

TOYLAND

DAVID LEVINTHAL | TOYLAND



Born in 1949 in San Francisco, David Levinthal has been confronting society and its mores through the playful use of toy figurines since 1972. The myths of the American West, the idealized 'perfection' of the female icons of the fifties, the realm of sexual fantasy, and war are all topics of Levinthal's exploration, and all of his work has been undertaken using toys as the subject matter for his photographs. "Utilizing toy figures and structures as subject matter for the creation of a surrogate reality, I have endeavored to create a 'fictional world' that simultaneously calls into question our sense of truth and credibility," states Levinthal.

Writing in *The New York Times*, Charles Hagen said that, "What distinguishes Mr. Levinthal's work is his interest in emotionally charged historical material. But the real force of his images comes not from his choice of subjects but from the way he tells their stories."

Levinthal has had numerous solo exhibitions including his first retrospective at the International Center of Photography, New York in 1997. He was the recipient of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1995 and the National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Artists Fellowship in 1990-91. Levinthal's works are featured in major museum collections, such as: the Smithsonian, the San Francisco Museum of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Centre Pompidou. His works are also a part of the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Menil Collection, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

David Levinthal has released several publications including, *Hitler Moves East: A Graphic Chronicle, 1941-43*, which he co-authored with Garry Trudeau, *Bad Barbie*, *Blackface*, and *IED: War in Afghanistan and Iraq*, amongst others.

21 JULY - 5 SEPTEMBER 2011

Do dolls have souls? Do Toys? Most children wish them to – Toys are the objects that furnish our childhood and we learn both about the surrounding world and our abilities within it by manipulating them. To quote Baudelaire:

“All children talk to their toys; the toys become actors in the great drama of life, scaled down inside the *camera obscura* of the childish brain. The overriding desire of most children is to get at and see the soul of their toys.”

What is the function of a doll? A toy? Most obviously toys are playmates for children – upon which they project their puerile notions of the sexes – they role-play and act out those impulses that are innate to both the male and female instincts. Toys offer children an outlet to allay their fears, express their emotions, and to act out their drives– be those of aggression, adventure, mothering, rage, socialization, individuation, love. Through game play and charades they exert their will upon an otherwise frightening and senseless world.

Artist David Levinthal: “I don’t think childhood is at all innocent, so why should toys be? It’s a period of socialization and conformity. Boys are supposed to grow up to be strong and stalwart men, willing to die for their country, and so on. That period of one’s life instills certain values. Playing with toys is innocent only in the sense that most people have passed through that stage. I suppose I never have.” Levinthal has discovered and succinctly reveals “that toys are not benign objects, but metaphors for culture itself.”

Childhood is the blueprint for the rest of our lives and is populated by toys. Levinthal moves through time in and out of the melee of impressions and youthful experience to show us through his arresting imagery the fuse that cuts through these formative years.

Levinthal captures the graininess of the past, in vivid clarity, as an almost Wordsworthian *spot of time* so that we see the past now as we saw it then. His moments, though paused, carry us back to the attic of our memory and unfold in cinematic nostalgia, the days of our creation. I think Tarkovsky, Bergman, a baseball game, a first date... back to our very own rooms, to our homes, to the wellspring of emotion... to the fons et origo... first desires, first blush, first time our hearts raced. The images we have known of color, size and shape are almost familiar in Levinthal’s work, as if he photographed our very own childhood.

One can also extrapolate to a discussion of toys and dolls as works of art in their own right, made by anonymous crafts people and machines. They are the epitome of pop in their mass production and packaging. Levinthal captures all the banalities of dolls, but then brings them into the larger theatre of adult play where he transcends the trammels of time and space exalting them to real subjects becoming more than dolls – subjects no longer objects – subjects with which we have to contend.

The artist must see the world anew, with childlike wonder - to see it perhaps the way it is and not how they’ve been told to see it. The job of the artist is to show us their world and thereby reveal a truth that we can choose to acknowledge or ignore. Levinthal recounts the past and draws us into the present so we can foresee our future. This is a great artist at work – a man who has the courage to play with toys and make the experience so powerful, so life-like and so beautiful that we question the very nature of reality – this is not only an artist but, in the world he has created, a God.

This land is our land this land is *Toyland*.

Jonathan Brown

LEADAPRON

8445 Melrose Place
Los Angeles, CA 90069
Tel. 323 782 1888
Fax 323 782 1883
info@leadapron.net
leadapron.net

Monday - Friday 10 to 7pm
Saturday 12 to 5pm