

Sidedoor Season 4, Episode 6: Memory, Myths and Miniatures

[Intro Music]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: One recent morning, I popped into the Smithsonian American Art Museum before it opened to see a photography exhibition titled, "American Myth and Memory."

[STREET NOISES]

Lizzie Peabody: We are walking up the sidewalk, approaching a sculpture of a cowboy on a bucking Bronco. Somehow that must be some foreshadowing of some kind.

Lizzie Peabody: We were guided by curator Joanna Marsh.

Joanna Marsh: Joanna.

Justin O'Neill: Joanna.

Joanna Marsh: Nice to meet you.

Justin O'Neill: Nice to meet you.

Lizzie Peabody: Hi! I'm Lizzie. Good to meet you.

Lizzie Peabody: The expansive exhibition features 74 photographs from contemporary artist David Levinthal's career. The collected photos show exactly what the exhibition's title promises, iconic images like Jackie Robinson stealing home plate in baseball's 1955 World Series...

[OLD FASHIONED BASEBALL GAME MUSIC]

Voice of 1950s Baseball Game Announcer: The windup and here comes Robinson trying to steal home. He's safe says the ump!

[AUDIENCE CHEERS and APPLAUSE]

Voice of 1950s Baseball Game Announcer: He's out says Yogi Berra. And brother is Yogi hoppin!

[AUDIENCE CHEERS and APPLAUSE]

Lizzie Peabody: ...battle scenes from the Vietnam War...

[SOUNDS OF HELICOPTER BLADES ROTATING]

Lizzie Peabody: ...and 1950s pinup models posing on the beach.

[SOUNDS OF WAVES CRASHING ON THE BEACH]

Lizzie Peabody: And when I first entered the exhibition, one photo in particular caught my eye. It's about twice the size of a spiral notebook. And the scene tells a dramatic story; it's full of action. In the foreground, there are eight men facing off, guns drawn. One man staggers backward, as if he's just been shot. Another is propelled backward by the force of a gunshot, his hat flying off his head. In the background, the sky is dark with brown and black hues, as if there's a forest fire raging beyond the ridgeline.

Joanna Marsh: So, this is one of David Levinthal's photographs from a relatively new series called, "History." And in this image titled, "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral," we see just that, a reenactment of the infamous gun fight that happened in 1881 in Tombstone, Arizona. These three figures in black are the Earp brothers. So, Morgan, Virgil and Wyatt. And that's likely Doc Holliday.

Lizzie Peabody: Doc Holliday wears a trench coat, as he's shown in the 1993 movie "Tombstone."

Doc Holliday from the film, "Tombstone": I'm your Huckleberry.

Lizzie Peabody: And if you aren't familiar with the story behind, "Tombstone," here are the broad strokes. There was some bad blood between a U.S. Marshall named Wyatt Earp and an outlaw gang that operated near Tombstone, Arizona who named themselves very originally, "The Cowboys." Neither the Cowboys or the Earps had great conflict resolution skills. They ended up shooting at each other at the O.K. Corral. Three of the cowboys died. None of Earp's posse did. In addition to Tombstone, this story has been told in at least 18 other movies.

[GUNSHOT SOUND EFFECTS]

Lizzie Peabody: It's been recreated so many times that it's easy to forget that this is something that actually happened and not just some kind of fictionalized western fantasy.

Joanna Marsh: Well, it's, it's a little bit of both. Right? And that's what David Levinthal is really trying to get at in this "History" series. Like, how do we know what we know about history? Well, it's largely informed by mass media, popular culture...

Lizzie Peabody: Hmmm.

Joanna Marsh: ...movies, television, books, whatever. And so, he's asking us to question what we know and how we've gotten that information.

Lizzie Peabody: And Levinthal is doing all that with toys!

Joanna Marsh: Exactly.

[MUSIC]

Joanna Marsh: These aren't exactly the toys you'd hand to your three-year-old. These have been made by, you know, model makers, so they're meant to be as historically accurate, and I use that, um, with quotes around it, as possible.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, we take a fresh look at the stories we choose to tell about two iconic moments in American history with the help of David Levinthal and his toys.

[MUSIC]

David Levinthal: I'm just a tired old man who plays with toys. (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: David Levinthal is a New York-based artist and photographer. And when the people we want to interview aren't in DC, we usually connect with them by phone. But no way was I going to miss a chance to see David Levinthal's studio full of toys. So, Sidedoor Producer Justin O'Neill and I took the train up to New York to check it out and by the time we arrived, the anticipation of what might be inside was killing me!

