

Ciao, digital. Hello, unpredictable art

Jesse Hamlin, Special to The Chronicle

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Plastic cameras are cheap, prone to light leaks and unpredictable. Which is why a lot of photographers are drawn to them in the digital age of pixel counts, precision focus and Photoshop.

"You don't know how the image is going to turn out when you shoot with a plastic camera. The unpredictability is a big part of the draw," says San Francisco photographer Carlos Arietta, one of the many artists whose work is on view in the RayKo Photo Center's 2010 International Juried Plastic Camera Show.

The show, which features more than 100 images by amateurs and pros from around the Bay Area and far beyond, is filled with intriguing pictures made with simple plastic-lens-and-body cameras that inherently produce soft-focus, often dreamy images. There's a surreal, painterly quality to many of the photographs, particularly the work of Czech artist Michael Borek, whose images are being showcased this year. He shoots with the popular Chinese-made Holga camera (the gallery is selling new Holgas for \$35). His mysteriously beautiful "Homage to Kamil Lhotak" brings Magritte to mind. A hot air balloon carrying two figures hangs in a twilight blue sky, a strange glow of light emanating from the blurry town in the distance.

Borek had been obsessed with making super-sharp and refined digital images "until I met Holga," he wrote. "She helped me let go and took me to the realm where imperfection and unpredictability - thanks to light leaks and lack of focus - can be inspiring."

Arietta, who teaches digital photography, printing classes and does high-end digital production work at RayKo, loves the unexpected results he gets with his Vintage Diana, a plastic camera using 120 mm film that was mass-produced in Hong Kong in the 1960s and '70s. He bought it from a friend for \$54 (you can buy a new Diana for \$50).

"With digital, it's instant gratification," Arietta says. His untitled contribution to the show is a loose, abstracted black-and-white image - shot from inside a spindly metal sculpture strung with bottles - printed on fine art paper on which he painted Pollock-like splatters with photographic emulsion. "With a plastic camera, you have to leave it to chance. Each image is a gift. Sometimes you get an amazing gift, sometimes you get something you don't want."

Nearby hangs a blurry, motion-filled nighttime street scene by Vancouver photographer Rachel Fox, shot with a Holga.

"One of the things about the Holga is that there's a setting called 'bold' that lets you keep the shutter open," says Audrey Jones, the RayKo workshop coordinator, gazing at Fox's picture. "With the long exposure, you get images of cars passing through. It's capturing movement."

Entering the gallery, you encounter "Stop," a dynamic color photograph by Layven Reguero of Las Cruces, N.M. It shows a woman in a bar holding her hand up to the photographer through a row of unidentifiable red rectangles that run through the frame. "Those red marks are probably light leaks, which can create weird traces of colors and patterns on the film. Or it could also be a double exposure, perhaps of a window, with a red light illuminating it from behind. One of the interesting things about the Holga is its ability to take multiple images on one frame, and have these layers of images built up on each other."

Then there's "Old Oak," a big black-and-white photograph by Robert Holmgren of Menlo Park that was awarded Best of Show. An ink jet print on tracing paper, it's an image of an gnarled old tree casting sculptural shadows on the wall of a brick building with narrow little windows (perhaps a jail). The play of light and shadow is equally striking in Holmgren's "Sears," which has the quiet intensity of a Robert Bechtle photorealist drawing. A palm tree rises above the horizontal sweep of the building that bears the shadow of its slender trunk.

RayKo's Juried Plastic Camera Show: 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Tues.- Thurs., 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Fri.-Sun. Through April 18. RayKo Photo Center, 428 Third St., S.F. Free. (415) 495-3773. www.raykophoto.com.

E-mail Jesse Hamlin at datebookletters@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/04/01/DDPM1CLU8I.DTL>

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“Balloon” by Michael Borek, who uses a Holga plastic camera, creates painterly images. His work is being showcased this year.

Photo: Michael Borek