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Timothy Haerens

California State University - San Bernardino

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Put Another Ken on the Barbie

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For over forty years, photographer David Laundy has expressed his passion for his craft by photographing toys staged in different scenarios. Before embarking on this journey, Laundy thoroughly prepared himself in order to become fully immersed in this genre of art. He earned his Master of Fine Arts Degree in Photography from Yale University in 1973 where he was fortunate to study under and befriend the famous American photographer Walker Evans.¹ Interestingly, the photographic approach he initiated in graduate school established a process that continues to motivate and inspire him to this day.

Laundy created the *Bad Barbie* series of photographs in 1972, while he was still in graduate school. It was during this time when he decided that the Barbie doll, as a symbol of the contemporary American woman, should be set free and recognized as being a sexually liberated figure, an agent who modeled what was happening in the United States during the 1960s-70s – the sexual revolution. Surprisingly, the *Bad Barbie* series of photographs stayed hidden from the public's eye for nearly forty years, until October of 2009 when they were displayed in an exhibition at John McWhinnie @ Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, a rare-book shop and gallery in Manhattan, along with the *Bad Barbie* exhibition catalogue. Laundy writes, "for almost 30 years these photographs have remained virtually unseen outside of the graduate school darkroom. Now . . . people will get to see for the first time a main antecedent to my career as an artist."²

When Laundy created this work, the influence of pop art dominated the American art scene, celebrating popular culture and acknowledging its relevance as an established reality. *Bad Barbie* was a sign of the time, a manifestation of the lifestyle of sexual equality embraced by a significant number of women. Since Barbie reflected and continues to reflect mass culture, I contend that she is not the subject of Laundy's photographs. Because she is a reflection, the subject of the *Bad Barbie* series is the viewer. Not only does Barbie represent popular culture but she also connects us to our own psychological reactions and responses when we view Laundy's work.

In this photographic series, Laundy arranged Barbie, Ken and G.I. Joe dolls in positions that simulated various sexual encounters. He used iconic toys to portray intimate human activity and produced photographs that were designed to arouse a response in the viewer. Looking at this sequence of images affected my strong reaction and fueled my eagerness to learn more about the artist and this psychologically challenging artwork. This prompted me to begin my research intending to determine the reasons why I felt an adverse reaction while viewing the *Bad Barbie* photographs. In the process I uncovered that Laundy's treatment of the Barbie doll reveals how we can "subjectify an object" – conceptually turning the object of Barbie into a human subject – and then sexually objectify this subjectified object, causing us to dehumanize what is

not human. Barbie assumes human form and then is stripped of her human characteristics and qualities through sexual objectification.

His decision to produce the photographs in black and white and sepia prints generates a seamy atmosphere. These visual elements intensify the sordid undercurrent that persists throughout the series. Levinthal describes the frame of reference for his creation as follows:

The context for the work was a confluence of ideas and influences. Having grown up in the 50's, I had memories of magazines like *Police Gazette*, which often featured pictures of risqué women with black bars over their eyes and lurid headlines. The late 60's and early 70's had brought into the open ideas of both sexual and racial equality. With this series I was trying to combine all of these ideas, and present them through the use of toys.

The toys that I chose were ones that already had a significant social context. Both Barbie and GI Joe were extremely popular and represented a form of socialization for young girls and boys. GI Joe was essentially a doll for boys, but because boys weren't supposed to play with dolls he was dubbed an 'action figure'. By choosing a black GI Joe I was able to push the social envelope even further.³

Barbara Millicent Roberts was only thirteen years old when Levinthal photographed her with Ken Carson and G.I. Joe Colton. Today, given her status as an American icon, Barbie continues to reflect popular culture and Levinthal's series of photographs documents the impact she has had on the American public and a countless number of people worldwide. At age fifty-five, she remains loved and idolized by some and, at the same time, hated and despised by others.

Few can argue with the success that Barbie has enjoyed since her introduction in 1959. According to Mattel, "the average American girl between the ages of three and eleven owns ten BARBIE dolls and the doll is currently sold in more than 150 countries around the world (Mattel 2001)...Two new dolls are bought every second and [as of 2001] over 700 million Barbie dolls have now been sold worldwide."⁴ As a matter of interest, one of my colleagues, Patricia Zambrano, shared with me that her grandmother who lives in Mexico owns a collection of five thousand (5,000) Barbie dolls. Ruth Handler, wife of Mattel co-founder Elliot Handler, conceived the idea of creating a doll that could be a three-dimensional version of the fashion-changing paper dolls, which were popular with little girls during that time.⁵ Fortunately, Barbie proved to be an instant success and transformed from doll to idol almost immediately while achieving cult status in the process. She has become a representation of the ideal, prompting both positive and negative attributes to be attached to her persona. For example, Dr. Mebbie Bell, professor of Women's Studies reports, "Barbie has become a cultural icon of heterosexual femininity."⁶ She symbolizes both physical and social perfection based on sociocultural ideals. She is a role model – admired by young girls and imitated by adult women attempting to emulate her face and figure. At the same time, she is disliked by what Bell identifies as "feminists and child educators for being a tool of racism,

classism, and sexism, and disparaged as a contemporary epitomization of the cult of thinness. Ultimately all stereotypes of women are legitimated in the body of Barbie.”⁷

