

Viewing the world

A British woman surveys the grand vistas of Icelandic landscape around her, and says bitterly, "I see nothing but stones, and beyond that more stones."

In Deborah Stratman's film *From Hetty to Nancy* (1997), the woman goes on an expedition with four schoolgirls. Stratman humorously contrasts caustic commentary with exquisite compositions of beautiful landscape and everyday rituals of indigenous life.

For more than a decade, Chicago-based artist Stratman has created films, videos, sculpture and public installations exposing the power structure that shapes landscape and architecture. This weekend, as part of its New Cinema Series, the Detroit Film Center screens three works from her 15-year career.

The 2002 film, *In Order Not to Be Here*, is Stratman's look at residential communities developed by corporations. Filmed entirely at night in the new neighborhoods around Valencia, Calif., and suburban Chicago, Stratman presents imagery with an ambiguity that leaves viewers unable to discern any difference in location. In some ways, it's a horror film, composed of static shots and what looks like police file footage. The malevolent force in this film is like a virus, suffocating residents with strip malls and gated communities.

"I was seeking out communities that had a peculiar, hollowed-out urban design," Stratman says. "I had grown up in the suburbs of western Chicago, in Naperville. When I was young, it had been a small town, but by the time I was in high school, it was engulfed by the suburbs.

"I think these communities are ominous, if not creepy. There is disconnectedness because they are not designed for walking, only for driving, and it is isolating the way people come from their cars to their homes."

In Order Not to Be Here is the filmmaker's attempt to understand why people choose to live in these places, and to comment on the way our environment, and how we move through it, profoundly affects our outlook and our relationship with those around us.

Stratman's latest film, *Kings of the Sky*, is a feature-length experimental documentary shot in the desert regions of Chinese-controlled Turkistan. For three months, she lived with a tightrope troupe of Uighurs, a Muslim ethnic group in China, while they toured the country. Stratman became interested in the project when she started reading about the people, learning about their struggle for cultural autonomy.

"When I discovered that tightrope-walking was the national sport," she says, "it seemed like such a metaphor for where they are at, wanting the technological advancement that the influx of Han Chinese were bringing, yet feeling adamant about holding on to their national identity, even if they don't have a nation of their own."

Stratman has alternated her film and video work with a number of public interventions and installation projects. In 1999, she built a permanent 60-foot radio tower in Wendover, Nev., near the Utah border. The tower is quiet, dormant in the desert. But when any curious passerby approaches the adjacent information kiosk, he activates a 10-minute broadcast, which is a looping one-minute message advocating for low-power radio and the decentralization of information centers. The transmission is broadcast to anyone who happens to be tuned-in to the unlicensed frequency.

In 2001, Stratman started a yearlong project, "Park: Architecture as Fraud." The artist was fascinated by single-person structures, so she built her own parking booth. For the next seven months, she surreptitiously set it up in public parking lots, on private property and in plain sight throughout Chicago. As she watched the results, she noticed how "something so puny, banal and unassertive as a piece of architecture has a certain deference to it. It could claim a space." When the parking booth was installed near a construction site, it had more authority than large "No Parking" signs — others followed Stratman's lead and parked near the signs. Her project also was unwittingly validated by city authorities. When the structure was tagged with graffiti, the city's graffiti-removal team repainted it two days later.

Stratman feels that her films and installations balance each other out, so she often works on several projects at the same time. "Although film will always be my first passion, sometimes I get frustrated with how film is always a monologue in its final form," she says. "I feel the need to make work that is more situated in the public and interacted with in an accidental way.

"The person encountering the work is not expecting a sublime experience; instead they come across it by chance and however it gets activated is largely up to them. In providing those doorways to experience I hope it gets people more curious to investigate further."

Three Films by Deborah Stratman, including On the Various Nature of Things, From Hetty to Nancy and In Order Not to Be Here. 8 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 3, Detroit Film Center, 1227 Washington Blvd., Detroit; 313-961-9936.

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