“Toys are not benign objects but representations of the culture from which they came.”

—David Levinthal

David Levinthal creates photographs that probe the recesses of American memory and imagination. Born in 1949 and raised in Northern California, Levinthal spent his childhood engaging with classic American myths and legends through televised Westerns and plastic playthings. He never strayed far from these formative influences, dedicating his forty-year career to photographing toys in constructed scenarios. Populated with cowboys and cavalry, Barbie dolls and baseball figurines, his photographs project the illusion of innocence. But look closer. The toys are stand-ins for society—for the stories we tell and the values we hold that shape our cultural myths.

This exhibition highlights six of Levinthal’s most well-known bodies of work selected from more than four hundred of the artist’s photographs recently donated to the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The featured series—Modern Romance, American Beauties, Barbie, Wild West, Baseball, and History—reveal the evolution of Levinthal’s work and his signature approach to color photography. His images explore the cultural prominence of these quintessential American subjects and mass media’s role in mythologizing them. Through his lens, Levinthal hints at the fallibility of collective memory and the deceptive myths it can engender, prompting us to consider the societal ideals and stereotypes lurking beneath our most familiar cultural touchstones.

The curator for this exhibition is Joanna Marsh, Deputy Education Chair and Head of Interpretation and Audience Research at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Tune in to a playlist inspired by the exhibition. Scan the QR code or search “David Levinthal Myth & Memory” in Spotify to listen.
History

From the beginning of his career, Levinthal has interrogated the relationship between history and myth. His most recent body of work, *History*, explores how popular culture influences the myths surrounding seminal moments in American life. The photographs reference events that span from the nation’s founding through the Vietnam War, but are not preoccupied with facts or fidelity. Instead, the way figures are arranged and captured in these instantly recognizable scenes echoes mass media’s endless recycling of imagery and reminds us that what we know of the recent and distant past is largely received secondhand from film, television, photojournalism, advertising, and even works of art. For Levinthal, history is the version of events that we come to understand and internalize as fact based on the influence of time, distance, memory, and popular media.

*Washington Crossing the Delaware*, from the series *History*  
2013  
archival pigment print  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Donald Standford Rosenfeld Jr. 2017.41.9

One of the most repeated stories about the nation’s first president is his famous Delaware River crossing on December 25, 1776, during the Revolutionary War. As a general in the Continental army, George Washington led 2,400 soldiers across the river in the middle of the night during a severe snowstorm. Levinthal focuses on the toy figure of Washington standing tall and pointing decisively ahead, unimpeded by ice and wind. The artificiality of the figure is immediately apparent, underscoring the fiction that lies at the heart of how Americans visualize this historic event.

*Last Stand Hill*, from the series *History*  
2014  
archival pigment print  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Donald Standford Rosenfeld Jr. 2017.41.27

*Last Stand Hill* reimagines the infamous event also known as the Battle of the Little Bighorn, or Custer’s Last Stand. The conflict unfolded in south-central Montana from June 25 to 26, 1876, between the Seventh Regiment of the U.S. Calvary and warriors of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes. Despite their defeat, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his regiment quickly became heroic legends. Levinthal has referenced this decisive battle many times and many different ways over the years. This repetition gestures to the event’s cultural prominence and its multiple interpretations.
The legendary shootout at the O.K. Corral took place on October 26, 1881, in Tombstone, Arizona. A group of lawmen, including the Earp brothers—Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan—and Doc Holliday, faced off against an outlaw gang who called themselves the Cowboys. Even though the event lasted a mere thirty seconds and was a rare occurrence in the West, it continues to resonate in popular imagination, inspiring countless cinematic treatments and daily reenactments in Tombstone. Levinthal’s own restaging calls attention to the mythic status of the historic gunfight, which came to epitomize the “wildness” of the Old West.

Rough Riders was the nickname given to a unit of cavalry volunteers recruited by Colonel Theodore Roosevelt in 1898 to fight in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Comprising a diverse group of Western riflemen, Ivy League athletes, Texas Rangers, and Native Americans, they became instantly famous—symbols of a new American masculine ideal rooted in the West. Roosevelt cultivated this image through written accounts of the group’s triumphs and defeats, which helped to enhance his own carefully crafted personal mythology. Although not represented in Levinthal’s photograph, Roosevelt became synonymous with the Rough Riders and celebrated as the ultimate cowboy-soldier-statesman icon.

