

Taming the Badly Behaved Camera: Michelle Bates and the Holga

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The Holga 120N is the opposite of its high-tech digital camera counterparts: It's lightweight, cheap, and has virtually no controls or settings to tinker with. This \$25 point-and-shoot toy camera is also prone to a peculiar set of flaws. Drop the Holga and light may spill through the tiny holes in the camera's plastic body and create unpredictable effects on film. Holga photographs gradually darken around the edges to provide a distinct, stark vignette effect. The camera's plastic lens also adds an uneven blurriness to the image.

The Holga occasionally produces unintentional double-exposures. And the rear of the Holga, if opened often enough, just might pop off. Indeed, this imperfect camera, first mass-produced in China in the 1980s, offers little predictability.¹ But therein lies the joy of seeing the world through the Holga's plastic lens. While the haphazard visual effects of the badly behaved Holga might make some professional photographers run the other way, the toy camera has a substantial following of ardent devotees, including Seattle-based photographer Michelle Bates, author of *Plastic Cameras: Toying with Creativity* (2010). She has customized her Holga 120N by patching many of its light leaks with dark tape. She has also created an irregularly shaped negative carrier for enlarging and printing in the darkroom, hand-cutting it from a piece of cardboard.

Bates, who was introduced to photography in 1991 through a Holga, is among a growing number of artists embracing the limitations and

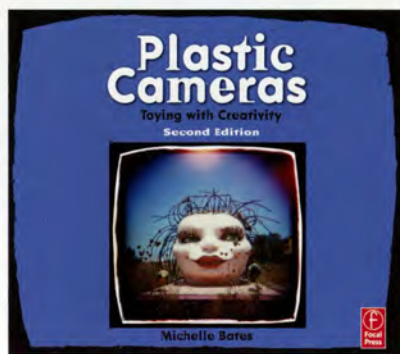
quirks of toy cameras. Their work is celebrated in a number of on-line galleries and blogs including www.toycamera.com, holgainspire.com, www.holgapalooza.com, www.holgamods.com, www.lightleaks.org, and www.fourcornersdark.com. The first edition of Bates's *Plastic Cameras* (2006) featured a history and guide to the world of toy plastic cameras, and included the work of more than thirty photographers, including the author. Last year's second edition includes fifty new pages

about the increased use of plastic toy cameras in studio practice, and work by about fifteen additional photographers, such as Christopher James and Michael Kenna. The second edition also offers an expanded look at images made with the Pinhole Wide Holga, the Stereo Holga, and the Blackbird, Fly camera.

But what precisely is drawing so many photographers to choose these quirky, film-based toy cameras over more sophisticated digital equipment? Bates explains that she finds a unique challenge in embracing the Holga's flaws, harnessing them, and making them part of her image-conception process. In doing so, she has

discovered that the straightforward, point-and-shoot plastic camera is anything but a plaything. Rather, it is ridden with complexities and contradictions. "It's very simple," Bates said, "yet I can write a whole book on how to use it. It's quirky. Yet it's easy. You can't adjust it. And yet it frustrates some people ... because they get really bad exposures sometimes. But I also want to teach people how to control it so they get exposures they like."²

Bates's learning experience with the Holga has inspired her to use the camera as a means to even the playing field for her workshop students. When the competitive burden of having the latest and greatest technology is removed from her students, she finds the classroom conversation shifts from technology to seeing. Students focus on



All images Michelle Bates, courtesy of the artist

Above: Cover, *Plastic Cameras: Toying with Creativity*, Focal Press, 2010



Coney Island, 1992, gelatin silver print, approximately 11 x 12 inches, 15 x 16 inches framed



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Above: *Body*, from the portfolio *Exquisite Decay*, n.d., C-print, approximately 11 x 12 inches, 15 x 16 inches framed

Opposite, top: *Beach Grass*, NJ, gelatin silver print, approximately 11 x 12 inches, 15 x 16 inches framed

Opposite, bottom: *Tree & Building – Bryant Park*, NYC, from the portfolio *Urban Oases*, ca. 2007, gelatin silver print, approximately 11 x 12 inches, 15 x 16 inches framed

