

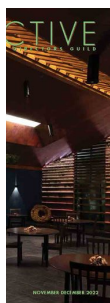


PERSPECTIVE

MANIFESTING THE MYTHOLOGY THE DESIGN OF NANNY

BY JONATHAN GUGGENHEIM, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

Above Image: AMY AND ADAM'S CONDO. PRODUCTION STILL.



DECEMBER

I received the script for *Nanny* as I was wrapping a feature in Wilmington, NC, in early spring of 2021. It was a demanding job and I was desperate for a break. Nikyatu Jusu's script, however, absorbed me and flooded my imagination with images. Each page enticed me with a unique visual language, surreal tone and otherworldly detail that led me to daydream about designing her film. I knew my break between projects would have to be brief. I wanted to do this film.

My interview with writer/director Nikyatu was fresh and informative. It was evident that she had delved deeply into these characters and knew their histories thoroughly. Our conversation focused

on her own African mother leaving home to care for other children under her charge as a nanny. Nikyatu wanted to tell a stylized horror story steeped in reality that could seamlessly weave between fantasy and nonfiction. We spoke in detail about the evolution of the mythological creatures: “Mami Wata” and “Anansi.” They had to be strongly and stealthily represented in the story. In her own words, we would have to “build water and snake symbolism at varied levels of intensity via a spectrum of practical and special effects.” My first bit of business was to research these curious spirits and educate myself on how they interacted with the human world and to grasp the extent of their powers. We weren’t simply telling the story of Aisha, an immigrant nanny hustling in New York. This was also the story of Anansi, the trickster spider who creatively outsmarts more powerful opponents and of Mami Wata, the water spirit who brings about good fortune, along with the threat of destruction. My mission was to create real-life environments that would embody the struggle of obtaining the American dream, while also serving the symbolism of cultural folklore in a modern setting.



A. INTERIOR OF AMY AND ADAM’S CONDO. PRODUCTION STILL.

B. INTERIOR OF AMY AND ADAM’S CONDO. PRODUCTION STILL.

C. NANNY COLOR PALETTE. CREATED BY JONATHAN GUGGENHEIM

Amy & Adam Hav’s Condo

From the very first read, I envisioned Adam and Amy’s condo as a haunted house. So much of Aisha’s mental turmoil was to happen within this space. It had to visually act as a catalyst for her actions, while still portraying a place where a friendship between their daughter Rose, and Aisha could naturally occur. I wanted the space to be a harmonious blend between the cold clean lines of the affluent Park home in *Parasite* and the worn, lived-in feel of Mia Farrow’s apartment in *Rosemary’s Baby*. In both of these references, the floor plan was disorienting. The living spaces were cavernous yet inviting, with tall ceilings and long corridors. I wanted Adam and Amy’s condo to feel agreeable and intentional, similar to a museum where one is meant to look but not touch—

design just out of reach. Locations had been scouting the Upper East Side of Manhattan weeks before I was hired on the project. Many of the possibilities were high-rise penthouse suites that had a superficial gloss to them. They felt more like hotels than actual places of permanent residence. Because of the production's limited budget and time, building the entire condo was out of the question.

The production began searching in Lower Manhattan and found some exciting possibilities that sparked visual interest and answered some special effects questions that were slowly rolling to a boil. We zeroed in on a fourth-floor residence in the Tribeca neighborhood owned by an architect and gallery curator. The space had been designed by the couple and sported a minimalist open floor plan with high-end modern finishes. A large wall of windows led the eye to an exterior deck overlooking Canal Street. This was the perfect scenario for cinematographer Rina Yang to light from outside—otherwise a difficult task without the luxury of equipment, crew or the capability to close down the streets below. The location had just enough hallways and nooks to retain the element of mystery and suspense, while the exposed industrial core offered a warmly weathered look. A stark office space crisply enclosed with matte metal and glass menaced in a corner of the main living area. I couldn't have designed it any better myself! (Although it could have been a tad bigger.) It was the perfect vote for Adam's large-scale photographs, which were to be heavily featured as a plot device. Furthermore, the ensuite bathroom served actor choreography and fit within the tonal palette I had been playing with for the characters.