The term “no man’s land” refers to the space between the trenches of opposing armies. During
World War I, it was a place of death and desolation where millions of combatants lost their lives. The photograph illustrates one figure carrying another across a landscape strewn with barbed wire and debris. Levinthal’s scene is a poignant reminder of the men and myths that died amid these wastelands. The unprecedented carnage of the Great War destroyed notions of military glory and noble sacrifice long associated with war, exposing instead its brutal reality.

*Iwo Jima*, from the series *History*
2013
archival pigment print
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Donald Standford Rosenfeld Jr. 2017.41.12

Levinthal’s photograph restages an iconic moment captured by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal toward the end of World War II. The original Pulitzer Prize–winning image shows six American Marines from behind raising a flag on Mount Suribachi after taking control of the Japanese territory during the battle of Iwo Jima. In Levinthal’s version, six toy soldiers face the viewer and raise a tattered American flag. By reversing the vantage point, Levinthal reminds us that history is constantly changing as new perspectives inform what we think we know about the past.

*Dallas 1963*, from the series *History*
2013
archival pigment print
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Donald Standford Rosenfeld Jr. 2017.41.13

*Dallas 1963* shows a model of President John F. Kennedy in a black Lincoln Continental moments before he was assassinated. The photograph is loosely based on Abraham Zapruder’s famous 8mm amateur film of the tragedy, but the orientation of the car and the figures is reversed. The First Lady and her pink hat, rather than the president, become the focus. Despite this and the blurring of the image, the subject is unmistakable. Its continual repetition in the media has embedded the scene in our collective psyche, reinforcing public fascination around the tragedy. Levinthal’s adaptation not only gestures at the actual event but also these countless restagings.
*Tall Grass*, from the series *History*
2011
archival pigment print
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Donald Standford Rosenfeld Jr. 2017.41.11

An infantry soldier crouches in the grass as the helicopter that delivered him retreats skyward. With this photograph, Levinthal creates a nonspecific yet familiar scene from the Vietnam War. At the time of the conflict, print and television media brought images like this into American living rooms and the collective consciousness of the nation.

*Helicopter*, from the series *History*
2014
archival pigment print
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Donald Standford Rosenfeld Jr. 2017.41.8

Levinthal began creating photographic references to the Vietnam War in 2010, spurred by the availability of a higher quality and number of toy replicas related to the conflict. *Helicopter* references the opening sequence from Francis Ford Coppola’s iconic 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, in which Huey helicopters fly in front of a massive napalm explosion. With just a few visual elements, Levinthal conjures a vivid and instantly recognizable picture of the Vietnam War.

“So much of what we see in pop culture about American history is told with the entertainment model of a heroic effort landing at a happy ending. Consequently, we’re programmed to subconsciously think that the winner in a historical conflict was the good guy. My job is to help show people that the real stories behind historical moments are often far more complex than a film or TV show can convey, and that every figure in history—indeed every human—is multi-layered, with good and bad traits, and that people of every kind have a part in our country’s story.”
—Holly Frey, Host/Executive Producer, *Stuff You Missed in History Class* podcast
Modern Romance

Levinthal’s *Modern Romance* series considers the media’s influence on ideas of intimacy and privacy. Inspired by Edward Hopper’s moody paintings of modern American life and the voyeuristic atmosphere of 1940s film noir, the photographs feature inch-high figures of men and women arranged in suggestive scenarios within shadowy sets. They hint at covert encounters and suspicious storylines that never fully divulge their secrets. Levinthal began the series using black-and-white film but quickly moved to a Polaroid SX-70 instant camera. For many of the SX-70 photographs, Levinthal pointed a video camera at his sets and then photographed the image that appeared on his television screen. The result—a grainy image reminiscent of closed-circuit surveillance footage—heightens the sense of illicit viewing and highlights the increasingly murky boundaries between public and private life.

