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TOYS TELL TALES IN 'DAVID LEVINTHAL: MAKE BELIEVE'
AT SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART

As kids, we all played with toys, helping Barbie and Ken set up house in a pillow-walled apartment under the kitchen table, then waging battles with a neighboring battalion of G.I. Joes. All in innocent fun. Or was it? Photographer David Levinthal -- who grew up in Palo Alto with his own toy soldiers regularly mixing it up with cowboys and Indians on the bedroom floor -- would gradually begin to spot ulterior motives in these figures of childhood play and the way they helped define our cultural views and values at a most vulnerable time in our lives. So nearly three decades ago, he started getting up close with these miniature messages of American pop culture, staging his own dioramas and poignant poses with action figures and models of everything from cowboys to baseball icons to bathing beauties, Hitler and World War II soldiers.

Through Levinthal's lens, even the benign Barbie often sports a sinister gleam. "Toys are intriguing, and I want to see what I can do with them," Levinthal, now based in New York, says in his artist's statement. "On a deeper level, they represent one way that society socializes its young."

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Thirty-nine of these striking toy land tableaux -- including 28 recent acquisitions on view for the first time -- are part of "David Levinthal: Make Believe," on display through November at the San Jose Museum of Art. They provide an intimate look at Levinthal's international career from 1975 to the present. Central to his work is "the idea that toys are not innocent playthings," says the exhibit's curator, Rory Padeken. "Through toys, children learn about expectations from society, about gender roles, about who are the heroes and who are the villains, and about what is valued and what is not. "David plays with these ideas in his photographs in order to create a rupture -- and when a rupture happens, we begin to question our values and beliefs," Padeken says.

Levinthal, who grew up in the 1950s, was among the first wave of artists raised with the ubiquitous visual language of postwar consumerism and TV commercials, Padeken says. Imagery gleaned from this popular culture became rich fodder for the so-called "Pictures Generation." His images, largely vintage Polaroids, are stunning and often merely whimsical at first blush. Indeed, some are just what they appear to be -- fun close-ups of toys, celebrating things like great moments in sports, such as Willie Mays' striking over-the-shoulder grab -- now known simply as "The Catch" -- in Levinthal's 2003 series, "Baseball."

Yet others tell deeper stories. The image of the perfect American woman and the role she was supposed to play in the home was

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quite literally modeled for little girls in the image of the Barbie doll, through the doll's outfits, hairstyles and body type. "David also complicates our values in images of the lone cowboy out on the range, a very heroic, valiant, rugged image," Padeken says. "But through David's view, the cowboy becomes a dark and sinister character. This twist in the narrative reveals both the artifice of the image of the cowboy - all that most of us know of the cowboy is through Hollywood films - and the historical role the cowboy played during American western expansion."

This kind of mental "twist" is even more evident in Levinthal's series titled "Mein Kampf." It uses small Nazi figures he found in Germany, and even a depiction of Adolph Hitler as a toy soldier. Rather than focus on the atrocities committed during World War II, Levinthal explored the pageantry of Nazi military parades and how one can be seduced by beautiful images, "and then feel completely shocked that something so horrible was subconsciously let into the mind," Padeken says. And it's all in the technique, he adds. The camera and the instantaneous quality of the medium, particularly with the early large-format Polaroid images, are integral to Levinthal's work in his studio photography. "Taking the outside world and breaking it down into its essential forms in miniature inside is something for which he is without peer," Padeken says.