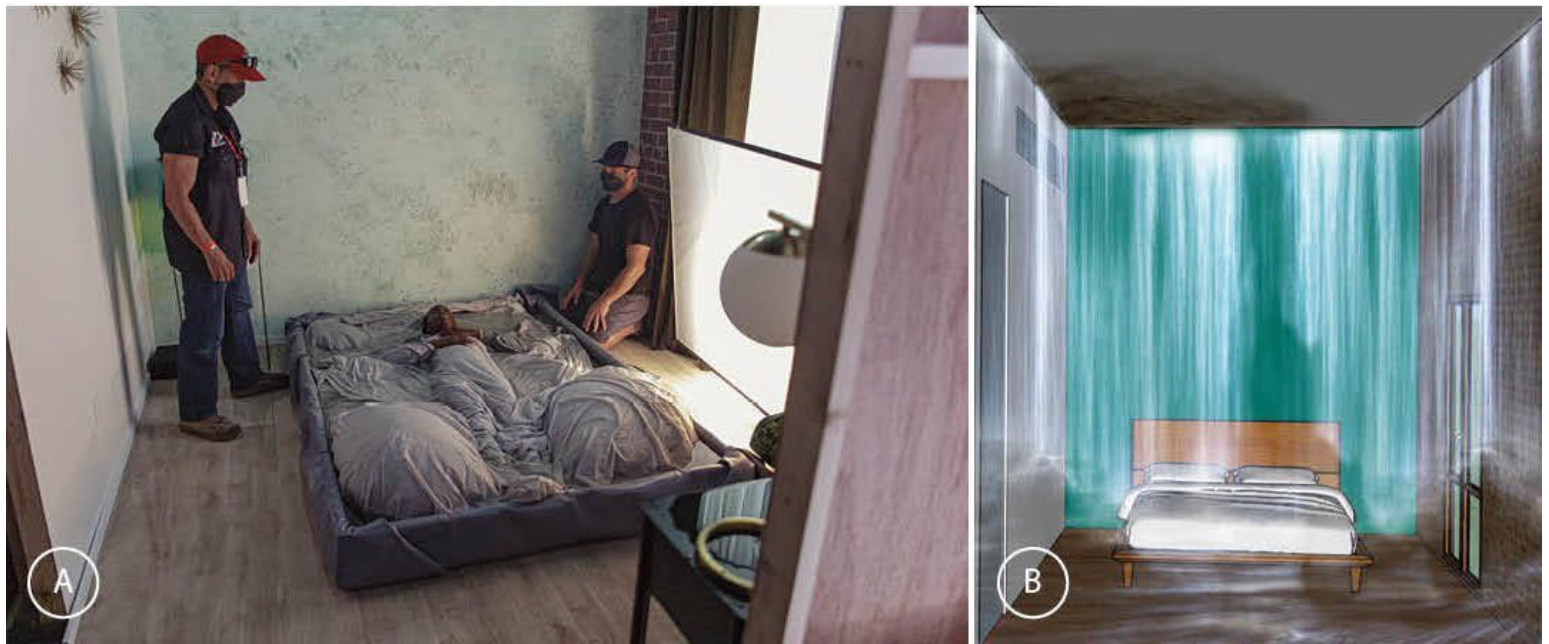
A. INTERIOR OF AMY AND ADAM'S CONDO. PRODUCTION STILL.

B. INTERIOR OF AMY AND ADAM'S CONDO. ROSE'S BEDROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.

C. AMY AND ADAM'S BEDROOM. SET PHOTO.

Adam and Amy's color palette needed to be rigid and instantly recognizable—an immediate departure from the otherwise bright and vivid environments Aisha

inhabited on her days off. I was fixated on desaturated greens and teals. Art Director Chloé Seytre headed up the guest bathroom/bedroom builds at GUM Studios in Brooklyn, NY, where we were to shoot the special effects sequences. I wanted to carry the eerie green into these sets, making them even darker and richer. The extreme use of green worked to convey the opulence and envy associated with the color, while still representing the ambiguity of fertility and growth. It also acted as a connective tissue between the multiple bodies of water featured throughout the film: bath, pool, river, sea. These surroundings were to purposefully perplex the audience and muddy the waters of reality. Adam and Amy's space had to figuratively feel as if it was slowly sinking into a lagoon. I wanted to encapsulate the living behind glass as if they were forced to reside in a filling fishbowl. The more immersed Aisha became with the family, the more prevalent the aquatic tones appeared. Set decorator Caroline Scott cleverly integrated objects nodding to the nightmarish nautical theme. Each piece of décor, from the sea foam flecked marble dining table to the Capiz sconce lights, had some semblance to the ocean or underwater tie that foreshadowed the story to come. There was even an elaborate plant story that flourished throughout, highlighting the String-of-pearls—a creeping succulent vine native to southwest Africa. All of these elements were to mirror the behavior of mischievous mythological creatures and to echo their warnings to Aisha. As a design team, we would jump at the chance to make a parallel connection between our real world and the folkloric realm.



A. SFX “WATERBED” FEATURING SFX COORDINATOR BEN HARRIS AND STUNT COORDINATOR MANNY SIVERIO. SET PHOTO.

VFX/SFX

The film had a substantial list of both practical and visual effects to heighten Aisha's moments of mental collapse, as well as to materialize the physical embodiment of Anansi and Mami Wata. Brian Marino at FuseFX was responsible for the VFX work surrounding Mami Wata, including her underwater movement, nictitating eyelids, waving hair tendrils and her submerged mermaid tail—created using a CG body extension. We went back-and-forth with how we were to shoot the swimming pool scenes. Specifically, how we were to spatially divide Aisha from the water creature and build out the aquatic environment around them. To help visualize how the scene would play out, we referenced Caroline Brewer's insightful storyboards. Because the creature was to break the surface of the water, it was vital that each department weighed in on how to practically produce this look. Initially, it was believed that a green screen cyclorama would have to be placed underwater running the width of the pool. This would enable the ability to digitally manipulate the lower limbs of both actors and create a murky water habitat. Ultimately, this work and world had to be simplified for time. Production had only one day to prep/rig the swimming pool location. We decided to ditch the environmental surroundings and focus on the SFX hair/makeup and practical fishtail created by Risha Rox and Taking Shape Creature FX respectively.

