

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

PacificPalisadesPatch



Barbie. Hitler. Spacemen. Little Black Sambo. Wild West Gunslingers. The Yankees. Soldiers in Iraq. Bathing Beauties. Jesus. They've all posed for photographer David Levinthal. Correction: He's posed *them*. Because for over three decades, Levinthal has chosen toy soldiers, dolls, and small figurines as his primary subjects. He stages and shoots them in a way that can appear lurid, humorous, disturbing, and at times, eerily life-like. Santa Monica's Gallery 169 recently hosted a special reception for a new exhibit showcasing his work. Levinthal was on hand to discuss his art and how he got the idea of using toy figurines while attending grad school. "What we set about trying to do with this show, with work from almost a 40-year period — from Barbie and G.I. Joe to the Iraq work, was to see how the work as evolved over time," Levinthal said. The idea of using toy figures began while studying photography at Yale Grad School. One of his earliest black and white efforts suggests a steamy romantic encounter between Barbie and G.I. Joe. (on display in the current exhibit). In the late 70's he was asked to collaborate with *Doonsebury's* Garry Trudeau on a book, *Hitler Moves East, A Graphic Chronicle 1941-43*. This sort of mock-documentary look at Germany's march on Russia during World War II. "Having gone to college in the late 60's, the Vietnam War was so omnipresent in everyone's life," Levinthal said. "Garry and I weren't consciously doing something to comment on that, but you couldn't help but be influenced by it subconsciously."

The book won critical acclaim and helped boost Levinthal's career. "At the time when the book came out in 1977 it was put in the History section, because there was not a comparable art photography genre to put it in," Levinthal said. "Fortunately I was young enough to ignore the fact that everyone thought I was a little crazy and just continued for another 40 years." Proof that his art continues to endure and raise eyebrows, *Hitler Moves East* and *Mein Kampf* (a series about Hitler at Nuremberg) will be shown to Germany audiences for the first time in 2012. Utilizing toys for the creation of surrogate realities, Levinthal aims to create fictional worlds that call into question our sense of truth and credibility. "It's what we do in movies, which is to create a scene," said Donald Rosenfeld, a film producer and art dealer. "He builds the set, casts the actor (the toys), then he manipulates them, and with the power of his lie, creates the suspension of disbelief."

One of the most interesting aspects of Levinthal's photos is his use of focus. Many images appear blurry except for one specific spot in the frame. "In all of my work there's a really narrow depth of field, almost the width of a string that draws your eye into a certain point," Levinthal explained. "The narrow depth of field gives a sense of motion and it makes the toys feel more realistic." This technique creates the impression that a toy Brooklyn Dodger really is sliding into home or wild stallions are about to gallop right out of the picture frame. In other instances the viewer might feel like a Peeping Tom or eyewitness to some scandalous film noir scenario. "In all of my work I try to make it ambiguous so that the viewer can develop their own narrative with it," Levinthal said. "The work that stands out for me is *American Beauties*," said Rosenfeld. "The sky's not a real sky, they light someone at the beach at night. And why is the foreground light and darkness in the distance? Unless it's the apocalyptic beach." One of his most recent series, *I.E.D.*, revisits the battleground milieu that brought him into prominence. This time he's staging scenes with soldiers fighting in current conflicts. "Part of that was just a fascination that they're making these figures of Iraqi's and American soldiers as this war was being fought," Levinthal said. "When I was doing the World War II imagery there was some distance--30 years--but the fact that these Afghanistan and Iraq war toys were coming out in real time was so amazing to me." One thing's for sure. With such a unique talent for capturing powerful, arresting imagery with toys, no one can call Levinthal's work child's play. *David Levinthal: Photographs: 1974-2008* is on view through May 1 at Gallery 169, located at 169 West Channel Road in Santa Monica.

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