

Real life rendered make believe

GALLERY GOING
GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Toni Hafkenscheld
at Birch Libralato
\$2,000-\$4,000 (U.S.). Until May 27,
129 Tecumseth St., Toronto;
416-365-3003.
www.birchlibralato.com

Toni Hafkenscheld's photographs look highly manipulated, but they're not. So much in them is out of focus, you'd think somebody had jostled his arm just as he released the shutter. And their colouring is odd too. It's bright and toy-like, as though Hafkenscheld had made normal photographs and then digitally altered them into a strange kind of diminution whereby everything looks like a model of itself.

But no. All he's done, as gallery co-director Robert Birch points out (the exhibition, which is fittingly called *Not to Scale*, is at Toronto's Birch Libralato) is use a standard 2¼-inch Hasselblad with a bellows attachment in the employment of what is known as tilt-shift photography.

Tilt-shift photography works to generate what is sometimes known as a "toy-train set" appearance: because of the way the lens is altered in the course of the photo's being snapped, the camera's depth of field is modified into a strange sort of surreal flatness. This results in a lot of the photograph's field being delicately out of focus, with only a narrow band of high focus running somewhere across the picture's horizontal centre. And why this tilt-shift procedure so profoundly affects the photograph's colour, I cannot imagine — but it does.

For example, in the Hafkenscheld exhibition, which draws heavily for its meaning upon the artist's creative use of tilt-shift behaviours, the emotive readings of the pictures are directly derived from a masterful technique. In a photo called *Man Sun Tanning*, for example, a beefy, highly focused guy in shirt-sleeves and heavy dark-rimmed sunglasses sits on his sun-baked balcony (in Montreal) staring out blandly at what appears to be — because of the white-hot lack of focus of the rest of the photo — something akin to rapidly approaching atomic obliteration. And in Hafkenscheld's exuberantly disrespectful *Washington Monument*, a circle of what look like very tiny, sharply focused American toy flags flutter around the absurdly huge, soft-focus, ridiculously phallic monument, looking like some sort of weird hologram. His *Statue of Liberty*, by the same token, looks like a nightlight (here, given the fact that this is Las Vegas's Liberty and not Ellis Island's, artifice is piled onto artifice). And his beautifully complex but spatially ambiguous *Diggers, Toronto* comes off as the kind of tableau a couple of ambitious kids might have built for themselves in a sandlot before being called away for cookies and milk.

Who can believe the vast girder running up other right side of the photo isn't from a Meccano set? And don't those cute little earth-moving machines look small enough to stuff into your jean pockets? Hafkenscheld says he likes making big objects look small, because that makes him feel big too. Which I guess is pretty much the way little boys feel about their trucks and cars and trains. And, as I recall, it's a nice feeling.



Toni Hafkenscheld's Diggers, Toronto: beautifully complex but spatially ambiguous.