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Oral history interview with David Levinthal, 2021 October 4-5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with David Levinthal on October 4 and 5, 2021. The interview took place in Jersey City, New Jersey, and was conducted by Matthew Cronin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Erin Hudak, Levinthal's long-time assistant, was also present at the interview.

David Levinthal and Matthew Cronin have reviewed the transcript. transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[Tracks levin21_1of2_sd_track01, 02, and 03 are test tracks.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: This is Matthew Cronin, interviewing David Levinthal at the artist's studio in Jersey City, on October 4th [2021], for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one. Hi, David.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Hi, Matt.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Thank you so much for sitting with me today.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Oh, it's my pleasure.

MATTHEW CRONIN: I'm really excited to talk to you a lot about your life and your work. Could you start with some basic background information; when were you born and where, and—?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I was born March 8, 1949, in San Francisco, California. I grew up in the Bay Area. My residency in San Francisco, I think, was about five days. Partially—well, my mother's father was a radiologist in New York City, and he didn't believe that there were any good doctors in the Palo Alto area, so that I had to be born in San Francisco, and so I have no real memories of—of that period, but I do get to say that I was born in San Francisco. I grew up, as I say, in the South Bay area.

My father was a physicist and was a graduate student at Stanford after the war, at a time when what we now refer to as Silicon Valley was, kind of, forming. He was, you know, friends and classmates with people like David Packard and Bill Hewlett, so there was a lot of energy and excitement going on at the time. And, after graduate school, he and some other entrepreneurs started a company that was called Varian Associates headed by the two Varian brothers, and they became, sort of, a major firm in technology. They produced the klystron tube, which ended up being used in the linear accelerator. And my father worked there and then left to start his own company called Levinthal Electronics, so it was a very exciting time. And he then ended up being asked to come back to Stanford by Josh Lederberg, who was a Nobel laureate in genetics, and worked with Josh, who became one of his closest friends. And they were part of what was called exobiology, you know, sort of space biology, and my father was involved with the Viking mission to Mars and was in charge of some of the cameras on the lander. He worked very closely with Carl Sagan.

And so I grew up in an environment that was incredibly intellectually stimulating. I think I recall once, you know, my parents had like a bridge group, and there were a number of, you know, friends over, and mostly, I think almost exclusively, faculty members from Stanford. And I was counting the number of Nobel laureates who were there, and I believe I came up with six, but they were just friends. I mean, they were, you know, Arthur Kornberg and Felix Bloch, who my father had studied with and had gotten his PhD with, was a Nobel laureate in —in physics. And so, you know, I would sometimes hear stories about Los Alamos and the development of the atomic bomb and—because a number of them had been there. And so it was, as I say, a very, very stimulating environment, and never in my imagination did I think that I would end up becoming an artist.

MATTHEW CRONIN: It's—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I imagined that, you know, I might, like my parents and their friends, appreciate art and perhaps collect some art. But looking at my early stick-figure drawings, which continue to this day when I try and sketch out ideas, I don't think anybody would've made the leap to think that I would become an artist of any kind.

[00:05:20]

MATTHEW CRONIN: When did you first start developing that idea that you might want to be an artist? Was there something, younger in your life, that sort of started to hint at it in any way, at least to you?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: No, I mean, you know, certainly the appreciation for art. I mean, I remember, you know, my parents, we'd go up to San Francisco, and I remember seeing a Kandinsky exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which at the time was actually part of the Opera House building, and it was—I was always exposed to art. When I went to college, or in fact, you know, when I was in junior and senior year in high school, I was very, sort of, looking at the idea of becoming a lawyer, specifically a constitutional lawyer. You know, it was the '60s, there was a feeling that, you know, being a lawyer and doing this kind of work was important because there were important things going on and happening. It was a period when, you know, the civil rights workers were being killed in the South and so, you know, that was, kind of, my goal.

