



The BAY AREA REPORTER

TABLEAUX VIVANTS

As a youth growing up in Palo Alto in the 1950s, photographer David Levinthal was a member of a generation hypnotized – some might say warped – by television and a steady diet of weekly serials – think *Gunsmoke* and *Combat* – war-movie matinees and Westerns. A grad of Stanford and Yale, he made his reputation and demonstrated an aptitude for controversy early, with photographs of disquieting tableaux meticulously staged with toys arranged in miniature dioramas. He started down this dubious road in 1971 with fellow Yale and "bad influence" Garry Trudeau of *Doodles* fame, when the duo devised WWII vignettes using toy figures to depict the 1941 invasion of Russia from the German perspective. Levinthal is said to have buried the soldiers in snowdrifts of baking flour, set model planes on fire, and photographed the conflagration as they crashed. Not for nothing do seasoned generals refer to combat as the "theater of war," a metaphor he apparently took to heart.

He lived out every little boy's dream, acting out elaborate battles with GI Joes in his room, but the crucial difference is that for Levinthal, it led to an art career. Informed by the work of Life magazine photojournalist Robert Capa, the collaborative project with Trudeau yielded *Hitler Moves East: A Graphic Chronicle, 1941-43*, an influential book admired by pictorial fabulist Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and other young artists. The plastic figurines contained in its pages seemingly come to life in sepia-toned battle scenes: a crouching infantryman, rifle in hand, is ready to spring into action; another pair of soldiers waits stealthily in the tall grasses. These two images are on view in *Make Believe*, an exhibition now at the San Jose Museum of Art, which features 39 photographs of Levinthal's theatrical tableaux, drawn from nearly a dozen series the artist has produced since the mid-1970s. As a mini-retrospective, the show is a sampling, and while it offers an instructive

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catalogue of Levinthal's various enthusiasms, the approach dilutes the impact of a complete series and the way it might act on the mind if viewed on its own. Many of the pictures were shot with consumer-grade and large-format Polaroid cameras, the latter an unwieldy contraption he would roll in to photograph a layout. His recent digital explorations of scenes from American history, which don't have the same depth or intrigue of his earlier forays, include a helicopter from Apocalypse Now and renditions of Custer's Last Stand and WWII Marines planting a flag on Iwo Jima. He deliberately blurs most of the photographs, which has the dual effect of making them appear both more life-like and unreal.

Since his grad-school escapades, Levinthal moved on to create increasingly lurid, voyeuristic, politically incorrect imagery: male sexual fantasies of submission and domination acted out with female dolls; baseball greats like Willie Mays and Babe Ruth in action; so-called "blackface" memorabilia; the mythical Wild West of cowboys, bucking broncos and gunslingers heading for High Noon stand-offs that only existed in the movies; and Barbies, those mean, wasp-waisted dolls with their perfect hair, stylish fashions and a drop-dead, loser gaze, photographed by Levinthal in saturated color and transformed into ladies-who-lunch ice queens. (Of course, there's Barbie's shady past to consider; before she was acquired by Mattel and became a role model for hordes of little girls, she was Bild Lilli, a German sex toy.) Utilizing dolls of a very different vintage, "Desire" (1990-91) and "XXX" (2000-01) venture into pornographic peep-show territory. In the former, a headless female body shot from behind stands with its legs hip-width apart while another figure is posed kneeling and cupping her breasts.

In the strongest section, Mein Kampf, whose chilling Holocaust imagery is horrifying yet impossible not to look at, a group of naked men is clustered at the edge of a large burial pit where, one surmises, they'll soon join fellow victims; the background is blood-red, and shadowy SS officers can be seen in the distance. Elsewhere, a looming guard tower blocks the gateway to freedom and the view of a wintry sky. That plastic toys are enlisted to depict a monstrous chapter in history doesn't trivialize it as one might expect;

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instead, it adds a repellent inhumanity. We also see Hitler, his arm extended in salute, standing on a balcony, reviewing the troops filing past him below. Levinthal's preoccupation with Nazis and the seductive pageantry of the Third Reich supposedly began when he found a Hitler toy in an Austrian shop, followed by the discovery of a New Jersey vendor stocking SS officers and a bevy of munchkin-sized Fuehrers. Like some obsessive out of an old X-Files episode, Levinthal, consumed by scenarios fueled by imagination and memory, engineers fictional worlds that become more real than reality.

