



Picture Perfect

Cinematographer
Katelin Arizmendi crafts a dazzling
psychological study for the
indie drama *Swallow*

By Valentina Valentini

***Swallow* is part psychological thriller, part horror, part drama, part feminist commentary and part dark comedy.** But the feature's imagery, shot by cinematographer Katelin Arizmendi, helps blend this complex identity into a stylish, compelling and crystal-clear narrative.

The first scripted movie from writer-director Carlo Mirabella-Davis, *Swallow* tells the story of Hunter (Haley Bennett), who — stifled, newly pregnant and treated as ornamental by her husband — suffers from a psychological disorder called pica that compels her to swallow dangerous objects.

Addressing Arizmendi's contributions to the project, Mirabella-Davis — known for his 2011 documentary *The Swell Season* — offers, "Kate is deeply connected to the

characters she's capturing. She relishes the opportunity to discuss their psychology and how to visually elevate the subtext of what they're experiencing. From our very first meeting, I was deeply inspired by how imaginative and passionate she was about illustrating Hunter's struggle. Kate isn't afraid to be bold, daring and innovative in her camera direction."

After a successful decade working on shorts, music videos and commercials, Arizmendi made a splash in the feature world with the 2018 thriller *Cam*. She has been lauded for her work on the Sundance 2020 hit *Charm City Kings*, and she was recently tapped to serve as cinematographer on *Flint Strong*, the feature-directing debut of ASC member Rachel Morrison. *AC* spoke with Arizmendi just before that shoot began.

***American Cinematographer*: How did you and Carlo Mirabella-Davis decide on the visual aesthetic of *Swallow*?**

Katelin Arizmendi: From our very first meeting, Carlo and I worked on this three-page document that had detailed ideas and rules-of-thumb that would make this story feel like Hunter's. For example, we pulled imagery from *Birth* for the opening dinner scene; *Black Swan* [*AC* Dec. '10] for reflections; *Buffalo 66* [*AC* July '98] for very shallow



◀◀ & ▶▶ Hunter (Haley Bennett) suffers from a psychological disorder that gives her an irresistible urge to ingest dangerous materials in the psychological thriller *Swallow*.
▶ Cinematographer Katelin Arizmendi shoulders the camera.

depth of field and bird's-eye shots; *Thirst* for the cyan-colored surgery scenes, making the blood pop; and *Dogtooth* for odd framing of Haley alone. Carlo told me he wanted a feeling of normalcy sometimes, to make the viewer believe that Hunter and Richie [Austin Stowell] are really in love, so I chose to have eyelines close to camera for those scenes. When she's feeling alienated and disconnected, I would lock off the frame with the characters in a short-sided single, pushing them to the edges [of the frame]. Their eyelines to each other would be far from camera, with lots of dead space on the opposite side of their eyeline. By placing the camera farther from their eyeline to each other, we feel a disconnection between the characters. There is more coverage of Hunter, but whenever she was with Richie and his family, I'd stick to mediums and would have the parents in a two-shot because, to [Hunter], they're an overpowering force. When Hunter goes into her [own] psyche, it was all slow zooms, tight shots and macro shots where we see her POV of these objects. For the zooms, we used an Arri/Zeiss 16.5-110mm T2.6

Master Zoom. Then, whenever she's feeling in control, it would be a symmetrical shot and sometimes I'd put her in the center of frame.

Which camera and lenses did you choose?

Arizmendi: I used [Arri's] Amira with Arri/Zeiss Master Primes. Originally, I thought it would be really cool to shoot everything with the Master Primes except for the close-ups of the objects — [I thought] that maybe shooting those with vintage lenses would bring out a magical feeling, some gloominess, maybe a little distortion. We tested that [approach], but in the end we felt that the Master Primes' crispness, and the sharpness of those objects in macro, was way better; you could see all of these textures that aren't visible to the naked eye.

I also built a LUT on set with DIT Jake Westphal. That became really helpful as a base since we were shooting with high-contrast lenses in a high-contrast location. The LUT took the edge off the highlights and gave us a nice, neutral look. Colorist Sam Daley emphasized that [look by]



keeping it very naturalistic. I didn't want it to feel 'graded,' so he didn't push any colors into the blacks or highlights. Nothing feels forced; everything has a creaminess to it, like Hunter's skin.

How did you achieve the movie's clean, glossy, catalogue-style photography?

Arizmendi: I wanted to have a lot of control over the lighting, and I never wanted hard light coming



Carlo Mirabella-Davis: Katelin Arizmendi is a visual genius with the eye of a renaissance painter. A true warrior of cinema, her control over frame composition, sculpting light, and illuminating character psychology with her camerawork is second to none.

