

DAVID LEVINTHAL

(Gallery 169, Santa Monica) This tasty sampler of images by noted photographer David Levinthal spans his prolific career. Levinthal was born in 1949, raised in San Francisco, CA, and currently resides in New York. He attended Yale University, receiving an MFA in 1973. His graduate work, a collaboration with Gary Trudeau entitled "Hitler Moves East" was published in 1977 and is now considered a collector's item. Levinthal has exhibited extensively since then, showing in museums and galleries worldwide. His first retrospective was organized by The International Center of Photography in 1997.

Here you get a little of this and a little of that and can begin to see the relationships between works, and the exhibition offers excerpts from his many projects, but not enough of any one thing to leave the viewer feeling satisfied. Although the exhibition spans 1974 to 2008 and presents images from many of his better known series, starting with "Hitler Moves East" and including "The Wild West," "American Beauties," "Barbie" and most recently "I.E.D.," these series are complete works and when repre-



David Levinthal, "Untitled No. 10, Space Series," 2007, Polaroid photograph.

sented by two, three or four images their full impact is lessened. This is not to say that Levinthal's individual images do not stand on their own, but it is best to consider this exhibition as an introduction to his work.

Although not hung chronologically it is possible to create a trajectory through the exhibition. When a graduate student at Yale Levinthal first began working with toys and created small black and white works where he photographed toy soldiers to illustrate Hitler's push into Russia in the early 1940s. These images were shot extremely close-up with a shallow depth of field. This became Levinthal's signature. Levinthal created hyperreal dioramas into which he placed the toy soldiers, resulting in photographs that were surprisingly wrought with emotion. Although clearly artificial, the impact of the blurred figures in ambiguous surroundings evoked the memory and the torments of war. Levinthal made these images using Kodalith film, and the effect of the grainy texture of the film served to further accentuate the scenarios he fabricated.

At first Levinthal's interest in using toys was just about the object, but as he scrutinized the toys under the close focus of the camera's lens he began to imbue them with life. Having found a way to make documentary-like images that referenced the photographs he saw in Life magazine while growing up, without having to go

into the field or the streets, Levinthal began to expand his explorations. Using myriad toys ranging from soldiers to Barbies to cowboys to black face figurines, Levinthal's body of work takes what is obviously fictional into the aesthetic realm of realism.

Moving away from black and white, Levinthal began to use a Polaroid camera. In his "Modern Romance" series (1984-85) he used an SX-70 to make images that mimicked urban life. Figures inhabited dimly lit streets and lingered on corners as if in a film noir. Always a collector, Levinthal amassed a trove of figurines, toys and props and began to make unique 20 x 24 inch images in Polaroid's New York studio. In these photographs the toys are larger than life and presented in vivid color. For "The Wild West" the toy cowboys, Indians and horses are placed in settings that challenge the myth of the American West. He frequently presents the subject of a series adoringly. For example in an image of Barbie from 1997 he poses her in a bright red dress. She holds a red pocket book and is photographed in front of a red backdrop as if she were a movie star. Casting himself as the doll's fashion photographer, Levinthal calls attention to the confusion between the real and the artificial.

Levinthal's relationship to his subjects is complex. It is clear he delights in the set-up, but as he casts his toys as players in adult dramas the first blush innocence of the endeavor disappears. In the "I.E.D." series he focuses on the details of battles, making images of bloodied soldiers and burning jeeps, exploring the dangers of war. Something of a return to the war-themed works that recreated Hitler's battles, these images comment on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq by bringing viewers into the soldier's world. His signature use of toys as cultural metaphors challenge accepted norms and bring to light both stereotypes and situations that are embraced and accepted in contemporary society.

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