ISSN 2378-6159
Volume 6, Issue 1 (Fall 2019)
www.bu.edu/sequitur

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“A West That Never Was”: David Levinthal at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Smithsonian American Art Museum, D.C.
June 7 - October 14, 2019

Kimberly Windham

Figure 1. David Levinthal (b. 1949, American), *Dallas 1963* from the series “History,” 2013, inkjet print, 17 x 22 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., image courtesy the author

The work of photographer David Levinthal is notorious for its “moral indeterminacy.”[1] For decades, Levinthal has photographed dolls, toys, and collectibles, using playthings to depict controversial themes. In 1996, Philadelphia’s Institute of Contemporary Art cancelled a planned exhibition of Levinthal’s “Blackface” (1995–98), a series of large-format Polaroid photographs depicting racist memorabilia. While the cancelled show was exhibited at an alternate location in New York City, no gallery or museum has ever mounted shows of Levinthal’s similarly controversial series “Porno” (1975–76) or “Mein Kampf”

[1] Sarah Boxer, “Hardly Child’s Play: Shoving Toys into Darkest Corners,” *The New York Times,* January 24, 1997, https://nyti.ms/2IYqwas.

ISSN 2378-6159
Volume 6, Issue 1 (Fall 2019)
www.bu.edu/sequitur

(1993–94).[2] Exclusion of the most problematic of Levinthal's works from the exhibition *American Myth & Memory: David Levinthal Photographs* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) not only elides some of the difficult conversations surrounding the photographer's work, but also presents a truncated view of his oeuvre. The vision at SAAM represents not that of the artist, but that of the curator, Joanna Marsh.

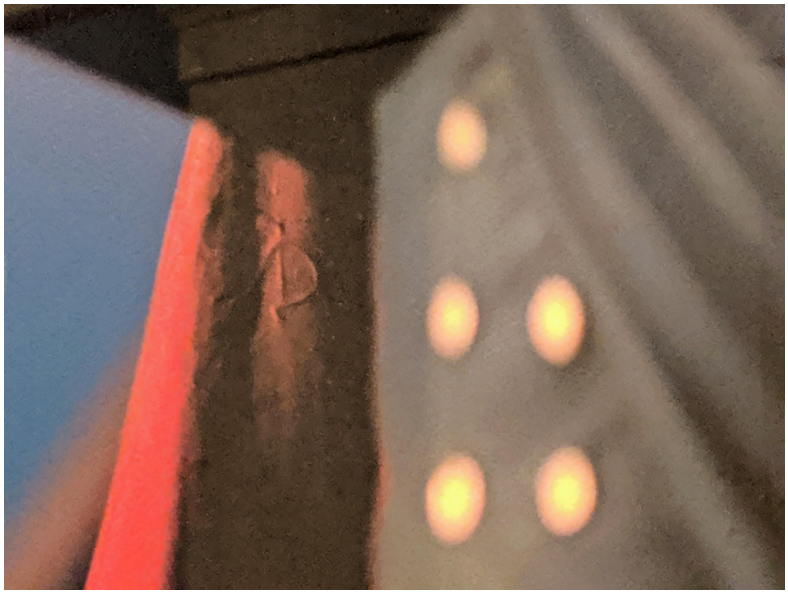

Figure 2. Detail from David Levinthal (b. 1949, American), *Washington Crossing the Delaware* from the series "History," 2013, inkjet print, 61 x 79 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., image courtesy the author

In this exhibition, Marsh succeeds in locating both conceptual continuity and formal contrast in the artist's oeuvre. When Polaroid ceased to produce instant film in 2008, Levinthal transitioned from instant to digital photography, creating a formal rupture of medium. Still, his conceptual vision has remained remarkably consistent over time. This is particularly apparent in the photographer's insistence on inserting himself into his images. In digital prints from the "History" series (2010–18), Levinthal is present not only behind the camera, but also within the frame. In *Dallas 1963* (2013), the photographer appears twice, both as an outsize figure in the green background and as a reflection in the toy car's front hubcap (fig. 1). In *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (2013), Levinthal's first initial, a cursive "D," is unmistakable on George Washington's plastic cloak (fig. 2). The photographer's presence within the frame allows him to function like the toy figures themselves, both observing and performing in the narrative. By juxtaposing these later works with the artist's early Polaroids in which rückenfigur dolls contemplate their surroundings while still performing within them, curator Joanna Marsh skillfully reveals a theme that runs throughout Levinthal's work. The pairing suggests the toys and their nuanced interaction with image-making serve as stand-ins for the artist (fig. 3).

[2] David Levinthal, "Exhibitions," accessed November 11, 2019, http://davidlevinthal.com/exhibitions/.

ISSN 2378-6159
Volume 6, Issue 1 (Fall 2019)
www.bu.edu/sequitur

Figure 3. Installation view of *American Myth & Memory: David Levinthal Photographs*, 2019, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., image courtesy the author

Despite this curatorial coup, the signage framing the seventy-four Levinthal photographs on display invites visitors to do what the show itself ultimately does not (fig. 4): disentangle memory from myth, truth from legend, and fact from fiction. *American Myth & Memory* claims to dismantle inaccurate and distorted national myths by closely examining them, blown up by many times their typical size. Instead, the exhibition perpetuates the accretion of myth about the American West at SAAM. Hegemonic visions of the West hang throughout the institution: George Catlin's portraits of Native Americans, numbered as if specimens; Thomas Moran's sublime western landscapes, asserted in luminous oils and devoid of indigenous inhabitants; Levinthal's Hollywood-inspired cowboys, all white. These imperial visions act as "cultural filters," images that shape perception.[3] Rather than successfully pointing out these filters, David Levinthal's vision of the American West at SAAM perpetuates the image of "a West that never was" (fig. 5), ensuring that it "always will be."[4]

[3] Anne F. Hyde, "Cultural Filters: The Significance of Perception in the History of the American West," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, no. 3 (1993): 351–74.
[4] David Levinthal, "Conversation with Artist David Levinthal," interview by Joanna Marsh, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., June 7, 2019.

ISSN 2378-6159
Volume 6, Issue 1 (Fall 2019)
www.bu.edu/sequitur

Figure 4. Installation view of *American Myth and Memory: David Levinthal Photographs*, 2019, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., image courtesy the author

Figure 5. Film still from *American Myth & Memory: David Levinthal Photographs*, 2019, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., image courtesy the author

Kimberly Windham is a Ph.D. student of American cultural history at Florida State University. Trained as a visual-arts librarian, she is the former head of the Florida A&M University Architecture Library and past president of the Art Libraries Society, Southeast Chapter. Her research for this article was supported by a fellowship from the Library of Congress.