

Deciphering the numbers behind

By Chris Klimek
Special to The Examiner

"Formulaic" is rarely meant as a compliment when art is the subject. But applied to his own work, it doesn't offend Mount Pleasant photo artist Michael Dax Iacovone in the least. When people say his images of familiar Washington locales like Malcolm X Park or the intersection of Columbia Road and 16th Street Northwest are "surreal," it's at least partly because they don't know what else to call them.

Iacovone understands this. That doesn't mean he has to like it.

"I've been doing these photos for a long time, and people get this notion that they're ephemeral or dreamlike," he says. "They're really anything but that for me. They're very mechanical and very mathematical."

Iacovone's prismatic, multiperspective images, on view at Flashpoint Gallery through Aug. 23, offer a fascinating view of Washington, D.C., that's at once familiar and alien, and in which the numbers really do govern.

Iacovone figures out in advance the sites he intends to shoot. His methodology varies, but his rigid adherence to it doesn't.

"I'll either look at a map and figure out how to divide the space evenly, or I'll apply a geometric equation to it," he says. ("Three Churches" is the product

of the latter method — you can see the equation scrawled atop the print.)

When he gets to each location, he takes a single exposure with a Holga — a cheap plastic camera of Asian manufacture that's gained an unexpected afterlife with art photographers for the difficult-to-predict anomalies it produces. But ambiguity has no place in Iacovone's modus operandi. He uses the Holga because of its manual film-advance level, which permits him to wind his frame forward only partially, allowing multiple exposures to overlap.

"Often I won't even look through the viewfinder," he says. "Once I've decided on a process and [a location], the shooting of the photo and the printing of the photo is really secondary." The art is in the formulas, in the process. "I have faith — in the romantic sense of faith — that it will come out right, or interesting, if I obey my own rules," he says.

His faith is typically rewarded.

"I'll develop my film, and [people ask], 'How'd it come out?' And I'll say, 'It came out.'"

Iacovone already has one master's degree in photography and computer graphics; he's pursuing a Master of Fine Arts. He regards his method as "me rejecting my own history" as a documentary photographer. When he trekked across New Zealand shooting pictures, the results were well-received,

If you go

Michael Dax Iacovone: The Numbers Behind
» When: Through Aug. 23, 2008
» Where: Flashpoint, 916 G St. NW
» Admission: Free
» More information: www.flashpointdc.org

but left him unfulfilled.

"New Zealand was beautiful before I got there," he explains. "I always felt [documentary shooting was] just kind of playing a game. Just because I'm willing to live out of a backpack on \$12 a day doesn't mean I'm making anything meaningful. I wasn't saying anything."

The beginnings of his method came to him partially from his long, meditative sessions shooting the Brooklyn Bridge. He'd experiment with arbitrary formulas, shooting a picture from the same spot every five minutes, or walking the bridge and shooting a photo every hundred paces. He also found inspiration in the work of British "land artist," sculptor, photographer and painter Richard Long.

Iacovone's formulaic photography and filmmaking is itself but a single method in the service of a broader goal. "I'd like to get people to consider their own familiar spaces," he says. "I don't think I've gotten there yet, but that's what I'm trying to do."

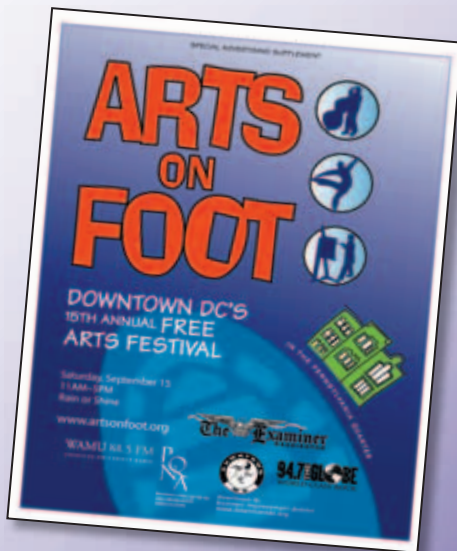


BY MICHAEL DAX IACOVONE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
 "Three Churches, One Intersection" (detail); 2007, digital output from black and white negative, 42 by 75 inches

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Lost in the 'Crowd'

Film adaptations of classic literary works are nothing new, but Matthew Buckingham's "A Man of the Crowd" is more challenging and ambitious than most. For one thing, you're not meant to sit and experience the film from a single perspective, by to move around as you view it. It's one of the 20 film installations featured in the second half of the Hirshhorn's The Cinema Effect exhibit, subtitled Realisms.

In Edgar Allen Poe's 1840 short story "The Man of the Crowd," a man watching the street through a coffee-shop window selects a stranger for the "absolute idiosyncrasy" of his face and follows him through the streets of London for 24 hours. He learns nothing about the man. What we'd thought was a detective story turns out to be a meditation on the anonymity of the "modern" city.

In 2003, Buckingham relocated the tale from 19th-century London to 21st-century Vienna, and used it as the basis for a film in which the camera embodies at various points both the follower and the followed.

He told Realisms curator Anne Ellegood that he chose to adapt Poe's story because it works as "a metaphor and paradigm for the question of nonfiction filmmaking itself." It espouses two disparate ideas of documentary filmmaking: the one that believes the camera must be concealed to record truth, and the European notion that, says Buckingham, "the presence of the camera would provoke the truth."

Poe had been to London only as a child. He had no firsthand adult



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If you go

The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image, Part II: Realisms at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

» When: Through Sept. 7
» Where: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Seventh Street and Independence Ave. Southwest
» Admission: Free
» More information: 202-633-4674; hmsg.si.edu

experience of the city; he borrowed his geography and descriptions from Dickens.

"I liked that it was a kind of documentary story about a city he'd never been to, really," Buckingham says. — Chris Klimek