

FILM AND TELEVISION

'I Love Dick' TV adaptation takes the action to Marfa

The cult feminist work gets the TV treatment

BY **LAUREN RO** | **@BLAURING** | MAY 15, 2017, 12:12PM EDT

The set of the Marfa Institute. | Photos by Canada Gordon

As is the case with many adored books, it was difficult to imagine a television adaption of *I Love Dick*, the autobiographical novel and cult feminist work by writer and filmmaker Chris Kraus.

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Published in 1997, the book traces the author's obsession with Dick, a cultural critic who also happens to be a colleague of her husband's, and her subsequent self-awakening. The story is mostly told through letters—a narrative that would have been a challenge to bring to life on screen. But with *Transparent* creator Jill Soloway and playwright Sarah Gubbins at the helm, and a star-making turn by actress Kathryn

Hahn (and Kevin Bacon in the eponymous role), *I Love Dick* gets the treatment it deserves.



In moving the action to Marfa, Texas, instead of California, where the book is based, the series also adds the [tiny, design-forward West Texas town](#) to the cast of intriguing characters. We recently spoke to production designer [Cat Smith](#) and set decorator [Dea Jensen](#) (both of whom work on *Transparent*) about starting the series in Marfa, using Los Angeles as a stand-in, the challenges of creating a feminist space, and what *I Love Dick* means to them.

Watch *I Love Dick* on [Amazon](#). Minor spoilers below.



The set of the Marfa Institute.



Curbed: What did you think when you first read the script and the book?

Cat Smith: I started to think about the theme of the book and I thought, Well, wait a minute, I've been through a relationship like that. At first you feel like, Who is this person and why can't they just get over this guy? And then you realize that it's not really about obsession, or even about this particular person. It's more about [Chris] finding a voice that she can speak in, and I found that really intriguing.

Did that understanding of the character play into the set design? What was your thought process in creating a kind of feminist space?

Cat Smith: This is a tricky project because [Chris and her husband Sylvere] move to the space [in Marfa]. The space isn't theirs—it's something that's been given to them by the institute, and so it's a space that doesn't really have an aspect of them to it. It's only what they bring physically from New York. But on the other hand, Dick fully has a place: He's got an institute, he's got his house, and all of those speak greatly to him. You get a little idea of Chris and Sylvere, though, because the show starts in New York, but in general, it's their baggage and their clothing [that make the space theirs]. It's

really the character of Marfa that is more embodied in their place than their characters are.

Was that challenging for you in terms of creating spaces for Chris and Sylvere?

Cat Smith: It was very challenging. Because when you have to create a space in which there's no living having been done in it, it can be challenging to make it look interesting, because you get things like texture and dimension with the layering of life when people live in their houses. And this is a rental space. But what you get instead is a total idea of the foreignness of the place they had come, and then over time, everything that's added to the set is strictly theirs. Then she adds the letters and that's a whole different ball of wax.



