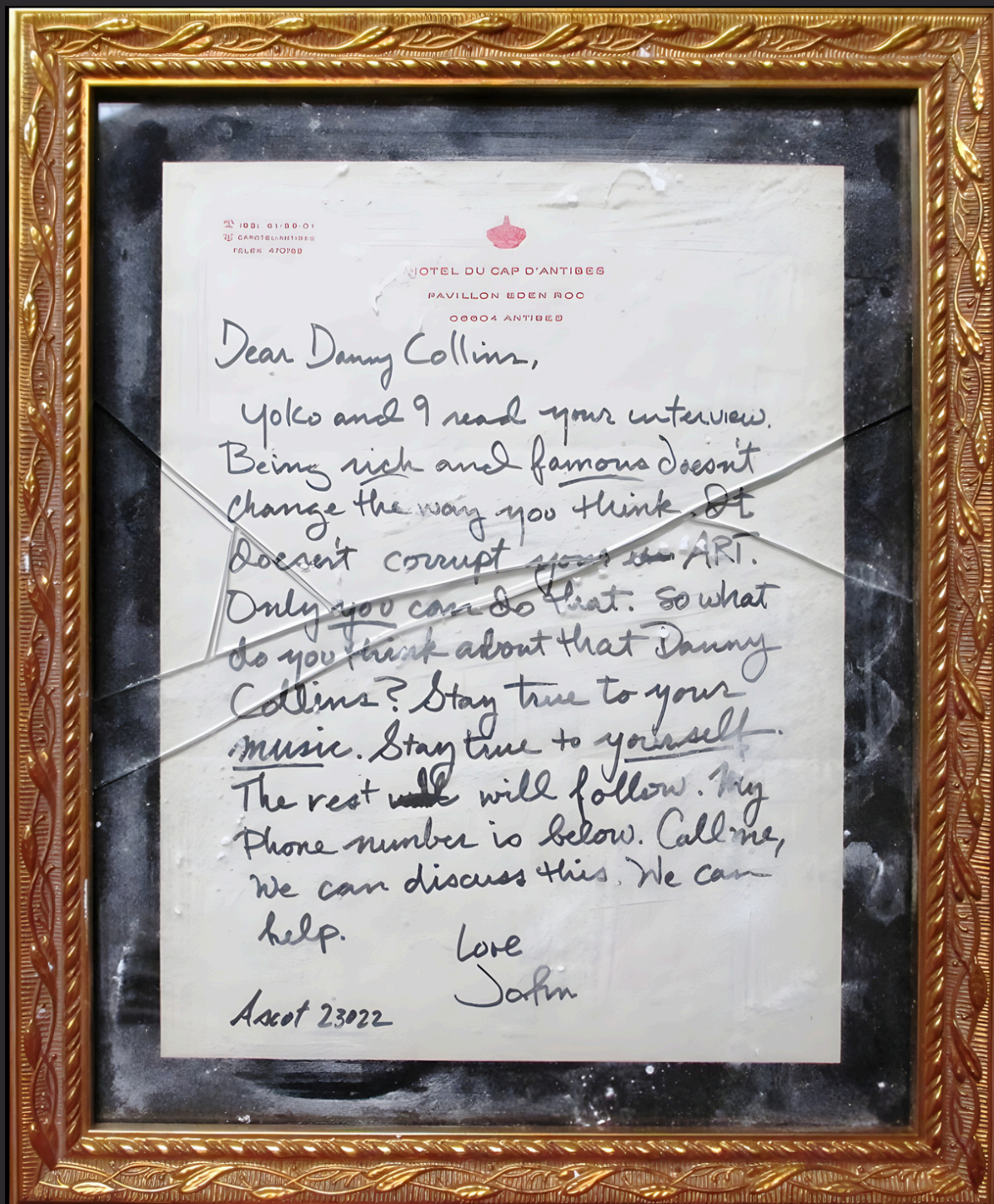
Art and architecture excite me – what people make. I can lose myself in a museum, looking at fossils or a beautiful building. Emmy Award-winning production designer, Gemma Jackson and her husband Andrew McAlpine who is also an award-winning production designer, live in London and are both friends of mine. Their house, garden, the colour and fabric they use, their ideas and the way they live their life – that's what fills me up!

