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**BLURRING THE LINES:** Michael Borek's images are painterly and full of ambiguity.

## Night for Day For ... Night

**Michael Borek's  
photographs hang  
in an eternal twilight**

**PHOTOGRAPHY** | "Some people call me very perverse," says photographer Michael Borek. This might be because, as he puts it, he uses "a \$7,000 [digital] camera with a \$20 plastic lens" attached instead of modern, precision-coated glass optics. His plastic periscope comes from a camera named the Holga, the darling of art-school photographers for the last decade, and one built about as well as a cereal-box toy.

"That Holga is helping me let go — I was obsessed with sharpness," says Borek. The Holga lens, charitably described as smeary, "lets me play more. You can do some of its effects in Photoshop, but the Holga does it more unpredictably."

But Borek doesn't claim photo-Puritanism: for "Wide Awake," his solo show at the Czech Embassy, Borek (who cites painters Giorgio de Chirico and Paul Delvaux among his influences) channeled the Surrealists in Photoshop form. He photographed scenes and then altered their lighting to grant them an unearthly ambiguity. You can't tell whether his pictures are from night or day, and that's just the way he likes it.

A balloon floats serenely in a near-idyllic scene, shown with

nostalgia-inducing haziness and looming dark corners. Jesus on the cross creeps in silhouette out of the shadows of a photograph from Kolodje. Bridges glint, twinkling in the deep darkness of the Montgomery County countryside at twilight. It might be hard to get into Borek's brooding, mysterious photographs, particularly in the sunny Czech Embassy — this show is best visited on a cloudy day — but his worldview grows on you.

Borek, by day a Czech interpreter, strives for what he calls the Campari effect. "It's an Italian drink that's made of herbs. It's red in color; it tastes very strange, almost like a medicine. Whenever I order Campari, my first reaction is, 'What did I do again? I really don't enjoy [Campari] that much.' And I finish that drink, and I think, 'You know, there's something about it that I like, and I'm not sure, but I think I want another one.'"

"Photography should have that effect; I usually find that if I like some picture immediately, and then after some time I look at it again, there's nothing left. You might not like it initially, but later, for some reason, you feel that you need to look at it again."

CHRIS COMBS (EXPRESS)

→ Embassy of the Czech Republic; 3900 Spring of Freedom St. NW; through Dec. 15; 202-274-9105.