



Quyen Tran at work on *Mogadishu, Minnesota*.

in the streets. “I remember seeing a Steadicam in action for the first time as a young kid at Billingsgate Market. That was the first time I thought about the different jobs in moviemaking.” Parsons studied photography, performance art and audiovisual mixed media at the Wimbledon School of Art (now Wimbledon College of Art) in England before moving to Halifax, Canada, to complete her studies at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

Although her degree was in photography, she was shooting short films before she graduated, and after college she took whatever jobs she could get to gain experience. “I carried sandbags, put lights together, and at leaner times joined other departments like set dressing,” she says. She ultimately found work as a camera assistant on such projects as the TV movie *Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story*, which was photographed by Uta Briese-

witz, ASC. “She went on to shoot *The Wire*,” Parsons recalls. “Her handheld work was impeccable.” Parsons was also mentored by photographer John Glover, whose influence on her work, she says, has been profound.

Both the celluloid and digital work of Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC continue to inspire Parsons and shape her own philosophy when it comes to cinematography. “I agree with his aversive attitude toward creating stunning images simply for the sake of creating stunning images,” she explains. “The job is more about creating images that are in service of a larger purpose.” Parsons skillfully applied that theory to her work on *Weirdos*, a coming-of-age story set in the 1970s that garnered widespread acclaim at last year’s Toronto International Film Festival — and is set for wide theatrical release in Canada on March 17. Parsons’ black-and-white photography

was singled out by critics, and she loved the opportunity to shoot monochrome in a period setting. “It was a pleasure to see a moving black-and-white view of the world through the eyepiece, and to work with contrast alone,” she says.

Having shot in both color and black-and-white, and on film as well as digital, Parsons remains open to the possibilities inherent in all formats. “I feel blessed that I am from a generation that knows well what it is to shoot on film,” she says — and adds that “digital sensors able to dip more and more into the low lights create a whole new set of choices for the cinematographer. The study of this craft is wonderfully endless.”

Quyen Tran

Quyen Tran came to the cinema via still photography and photojournalism, disciplines that continue to inform her work as a director of photography. “Hailing from a photojournalistic background, I’m always looking to tell the story in the most economical way possible,” she explains. “With stills, you have one frame to tell a story. Sure, it can be beautifully composed and lit, but what is the essence of that frame? Why does it exist? What’s behind those eyes?”

It was while shooting stills on an NYU thesis film that Tran caught the movie bug and decided to apply to film school herself. She attended UCLA, where she met cinematographer-in-residence Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC, who became a valued mentor, along with Johnny Simmons, ASC. In fact, she still implements a piece of advice from Simmons regularly. “He said, ‘Anyone can get the job done, but how do you want to do the job?’ — which really stuck with me,” she says.