[SOUNDS OF LARGE DOORS OPENING]

Lizzie Peabody: Holy moly! Wow! This is like a child's fantasy.

David Levinthal: Yes, many people have told me I'm a child who never grew up. Here you are!

Lizzie Peabody: This is so rarely the case, but the studio was exactly what I imagined. Floor-to-10ft-ceiling shelves crammed with miniature toys of all kinds. And behind the shelves, more shelves with boxes of toys. I started reading some of the labels.

David Levinthal: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: I'm seeing there's ancient Greece, temples and soldiers, storytown...

David Levinthal: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: ...dime store, nursery rhyme. (Laughs) Oh, painted tin figurines.

David Levinthal: Yep.

Lizzie Peabody: Can I touch this?

David Levinthal: Oh yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: It almost feels like it's ceramic.

David Levinthal: Yeah. Here, this is the stagecoach driver.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, ok.

David Levinthal: He's tied to a tree...

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, ok.

David Levinthal: ...with Indians throwing knives at him.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, that's exciting.

Lizzie Peabody: The figures in Levinthal's collection range from the green plastic army men you have to twist off the stem, if you've ever stepped on one, you know the toys I'm talking about; others are hand-made ceramic likenesses, showing recognizable historic figures. These are more likely to be on the shelf of a collector, than in the hands of a three-year-old, but at the end of the day, a toy is in the eye of the beholder.

Lizzie Peabody: Do you call these toys or figurines?

David Levinthal: Um, I call them figures.

Lizzie Peabody: Figures? Ok, got it.

David Levinthal: Yeah. I mean, I'm sure they're not embarrassed if I call them toys.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: But since I'd just visited Levinthal's exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum the day before, I wanted to see one scene in particular: 'The Shootout at the O.K. Corral.' I also want to add, if you want to see any of the images we mention in this episode, we've put a link in the description. Ok. So, to set the mood, Levinthal threw on some music from his favorite film version of the famous shootout, which is titled, hold on, you'll never guess this, "The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral," but it's the 1957 version, starring Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas, that Levinthal loved as a boy.

David Levinthal: Frankie Laine, "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral." Would you like to hear it? Here we go.

[MUSIC OF FRANKIE LAINE'S "GUNFIGHT AT THE O.K. CORRAL"]

Lizzie Peabody: Mood properly set, Levinthal began the search for the O.K. Corral diorama. And I want to add, Levinthal's organization system is a bit loose.

[MUSIC OF FRANKIE LAINE'S "GUNFIGHT AT THE O.K. CORRAL"]

David Levinthal: Yep. Alright. This requires a ladder. (ladder dragging sound)

Lizzie Peabody: This is a serious action scene.

(ladder dragging sound)

David Levinthal: Can I pass this down to you?

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: The diorama is bigger than your classic grade school shoebox project.

[SOUNDS OF BOXES BEING MOVED AROUND]

David Levinthal: Ok. You can just put it over on that big wooden table where the other things are. You saved me from back surgery.

Lizzie Peabody: (laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: It looks closer to a 10-gallon glass fish tank. It's what Levinthal calls a quote "museum quality" diorama, which means it's expensive. And seeing the diorama in person, I was struck by the level of detail that I hadn't noticed in the gallery photograph.

Lizzie Peabody: I love this man who's just been shot...

David Levinthal: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: ...and who's falling into the fence. And I was so impressed by how his hat is off...

David Levinthal: Right.

Lizzie Peabody: ...in the sense of motion that you evoke in the image, but I totally missed the fact that his boot is coming off.

David Levinthal: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: I didn't even see that.

David Levinthal: That's part of the figure, I mean, that's part of how they made the figure and if you buy him out of the box, he, you know, there's the fence and I think the barrel is there too. So, I mean, these are really finely sculpted and articulated and it's really amazing.

Lizzie Peabody: Levinthal has a lot of dioramas. Some he builds on his own, others he orders from professional artists. He'll often paint a backdrop for his images to give the scene more depth. Then, he shoots these miniature scenes from dozens of different angles. Back in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, curator Joanna Marsh explains that this is part of Levinthal's signature style.

[MUSIC]

Joanna Marsh: If you look at all of the photographs in this exhibition, you can likely identify one small area that's in focus and we call that selective focus, and the rest of the photograph is pretty clearly blurred out.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In one image, he might focus on just a gun; in the next, he might highlight the sand under a character's boot.

[MUSIC]

Joanna Marsh: And the reason for that is that Levinthal wants us to sort of complete the image ourselves with our own imagination. Um, so fill in the missing details as it were.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This selective focus tricks your brain into seeing not a little ceramic figure, but a person. Unless you're looking for it, it can be easy to miss at first.

