



Transcribed and edited from an interview at the Broadway Brewery in October, 2010.

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Deborah Stratman is a T/F alum who currently teaches at the University of Illinois - Chicago's School of Art and Design. She is a prolific documentary filmmaker and artist from Chicago whose films have screened at numerous film festivals around the world. Her most recent short film, ...*These Blazing Stars!*, will screened at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in January.

T/F's Elliot Reed met with Deborah downtown when she was in Columbia for the Citizen Jane film festival. She was returning with her film *O'er the Land*, an atmospheric film which had screened at True/False earlier in the year.

Deborah describes OTL as a mirror - an opportunity for the audience to learn something about itself from a collection of images. Watching one of her films is like following a trail through a forest, glimpsing coattails behind trees and getting distracted by pretty fungus on the forest floor.

Her first film, *My Alchemy*, was shot on a rural Missouri farm. And she's gone on to make 20 others in 20 years, including *The BLVD* (1999), about the street drag racing scene in Chicago, the incomparably spooky suburban critique *In Order Not to Be Here* (2002), and *Kings of the Sky* (2004) about a Uyghur tightrope-walker in China.

T/F Co-Director Paul Sturtz has this to say about *O'er the Land*:

"Deborah Stratman is at the top of her game here, fashioning a Martian-eye view of an America built from a robust, and absurd masculinity...a 16mm tour of men and their toys, from a shooting range to firemen in a rural town..All this is presented without commentary, only an occasional foray into disembodied voices talking about RVs or patrolling the border or most strangely, a guy reading Lt. Colonel William

Rankin's first-person account of surviving a plane crash. Near the end we're introduced to birds fluttering into their cages and golden, gorgeous shots of men stoking a fire at night, in the aftermath of some senseless firepower. What does it all mean? Why does this work so well? It's hard to say for sure, but the important thing is that in Stratman's masterful, intuitive hands, we ask this question throughout her non-narrative. Almost like the Great Lost Experimental Classic of the Early '70s."

LET'S START WITH THE LAST WORDS SPOKEN IN YOUR FILM O'ER THE LAND.

"Am you a director?" [laughs]. I'm definitely a director. Not like the one he was referring to. I still develop arguments and put ideas together into a productive tension. But I'm not interested in every audience member coming to the same conclusion. I'm interested in people working at the film. I want the puzzle to keep eating at you when you leave. That you ask yourself "why"? What does that story about a guy falling have to do with football players?

I'm interested in obliquely aligned images. You have to step up to the plate. Not all of my films force you to work as hard as "O'er the Land." I like using different degrees of rigor, but I try to avoid verbal harangue. I'm not telling you where to end up. This film in particular becomes a mirror. It reflects peoples' preconceptions. If they think, "RVs are awesome," or if they hate RVs, they could read the motorhome scene two totally different ways. If there's anything I do ram down peoples' throats, it's aesthetics and style. The politics, less so. I see the absurdity and irony of the RV vignette, but I have empathy and respect for people who see RVs as a route to independence. How much people read the critique in different shots depends on their background and politics. People can see those bland RV shots in such radically different ways. Most of what's wrapped up in these iconographic images walks into the theatre with the viewer.



From O'er the Land

WHEN YOU'RE PLANNING A FILM LIKE O'ER THE LAND, DO YOU HAVE THE WHOLE SEQUENCE OF IMAGES IN YOUR HEAD?

The sick thing is that there's a very tiny pool of potential images to choose from in the edit room when I'm deciding what image should follow what. My shooting ratio for 16mm is pretty tiny. It's more like 2:1 than 30:1. I won't have a specific image in mind, but sometimes I know what scene needs to be found or generated. Every film is different. For some, I have no preconceived notions. Those are made totally in the editing room. *Kings of the Sky* was like that. In the case of OTL, I'll have thematic shots in mind. I knew I wanted re-enactors for instance, but I wasn't sure which kind.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST EVER FILM?

I made a super-8 in high school. There was video footage I took off the TV of Kermit the Frog whacking someone in the back. Or maybe Kermit was getting whacked. I can't remember. Even at that age, I didn't get narrative. I think there was footage of a train station. I can't really remember the film, but some of the specific images I can. It had a Talking Heads soundtrack. I think it was "Born Under Punches". Talking about it is making me want to watch it again.

I started out really experimental, and it was only later that I started asking people to talk on screen or reenacts things, or shoot documentary scenarios that could be recognized by most viewers as documentary. But I'd say a lot of my early content was gathered in a documentary mode, where I found things rather than create them from scratch.

I'm a huge reader and watch a ton of films, but I just don't have a narrative brain. My brother and I would go to the movies. When we got back, he would tell my mom the plot. I was amazed, since I was oblivious to that plot. I would notice more infrastructural things, like the way buildings look, or the light, or the juncture between shots. I could never reiterate the narrative details. I wasn't interested. Sometimes, even when I'm watching my own films, I can't remember what scene comes next. Then I see it and am actually surprised and am like, "oh, that was a good choice!"

