

TAKE ME BACK

Two artists tweak nostalgia at Marcia Wood Gallery

REVIEW

William Steiger: dreamland
Toni Hafkenschied

Through Dec. 3, Marcia Wood Gallery, 263 Walker St. 404-827-0030, www.marciawoodgallery.com. Tues.-Sat. 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

BY FELICIA FEASTER

William Steiger's paintings and Toni Hafkenschied's photographs are a beautifully complementary pairing of artworks that plunges you into a warm bath of nostalgia, evoking the kind of phantom limb ache for a time or a world never even experienced.

Nostalgia seems to run on a fuel of such delusional imagination. The saccharine images of Norman Rockwell or Thomas Kinkaid, for instance, offer Ameritopian worlds few folk have actually lived in outside the narrow window of childhood.

Steiger and Hafkenschied are birds of an entirely different feather. They are enablers of that comfort Jones but conceptual artists who use formal techniques to create an illusory world we are encouraged to question, or at least ponder as a fiction. The artists feel like our collaborators, as eager to play along as they are to pull back, happy to set the stage for our desire, but self-conscious in their stagecraft.

At first glance, the Toronto-based Hafkenschied appears to photograph model railroad villages somewhere between the psychology-laden miniature worlds of Gregory Crewdson or David LaVinthal. But look closer. The scenes Hafkenschied shoots are real ones, but the sense of artificiality has been enhanced by photographic technique. Hafkenschied uses focus to make the center of his images hyper-clear and the sides, background and foreground hazy and out-of-focus to confuse the eye into believing his scenes are actually miniature models.

He tends to concentrate on rural settings and contrasts of juicy colors and flat, uniform hues like gray concrete roadways, blankets

of green forest and bright blue skies to make his scenes look even more artificial. In "Train Snaking Through Mountains," a perky red train moves through a forest of evergreens. In "School Bus," a vivid orange bus pauses at a bright red stoplight in a scene that in our own irony-laced times seems suddenly filled with David Lynch foreboding. We both desire and distrust the idyllic visions of Tiny Town that Hafkenschied offers us.

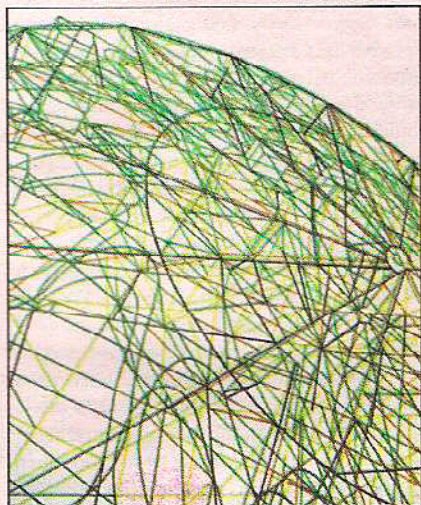
The images are both delightful and eerie for suggesting our world is, from a distance, nothing more than a dreamlike fiction — convincing up close but frail and illusory from a distance. The viewer takes on a God- or Godzilla-like vantage not unlike that of a passenger on an airplane flying over the landscape. Suddenly, a world so familiar becomes abstract.

In his accompanying *dreamland* exhibition of paintings and drawings, New York-based William Steiger also isolates his perfect, crystalline visions of American life. Steiger moves in even closer than Hafkenschied to his objects, which distill our sense of the past and push our nostalgia button. His images of train cars and fairground "Wonderwheels," "Aerial Tramways" and old-fashioned grain elevators reduce the past to its iconic industrial and architectural forms. His paintings are a language of form where backgrounds are blank and white, the better to highlight his exquisite objects.

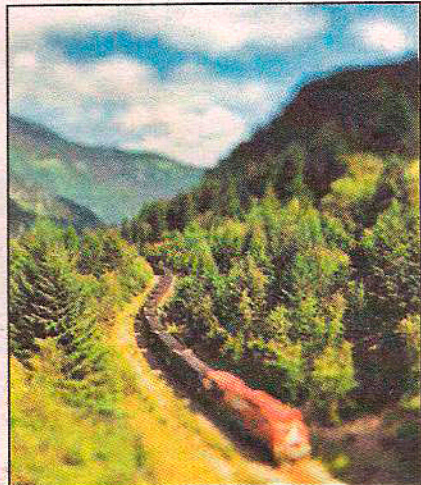
Over time, Steiger's work (this is his fourth solo show at Marcia Wood) has become more minimalist, as much about what is left out as what is included. In the same way minimalists use form or color, Steiger uses architecture. But while the images are pared down and streamlined, they are far from cold. They propel us directly into the sensibility of the past.

And many will find themselves eager to be carried along.

FELICIA.FEASTER@CREATIVELOAFING.COM



"Green Wonderwheel" by William Steiger



"Train Snaking Through Mountains" by Toni Hafkenschied

MARCIA WOOD GALLERY

TONI HAFKENSCHIED