Joanna Marsh: I think for a lot of our visitors, they don't immediately recognize that these are toys. And that's partially the point. He's not trying to trick us per se, but he wants to sort of suspend that realization just for a moment or two.

Lizzie Peabody: When we were talking with Levinthal about his dioramas, he said he isn't trying to pass his figures off as real, nor are the scenes necessarily historically accurate. For example, shootouts didn't happen as they were depicted. Instead of facing off in a public street...

David Levinthal: You'd wait in an alleyway until somebody walked along and then shoot him in the back because you had a really good chance of surviving that. (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: The gunfight at the O.K. Corral actually happened, but it didn't happen the way we remember it today. It passed through a barrier that stripped it of facts, out of the newspapers and the lived memory of the citizens of Tombstone, Arizona and into the national consciousness by the popular retellings of Levinthal's childhood.

David Levinthal: Many, many of my photographs are about a west that never was, but always will be. And um, you know, the stories about the O.K. Corral are much more interesting than, um, the facts...

Lizzie Peabody: The actual events, yeah.

David Levinthal: ...the actual first-person accounts. There were some sketches that were made somewhat contemporaneous to the event and it was very different, you know, it all took place in like this alleyway. There was no corral. You know, I remember reading in some of the 80s and 90s sort of, you know, telling the real story of the American West that's never, ever going to rise in the public consciousness.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

David Levinthal: It's so embedded.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

David Levinthal: And...

Lizzie Peabody: It's become the myth that is now fact.

David Levinthal: Exactly.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And in part, the differences between what actually happened at the O.K. Corral and what's shown in the movies are understandable. It's a lot easier to sell audiences on tales of good guys fighting bad guys, than a morally ambiguous story about one man shooting another man in the back. It's a better story. And it makes us feel better about the past.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But the problem with that type of narrative shift, nobody remembers the real version. It's almost as if the movie version erases the harder to understand reality that it's based on. And, in that way, American myths are born, but if you look hard enough, you can see the artifice beneath them. And that's what David Levinthal does. He shrinks the myth down to a manageable scale and lets us see it for what it is.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Coming up after a quick break, we look at another critical moment in American history that has taken on a life of its own, both through the media and in Levinthal's photography.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We're back and we're talking with photographer and artist David Levinthal, whose work is featured in an exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum titled, "American Myth & Memory." Much of Levinthal's work examines important historical moments that are regularly mined for their drama. Some of these dramatic renderings move the event further from the truth. As dramatic moments are shaped for the times, the truth is buried, and the myth is all that's left.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But there's a more recent moment of American history that David Levinthal photographed. It's hanging on the walls back in D.C. Here's curator Joanna Marsh again.

Joanna Marsh: We're looking at a very blurred photograph with a car, a black car in the foreground of the image, and several figures seated in the vehicle, and then a deep green background sort of receding behind them. And in the backseat of the car, you see one figure, um, very distinctively with a pink hat on and a pink jacket. And what we're looking at here is the Kennedy motorcade.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The image titled, "Dallas 1963," shows President John F. Kennedy in his car, moments before he was assassinated. But in this image, Levinthal's selective focus doesn't show much clearly. The car fills the bottom third of the frame. Its rear bumper isn't even in the picture. The only part of the image that's in focus is the front left corner of the car: the chrome hub cap and Kennedy's blue Presidential flag.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: What strikes me about this image is that there's so little about it that's specific, and yet it is completely and instantly recognizable.

Joanna Marsh: Absolutely.

Lizzie Peabody: There are no faces, there's no location. It's just some glints of chrome from the hubcaps and, and the side view mirror and a pink pillbox cap and you know, not only what it is, but also where and what's about to happen.

[MUSIC]

Joanna Marsh: Absolutely. I mean, the pink hat is really the giveaway in my mind and I think that's was David's intention. Um, it's immediately recognizable, but I think also fascinating the way he's treated the background. It's just an abstract sort of greenish background, but it immediately evokes the grassy knoll. So, what Levinthal is doing is making a statement about how we know and come to remember certain events. We may not have lived through the Kennedy era or witnessed his assassination. And yet we have seen so many depictions, reenactments, um, re-presentations of this historic event that we feel like we know it.

Lizzie Peabody: In his studio, Levinthal confirmed all of these interpretations. But when I asked him about his selective focus, he wanted to the model car from the picture.

David Levinthal: It's very frustrating when I can't find something and I know that it is here. Uhhh. Whoops. Oh. Phew.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, you found it!