Additionally, as a prime example of physical perfection and beauty, Barbie functions as the ultimate desire of heterosexual males. Surprisingly, Barbie seems to vacillate between being unreal (a doll), to being “tangibly” real (something that can be physically held or imagined), to being hyperreal (hyper-feminine – more female than any female). Hande Bilsel Engin refers to the “Barbie ideal . . . [as being] the casual relation between the popularity of Barbie and the continuing value emphasized on white, skinny, voluptuous, blue-eyed, blond females.”⁸ Not only do men want her, women want to be her. Along with her flawless physicality, Barbie has everything: homes, automobiles, adult toys, and a limitless wardrobe with infinite accessories. She does anything she wants to do. Her résumé boasts of over one hundred thirty careers: including schoolteacher, nurse, veterinarian, astronaut, CEO, and she was the first female candidate for the presidency of the United States. The woman, whom Barbie represents, doesn’t exist and that’s why she is personified, which is what I mean by “treating an object as a subject.” Bell contends that Barbie is idealized because she is not real and that with the notion of an ideal comes the awareness of the unattainable. Understanding many of the complexities that encompass Barbie’s impact and influence on our culture is critical in helping to define the “subject” in Levinthal’s *Bad Barbie* series. Through the process of subjectification, I recognize Martin Heidegger’s theory about creating a thing out of a thing as Levinthal subjectifies an object in his photographs. Heidegger believes that art reveals something other than itself. The physical subject of the art is, in reality, a symbol of something it represents. In this case we see Mattel’s Barbie, and like Heidegger suggests, we judge, react, respond, and create our own story – the thing out of a thing.⁹

When a viewer is confronted with Levinthal’s *Bad Barbie*, he or she is challenged to face the persona created by Mattel and supported by her fans for over fifty years. Although heterosexual males may see Barbie as an object of desire and females may want to emulate her physicality, she continues to be a little girl’s toy. However, since Levinthal reveals both a subjectified and sexually objectified Barbie, as a viewer, we react according to how we have been conditioned to see her. The photographs disturb our perception and any preconceived notions or ideas we have developed about Barbie over the years. When we witness her appearing to engage in some kind of sexual activity, it prompts us to wrestle with the image of Barbie as the hyperreal, hyper-feminine woman [subject] – versus Barbie who is the doll [object]. Much like watching a celebrity fall from grace, we realize that she’s only human. But Barbie isn’t human, is she? According to Trinna S. Frever, “the doll is, in its most literal sense, a representation of humanness made miniature...The uneasy tension between living adult female, actual doll as cultural artifact, and the woman-as-doll image replicated in a host of cultural texts sets up the doll as a site for gender representation controlled by forces other than the living woman herself.”¹⁰ I maintain that our experience of viewing Levinthal’s photographs makes it difficult for us to see Barbie as anything other than a

sexually objectified figure. This is exacerbated by the amount of credibility that we give to photography.

According to author, educator, and artist Terry Barrett, “People believe photographs . . . with or without justification. That is, when viewing photographs people generally tend to grant to photographs more credence than they would to paintings, drawings, prints, or sculptures. In experiencing photographs, viewers blur distinctions between subject matter and pictures of subject matter and tend to accept photographs as reality recorded by a machine.”¹¹ This phenomenon contributes greatly to the viewer’s tendency to dehumanize, or deprive of positive human qualities, sexually objectified women. Jeroen Vaes, Paola Paladino and Elisa Puvia conducted three test studies where both men and women participants were presented with photos of both sexually objectified and non-objectified male and female models. The following is their conclusion:

Overall, the present set of studies shows that only sexually objectified women are dehumanized by both men and women but for different reasons. Whereas sexual attraction shifts a men’s focus of a female target away from her personality onto her body triggering a dehumanization process, women are more inclined to dehumanize their sexually objectified counterparts the more they distance themselves from these sexualized representations of their gender category.¹²

Because Barbie has been sexually objectified in Levinthal’s photographs, I am convinced that both the males and females who view *Bad Barbie* will dehumanize her for the reasons ascertained in these studies. How can a non-human be dehumanized? I would argue that she would be judged according to human standards because she is hyperreal and hyper-feminine. In essence, Levinthal’s photographs trigger different psychological responses in men and women, yet they yield the same reaction – dehumanization.

The effect that the Barbie doll seems to have had on our culture and, most especially, the women in our culture is eye-opening. This includes not only physical ideals but also the appearance and representation of genitals. Vanessa Schick, Sarah Calabrese, and Brandi Rima conducted research analysis based upon images of nude women taken from *Playboy Magazine* that were used to determine mainstream media’s ideals concerning female genital appearance. They selected *Playboy Magazine* because of its popularity as a “sexually explicit magazine that targets a heterosexual male audience. Overall, the results of their findings suggest the perpetuation of a ‘Barbie Doll’ ideal characterized by a low BMI, narrow hips, a prominent bust, and hairless, undefined genitalia resembling those of a prepubescent female.”¹³ The idealized unnatural physical and genital appearance has become the standard by which models measure themselves and are, therefore, measured by others. Consequently, the absence of distinctive genitalia in Levinthal’s *Bad Barbie* series fails to discredit her sexually liberated persona, thereby prompting us to subjectify an object, sexually objectify this subjectified object, and dehumanize what is not human. Through the process of

experiencing the impact of mass culture being reflected through the *Bad Barbie* series of photographs, we discover that the viewers become the subject of Levinthal's art.

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