

## CHICAGO READER

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## Now Showing

## Ceci N'est Pas un Truck Stop

Photographer **Toni Hafkenschied** says he was "chasing trains" for three weeks before he found just the right spot overlooking an S curve for *Train Snaking Through Mountains*. Then he waited several hours for a train to appear, knowing that Canadian Pacific's trademark red would contrast with the surrounding trees and draw the eye in. The resulting image, with its toylike colors and highly restricted area of focus, resembles the miniature scenes in catalogs designed to entice model train enthusiasts.

People often mistake Hafkenschied's lushly beautiful land- and cityscapes for photographs of models, and "HO," the title of his show of eight images at Aron Packer, refers to a model train track gauge. A native of Rotterdam ("a very clean and well-ordered city") now

**Toni Hafkenschied:**  
**HO**

**WHERE** Aron Packer, 118 N. Peoria

**WHEN** Through May 28

**INFO** 312-226-8984

living in Toronto, Hafkenschied says he wants to "play with the fake and real" in a medium usually thought to represent reality, often simply waiting for the right false-looking effect to occur. For *River Road—Vancouver, B.C.*, taken from a high suspension bridge, he watched the intersection of a road and rail line for two hours, until three trucks showed up at

once, each in a different primary color. Two of them, some trees, and an adjacent gas station are the only objects in focus in this postcardlike scene. *Roller Coaster—Santa Monica, CA*, taken while Hafkenschied was driving his kids to Disneyland, shows a fragile-looking roller coaster against a blue sky; the American flag visible through it is the image's only sharp component. This time he waited for the flag to be horizontal so the stars and stripes would be clear. "Canadians and Americans fly their flags quite often compared to Holland, and the flags tend to be big—they look almost fake," he says.

When Hafkenschied was ten his mother died, and shortly afterward his father bought him a model train. Hafkenschied enjoyed building sets for his trains more than running them, however, creating and dismantling one landscape after another on a big table in the living room. "I almost felt like God," he says. The landscapes he built seldom resembled Holland's—in fact he often included papier-mache mountains, a distinct departure from his homeland's flat, tame views. "Even the tulip fields are all square," he says, "almost like a Mondrian painting."

After he finished high school in the late 70s, Hafkenschied traveled first to France and Spain and then across North Africa to Egypt, where he met the Canadian woman who became his wife. In the early 80s, when they were traveling from Japan to Nepal, he bought a camera and found that photographs were the "first things I liked making since model train sets." He also liked making prints in a darkroom, borrowed from a friend of a friend while he was living in Sydney, and when he returned to Holland he started studying photography. In art



*River Road—Vancouver, B.C.*

school he began his first series—staged indoor scenes inspired by the fact that in Holland "people don't close their curtains at night," he says. "There's this whole theater." He carefully lit each tableau in the manner of the Rembrandts and Vermeers he'd seen in the Rijksmuseum. When he and his wife moved to Canada in 1989, he started using a Diana camera—a toy made in the 60s that's become a cult item because of the distinctive fuzzy look of the prints it produces—for some images in his next series, staged scenes inspired by actual suicides.

Hafkenschied and his wife often spend summers in her hometown of Hope, British Columbia, which is in the middle of the Rockies, surrounded by three mountains. The place has always looked incredibly surreal, even fake, to him: "Through the years the idea grew that I really should do something with this

incredible landscape." Aiming for more control over focus than the Diana gave him, he bought a Hasselblad whose lens can be tilted with respect to the film to select a single area that's sharp. He knew exactly what he wanted—to re-create the look of model train sets in photographs—but says his first images were a "total disaster." Eventually he developed the methods he still uses, among them shooting from overhead, which makes him "feel like God, with power over the world."

Hafkenschied says that catalogs by Faller, a manufacturer of miniatures for model train sets, are "almost like my bible." The colors in scenes are slightly off, "like 1950s postcards—bright and sunny. Rotterdam is concrete and glass and mostly gray. This is the happy world I would like to have lived in as a kid." —Fred Camper