Deborah Stratman, *O'er the Land* (still), 2009.

Join us on e-flux Video & Film for the online screening of **Deborah Stratman**'s *O'er the Land* (2009), on view from Wednesday, September 2 through Tuesday, September 8, 2020.

O'er the Land is a meditation on the milieu of elevated threat addressing national identity, gun culture, wilderness, consumption, patriotism, and the possibility of personal transcendence. Of particular interest are the ways Americans have come to understand freedom and the increasingly technological reiterations of manifest destiny. While channeling our national psyche, the film is interrupted by the story of Lt. Col. William Rankin who in 1959, was forced to eject from his F8U fighter jet at 48,000 feet without a pressure suit, only to get trapped for 45 minutes in the up and down drafts of a massive thunderstorm. Remarkably, he survived.

This film is concerned with the sudden, simple, thorough ways that events can separate us from the system of things, and place us in a kind of limbo. Like when we fall. Or cross a border. Or get shot. Or saved. The film forces together culturally acceptable icons of heroic national tradition with the suggestion of unacceptable historical consequences, so that seemingly benign locations become zones of moral angst.

—Deborah Stratman

O'er the Land is the third installment of **Take Me Back**, a program of films, video works, and interviews convened by **Jumana Manna**, and comprising the third cycle of **Artist Cinemas**, a long-term,

Film. It is presented here alongside an interview with the filmmaker by **Shuruq Harb**.

Take Me Back will run for six weeks from August 19 through October 3, 2020, with each film running for one week and featuring an interview with the filmmaker(s) by Manna and other invited guests.

Deborah Stratman in conversation with Shuruq Harb

Shuruq Harb (SH):
As we speak today, there are many gunshots heard across the United States of America. Your film *O'er The Land* (2009) deals with this soundscape, its visual and political history and contemporary reality—first in Kokomo, Indiana in the form of a family-friendly activity: a reenactment of the French and Indian War (1754-1763) waged between the French and British colonies . In another scene we hear a US Border Patrol (USBP) guard describe the tracks left by Nike, Adidas, and Converse shoes and the more elusive patterns made by crawling elbows and knees on the Mexico-US border. His Mexican-American accent is jarring. His scanning of the landscape imprints a strong visual, even though we don't actually see these tracks in the film. This makes the close-ups of the gunshots puncturing the mud in the theme park for gun enthusiasts feel even more aggressive. Here nature becomes this

blank canvas to shoot up your rage. In American terms I believe it is commonly described as “exercising your freedom.”

Deborah Stratman (DS):
I agree, the Mexican accent jars. It’s uncanny to hear the idiom of the surveilled in the mouth of the surveillant. A significant percentage of USBP, especially along our southern border, are Hispanic. It’s reflective of how many Latinx people live in the region, partly as a result of immigration, but equally because the entire region used to *be* Mexico until it was annexed by the United States in 1848.

When I approached the Border Patrol about filming, I was focused on the art of “cutting for sign,” which as the agent describes, requires a fluency in reading the dirt. I liked how this old technique of discerning egress functions right alongside those tinted-window cherry-picker surveillance booths with telescopic night vision. It’s an embodied perceptual skill, equally prehistoric and futuristic/post-apocalyptic. It makes me wonder if traditional skills are more covert because our expectation of Empire is for the latest technology.

The American alliance between ownership and freedom seems inextricable. Outsiders (by which I mean Europeans) arrived on this continent, declared it “empty,” declared it theirs, and then

immediately commenced defending their property. These were existentially irrelevant concepts to the many peoples who were already living here. As I understand it, land for them was not something that could be owned, let alone private. Theirs was (is) an ecology of cohabitation that values negotiation, connectivity, stewardship—where our species is a piece, not a pinnacle.

Many of the episodes of the film deal either with the explicit defense of borders (national "private property"), or with ritualized/theatricalized versions of that. The theater of war supplies this nihilistic catharsis of expenditure. An exercising of freedom as you say. Or maybe an exorcism.

SH:
In these episodes, nature is a place of return to historical and national purity commercialized as a form of outdoor escape. This is best captured by the salesman's pitch of the RV as a toy that provides a "good memory bank." Yet a quick look on Wikipedia reminds us of the significant role the RV played in advancing white settlement in North America, since as early as 1745. It gets repackaged in the 1920s as a great way for Americans to explore nature through camping. Today, almost 85% of these vehicles are manufactured in Indiana, while as the salesman in your film points out, the idea is to travel with this car to places like Alaska and the South West.

DS:
The relationship of technology to site, whether that's an RV, a gun, or a jet is something the film circles back to. The line you quote above is immediately followed by the salesman characterizing the ultimate attraction being that "you're totally independent." Of course, you are independent in the sense of drift, but profoundly dependent in the sense of consumption. The amount of fossil fuel required for that degree of movement and convenience is bananas.

RVs represent a lifestyle, a dream of mobility where there's a sort of laissez-faire built in— you don't have to be answerable to a place. There are some interesting off-grid communities in places like Quartzite or Slab City where inhabitants form impressive temporary, self-governed cluster communities. These are less about seeing nature than engaging in a sort of DIY urban planning. I think it's to gain some semblance of control over a capitalist environment that's spun so far out. Maybe the person razing the dirt with a flame thrower, or cruising in their A-class motorhome is just trying to stay upright, surfing the unmoored, commodified, militarized space of America.

SH:
There are these static moments of wilderness in the film that bring to mind Mark O'Connell's essay from January this year, "Splendid Isolation: how I stopped time by sitting in a forest for 24 hours."