I think in terms of volumes and pressures when I'm editing. I think, "How does that shot absorb or repel what came before or after it?" Film has a unique cinematic language that is not words. It's cinema. I don't believe cinema's native form is language or the literary or the narrative. It's something temporal and sonic. Pure cinema might incorporate words now and then but doesn't have to rely on language. It does its work other ways. You could say it poetry with images, or a debate with temporal image blocks, or an energetic pressure chamber. I'm interested in distilling ideas from these very dense little scenes, at least in O'er the Land. It's kind of like pemmican. All the fat's been trimmed. It's essentialist. I can't remember who said it:

getting your idea to be what you want it to be is like draining a pond to get at the fish. There exists what I would call a religion of cinema.

But to go back to your question, the first of my films I took seriously as art was called "*My Alchemy*". Shot in Linn, Missouri on a rural farm. There were shots of algae and cows and weeds.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DRAINING THE POND AND FISHING?

That's the difference between *The BLVD* or *Kings of the Sky* and... *O'er the Land* or *In Order Not to Be Here*. The first two are like fishing. I go to the pond and cast around for my shots. With the others, I see the pond, I'm pretty sure there's a fish in there, so I drain it, and when all the water's gone, I've got my fish. I guess that's what I mean by 'rigor'.

TELL ME ABOUT THE KNOB CREEK GUN RANGE, WHICH FEATURES PROMINENTLY IN O'ER THE LAND.

I read about it in the newspaper, then I put it in my "interesting things" folder. A machine-gun festival... I knew I would use it for something. And when this project came up I thought "Now I've got the film for it!"

The gunfire was more or less constant. There were extreme waves of it. Once an hour, they blow up a barrel of fuel and scores of guys with guns shoot at the barrels and cars and washing machines nonstop for about a half hour. There's constant moving of debris on and off the shooting field. Cycles of sound. Like a box at the opera, there are long waiting lines for a shooting stall. Guys apparently wait for years to get one of these sought after stalls. There's also a Vietcong course down on the lower shooting range, which they set up every year. The guys who run it are really cool. You can see them at the end of the film. They were super generous and non-judgmental. Total libertarians... "You have your idea of what freedom is, I have mine." They didn't seem to judge other peoples' personal choices. When I showed up, I introduced myself and said "I'm making a film about how people construct freedom." And they respected that. I wasn't trying to make an expose. Second amendment rights are how lots of Americans define freedom.

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE FREEDOM?

Freedom: personally removing myself from the system. The guy stepping off the cliff [seen in *O'er the Land*] is the visual heart of the freedom decision. He deliberately relinquishes control. I like that idea of being, even if it's just momentarily, free from the systems that control us. That's why Colonel Rankin's story was so interesting to me. If there's one thing we can't escape, it's the laws of gravity. Rankin escapes them, by being tossed around for 45 minutes in the sky in the up and downdrafts of the thunderheads. You would think that that would be a watershed moment, changing him spirituality... but he doesn't speak about it that way at all, it wasn't metaphysical or transcendent for Rankin, which totally fascinated me. I think America sometimes tries to define freedom in terms of material things... being free to own land, free to defend that land. But I relate to it more as a state of mind, relinquishing yourself to something bigger than yourself.

The film made me ask better questions. It didn't answer any. I know people who literally did work their whole lives to have the freedom of an itinerant lifestyle. When I began making *O'er the Land*, I kept asking myself, "What are cliché iconic images of freedom for me, with all my particular, regional baggage of having up in the Midwest in the 60s and 70s?"

I fully embrace the absurdity of taking on a subject as gigantic as "freedom". I know it's ridiculous to tell someone your film is about freedom. It's really more about the foundational myths we believe in. What started me off was when I read about a pizzeria owner who was quoted asking "what do we lose in the name of freedom?" I was interested in patriotism. How does a nation build a patriot? I don't even like football, but I get these super sentimental, patriotic feelings when I see high school football games at night. I wanted the film to encourage us to ask what sorts of agendas are getting camouflaged by people's sentiments towards freedom.

Deborah Stratman talking about her work at Portland State University

DO YOU CARRY AROUND A CAMERA?

I used to travel with a 16mm Bolex everywhere. It's insane to think about now. Until I was about 25, I would literally almost always have a Bolex with me. Some of my first films were basically just accessing archives of my own footage as if it were found footage. I just was shooting anything that was interesting to me. I was collecting images like that for years, then I read a Michael Faraday essay and I decided to go back through my footage to find ways to illustrate his Christmas physics lectures with this material I'd been amassing. The film is called "On the Various Nature of Things". 16mm film forces you to be super economical with shooting. Now I capture environments that look cool with my brain, or my notebook, and I come back later and capture them on film. Before it was more like... you see a bug, you like it, you shoot it, that bug might never be in the same place again! There was just a delight in looking.

YOU PAID FOR YOUR OWN FILM?

I got a few discounts, some grants here and there. I was just buying little bits at a time. I loved school and was really into the sciences. I was a total nerd. At some point I realized, "I've got to figure out a way to investigate things I'm interested in that doesn't involve calculus." So I left science and went to art school. This surprised my family, but they never judged it as a lesser life's work. I am the product of expensive private art schools I'll never pay off. And supportive parents. Science and art are pretty similar. They're both disciplines of people who like to ask questions.

I teach now, and I enjoy working within the public university system. It's less sheltered. There are working class people and no illusions about money. There's a great work ethic, compared to some of the art schools I've taught. A lot of students come in with pretty narrow idea of what a filmmaker is or can be. I tell them we're basically just artists who happen to use light and time and sound as our raw material.



From In Order Not to Be Here