Danny Collins...

Danny Collins was really fun! First off, it was maybe one of the best scripts I'd ever read.

Dan Fogelman is a brilliant writer.

For Danny Collins, we got to do so much fun detail – like writing John Lennon's letter – that was my handwriting – and choosing a picture frame for it. Setting up a set list and all the instruments for the band was fantastic – we had fascinating musicians. When we filmed some of the music scenes at the Greek Theatre, there was an offstage table, set up for the band Chicago. It had aspirin, lip gloss and throat spray etc so I set up a similar table for the film. We made album covers, concert and backstage passes – every detail. It was so fun creating a history for the character. To me, Al Pacino's character choices wouldn't have been what I imagined. I would have gone more "Elton John flamboyant/Rod Stewart look". That wasn't what it was so I had to adjust my thinking. Don Was was the music supervisor – what a guy!



Danny Collins (2015)
Photographer Ellen Freund
Ellen re-creating John Lennon's handwriting

T Bone Burnett & Keb'mo

T Bone Burnett is so brilliant, I admire him so much. He produced the music for All the King's Men. Just being around him was an honour. There was a memorable event that happened... Keb'mo came to set without a guitar – I hadn't gotten him a guitar! I had to find a vintage guitar shop at 7am, as the show was set in the 40s. In New Orleans, I swear no-one gets up before noon! Luckily, the owner lived above the guitar shop so myself, Keb'mo and T Bone Burnett, all hopped in a car to get there. They wandered around the shop and played every guitar, to make sure they got one that "felt" right. It was just so fantastic!



Keb'mo
Photographer Ellen Freund
Vintage guitar shop in New Orleans
All the King's Men (2006)

Sam Raimí...

I knew Ellen always looked for a good script because as she says “everyone loves a good story” but I was curious as to why Ellen makes an exception for Director Sam Raimi – as she’ll always work for him, regardless of the script.



Sam Raimi is a joy to work with and loves what he does – a great collaborator. He’s so enthusiastic about everything – he’s like a 12-year-old boy – he jumps up and down and he will totally test you!

I was happy for cell phones when I was working with Sam Raimi. He would come up with new ideas in meetings like, “so here’s what we want, a gigantic spoon so when she lifts it up to her face, it looks gigantic”. I could text my crew and say “can you find a gigantic spoon or give me the price for building it”. By the end of the meeting, I could give him a photo of what existed or a price for building it.

*I don't know how they work
their magic - but I do get to
add to the magic...*

Visually, when you work with a brilliant cinematographer, like Philippe Rousselot, on *A River Runs Through It* and you see their process – I really credit it. The interaction between the designer Patrizia Von Brandenstein and cinematographer, Pawel Edelman on *All the King's Men*, is what created those visuals. I don't know how they work their magic – but I do get to add to the magic.

On *All the King's Men*, we had a myriad of technical advisors but when things had to be built, then this became my role. I learnt flyfishing for the film so I could understand what was needed and how it was used. I had to build the fishing rods and flies and all materials to tie the flies – but really, it took a lot of people who were way more knowledgeable than me, to make it look the way it did. We had to get all elements correct, for example, they wanted to use modern fishing lines so I often had to paint the line so it would look older.

Activator of dreams...

I feel like it's important to help younger filmmakers. I set up a salon with my husband who sadly has now passed away. We would hold these events, a few times throughout the year. We'd invite every young filmmaker we knew and "threw them together" in the backyard so they could share ideas and work on each other's films – to get their dreams activated. We did this for a number of years.

I vote with my dollar!

When I make things, I would much rather go to an artist to have it made. For example, I want to help keep the art of bookbinding alive so I'll find someone to bind my books. If I need an appropriate wooden spoon, I want to go to someone who hand carves wooden spoons.

