



Improvised Explosive Device  
by Kirsten Bengtson-Lykoudis

*I.E.D.: War in Afghanistan and Iraq*  
Stellan Holm Gallery  
524 W.24th St., New York, NY 10011  
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David Levinthal has been shooting narrative constructions of his own making since earning an MFA from Yale in the early 70's. Fueled by a fetish-like fascination with dolls and toys and their role in "socializing the young," he employs the techniques of photographic artifice to touch upon a variety of social and political issues, from World War II to Barbie to X-rated films. His carefully staged color images of plastic figurines engaged in subversive action are riddled with irony.

His latest series, I.E.D. The War in Afghanistan and Iraq, on view at Stellan Holm Gallery in Chelsea, is accompanied by a book of the same title, (Powerhouse Books, New York, 2009) edited by David Stanford, which includes blog entries from American troops stationed overseas. The eighteen large-scale color pigment prints on view depict a selectively focused stream of GI Joe figures in scenes of warfare blown up far beyond their original scale. Despite the disturbing content, the point of view is flatly neutral and one is unsure whether the characters are vulnerable, evil or heroic.



Levinthal's eerily lit scenes look obviously staged, yet convey a chilling sense of realism, zeroing in on poignant details such as a drawn gun, a bloodied face or an outstretched hand. The action is truncated, running off the page from one shot to the next in a sickly green haze. With their Technicolor surface, when viewed from afar, scenes of a bombed car in flames, soldiers crouching behind tanks for shelter and kicking down an 'insurgent's' door, resemble nightmarish film stills arranged in sequence around the room.

The prints' large size counteracts photography's usual tendency to reduce scenes from real life and encapsulate them. Levinthal has opted instead to enlarge his ghoulish miniatures, wreaking havoc with the viewer's sense of scale.

The resulting images reveal both the cruelties of war and Levinthal's blatant tinkering with our notions of 'reality'. Although situations like these occur on a daily basis within 'theaters' of war worldwide, our experience of them in the West is generally second-hand. Like the Surrealist Hans Bellmer, who used voodoo-like dolls as proxies to depict acts of human violence with sadistically bound poupees, Levinthal has created a fetishized fantasy world that depicts both internal and external power struggles.

The series has a bit less impact than it did when Levinthal first started photographing toy soldiers during the Vietnam War, but it is nonetheless jarring. It is also a painful reminder of how little American foreign policy has changed since then. His underlying challenge to the idea of photographic 'truth' resonates more than ever in an era where our perception of reality is mediated on previously unseen levels. His faux constructions aren't meant to look real, but are intensely revealing about the way we see the world today.



(Images: All Untitled from the series I.E.D. The War in Afghanistan and Iraq (2008), Archival pigment print on polyester film, 43 1/8 x 55 5/8 inches. Courtesy of Stellan Holm Gallery.)

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