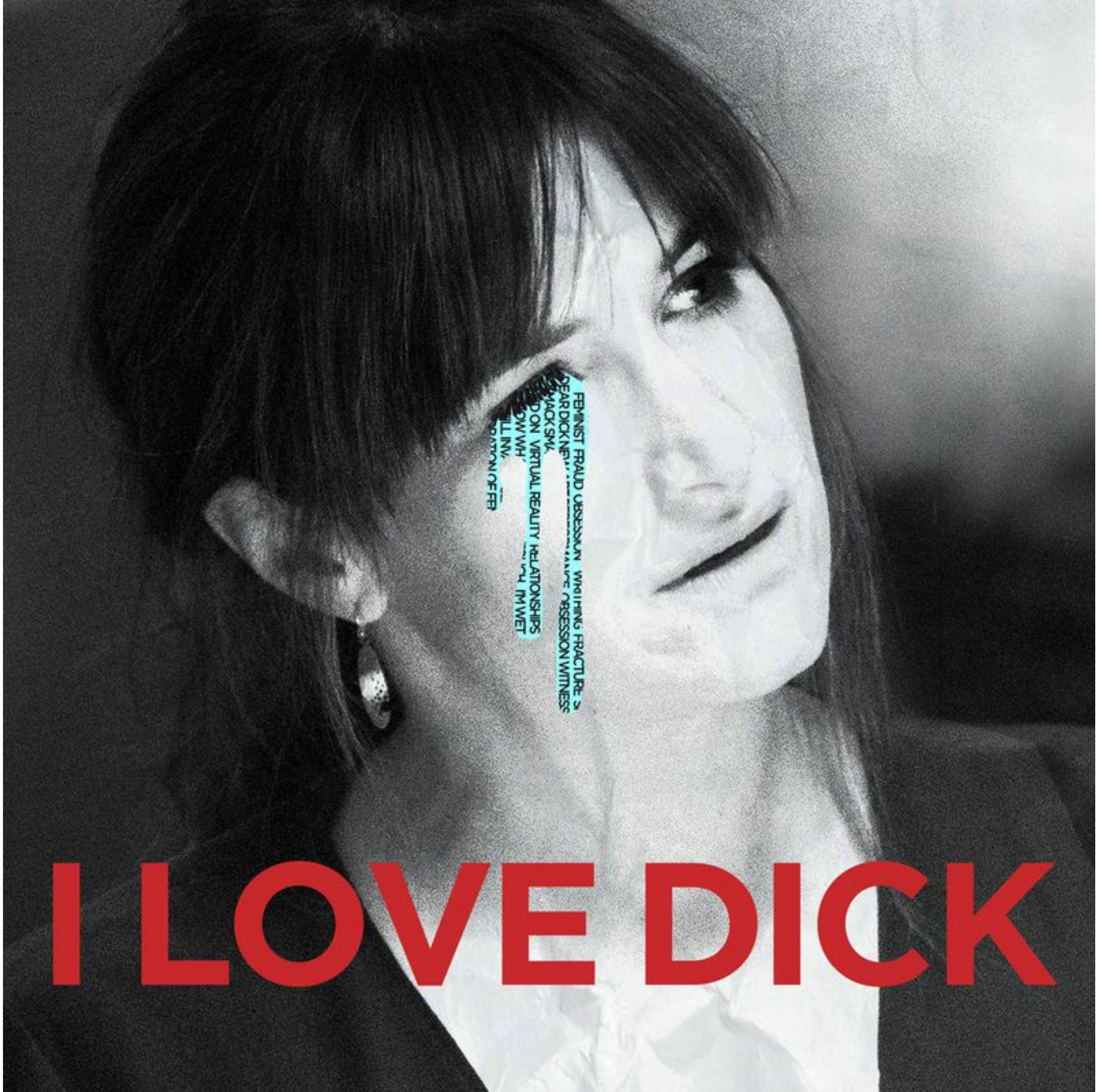
What were you going for in terms of Dick's house and its look?

Cat Smith: Dick has a very specific minimalist look, but he also has a little bit of an ego, and so everything that he picks for himself is just so. We were very lucky to have a location in which that was the aesthetic already. It was very straight lines, just like his

institute.

What was it like working in Marfa on the pilot, and how did being in a place that's sort of magical in a lot of people's minds influence the design of show?

Cat Smith: It's a really odd place. it's almost haunted, like a ghost town. You go down the main street and it looks like a small town, but there aren't any signs that say "gallery," [for example]. It's very minimalistic. They've taken down all the awnings and all the signs of life, and there aren't very many people walking around during the day. There's an old railway track, and it's almost like walking on a backlot. You can walk down the street in the middle of the night and you won't run into anybody, and you're perfectly safe. It was sort of a very foreign concept, at least for me. I really felt like Chris in a way when I was there.



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How did you get into Chris's headspace? What physical clues did you employ?

Cat Smith: A lot of it or me plays off each other. When I saw the pilot before we ended up doing the series, I got so much from Kathryn Hahn's performance. I tried to

build on that.

You also mentioned that minimalist aesthetic.

Cat Smith: That's the opposite of Chris. That's more about Dick, and I haven't really figured out yet whether it's really Dick, or it's just what Dick thinks everybody wants. There's something about his place, too, that isn't quite authentic, and so I like that part. But the other thing that producers would talk about a lot was that we didn't know whether Dick's place was actually the real place that he was living in, or whether this was Chris's fantasy of where he was living until the end when she actually goes over there. That's when they decided that it was going to be real. But before that it could all have been a fantasy.



Chris and Sylvere's cottage.



Curbed: What did you think when you first read the script and the book?

Dea Jensen: It's probably one of the favorite projects I've ever worked on. It's so edgy and crazy and female-centric that what is not to love about that? It's such challenging material and it's kind of hard to read because it's so raw, and it does not shy away from anything.

