

Q&A: In search of the meaning of freedom

Vox sits down with Deborah Stratman, director of *O'er the Land*

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There's much more to Deborah Stratman than the 20 films she's made in the past 20 years. Stratman, who teaches in the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois-Chicago, also works in public sculpture, drawing and photography, all of which she says play a part in her filmmaking. Stratman sat down with Vox to talk about her desire to remove people from their everyday life with her movie *O'er the Land* and why she is so excited about an early morning breakfast on a farm.



COURTESY OF DEBORAH STRATMAN

Vox: For people who are unfamiliar with the movie, can you describe what it's about?

Deborah Stratman, director of *O'er the Land*.

Deborah Stratman: I started the film because I was thinking about how we've come to understand freedom in this country. More and more over the years, we think about freedom being tied to property ownership, and then property needs to be defended. It seemed to me that a lot of people were defining freedom in terms of commodity or something material whereas for me it still is very much something absolutely nonmaterial and kind of metaphysical. Sometimes the things that prevent us or absolve us or give us an escape valve from these patterns we get stuck in; they let us mentally have a certain kind of freedom. It could be something really simple like trip and fall. Or maybe it's that you get shot at. Or maybe it's that you try to cross the border. That gives you different kind of perspective. It frees up your thinking in a way.

You talk about things that remove you from your everyday life. Is that something you aim to do with the film?

DS: I do hope there's points of the film that people get transported somewhere else, but I think, also, my films are also quite slow in a way. Sometimes it takes a while for people to think through why they were really moved by something or really bugged by something, but you don't even know why you're watching. I think that's maybe more what I'm after, just getting in somebody's craw and sticking with them and getting them to think, "What do I think about this? What do I think about control or freedom or transcendence of manifest destiny?"

So you're not trying to get them to see a certain point; you're just putting it out there for them to ponder?

DS: I think to some degree what I try to do, maybe not in every film, is to lay out an argument and give people the piece of the puzzle that they then have to go home and put together.

How did you come upon the general theme of your film?

DS: It wasn't really one trigger. I think the general theme was something that built up because of some of my own questioning of the military industrial complex and what it is

that we're defending or how male that whole thing is. A few of my films operate in that way, where I can't quite get my head around something, and so I make a film about it.

You've mentioned your style a few times. Is this movie very much in the same style as your others? Did you try to do anything differently?

DS: Every project is a little different. The length is anywhere from 44 seconds to 68 minutes, and some are video, shot on video and edited on video. Some are film; some are more short, lyrical, experimental. Some are more traditional documentary, and some are more like this (*O'er the Land*). It's sort of an essay film.

Is this your first time at True/False?

DS: It is. It's my first time there although I've had a lot of filmmaker colleagues who have raved about it and been like, "It's my favorite festival!" I was excited when they wanted to show the film this year.

Did they contact you?

DS: I had already heard from some filmmaker friends that they spoke really highly of it, so I actually submitted the film, and then Paul Sturtz contacted me and asked me to submit the film, and I was like, "Check in your offices 'cause I already did."

What about True/False makes you psyched to come?

DS: I like that they mix it up. It's not just films, but they also have some music stuff going on. And here's some kind of early morning breakfast trip where you go to a farm. I'm not even usually an early morning person, but I was like, "What? The festival is organizing a trip to a farm? I'm going to totally do that." I like that they think more expansively about what a festival might be.