

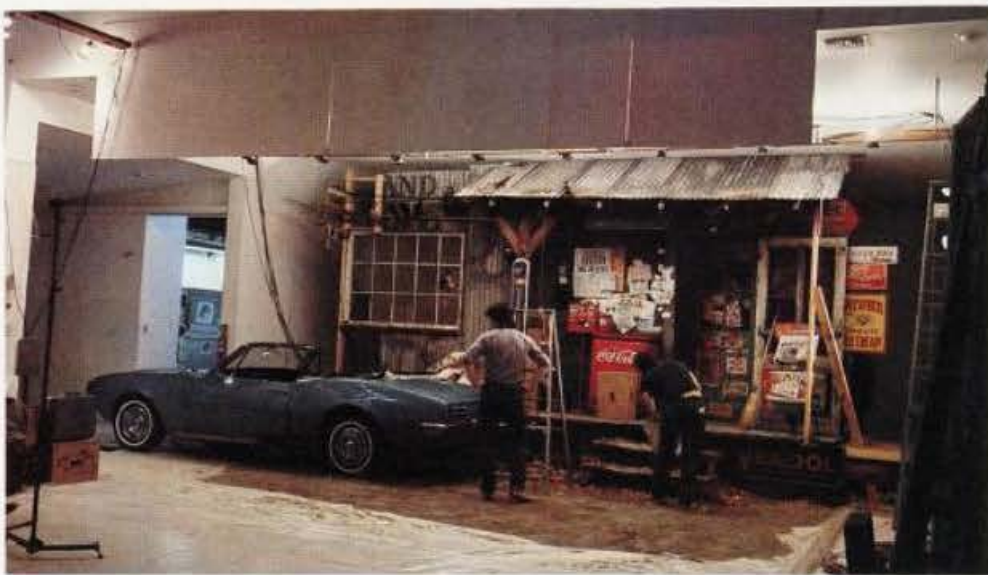
Staging a Rustic Tableau

As an instrument for creating complex, story-telling images, the studio photographer's camera challenges the illustrator's pen. Among the photographers who are known for this narrative approach is Hollywood-based Reid Miles, whose intricate vignettes have become hallmarks of several major advertising campaigns. In them, Miles evokes the small-town feel of Middle America with a whimsical mix of nostalgia and humor that often emulates the styles of Norman Rockwell and other period illustrators.

One of Miles's chief assets is Hollywood itself. The movie-making community not only has an abundant supply of skilled designers, stylists and other set workers, it also boasts a large number of prop-rental shops filled with authentic remnants of decades past. In addition, Hollywood offers an enormous selection of character-actors whose larger-than-life personae are perfectly suited to Miles's broadly comic roles.

Miles — who claims with a smile that he turned to the camera because he could not draw — pays minute attention to staging the tableau and refining its details. (The set at right took four days to build.) He especially devotes time to coaching the actors in the exaggerated expressions and postures needed to turn them into caricatures. The result of his orchestration is a humorously overblown scene packed with such realistic details that it rivals the most intricate drawing.

Inside Reid Miles's Hollywood studio, two assistants (above, right) give the finishing touches to a set carefully designed to epitomize a rustic general store. Miles himself (right) gives directions on light placement from his chair next to a huge view camera that gives a 20 x 24-inch image on instant film; the final shooting is usually done with a 35mm camera.





Two actors look on as Miles and an assistant examine one of the giant instant-film shots. Miles uses the shots first to check the appearance of the set alone; on the day of the shoot he uses them to study the effect with the actors in place.



During a break in the shooting, the actors gather to look at the growing array of instant shots. Miles sometimes employs the shots to study major changes in composition, but more often he uses them to check variations in the actors' animated facial expressions and exaggerated postures.

Trying one approach to the theme of cityfolk lost in the country, Miles positions the actors to see how the scene would look with the map spread on the ground and the actors hovering over it. He abandoned this version without taking a picture because it forced the actors to look down, obscuring their expressions.



Before the final shoot, Miles takes a few minutes to contemplate the 14 best instant pictures of the 40 taken. He will shoot several versions of the same basic scene, and at this point in the day's work he must decide which arrangements he wants to use.



The final version selected for Reid Miles's portfolio captures the reactions of a city couple and their son to the contradictory directions they receive from a colorful assortment of rural characters. The set supports and studio ceiling seen at the edges of the picture are normally cropped in reproduction; Miles shoots the extra margin to be sure he has the entire scene within his frame.



REID MILES: City Slickers, 1981