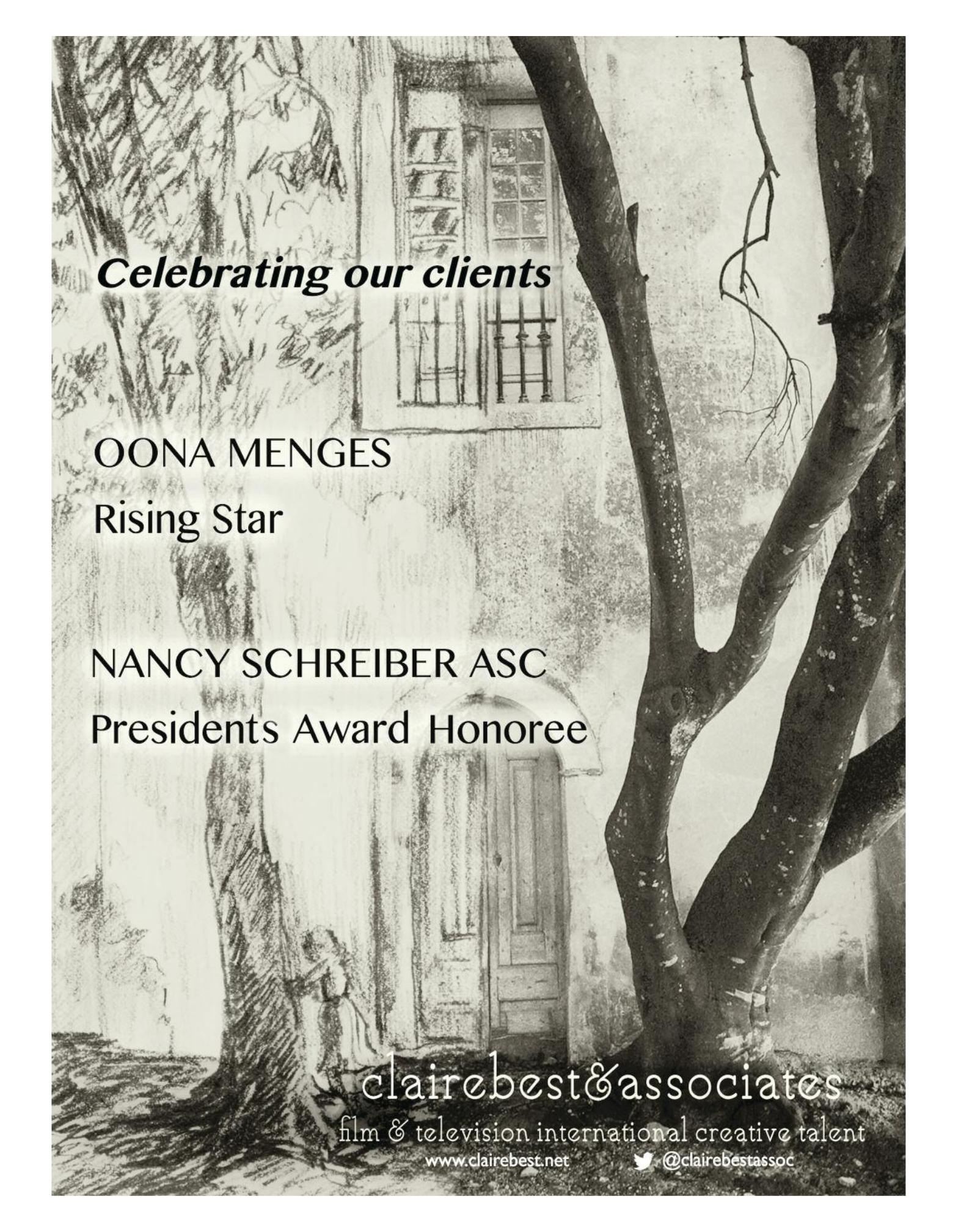
Tran also received some valuable extracurricular education by spending time in her sister-in-law’s editing room, where she had the opportunity to study footage from films like *There Will Be Blood*. “I got to see [ASC member] Robert Elswit’s dailies, which was insanely amazing,” she recalls. “That taught me a lot about coverage and gave me a totally different perspective from what I was learning in the classroom.”

Tran’s time at UCLA led to her first job as director of photography — when she

On interviewing:

“A very important aspect of the agency’s work is making sure you, the cinematographers, have as much information as we can give you about the people you are going to meet in the interview. Make sure you’ve seen the films they’ve done before, and know the surrounding elements, such as the cast, the production designer, the line producer, the first AD, the locations. Think about what kind of crew you might take with you, and go into the interview with visual references.”

— Claire Best, Claire Best and Associates



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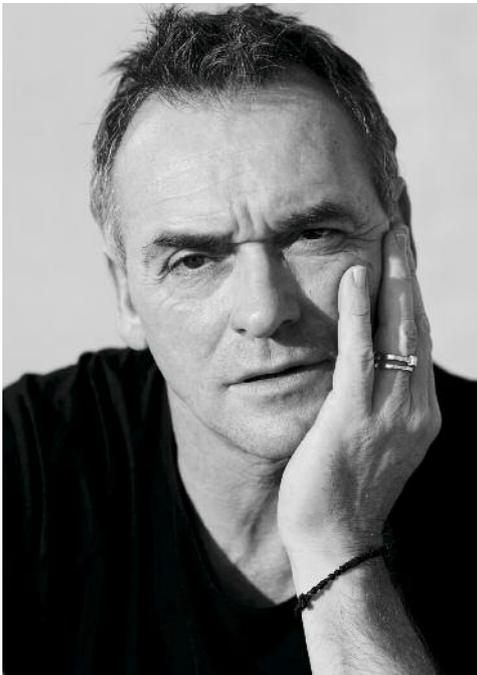
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Cinematographer Pieter Vermeer.

shot a professor's movie before graduating — and she then moved on to projects like *Girlfriend* (2010), a \$150,000 feature starring a young man with Down syndrome. "On that set I learned a lot about people with Down syndrome, and it really changed me," she says. "It made me a more compassionate human being."