DS:

I think many of us can connect to the urge McConnell feels, as a person who's primarily lived indoors, on the internet, or in books—that it's time to go OUTSIDE. Time to be in-the-midst-of. Time to be humbled, made small, inconsequential, extra-humanly connected. This is similar to what I like about the documentary mode. The requirement that I insert myself into a situation that is not my own, a culture not my own, an occupation, a politic, or environment not my own. To be part of a scenario I can't control and where I'm not an expert. This connects as well to the film's metaphor of the fall—both [Lt. Col. William] Rankin's ordeal, but also the young male body that steps intentionally off an edge and drops.

The privatization of land central to the film's dilemma is something O'Connell touches on too. It's so difficult in the West to find someplace where you don't sense yourself to be in trespass. This lack of access to non-owned (or commonly-owned) land has deeply impacted what freedom can be. And it's the same with time. We're over-oriented by the industrialized version of it. There's a disregard for uncoordinated local time. If we didn't keep time, we wouldn't have to save it, or serve it.

"Wilderness" is expressed through the film's woods. Structurally, they're grammatical, a bit like commas. Geographically, they mirror

a western expansionist trajectory. Each forest depicted is further west than the last. Ontologically, they represent a myth of raw, untraversed land. But that's a fiction. There was always a path just out of frame. I think the desire of the colonists to find some virginal plot to reconstruct themselves is just as animating today. Metaphysically, the woods are a respite from the film's technological advance. But most productively for me, the woods are undeclared in allegiance. They can be a place of shelter, or a place to fear.

SH:
I want to go back to this notion of going off-grid both in relation to time and space, which is encapsulated in Rankin's ordeal, who in 1959 finds himself ejected from a fighter jet and gets caught in a thunderstorm. The sound effect used creates a sense of acceleration to the ground, while actually both the tone of the actor and the actual description of the experience are so neutral—an almost out-of-body, militaristic, matter-of-fact description of a personal near-death experience. The sound effect gives a sense of motion while the voiceover gives a sense of stagnation or limbo. Did the idea of the film begin with his story?

DS:
I came across William Rankin's story before the film was even a remote idea, while I was researching for my project *Power/Exchange*

(2003–ongoing), looking into situations where the power grid fails. Years later when I started working on *O'er the Land*, his story came back to me and I included it as a sort of allegorical maypole that the other film episodes cluster around.

The sound you're describing is a Shepard tone which gives the sonic illusion of an infinitely falling (or rising) pitch. Given that Rankin is literally suspended in the air for forty-five minutes, being tossed around on storm drafts, the sound seemed apropos. I also love the tone's anxiety-producing quality.

SH:
I am interested in your description of his experience: "Rankin's story represents a non-material, metaphysical kind of freedom. He was vomited up by his own jet, that American icon of progress and strength, but violent purging does not necessarily lead to reassessment or redirection."

DS:
I'd tried to get Rankin himself to read the text, but as you hear on the answering machine, he declined. So I had an actor read it, which sounded fantastic until I put it over the images, and it was all wrong—too dramatic. It's a hard text to read without sounding incredulous. I eventually asked my friend Rob Kelly, a hockey fanatic from Winnipeg who had the right unemotional delivery. He

expressed that matter-of-factness which was probably the reason Rankin survived in the first place. Despite going through an insanely physical, otherworldly ordeal, it didn't lead him to an existential catharsis or religious experience or life re-evaluation. I mean, he recognized the experience was extreme, but he never spoke about it in a transcendental way, which would have been my tendency. It's like his body itself became the technology.

SH:
Would it be fair to see your description of Rankin's experience as a wider read of what is happening in the USA today?

DS:
Maybe. I think people sometimes need the violent purge just to feel alive. Though most of us wouldn't survive what Rankin did. I remember when I was editing, wanting to fuse the ecstatic with the fear-provoking—because somewhere in this realm is freedom. Or the freedom I want to believe in at any rate. A freedom that hinges on the annihilation of ego, instead of on ownership. The power of that storm, or the crush of water dropping over the Niagara Falls are a rejoinder to our munitions. It comes as a relief that the non-manmade world can still royally fuck us up. But yeah... if we read the jet as corporate/military industrial America, then it's definitely shitting us out.

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Artist and filmmaker **Deborah Stratman** makes films and artworks that investigate power, control, and belief, considering how places, ideas, and society are intertwined. Recent projects have addressed listening, freedom, surveillance, sinkholes, comets, raptors, orthoptera, levitation, exodus, sisterhood, and faith. She has exhibited internationally at venues including MoMA NY, Centre Pompidou, Hammer Museum, Witte de With, PS1, Tabakalera, Austrian Film Museum, Yerba Buena Center, MCA, and Whitney Biennial. She has done site-specific projects with venues including the CLUI, Temporary Services, Hallwalls, Mercer Union, and Ballroom Marfa. Her films have been featured at festivals and conferences including Sundance, Viennale, Berlinale, CPH:DOX, Oberhausen, True/False, TIFF, Locarno, Rotterdam, the Flaherty, and Docs Kingdom. She is the recipient of Fulbright, Guggenheim, and USA Collins Fellowships, an Alpert Award, Sundance Art of Nonfiction Award, and grants from Creative Capital, Graham Foundation, Harpo Foundation, and Wexner Center for the Arts. She lives in Chicago where she teaches at the University of Illinois.

Shuruq Harb is an artist, filmmaker, and writer. She is the co-founder of several independent art initiatives such as ArtTerritories (2010-2017) and The River Has Two Banks (2012-2017). Her artistic practice focuses on online visual culture and traces subversive routes for the circulation of images and goods. Her film *The White*

Elephant received the award for best short film at Cinema du Reel Festival in Paris, 2018, and was shortlisted for the Hamburg International Short Film Festival, 2019. She is the winner of the 2019 Han Nefkens Foundation – Fundació Antoni Tàpies Video Art Production Award. Most recently she published her first short story, "and this is the object that I found" (2020).