“After the uplifting parables that Hollywood churned out during World War II, the postwar genre called ‘film noir’ validated a country’s creeping sense of alienation. Having witnessed firsthand the atrocities of war, veterans and civilians alike were drawn to noir’s cardinal themes of paranoia and pessimism—not as an empty stylistic stance, but as recognition of a hard-won existential truth. The genre’s detached anti-heroes and bleak environments offer psychic respite from American boosterism run amok, and remind audiences that, in victory or defeat, we never leave our shadows entirely behind.”
—Ann Hornaday, Chief Film Critic, *Washington Post*

American Beauties

Levinthal began the *American Beauties* series in 1989 after discovering a set of miniature pinup girls designed by legendary toymaker Louis Marx. The figurines boast voluptuous figures and strike classic poses derived from American film, advertising, and propaganda of the 1940s and 1950s. The Second World War was the pinnacle of the pinup—through photographs and pen-and-ink drawings, these idealized wartime women were presented as sensual without being salacious, as well as ultra-feminine, wholesome, and attainable. Levinthal captures these qualities, yet introduces an aura of unease and artifice that brings attention to the unrealistic ideals the toys embody. The inky blackness that looms behind each figure suggests the dangerous role that cultural symbols can play in shaping thought and behavior.

“Beauty has evolved so drastically over the years and I feel as though we have finally gotten to a place where diversity is becoming more and more visible. For so long beauty has had such a narrow definition, but as we have evolved as human beings, we are realizing that beauty is truly ubiquitous.
I have so graciously been given a platform to rise above what society has deemed beautiful for so many years. I am able to speak out and be a voice for a generation that has felt as though they were not seen.”
—Hunter McGrady, Model and Activist
The distinct look of the *American Beauties* series came about after a long day of shooting Western pictures at the 20x24 Polaroid Studio. Levinthal positioned a newly acquired pinup figure on a bed of sand leftover from his cowboy photos and removed the spray-painted *Wild West* background. He then photographed the solitary figure with dramatic lighting in a darkened studio. Levinthal loved the simplicity of the result and the sculptural quality of the tiny toys. The images are among the artist’s most evocative and enigmatic—nocturnal beach scenes where the world of childhood innocence intersects with the world of adult experience.

**Evolving Process**

**Formative Years**

Levinthal’s childhood mementos and memories played a central role in his artistic development. In 1972, while studying photography at Yale University’s School of Art, Levinthal returned to the subject of fascination and play from his childhood. After years of photographing landscapes and urban scenes, Levinthal's transition to shooting miniature objects inside the studio marked a major departure for the artist. His new process involved an extremely shallow depth of field, so that only a small area of the photograph was in focus. Now a signature technique for Levinthal, it not only blurs the image but also the distinction between reality and fiction.

Courtesy Levinthal Family, 1954

**Early Career**

Levinthal came of age as a photographer in the 1970s and early 1980s alongside a new generation of artists who viewed photography as a way to dissect media culture, rather than a medium for documenting modern life as their predecessors had done. These artists of the so-called “Pictures Generation,” such as Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and Sherrie Levine, sought to reveal the constructed nature of photography by exposing its artifice and questioning its authenticity. Levinthal achieved this by deftly transforming a classic snapshot camera (America’s favorite truth-telling tool) into an instrument for capturing make-believe worlds.
**Instant Originals**

Levinthal began experimenting with Polaroid technology in 1983 with the Polaroid SX-70 instant camera. The format allowed him to immediately review the print and adjust his models between each shot. The saturated colors and intimate size of the prints perfectly simulated the shadowy nocturnal world of film noir in his *Modern Romance* series. Levinthal also produced his first *Wild West* images using the handheld camera. In 1986, Polaroid invited Levinthal to experiment with their 20x24 camera—a five-foot-high machine on wheels that produced unique large-scale prints—which he would continue to use for the next twenty years, resulting in more than a dozen different bodies of work.

**Going Digital**

Polaroid ceased production of the instant film for its 20x24 camera in 2008, which signaled the end of an era for Levinthal. Spurred by the impending disappearance of his primary material, as well as new creative aspirations, Levinthal decided to go digital. At the time, he was working on a series about the war in Iraq and needed a medium that would more closely reflect the media coverage of the conflict. In contrast to the cumbersome 20x24 camera, digital equipment allows Levinthal to capture more detail and many different angles, and print his images on a much larger scale, as evident in the *History* series.

**Barbie**

For sixty years, Barbie has been a source of fun for millions of children, as well as a muse for artists, a metaphor for writers, and a subject of commentary for scholars. Levinthal embarked on a series depicting Barbie in fashions from the 1960s after he was asked to contribute to a book commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the famous doll. Using simple sets and punchy background colors, Levinthal simulated the look of fashion photography and advertising from the era. It was unlike any photo shoot the artist had done before or has undertaken since. Levinthal realized immediately that Barbie was too big, literally and figuratively, to obscure her identity with his signature blurring technique. Instead, he captured Barbie in sharp focus, amplifying the details that contribute to both her cult status and critical reception.