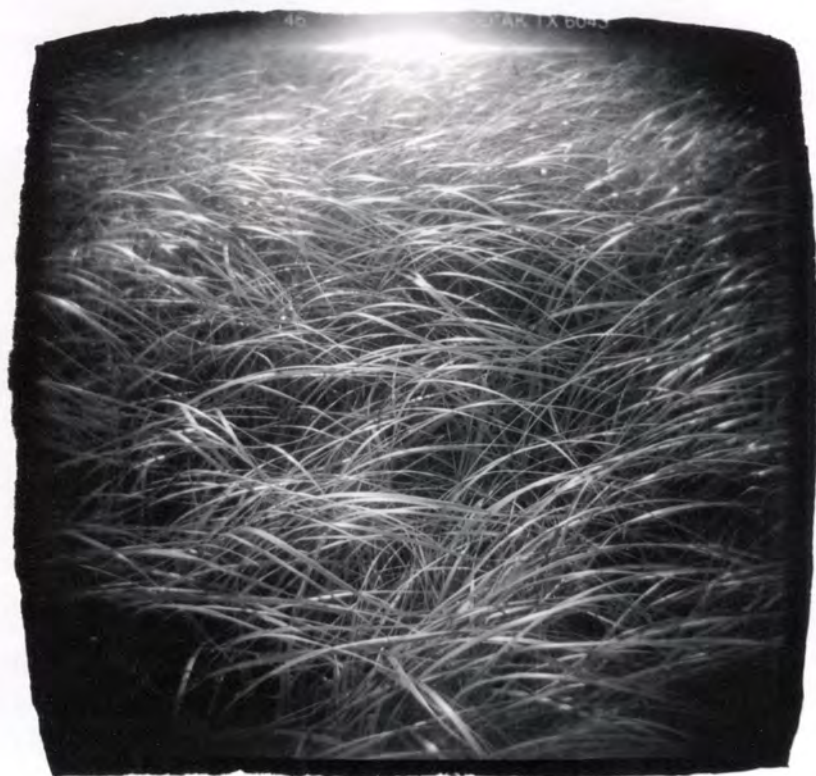
making compelling images instead of struggling with technology. The medium's digitalization, she explains, has transformed conversations about the medium. "Now, whenever you hear discussions about photography, 99.5 percent of them are about technology. When do you ever hear people talk about seeing? It's all about, 'You gonna get that camera?' ... The discussion of photography has massively shifted."

Bates herself experiences this conflict between seeing and technology in her professional practice of photographing performance and festivals. (See p. 32.) Bates embraces fast lenses, as well as the most up-to-date camera technology and image-alteration and organizing software. But in her fine-art practice, Bates shuns the clear, controlled, impressive polish of the digital. "I fell in love with the Holga," Bates said. "My artistic vision kind of grew up with it." Working with the Holga, Bates explains, forces her to really get to know her equipment's unique manner of translating the world into a tangible image, but she fears that such familiarity with image-making tools is a potential casualty of an increasingly digital age. "With film[-based] photography and the darkroom, ...[y]ou could use your grandfather's camera or the same camera for your whole career. ... The camera would become second nature to you. I feel like that's nearly gone now. I get a new [digital] camera every few years." Bates's vision has evolved over nearly two decades. She began by shooting scenes from amusement parks, eccentric statues and monuments, and carnivals—subjects she describes as "the stuff of great Holga pictures." However, not wanting the toy camera to have too much control over her choice of subjects, Bates explored the forgotten and surprising details within urban and natural environments in the series *Urban Oases*. As a whole, her work ranges in mood from goofy to graphically bold, sublime to sophisticated and subtle.

Indeed, while viewing Bates's work, it's easy to forget that she shoots with a \$25, taped-up toy camera with a plastic lens. Her vision transcends her equipment.

1. The Diana, first produced in the early 1960s, was among the first mass-marketed toy cameras. It was followed in the 1980s by devices such as the Holga and, more recently, by the Nickelodeon PhotoBlaster (1990s) and digital-camera lens-alteration mechanisms such as the Lensbaby (2000-present), which mimics the effects of earlier analog toy cameras such as the Holga.

