

Blurry photos put ideas in focus

Finnish artist's purposely distorted photographs play on peripheral vision to create a sense of clarity

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VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

The best blurs are not found in rock 'n' roll but in contemporary photography, where to see something clearly is to get only part of the story these days – and often the least interesting part at that.

The latest blur-meister worth the time is Finnish photographer Miklos Gaál with a show at Artcore/Fabrice Marcolini gallery.

"Sights," with its 18 large-format chromogenic photographs – as well as a sumptuous 16-minute, 21-second video, *Transit Loop* (2007), made with Otto Karvonen – reminds me of Olivo Barbieri's "Site Specific_Las Vegas" exhibition. Wildly differing intentions and practices go into each artist's work, of course. The Milan-based Barbieri uses distortion to rethink architectural forms, revealing Las Vegas as a toy model or a model for a fantasy city, which in a way it is.

Yet because each photographer plays with ideas of perception and understanding, certain common ideas emerge. In Gaál's work humans are likewise reduced to toy size, such as the group of guys in his *Construction Men* (2004, series of seven). There's even something toy-like about the bright yellow colour on their helmets that pops out of the picture against the surrounding muted haze.

Contemporary artists using kids' toy cameras for serious photographic work is old news. It has recently been brought to my attention however that a droopy-looking movable lens gizmo made by Lensbabies affixed to a high-end digital camera can distort shots as if the entire unit cost \$9.93.

Gaál is entirely low-tech, using an analog camera and creating distortions by hand. His practice is to shoot his subjects almost as if they were in a parade and he was leaning out a window to get a better view. Yet since his method is mostly always the same – using a large format camera, knowing the point of focus will always be circular and the diffuse areas of the image will crowd the edge of the finished picture – the photographer is in a sense staging every shot he takes.

His main task is to simply find the character to play the roles he has in mind. In *The Puck* (2004), he waited for the tiny dots of hockey players to cast shadows like pencil lines in the snow to form part of the photograph's greater geometric design. (Gaál trained as a designer in Helsinki.)

Some photographers have argued since the 19th century that certain degrees of distortion might well be part of the image, feeling it more truly represented how the human eye sees things. Gaál suggests, "Maybe our way of looking is more similar to cinematic storytelling than halted single photographs."

Maybe. But to my mind, Gaál's particular genius is to remind us of the kind of clarity that comes with peripheral vision.

It's a clarity that means more than simply *seeing* something. Noticing something peripherally often brings that jolt of recognition that comes with fear or curiosity. We wonder: what is it about those few in-focus figures surrounded by the gathering crowd in Gaál's *Street Market* (2006)?

Peripheral vision is underrated, an optometrist tells an elderly patient in *The Tiger in the Grass*, a superb short story by the late American novelist Harriet Doer. "That's how we see the tiger in the grass," the doctor adds. "It's also how the tiger sees us."

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Just the facts

WHAT: "Sights" by Miklos Gaál

WHERE: Artcore/Fabrice Marcolini gallery, 55 Mill St., Distillery District, Building 62

WHEN: Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m., until Oct. 20.