“I believe Barbie has had a lasting history because she has evolved to include all girls and women of every color and size. Her style has been quite iconic as well. It’s as though Barbie walked through every aspect of the female experience and challenged herself to reflect her multifaceted cultural journey. It’s so amazing to be a part of the Barbie experience. To see Gabby Barbie take her place alongside so many others in the Barbie family is quite humbling. I have looked up to many of these inspirational figures, and I continue to be inspired by the accomplishments of all trailblazers!”

—Gabby Douglas, Olympic Gold Medalist
Ruth and Elliot Handler, the founders of Mattel, introduced Barbie to the American public in 1959. Designed to resemble postwar ideals of feminine beauty and echo middle-class American values, Barbie looked like a glamorous and *mature* girl next door. Her early outfits reflected the cultural expectations and aspirations of her consumers—from tennis and ballet skirts to senior prom and wedding gowns. In an effort to further conform to social conventions of the day, Mattel introduced Barbie’s boyfriend, Ken, in 1961. Levinthal’s photograph of the couple underscores the idea of Ken as an obligatory accessory, born of an era when women were still largely supported by men.

The “Slumber Party” Barbie represented here is a far cry from the astronauts and Olympians offered to consumers today. In 1965, Barbie’s sleepover ensemble came with a scale (not pictured) and a book titled *How to Lose Weight*. Amid the rise of the women’s liberation movement in the mid-1960s, Barbie’s body-conscious accessories cast her as a conservative icon of prescribed gender roles. Despite Barbie’s transformation in subsequent decades, the doll continues to be a flashpoint for debates about female body image.
The *Barbie* series is an outlier for Levinthal in many ways. He doesn’t own any of the dolls that appear in the photographs, even though he is an avid toy collector. Instead, he borrowed vintage Barbies from a private collector, who hired a costume designer to dress and style the dolls for the photo shoot. While Levinthal directed the studio session, he never handled the valuable dolls. And when it came to photographing them, Levinthal deviated from his signature blurring technique and captured the dolls in sharp focus. The artist likened his role to that of a fashion photographer working with the world’s most cooperative models.

### Baseball

Baseball has long been intertwined with myth, beginning with its fabled origin story of Civil War general Abner Doubleday inventing the game in Cooperstown, New York. It is a game of statistics—neatly symbolized by the box score—but also a game of memory and emotion that grows grander and less tangible with time. For many, the historical fictions that surround the sport become as real as the pitcher’s mound. Levinthal’s *Baseball* series embraces this blurring of fact and fiction by depicting legends of the game—the players and the plays—with minimal detail and definition. Using shadow play and selective focus, Levinthal gives just enough information to identify his subjects but leaves us to complete the story. In doing so, Levinthal invites nostalgic reveries perhaps as hazy as the photographs themselves.

Lou Gehrig, a first baseman for the New York Yankees, played from 1923 until 1939. Referred to as the “Iron Horse,” Gehrig was renowned for his endurance. However, his career was cut
short due to complications from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). The disease ended Gehrig’s record-setting playing streak of 2,130 consecutive games and claimed his life at age thirty-seven. Levinthal photographed the figurine in profile without any distinguishing characteristic other than the number “4.” It was the first uniform number that a baseball team retired to honor a former player.

*Untitled, from the series Baseball*
2004
Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor 2017.32.49

Jackie Robinson broke baseball’s color barrier when he became the first African American player in the major leagues. Prior to Robinson’s debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, professional baseball relegated black players to the Negro Leagues. The photograph reenacts an iconic moment from game one of the 1955 World Series, featuring the Dodgers and the New York Yankees. Levinthal depicts Robinson stealing home plate as he slides safely under catcher Yogi Berra’s tag. Robinson’s Dodgers went on to win the series in seven games, finally vanquishing their crosstown rival.