David Levinthal: Yep.

Lizzie Peabody: Huh.

David Levinthal: Presidential vehicle series number one.

Lizzie Peabody: All right.

Lizzie Peabody: He holds up the four-inch-long model car, a four door Lincoln Continental convertible, with tiny figures of the President, his wife Jackie, and the other people who were in the car that day.

David Levinthal: I'm constantly amazed at some of the things that are made as toys are collectibles.

Lizzie Peabody: Beyond the amazement that someone made this model, Levinthal knew he'd have a major creative challenge in photographing the scene. For one, the heads of the figures in the car are the sizes of peas.

David Levinthal: You look at Kennedy and Connally, I mean their faces are so distorted.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

David Levinthal: The figures are, you know, what you'd expect from very small plastic figures.

Lizzie Peabody: Right, a little blurry.

David Levinthal: (laughing) You know, like, nobody looked like that.

Lizzie Peabody: Turns out, sometimes artistic decisions are just practical. Like the choice to shoot in a style that obscures the crudeness of a figure's face, but Levinthal also says that selective focus helps audiences relate to his art.

Lizzie Peabody: In a way, I think it taps into something in your work itself that we were talking about at the museum; how, in leaving the backgrounds blurry...

David Levinthal: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: ...and in this selective focus, it leaves us enough space to kind of empathize with or infuse your images with our own meanings...

David Levinthal: Right. Exactly.

Lizzie Peabody: ...our own connections.

David Levinthal: Exactly. I mean, one of my favorite quotes of myself is...

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs) That's my favorite quote of you!

David Levinthal: ...I can't remember where I first said this, but I told people there's less in my photographs than meets the eye. And what I meant was there's this sort of partial void that the viewer, based on their own experiences and their own library of images will fill in the details. It's almost in some ways like a Rorschach test. I mean, there's no right answer, but you know, you look at these things and then you kind of fill it in.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: By giving his audience an incomplete image, Levinthal leaves space for viewers to relate to that moment in history. Like many Americans, Levinthal remembers when President Kennedy was shot.

[MUSIC]

David Levinthal: I mean, that whole weekend, everybody was riveted to the TV. It was so surreal. The whole series of events was so transfixing.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It transfixed people because, it was totally shocking. The public and investigators dissected every frame of grainy 8-millimeter film footage of the Kennedy assassination to try to understand just what happened. There was no tidy explanation for how Kennedy was killed, but that didn't stop people from writing about it, filling in their own blanks where facts failed to provide a definite answer. Before long, there was a layer of myth already coating these disturbing events and it's that uncertainty, that fuzziness of facts that Levinthal's photos hint at.

David Levinthal: There was like a continuous stream of books that were published, you know, throughout the 60s. You know, Oliver Stone's, J.F.K came out. And so, it was kind of, you know, it was floating around there in your, in your mind.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: As we left Levinthal's studio, I thought it's ironic that he uses photography, which was first used, essentially, as a medium to show the world as it is, but Levinthal turns this concept upside down, and uses his cameras to show the world as it isn't. Here's curator Joanna Marsh again.

[MUSIC]

Joanna Marsh: So, the whole history of photography is that it started as a truth telling medium, as a documentary medium. There was an expectation with photography that there was a fidelity to real life. So, what you were seeing had actually happened. And throughout then, the history of photography, we see artists begin to manipulate that expectation. And David is playing with that right here, and in all of his images, right? He's presenting something to us that in our initial assessment looks quite real, but if you stay a little bit longer with it, you realize what you're seeing is in fact not real at all and is the artist's own interpretation of an event or, you know, a moment.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The exhibition title, "American Myth & Memory," perfectly describes the world Levinthal creates in his images. He shows the America of legend, popular stories that have been passed down for decades. And just like these stories, the figures he uses, at first glance, appear real. And that is the power of the myth.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to check out David Levinthal's exhibition, which you definitely should, titled, "American Myth & Memory," you can see it at the Smithsonian American Art Museum through October 14th, 2019.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We'll also include some images of his work, including the two we discussed today, in our Newsletter. And if you're curious to see Levinthal's studio and his many toys, we'll have photos of that as well. Check it out at si.edu/Sidedoor. That's si.edu/Sidedoor. And while you're at your keyboard, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts! Like this one from ChaosD, who writes, "This is such a light-hearted podcast. Great for washing dishes!" Let us know what you do while listening to Sidedoor! Laundry? Washing the dog? Gardening? We want to know.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Sidedoor is made possible with help from people like you! Your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Michelle Harven, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, and Lara Koch. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]