The Art Department worked extensively with SFX coordinator Ben Harris to achieve the more literal water intrusion that occurred in our stage builds. After placing the bedroom and bathroom sets within a waterproof membrane, Ben was tasked with fabricating plastic weirs that would alter the flow characteristics of water leaking into the guest bedroom set from the ceiling above. It was apparent that Rina wanted a "spider cam" to be crawling across the bedroom floor angled up toward Aisha just as the cascade of water entered the room. It needed to be conceivable that the leakage could have been caused by damaged pipes and was not just a premonition. The height of the existing room on location helped us greatly, as we built the room to match. With assistance from VFX house, Break + Enter, we were able to shoot plate shots of the existing ceiling and stitch them together in post. We provided reference images of waterlogged sheetrock laden with mold for the final digital enhancement. Admittedly, navigating the conversations between VFX/SFX simultaneously was a learning experience. Many decisions that were to be produced in post had to be made in real time in order to inform the functionality of our sets.



A. SFX BATHTUB. SET PHOTO.



B. GUEST BATHROOM. STAGE BUILD. SET PHOTO.

Aisha's Environments

In order to create a contrast between lifestyle and location, the team leaned into the sun-soaked colors of traditional African art and wardrobe. I would frequently communicate with costume designer Charlese Antoinette Jones to discuss a myriad of textures and patterns. Much of my research began with African fashion photography, which led me back to the aesthetics of Althea McNish and David Hicks—stalwarts of expressive and energetic design. It was Hick's quote, "Colors don't clash, they vibrate," that encouraged the ever expanding and vibrant palette. It was important for each character to have a defined color story, to be grounded in a world of layered illusion. Aisha's color story wove like thread work throughout the film. I wanted her existence in the auxiliary settings to be tethered to the energy and comfort of Senegal. I was inspired by the mixed media work of Joana Choumali and her striking use of street photography outlined in brilliant textiles. Aisha's personal living space needed to have a transient nature to it. She lived with her aunt in a Harlem apartment, where living quarters were tight and less refined. In order to accommodate several scheduling needs, the crew reconfigured a single-family Victorian style house.

Plugging the staircase and closing off a large attic room provided the desired layout, while the rest of the house remained available for subsequent sets and insert shots. Aisha's bed/bathroom had limited time on screen, but it was key that she have an authentic set to communicate with family and son via cellphone. The design team layered her walls with family photos (all of whom were related to Nikyatu!) and placed stunning wallpaper that resembled a bed of oysters. In her

bathroom we introduce Aisha's special color, red, as her reflection gazes back at her. This scene is mirrored in a more sinister incarnation as Aisha slips into a red dress that is enveloped by the evil green walls of Adam and Amy's condo.



A. GUEST BATHROOM. STAGE BUILD FEATURING CHARGE SCENIC GERALDINE POPE. SET PHOTO.

B. AISHA'S BATHROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.

For the character Kathleen, played by Leslie Uggams, I wanted to accentuate her art of divination. A pivotal point in the story occurs when Aisha meets her love interest's grandmother. Kathleen, a clairvoyant, explains the powers and purpose of the foreboding water spirit. Purple was the best fit for her story, as it frequently represents nobility, mystery and the divine. Again, hinting at the spirit world amid the film's everyday décor was of utmost importance. A sample of purple wallpaper, provided by Astek, informed the look. It was used to cover the walls of her traditional Harlem brownstone. The abstract pattern of flowers and fish scales provided the perfect canvas for a piece of hero art, which was to loom in the formal living room. *Killing You Softly*, by Wangechi Mutu, is a colorfully collaged piece of art that was written into the script. The piece depicts a razor-toothed Mami Wata holding what appears to be the disemboweled body of a woman. Producer Nikkia Moulterie spearheaded the arduous task of obtaining the rights to use the work within our film. Unfortunately, one of the stipulations of using this work was that it had to be printed at the same size as the original. At 80"x 58" the piece was imposing in the narrow brownstone, but luckily worked as a towering type of tarot card. Combining the texture of the wallpaper, Charlese's net-like wardrobe, and the Mami Wata piece, we conjured creatures that were just below the surface. **ADG**



A. KATHLEEN'S BROWNSTONE. PRODUCTION STILL.



B. AISHA'S APARTMENT. SET PHOTO.



C. AISHA'S BEDROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.

Jonathan Guggenheim, Production Designer

Chloé Seytre, Art Director

Joseph Feld, Assistant Art Director

Caroline Brewer, Storyboard Artist

Caroline B. Scott, Set Decorator



A. AISHA'S APARTMENT. PRODUCTION STILL.



B. AISHA'S BEDROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.



C. KATHLEEN'S BROWNSTONE. PRODUCTION STILL.



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