I vote with my dollar and I'm in a lucky position to do this. For example, working for a studio – I will spend their money to help promote artists. It may cost a little more but this keeps a craft alive.

If I go into a little store and they want to give me a discount, knowing the item will be in a film, I tell them the studio has more money than they do and insist they charge the real price – I want these people to survive.

In series 13 Reasons Why (2017), I found a craftsperson who made cool postal bags and their bag is featured in the drama. I will always go down this route to support artists.

Greatest lesson...

I believe everything in life, is designed to teach us lessons about ourselves... I asked Ellen what she believed has been the greatest lesson, on taking this particular career journey and what it has taught her about herself.



Doing what I do, being part of a team, being part of a hierarchy – and not the high end – has taught me how to listen, how to observe and how to contribute to make something bigger and better, than anyone had ever thought.

Note from founder of Níroshini Míni Magazine, Melissa Day...

Ellen Freund's remarkable journey as a Property Master, stands as a testament to not only her immense talent but also her profound humanity and warmth. Her ability to weave magic into the realm of filmmaking, transforming inanimate objects into pivotal, life-breathing elements of storytelling, showcases a rare blend of creativity and care. Ellen's laughter and kindness, as vividly experienced during her interview with me, reveals a personality that is as generous as it is joyful, making every interaction with her a delightful and memorable experience. Her stories, filled with humour and wisdom, offer a glimpse into a world where every prop tells a tale and every moment is an opportunity to bring joy and laughter into the lives of others.

Ellen's commitment to nurturing young talent and preserving traditional crafts, highlights her understanding of the importance of community and legacy in the creative industry. Her efforts to support emerging filmmakers and artists, underscore a deep-seated belief in the power of gentle guidance and the importance of keeping the flame of old-age crafts alive, for future generations.

This generosity of spirit is further exemplified, in her spontaneous act of sharing personal photographs during our interview; a gesture that speaks volumes about her desire to connect with and uplift others.

Moreover, Ellen's role as a Property Master is crucial, underpinning the very essence of filmmaking. Her insights into the importance of detail, care and love in prop creation, reveal a philosophy that goes beyond the visual aesthetics of movie-making. Ellen does not just create props; she imbues them with life, ensuring that each piece contributes authentically, to the narrative tapestry of a film.

Her leadership in building teams that share her vision and values, reflects a profound respect for collaboration and craftsmanship. Ellen's dedication to her craft, coupled with her ability to inspire those around her, truly makes her an unsung hero in the cinematic world. Her contributions not only enrich the movies she works on but also elevate the art of filmmaking itself.

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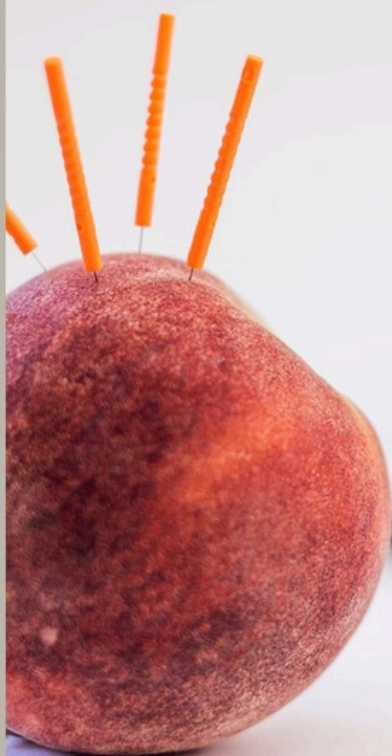
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About the inclusion of Facial Acupuncture

This form of acupuncture, aims to boost your health and the benefits can aid specific ailments, stress or general well-being. There are acupuncture points in the face, that correspond to all the major meridians, energy pathways and organs of the body. Fine needles are inserted into the face around the brows, the nose, the chin, the mouth; wherever is needed. Melissa uses her experience as a Reiki Practitioner and Acupuncturist, to guide the placing of the needles. Every combination of needles is different, from person to person and from one treatment to the next.