*Untitled, from the series Baseball*
2004
Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor 2017.32.52

Many believe Henry “Hank” Aaron to be the greatest home run hitter in baseball. His chase to beat Babe Ruth’s career home run record in the early 1970s became legendary. Leading up to it, Aaron endured years of death threats and hate mail from baseball fans who did not want to see a black man compete with a white man’s legacy. Despite the danger to himself and his family, Aaron “kept on swinging,” finally hitting his record-breaking 715th home run on April 8, 1974, while playing for the Atlanta Braves. Levinthal appears to restage the moment right after Aaron makes contact with the ball, on his way to making history.
The power-hitting third baseman Eddie Mathews is best remembered for his years playing with the Braves during the 1950s and 1960s in Boston, Milwaukee, and Atlanta. No other player represented the team in all three of its home cities. In 1954, Mathews appeared on the cover of the first issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Mathews and fellow Braves Hall of Famer Hank Aaron hit the most combined home runs of any teammates in baseball history, surpassing Yankees duo Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig.

A figure of national fascination, Joe DiMaggio cultivated a reputation that extended beyond his success in baseball. His marriages to Hollywood stars Dorothy Arnold and Marilyn Monroe contributed to the idolization of this Yankee great. Levinthal’s photograph appears to show a DiMaggio figurine completing a swing of the bat. DiMaggio was a legendary hitter; in 1941, he completed a fifty-six-game hitting streak, setting a record that many believe will never be broken.

“Baseball has always been connected to our own memories and moments of nostalgia. The stories of the players on the field seem to connect and weave into our own lives. My dad told me stories of Mickey Mantle and Sandy Koufax when I was a kid, and I remember feeling like they were somehow connected to me as I grew up and played the game. My swing, my smile, my love for the game came from them.”

—Jessica Mendoza, Olympic Gold Medalist and First Female Full-Time MLB Analyst
Known for his fastball, pitcher Leroy Robert “Satchel” Paige was a force in the Negro Leagues for more than twenty years. Levinthal’s photograph shows the figure in a Kansas City Monarchs uniform, which was Paige’s last team before the integration of modern era baseball. Paige’s major league debut came in 1948 at age forty-two with the Cleveland Indians. That season, he became the first player from the Negro Leagues to pitch in a World Series.

Levinthal captures the likeness of a young Willie Mays in a New York Giants uniform looking over his right shoulder after making a hit, following the flight path of the ball. It may reference the 1954 season when the Giants swept the World Series, which was the center fielder’s only championship season.

Levinthal’s photograph depicts the figure of Roberto Clemente, who was the first Latin American and Caribbean player to be enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Beloved not only
as a superb outfielder but also for his philanthropy and charitable work, Clemente died in a plane crash while traveling to Nicaragua to deliver aid to earthquake victims in 1972.

Untitled, from the series Baseball
2004
Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor 2017.32.42

Levinthal depicts Rickey Henderson, known as the “Man of Steal” and considered the greatest baserunner and leadoff hitter of all time. Henderson, who played throughout the 1980s and 1990s, still holds the records for most stolen bases in a season and in a career. The image represents the legendary figure playing for the Oakland Athletics, poised to bolt down the basepath.

Untitled, from the series Baseball
2004
Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor 2017.32.39

George Herman “Babe” Ruth Jr. is perhaps the most well-known and mythologized player in baseball history. The New York Yankee’s famous “called shot,” evoked in this photograph, was made during game three of the 1932 World Series in Chicago against the Cubs. In the fifth inning, facing insults from opposing players and fans, Ruth appeared to gesture in the direction of center field before launching a deep home run over that fence. Levinthal commissioned a set designer to create the diorama of the infield for this and other Baseball pictures. It was the first time Levinthal had a set specifically created for a project.

Wild West

Levinthal’s Wild West series explores the powerful appeal of the American West and its place in contemporary culture. The artist attributes the persistence of this imagery in his own work to the impression that Westerns made on him in the 1950s and 1960s. While Hollywood didn’t invent
the myth of the West, its highly romanticized narratives helped to crystallize the characters and
tropes and cement them in popular imagination. *Wild West* taps into the familiarity of these
frontier fictions, showing cowboys, Indians, gunfighters, lawmen, and women in classic poses
and scenarios. Although Levinthal hides the toy-ness of his subjects—burying their bases in turf
and blurring their forms—the illusion is never quite complete. Levinthal invites us to recognize
the layers of artificiality within his images, from the toys themselves to the mythical “types” they
represent. As Levinthal describes, this is “a West that never was but always will be.”

