

Deborah Stratman *O'er the Land*

Thursday, November 19, 2009 — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
presented in association with the USF Film Studies Program
Deborah Stratman In Person

A committed cinematic explorer, Deborah Stratman's essayistic film work resembles that of James Benning and Vanessa Renwick in its examination of landscape and locale as well as its poetic contemplation of ideology and belief. Presented as a series of patient observances of competitive spectacle and masculine display, her epic *O'er the Land* channels the dark side of the American psyche, presenting a savagely poetic meditation on the contemporary culture of violence, territoriality and patriotism through studies of gun culture, war reenactments and border conflicts. Including a telling of the story of Lt. Colonel William Rankin—a USMC pilot who survived being trapped in the updrafts of a thunderstorm for forty-five minutes following an emergency ejection at 48,000 feet—*O'er the Land* describes a stark and disturbing world of survivors and warriors. Yet against this grim backdrop, a rich, even redemptive exposition of the American landscape emerges. Also screening: Stratman's *Paranormal Trilogy* (*How Among The Frozen Words*, *It Will Die Out in the Mind* and *The Magician's House*) and her 1993 film *Palimpsest*. (Steve Polta)

Palimpsest (1993) by Deborah Stratman; 16mm, b&w, sound, 3 minutes, print from the maker

"A little film about layers of secrets and hidden things. For the times when our prying and digging reveals nothing but an empty center." (Deborah Stratman)

The Paranormal Trilogy:

How Among the Frozen Words (2005) by Deborah Stratman; digital video, color, sound, 44 seconds, tape from the maker

"Inspired by a chapter in Francois Rabelais' 1653 epic novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* wherein Pantagruel finds that the explosions, cries and other sounds generated from a battle that had occurred the year before have been frozen into discernable shapes—and that the sounds can be released upon the breaking or melting of the frozen forms." (Deborah Stratman)

The Magician's House (2007) by Deborah Stratman; 16mm, color, sound 6 minutes, print from the maker

"Sometimes the supernatural lingers plainly in the most ordinary places, secret only in so much as its trace goes unnoticed. Both a letter to a cancer stricken alchemist/filmmaker friend, and a quiet tribute to the vanishing art of celluloid, *The Magician's House* is full of ghosts. Including that of Athanasius Kircher, inventor of the Magic Lantern or 'Sorcerer's Lamp.' The music, 'La lutte des Mages' ('The Struggle of the Magicians') was composed by Armenian mystic Georges Gurdjieff and Thomas De Hartmann. Gurdjieff thought man was a 'transmitting station of forces.' To him, most people move around in a state of waking sleep, so he sought to provide aural conditions that would induce awareness." (Deborah Stratman)

It Will Die Out In the Mind (2006) by Deborah Stratman; digital video, color, sound, 4 minutes, tape from the maker

A meditation on the possibility of spiritual existence and the paranormal in our information age. Texts are lifted from Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* in which the Stalker's daughter redeems his otherwise doomed spiritual journey. She offers him something more expansive and less explicable than logic or technology as the conceptual pillar of the human spirit. (Deborah Stratman)

The title is taken from a passage about time from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*:

Stavrogin: ...in the Apocalypse the angel swears that there'll be no more time.

Kirillov: I know. It's quite true, it's said very clearly and exactly. When the whole of man has achieved happiness, there won't be any time, because it won't be needed. It's perfectly true.

Stavrogin: Where will they put it then?

Kirillov: They won't put it anywhere. Time isn't a thing, it's an idea. It'll die out in the mind.

O'er the Land (2008) by Deborah Stratman; 16mm, color, sound, 52 minutes, print from the maker

A vast vacuity: all unawares

Fluttering his pennons vain, plumb down he drops

Ten thousand fathoms deep, and to this hour

Down had been falling, had not by ill chance

The strong rebuff of some tumultuous cloud,

Instinct with fire and nitre, hurried him

As many miles aloft...

With fresh alacrity and force renewed

Springs upward like a pyramid of fire

Into the wild expanse, and, through the shock

Of fighting elements on all sides round

Environed, wins his way...

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

"[...] *O'er the Land*, takes its title from [...] the [United States'] National Anthem, when Francis Scott Key wondered if the flag still waved 'o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.' The anthem and what it connotes—patriotism, valor, war—serve as a backdrop against which the [...] film's several gentle vignettes unfold. In them, we see costumed patriots trudging through verdant woods in Civil War reenactments, football players hopping up and down in a giddy dance in the stark light of a night game, and hulking RVs with their promise of exploration filling vast parking lots. Each of these very American images is shot with a still camera in carefully framed wide-angle shots, with Stratman's typical formal rigor underscoring the laconic cultural systems that quietly churn in the background of American life. The film abruptly shifts gears, however, when a voice-over narration relates the gripping story of U.S. Marine Colonel William Rankin, a pilot forced to eject from his jet in 1959 while 47,000 feet above Earth (which he miraculously survived). While this dramatic interruption initially seems out of place within the carefully orchestrated segments that bracket it, the film's fractured form underscores Stratman's premise—namely, that the seemingly pervasive order of the world can be suddenly interrupted by the unexpected, and that this alternate view, like a bolt of lightning, illuminates new perspectives. In this way, *O'er the Land* echoes a continuing Stratman theme—a pondering of the boundaries and structures that frame everyday experience in a body of work that hovers between narrative and documentary. (Holly Willis, *LA Weekly*. Feb. 19, 2009)

"[*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.

"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)