



Hafkenscheld's exhibit includes Niagara Falls, left, Train and Diggers on Spadina, below.

SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Mysterious photos remind us that images can't be trusted

ONE of the more interesting and challenging art works to come out of Europe in the early 20th century was Rene Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images*.

Under an image of what is quite clearly a pipe, Magritte wrote: "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" — literally, "this is not a pipe."

And he was right, of course, because it wasn't a pipe — it was only a painting of one, and it was that subtle but important difference that he was drawing the viewer's attention towards.

Magritte's painting showed that an image is not the real thing, but only an artist's reproduction of something — and images, as he reminded us, can be treacherous.

Toronto artist Toni Hafkenscheld, a Dutch-born professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design, seems to use Magritte's ideas as a point to consider the North American landscape, and how we have viewed it both now and in the past.

HO, the show's title, are the letters used to describe a particular scale of model train set, and the work itself looks like some kind of model, where it's impossible to tell what, if anything, is real.

To describe it simply, Hafkenscheld's exhibit presents a series of photographs that, at first glance, look like pictures of model train set worlds. Everything about the trains, mountains, beach scenes, cityscapes and people in these works, including the colours, seem almost too real, if that's possible. And the slightly blurred perspective, with only the centre of the work in sharp focus, gives the viewer a



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ART REVIEW

- *HO*, by Toni Hafkenscheld
- Platform Gallery
- 121-100 Arthur St.
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sense of looking through a peephole at some tiny, miniature world.

By using a lens designed for architectural photography — ideal for taking full views of tall buildings, often from directly across the street — Hafkenscheld is able to fit a wide depth of field into his images. This means that everything from the immediate foreground to the furthest mountaintop have the same, blurry focus.

For those walking into this show knowing nothing about it, the mysterious quality of the photos is both puzzling and fascinating. The illusion that these are in fact models is so convincing that it's easy to spend the entire viewing time trying to guess what's real in the photo and what's not.

Photographing iconic North American landscapes — rugged mountains, small roadside motels, even Niagara Falls — the artist presents them in a way that viewers would only have seen in postcards. The fact that the works look this way isn't accidental — during the developing stage, the artist tints the images to give them that 1950s postcard-perfect hue, calling attention again to the artifice of images, and how they can be used to misrepresent.

It's no coincidence that the train, one of the ultimate symbols of "progress" on our continent, shows up so often. Hafkenscheld's work is often talked about in terms of the notions of progress, or the dream of the brilliant future that existed in 1950s North



America.

It's also no coincidence that, in the image of Niagara Falls, the tourists are too preoccupied with themselves or each other to bother looking at the falls, since the idyllic dreams for the future that existed in the 1950s largely ignored the natural landscape and our effects on it, something we're paying the price for today.

Since the idea behind postcards is that they be used as an advertising tool, designed to lure future tourists or to persuade old ones to return, it stands to reason that they present an overly optimistic view. Hafkenscheld does the same here, seeming to deliberately ignore the political or social implications of the images, and thereby giving them an even more powerful and ironic political twist.

By taking the real and placing it in such an unsettling, miniaturized context, Hafkenscheld reminds the viewer, as Rene Magritte did 80 years ago, that images can't be trusted. Even in the realest of depictions, he shows us, there is always a distortion or bias.

As with the idyllic images of 1950s North America, the artist presents an impossibly perfect world, leaving what's real and what's not in doubt. It's a show that, both for the theory behind it, and for the incredible visual quality of the work itself, reveals an artist at the top of his game.

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