“I can vouch that you have to be tough to be a good cowboy. I think cowboys and the settling of
the West still represent to people toughness, resilience, individualism, hard work and honesty. I
know that the cowboy code has been my guiding light for my entire life.”
—Ty Murray, Nine-Time World Champion Cowboy, Hall of Famer, and Professional Bull
Riders (PBR) cofounder

*Untitled*, from the series *Wild West*
1989
Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor 2018.3.190

The myth of the American cowboy is as pervasive and popular as the myth of the Wild West,
and both are an integral part of American identity. The cowboy of legend wandered the open
range with nothing other than a loyal steed and a sidearm. He was honest, brave, self-made, and
self-reliant. As such, he became a symbol of core American values. The invention of the cowboy
hero emerged as the Western frontier was still being settled. One hundred and fifty years later, he
exists in American culture much like in Levinthal’s photographs—a carefully constructed
fictional figure who is often mistaken as real.

*Untitled*, from the series *Wild West*
1994
Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor 2018.3.194
Levinthal began the *Wild West* series with the Polaroid SX-70 camera. The small-scale photos, on view in the adjacent gallery, won Levinthal an invitation to work on a larger scale with Polaroid’s 20x24 camera. The subsequent success of the *Wild West* series brought his work to the attention of Absolut Vodka, which commissioned a photograph for their popular advertising campaign. During this process, Levinthal discovered a new method for making his backgrounds, which were previously spray paint on foam core. The technique, which Levinthal uses today, involves spray-painting translucent vellum sheets and illuminating them from behind.

![Image](image.png)

*Untitled*, from the series *Wild West*
1988
Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor 2018.3.178

This portrait of a solitary female figure holding an infant is one of just a few images in the *Wild West* series that represents frontier women. In contrast to the roaming cowboy, Hollywood’s archetypal Western woman never strayed far from home. Classic films portray her as Levinthal does here, fenced off from the frontier and attending to domestic life. Yet Levinthal places the bonneted figure at the center of his photograph, reminding us that women played an essential role in the real settling of the West.

**Wagon Train**

The *Wagon Train* series represents another significant evolution in Levinthal’s artistic process. He developed his signature style in the early 1970s by photographing toys as loose figures within his own sets, adjusting the objects and their surroundings between shots. More recently, he has used pre-built dioramas—some found, others commissioned—as a different approach for capturing these narratives. Levinthal had the *Wagon Train* diorama here built in 2018. It represents the largest and most detailed diorama he has ever photographed. The resulting images on view illustrate the many different compositions Levinthal was able to construct from this one diorama. While both techniques offer a seemingly endless number of shots, Levinthal vows he will never abandon working with loose figures and his improvised sets for the flexibility they provide.
All photographs *Untitled*, from the series *Wagon Train*
2018
archival pigment prints
Donald Standford Rosenfeld Jr. Collection

**Diorama**

**Developing Perspective**

Walk around the entire diorama, then step a few feet back. How does the model change as you consider it from different angles and distances?

![Diorama Image](image)

Courtesy Ryan Oskin, 2018, David Levinthal Studio

In the artist’s words: “I find objects and I try and animate them . . . and breathe life into them, so that when you look at the photographs the last thing you think of is that they’re toys.”

![Diorama Image](image)

Courtesy Ryan Oskin, 2018, David Levinthal Studio

Take a look at David Levinthal’s *Wagon Train* series (the photographs are adjacent to this diorama). Can you figure out where Levinthal might have set up his camera to create these images?

![Diorama Image](image)

Imagine what stories you could tell using this diorama. Can you find a unique angle or interesting perspective to take your own Levinthal-style photograph?

Share your image with us on social media by tagging #LevinthalSAAM
Investigating Perspective

The Wagon Train diorama is full of small, lively tableaus. Some are easy to spot, while others are hidden.

Can you find the mother and child in the back of a wagon?

There are many different animals traveling with the wagon train. How many horses can you count? How many dogs?

Which scene within the diorama interests you most? Imagine yourself as a character in that scene.

What is going on around you? Think about how it feels to enter that moment.

What is missing from this diorama?

Western wagon trains traveled through American Indian tribal lands. What does the absence of American Indians in this diorama tell you about the way this period of American history is remembered?


How is the myth of the West understood in American media and popular culture?

Movies, TV shows, books, and even video games help us imagine the experience of traveling on a wagon train.

The Oregon Trail, a computer game created in the 1970s that is still popular today, allows players to assume the role of a pioneer and explore the fictions of the frontier.