

John Vettese sees what develops

by John Vettese

Published: October 14, 2008 - Philadelphia CityPaper

On first glance, Patrick McHugh's work seems deceptively simple. He fancies street corners in Fairmount or countryside paths, tightly composed in a square frame. These naturalistic subjects aren't anything outrageous, but note the presentation. McHugh's photo of a fishing jetty at Cape May Point (pictured) contrasts a central burst of white sky with a grayish-black ring vignetting the frame. On the bottom, there's the sea and fishers. On top, dots that might be seagulls.

This effect wasn't achieved in post; it's the natural by-product of using his Holga. McHugh is part of a growing culture of photographers who have reverted to the toy camera and its kin, like the Lomo and Diana. (An exhibit of his Holga work opens at The Abbaye in Northern Liberties on Nov. 8.)

They're called "toy" because these film cameras are über-basic point-and-shoot plastic boxes. They generally have two aperture settings, one shutter speed and none of the bells and whistles of modern digital photography. This lo-fi approach to fine art allows the photographer little in the way of control, which is how McHugh likes it. "Basically, you duct-tape the body together as light-proof as you can, and the rest is up to chance," he says. "The resulting photo looks so different from the scene you snap, it's a lot like a painting."

G.A. Carafelli, another local toy-camera devotee, takes haunting color images of brick factories and brownstones in North Philadelphia with his Lomo; he's also used it for subway abstracts, Icelandic panoramas and on tour with Birdie Busch. The images have a soft, aloof look, but as Carafelli puts it, "In this age of sharp, crisp images ... where everything in the frame is in focus and has a certain sameness about it, the move to toy cameras is a little bit of a rebellion." Like McHugh, Carafelli embraces flaws and the element of chance. "Part of the charm of the toy camera image includes all of the analog mistakes that can happen," he says.

If the shooter doesn't tape the camera tightly enough, light leaks fill the frame with flare-ups and ghosting. With minimal manual controls, focus is hit-or-miss. If the camera has an internal mask holding the film in place, you get individual images; if not, they overlap. And if the back of the camera pops loose at an inopportune moment, the exposure can be fogged, or worse, completely ruined. But all these aberrations can become stylized.

"These cameras are like people," says Andy Benson. "They have personalities, and they lend those personalities to the photographs."

They also allow photographers to explore and exhibit their own personalities. Benson is showing his Holga-shot series of Philadelphia chefs at NEXUS Gallery's "Toyland" exhibit (through Nov. 7). He prefers the maskless approach, where multiple exposures overlap. At left of one image, the chef's hands arrange scallops on a plate; at center, his tightly framed face looms above; and at right the plate is removed.

Exhibit curator Chris Macan likes separating his images with masked borders, but doesn't believe in taping his camera; his fashionistic series of models in sundresses is awash in blobs of rich color and incongruous light.

Most breathtaking in the Toyland exhibit is the work of Rita Bernstein, who prints on thin, delicate Japanese gampi paper. Its orange tone and wrinkled surface lend a dreamlike quality to her images, giving the impression that these scenes exist only in the minds of the women she depicts.

That these feats are achieved with the most simple of machines is why Macan dismisses talk that toy cameras are incapable of producing high art.

"A lot of people like them because they are childish, anti-technology and easy," he says. "But a lot of people approach toy camera photography with care and precision, putting the same level of thinking about it, the same amount of work as they would with traditional cameras."