Tran was similarly affected by her work on the award-winning documentary *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*. "Director Grace Lee and I worked on that for six years, and it really changed the way I see the world today. It's the reason I started gardening, it's the reason why I became more interested in politics, and all of that makes me a better storyteller."

Tran's interest in conservation informs not only her approach to storytelling, but also her feelings regarding the film-versus-digital debate. "I used to love

printing in the darkroom, and as a still photographer I was one of the last photo-journalists to switch to digital," she says. "However, I quickly learned to adapt to the new format, and there seemed to be a lot less waste, which is important to me."

At the time of this writing, Tran had just shot a pilot for HBO called *Mogadishu, Minnesota*, and was prepping for the presentation of two narrative features at Sundance entitled *The Little Hours* and *Deidra & Laney Rob a Train*. She reiterates her belief that it's ultimately all about story: "Technical aspects aside, as long as I'm telling meaningful and impactful stories, I'm a happy shooter."

Pieter Vermeer

Dutch director of photography Pieter Vermeer also found his way to cinema via still photography. "Both of my parents are artists, so I grew up in a visual environment," he explains. At the same time, Vermeer was becoming exposed to the work of filmmakers like Bertolucci, Fassbinder, Polanski and Scorsese. "I became more and more interested in telling stories with a camera as opposed to just dealing with a single image," he says.

His first break came with an internship operating a primitive form of video assist for director Pieter Verhoeff. "Eventually, Pieter took me on to his next movie, where I worked in the electrical department," Vermeer recalls. Vermeer went on to work as a grip and gaffer on a number of films in the Netherlands, ultimately becoming a director of photography in commercials. "I went international, shooting commercials in France, England, the U.S. — which led me to relocate to New York in 1997."

Through music videos and commercials, Vermeer met director Elliott Lester, who asked the cinematographer to shoot his features *Nightingale* (2014) and *After-*

On diplomacy and collaboration:
"You're dealing with people all day long when you make films, and your talent will stay in a box if you don't figure people out — a director or producer who doesn't know what they want or communicates in a way you're not used to. It's more than just your art; it's a collaborative medium, and you're dealing with different people and different scenarios, schedules, budgets and conditions. There are so many variables that go into it. You have to be able to adapt and figure it out."
— Paul Hook, ICM Partners

math (2016). These films allowed Vermeer to flex different creative muscles than he had been accustomed to with his shorter-form work. "Commercials and features are quite different animals," he says. "In a film, you have so much more time to tell your story and to develop your shots and scenes; in commercials, you have 30 to 60 seconds and generally the main purpose is to sell something."

While working in features, commercials and music videos has allowed Vermeer to shoot extensively on film negative, he has fully embraced the digital revolution. "I like the latitude and color space of digital," he says, having shot his last three features on Arri Alexa cameras. "Don't get me wrong, I sometimes miss the texture and grain that come with shooting film. Unfortunately, in my experience the infrastructure for shooting on film is slowly disappearing; it's difficult to find the right people and the right labs."

When shooting digital anamorphic, Vermeer tries to take the sharp edges off by using older glass like Panavision C and E lenses. "I'm always trying to deconstruct the

On making a good impression:
"What comes first: the agent or the project? Often it's the project, so how do you get the project? Socializing. You need to make the contacts. There are some cinematographers whose talent may be no better than the next person's, but they still rise to the top because people like them. As agents, we have to sell your disposition as well as your talent. Do the producer and director want to see your face every day at 7:30 in the morning? We often look for people who aren't divas — that can be career suicide when you're just starting out."
— Jonathan Silverman, Intrinsic

Vermeer photo by Jan Welters.