Kate and I storyboarded every frame of *Swallow*, creating a massive archive of film stills from our favorite movies as inspiration. We crafted a rigid vernacular of camera direction, a strict set of rules that we would break at key emotional junctures in the narrative. In the beginning of the film, Kate frames Hunter with many locked-down master shots where Hunter is lost in the frame. Later on, Kate breaks those rules by suddenly using handheld or a shallow depth-of-field close-up to reflect Hunter breaking free from the patriarchal paradigms of her environment.

Kate had this brilliant idea to use Master Prime lenses, which capture everything in powerful textural detail to reflect the way people with pica often describe the texture of objects.

Working with Kate was one of the best artistic collaborations of my life. We both love aesthetically striking imagery, so we shared an instant aesthetic camaraderie. She relishes upending convention, and values visually arresting images that leap off the screen and sear themselves into your memory. Kate ushered us into Hunter's way of seeing the world with such artistry, courage, insight, and heart. It was a dream come true to work with Kate Arizmendi, and I thank the gods she decided to be the eyes of *Swallow*.



Hunter contends with her feelings of isolation.

through the windows. But that strategy was challenging, because it was a house with huge glass windows! With a limited budget, I didn't get to have a ton of HMIs to push light in, so I got comfortable using the curtains and shaping the light that way. If it was sunny outside, I closed the curtains and put 12-by-12 frames of muslin or negative outside the window to heavily diffuse the direct sunlight, while allowing the ambient through. I keyed with 4K HMIs through diffusion from the balcony of the living room or coming through various windows in the house, and was able to control the level of contrast on the characters by taking out the competing factor of the sun outside. It became more about taking light away rather than adding it, in order to create a uniformity in this 'perfectly' lit house. The approach also had a lot to do with the camerawork — a lot of lock-offs where we would obsess over every single thing in the frame,

making sure that each and every object had a visual purpose.

How did you visually portray pica, the disorder Hunter suffers from, and all of the objects she swallows?

Arizmendi: We discovered that the 100mm lens with a +2 or +3 diopter was sort of the sweet spot to shoot those objects. A big part of pica is the feeling of the objects' textures in the mouth, so that was a crucial part of the story to visually convey. I wanted to shoot the objects so close that you can almost feel or taste them, and I would add a little bit of a backlight to each object. For example, with the marble, I had a pinpointed light that backlit the marble — and when you see Hunter holding it up, you can almost see the light from the marble in her eye, which created a bit of magical surrealism. In the scene with the ice, we backlit it and got so close with the lens that the ice practically glittered — it almost looked like tiny glaciers that

AC: The camera's perspective often feels voyeuristic. Was that deliberate?

Katelin Arizmendi: [Director Carlo Mirabella-Davis] told me that he wanted it to feel as if someone was always watching Hunter, so I incorporated shots where it's not clear whose POV we're showing. The house is like a glass box, with Hunter — and sometimes her husband, Richie — trapped inside, and the viewer looking in from the outside. For those shots, I pulled out to extreme wides so the characters would feel very small and insignificant in this house surrounded by nature. In the scene when they're getting ready for bed, the camera pulls out to a wide shot at the corner of their house, making them look like little people in a dollhouse.



were melting. That was so exciting for us, because we really didn't know what the ice would look like in detail until we put the lens up close and tried it.

This is only your second feature film, but it seems you have a favorite type of project.

Arizmendi: As I've been working on commercials, music videos, and short-form projects, I've been reading a lot of scripts. I started out making experimental films after film school — things that were sexual and uncomfortable, and it was obvious that that was the subject matter and aesthetic that I was into. Then my career began to 'normalize,' where I was shooting commercials and making clients happy, and not doing anything that was necessarily very bold, visually speaking. I wanted to wait for the right

▲ Hunter and her husband have an awkward dinner with his parents. ► Arizmendi finesses the setup.

script, one that was boundary-pushing. The first one was *Cam*, which was a thriller set in the world of webcam pornography. And after that, I was actually a little hesitant to do another psychological thriller, because I do like to work on something different than the previous project I've worked on. But I was so enamored by *Swallow's* script and this character study. I wanted to get inside of Hunter's head and tell her story in this quiet-rebellion way that she does. These first two films of mine, they're not for a general audience; not everyone's going to love them, but I am into that kind of filmmaking. I like making people uncomfortable. ♦

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TECH SPECS

2.39:1

Digital Capture

Arri Amira

Arri/Zeiss Master Prime, Master Zoom