Making the Colossal Landscape Small: The Photographs of Toni Hafkenscheid

In *Ho*, Toni Hafkenscheid miniaturizes the North American landscape, creating soft-edged images that bring into focus the ways in which the "real landscape" is constructed by both artist and viewer. When we engage with these carefully crafted photographs we are invited into a world of make-believe and model train sets, into a world of nationalist fantasies and image mastery, where it is entirely unclear what is actually real.

Hafkenscheid's honed craft is apparent – his shallow depth of field, the careful selection of what is inside and outside of the frame, how he plays with space and perspective, his skilled manipulation of light and colour. Most intriguing though, is his omniscient relationship to the landscape. He is an artist who is conscious of his presence in the landscape when he is holding his camera. I think it is because of this conscious presence that we are compelled to join him in the image.

If we accept the invitation and let ourselves step into Hafkenscheid's images they can pull us into an enchanting uncertainity, a space where we can question the truth of the landscape before our eyes, where we can question the making of the image and the image itself. Questions about what is real repeat themselves with each image. A train rolls through an unnervingly familiar, mountainous landscape – yet something is slightly strange here. The train tracks are edged by a blurred meadow of purple flowers. How did he do that? How did he make the model train set look so real? Upon closer exploration, the artifice of the image slowly reveals itself; we may doubt our vision. Is that a real train?

Hafkenscheid's work unsettles and defamiliarizes the very landscape we take for granted; this is not solid ground we are standing upon. We begin to understand with a tentative certainty that it is not a model train we see in these photographs, but rather a "real train," moving through what we have come to know as "the landscape," picturesque and postcard-perfect. How do we engage with the image of the Rocky Mountains, given its already over-determined meanings communicated to us through travel postcards, relentless tourism advertising and souvenirs? Hafkenscheid successfully reveals that the image is constructed, disrupting persistent notions of the truth of the photographic image, and also of romantic notions of the landscape and constructed identities. Yet even when his craft and the illusion of the image have been revealed, the tension between fantasy and truth is maintained.

Iconic symbols of nationalist identities, some of the most famously monumental landscape features of Canada are presented to us, as is the opportunity to shrink them and examine them. As we realize that these are miniaturized "real" landscapes, our own relationship to these images shifts, as does our size – suddenly we become giants. With our huge hands we can pick up objects from these landscapes that we now inhabit. We can turn each object around, examine it and explore it, becoming intrigued by each element. We can take apart the postcard image, step outside of it and its assumed meanings to ask new questions. What is my relationship to the train? How was the railway built, a steel track laid down through a mountainous landscape? Whose hands constructed those passageways and bridges? At what point do we question North American's colonization of the landscape? How do artists participate in the consumption of the land? What is our relationship to the land that this train is soldiering through?

As giants, we continue to dismantle Hafkenscheid's images. We can pick up a bridge, a tiny bungalow, a spruce tree, or an apartment building. We can push the gondola from side to side, watch the side of the mountain come in and out of focus. We can tamper with landscapes that have been presented to us as part of a "national" or "normal" identity. Being presented with the opportunity to engage so closely with the images before us, we too become aware of our own presence in the landscape. Need to dig further into an image? There is a backhoe to use, already several layers beneath a cityscape. What might we unearth? What might we build here?

I step into the suburban landscape. I am careful not to step on the cars, the houses and the bridge at my feet. I sit down, reach over and uproot a flowering tree carefully placed beside a house. I have the power to destroy or mess with the North American dream – a house, two cars, a couple of kids and a dog. Whose dream? I pick up a car and throw it into Niagara Falls on the Canadian side. I select a perfect house to shake to see if any people will fall out. It's empty and I realize that in many of his suburban/urban landscapes Hafkenscheid has managed to photograph when few people were around. Where are the people of these suburban and urban landscapes? What landscapes have been emptied out and how?

I pick up a bridge, conscious of its meaning, and with two huge fingers I pretend to walk over it. You might join me, pick up the small plastic people who stroll by Niagara Falls. What feelings are evoked by these tiny people at the edge of the Falls? What are they doing there? How do we now inhabit this famous waterfall, we might ask one another. What are the layers of meanings associated with this place? The Canadian landscape is undoubtedly infused with meaning as are the images we make out of it. It is at this border, on the edge of the falls that we can begin to photograph the real.

Roewan Crowe