

Toni Hafkenschaid and the Supernatural

By Julia Dault

Magic is the art that purports to control or forecast natural events by evoking the supernatural. Apply that definition to photography – an art form that is unavoidably magical – and more specifically to Toni Hafkenschaid's pictures, and prepare for absolute immersion into fantastical worlds, into actual visual sleight of hand.

Using a perfect balance of sharp and soft focus, finely tuned colour palettes and orchestrated points of view, Hafkenschaid's images hover between what is real and what is not. A scene of a train snaking through the Canadian countryside, a lone house in Ottawa under a darkened winter sky, or kids playing in a dingy raft, say, all play with scale and artifice, ultimately forcing viewers to question what they are seeing and how they are looking. An enchanting process of evaluation, the viewer's double take confirms the magic of the image – Hafkenschaid's signature style makes models out of real life. Hafkenschaid's latest landscape series works within this frame, taking the subject of place and resituating it in the charming in-between space of fact for fiction. These subjects – some specifically Canadian, some not – survey pastoral scenes, invoking rural life in an idealized way. They are of vistas often seen from highways, trains through prairie grasses, tourist hot spots, quiet neighbourhoods; some show people engaged in activity, others are still moments on empty streets or views of far-off motels. All of the pictures highlight place from a lofty but anonymous perspective.

When coupled with Hafkenschaid's aesthetic, there is enormous symbolic weight to these pastoral scenes. That isn't *just* a gas station in Hess or *only* a small town neighbourhood in Hope, British Columbia; Hafkenschaid succeeds in mythologizing the landscape by treating it to his magic touch. The modeling effect of reality in these pictures makes for an almost generic survey of pastoral landscape. These images are stand-ins for all gas stations, for all small town neighbourhoods.

The effect is one of utter balance: Hafkenschaid's images straddle authenticity and myth, truth and illusion; they both diminish and aggrandize specific experiences of the land, cajoling the viewer into questioning all that they see. Using shape and colour, symbols and icons, these landscape are compositions of all that is both foreign and familiar. Like magic, these pictures take what is natural and with charm, imagination, and dream-like play elevate it to something otherworldly, something supernatural.