2. All Bates quotes are from a conversation with the author on August 9, 2010.

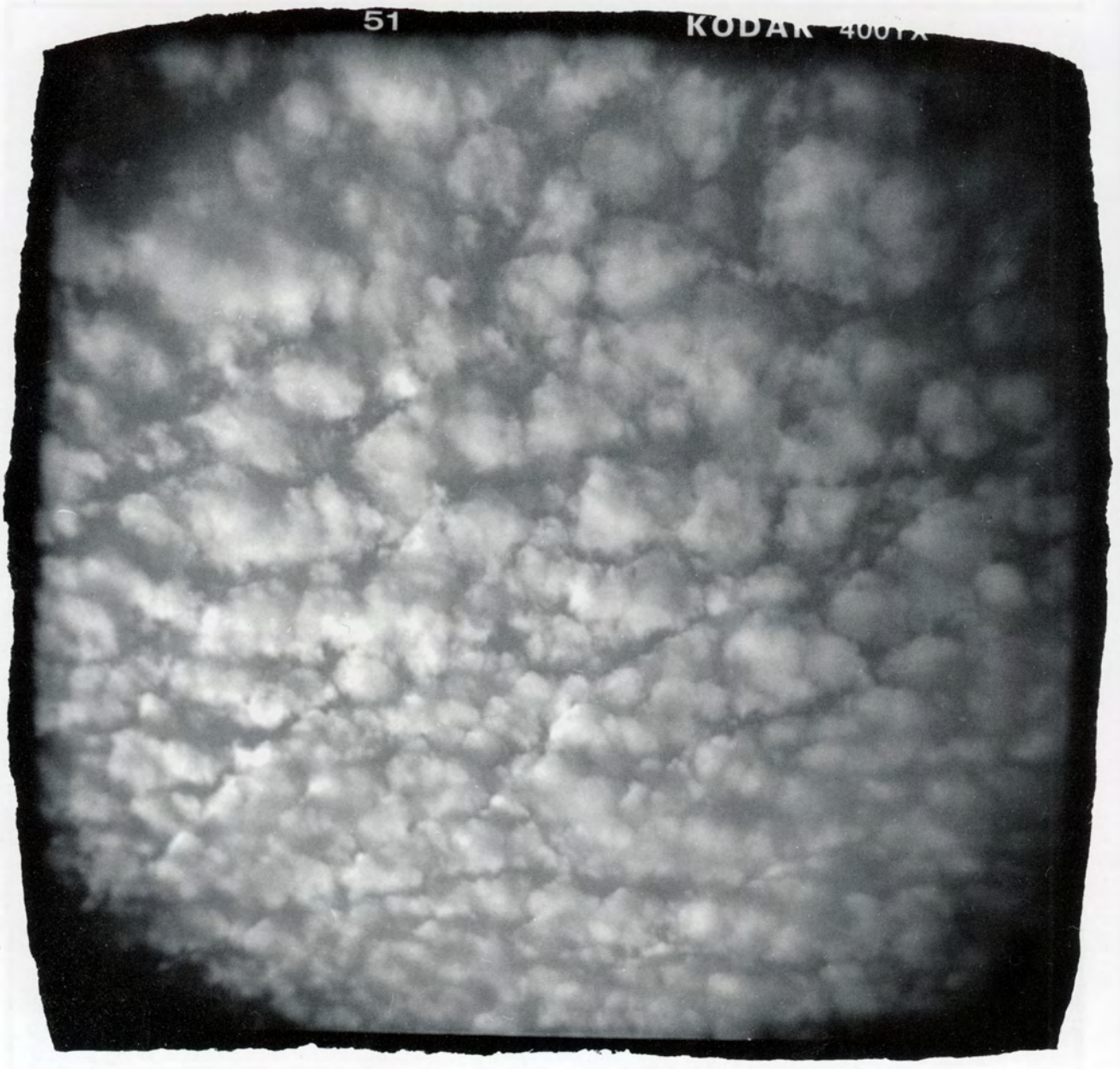




Shadow and Window, from the portfolio Urban Oases, 2005, gelatin silver print, approximately 11 x 12 inches, 15 x 16 inches framed



Temple of Joy, Burning Man 2002, by David Best & crew, 2002,
C-print, approximately 11 x 12 inches, 15 x 16 inches framed



Clouds, Seattle, from the portfolio *Urban Oases*, n.d.,
gelatin silver print, approximately 11 x 12 inches, 15 x 16
inches framed