What was it like working in Marfa?

Dea Jensen: It was such a pleasure to work in that two-worlds-colliding kind of aesthetic. There's this really strong modernist aesthetic, and then the middle of nowhere West Texas aesthetic, and it's so funny how the town is both of those worlds.

It's very much about the idea that the artist Donald Judd was working with, about how art and architecture can complement each other. What I found when I was there was how much it related to the work we do on set. It was work that I didn't really understand until I came to Marfa and saw it.

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And then when you're in it, you just get it.

And it's not about the actual art, it's not

about the actual architecture, it's about how

the two reinforce each other and create a whole unique experience that brings the art and architecture together with the landscape. It's so much like what we do with sets—the way we bring art into it and create these environments, and all the atmosphere that that brings, and how that can inform performances. It's a very ripe place for that kind of interaction to happen. And then what Jill Soloway brought to it was this whole hilarious, feminist—almost like a soap opera. You get the sense reading the book that it's like reading *Madame Bovary* as written by Madame Bovary with help from Madame Bovary's husband, and starring the interloper. It's so kooky and yet so real and so much like what we all actually experience in our lives.

What themes were you going for with set decoration?

Dea Jensen: I felt really strongly about bringing, in addition to the modernist and local Marfa aesthetic, a sense of what it is to be in the Southwest, far from the centers of art and general culture. I wanted to bring that sense of what it is to be in that part of the world without being kitschy, and to bring a lot of realism to that. It also helps the actors to get their bearings when that is provided.



Dick's house. | Photo by Dea Jensen



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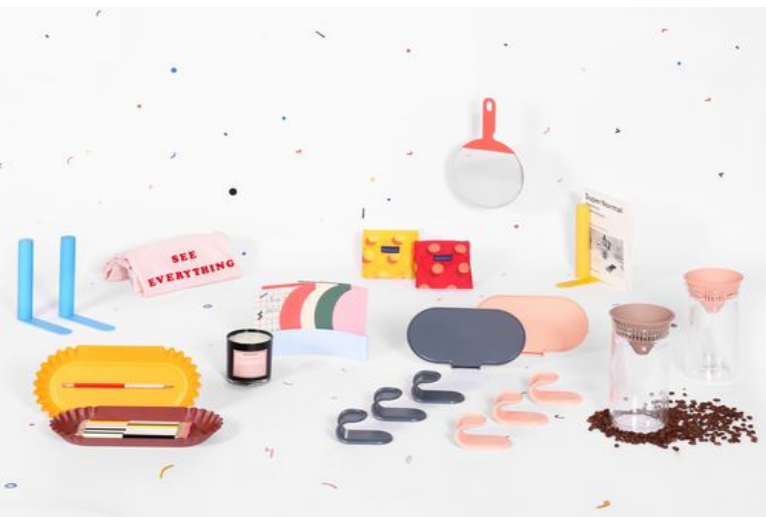
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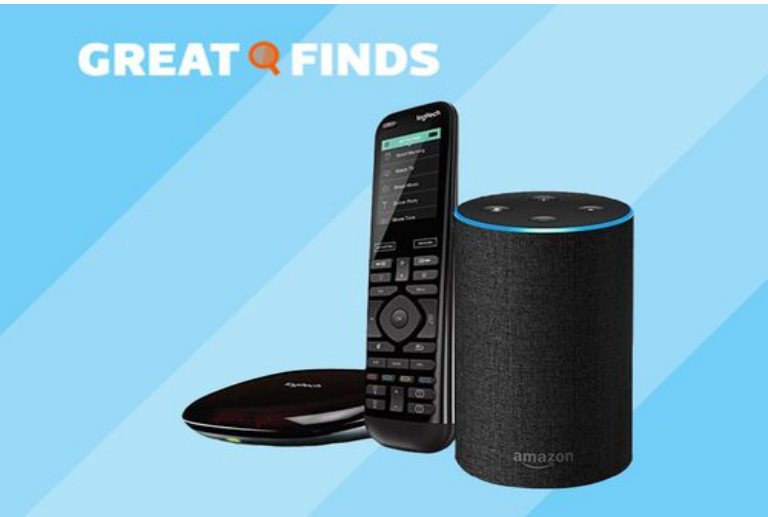
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