When I look back at my life, and this includes my, you know, current artistic endeavors, I find that sometimes coincidence or happenstance, or just fate, has played a role. The one example I often think of is when I was beginning my freshman year at Stanford; you know, there's like, you know, pre-reg week and everybody's running around, I guess, drinking and chasing members of the opposite sex, although in the '60s, it would've been men chasing women. And my father—because my parents were friends with the chairman of the political science department, I had thought the normal, sort of, route to being a lawyer was being a Poli Sci major, and then going to law school. My father arranged for me to have a meeting with him at his office, and I remember sitting there and talking to him, and his advice to me was, "Well, don't take the introductory political science class, you're far too smart for that. You should take my class," which was I think in the second or third quarter of the year, and—which I ended up doing. And, you know, I had listed myself as a Poli Sci major, so I got a Poli Sci, you know, faculty member as an advisor, who was fairly old and very old-school. I do remember, you know, a group of us seated around him, you know, all with our little, you know, white, button-down shirts and listening to him, and he gave us such sage advice as, it was okay to go—you know, you could date girls from San Jose State, but if you wanted your children to get into Stanford, you really need to marry a Stanford girl; and also, you know, like going overseas was, you know, a total waste of time, to one of their campuses. All of which of course was terrible advice.

And, I started, at one point, I think it was actually in December of my freshman year, there was something called the Free University. Now, you remember, this is 1966. The Free University was—there was no credit given. It was basically set up so that anyone could teach a course on anything, and literally, William Shockley, who was a physicist who had been awarded a Nobel Prize, taught a class on the superiority of Caucasians.

[00:10:05]

MATTHEW CRONIN: Wow.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So literally, you know, anything goes. There happened to be a class on photography, and it was being taught by someone named Dwight Johnson, who I knew because he was married to the older sister of one of my close friends from high school and, you know, the—the family lived close by, and, you know, we were good friends. And Dwight was like the coolest guy I had ever seen. He had very long hair, and more importantly, wherever he was on campus, despite the fact that, you know, he was married to Janet, he was always accompanied by these women who looked like they'd walked out of Andy Warhol's Factory. You know, they looked sort of like Nico, or something, with their long hair, and it was like, I want to be that.

So I decided to take Dwight's, quote, unquote, class, which met for the first time in somebody's home, and there were maybe 15 people there, and they were all graduate students of—in different departments who had had interest in photography. And I think

Dwight, you know, explained about how to develop a roll of film, and the second meeting of the class, the second and last meeting of the class was at Dwight and Janet's home in—I guess it was Palo Alto, and he showed me, you know, how to print and whatever. At that class, I think there were—I think there was somebody besides myself, but that was kind of it. But I, you know, stayed friends with Dwight and would come over and, you know, show him things and, you know, work with him.

So, prior to taking the class, which I think was going to start in January, I decided over, you know, the December holidays to borrow my father's Nikon, and I was going to go out early in the morning to the beach; you know, San Gregorio. And my idea was, which was—I was going to photograph, you know, the sunrise, not realizing, of course, that the sun actually rose in the east and not the west, but it was early morning, and, you know, so I took these photographs, and I just became totally enraptured. In fact, one of my photographs from that day, I think a year or so later, was in this small exhibition at the student union. And it looked like it was a wet beach with the water receding, but the way it was printed, it looked like it was taken at night, but it was very sensuous, and so that was, kind of, my first significant photograph, which I actually ended up selling from that exhibition at Tresidder, probably for $10 or $20—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —whatever it was. But it just—you know, it was something I became very interested in.

Coinciding with that was my taking of the political science class, which was really meant mainly for sophomores and juniors, and it was held in a big auditorium and was the single most boring and pedantic class that I'd ever taken in my life. I think we were assigned, like, 10 books, and 12 of these Bobbs-Merrill pamphlets that were supposed to be read, and reading about, you know, voter elections in some obscure town in Vermont and, you know, changing—but, I mean it was just—and I managed to read two of the books, and two of the pamphlets. And for the final in my blue book, you know, I wrote and wrote and wrote, and I got it back, and the grade was a B-plus, and the comment was, "Wish you could've expanded on this." And I felt like saying, me too, but you got everything I had!

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: It was all in there. And I do remember—

[00:14:59]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —Professor Eulau, seeing my parents at a party, they're, "I just don't understand how Dave got a B-plus, he's so brilliant." Now, he had actually called on me by name in this big auditorium one time, you know, which was a little unsettling, but I returned the favor some classes later by asking him about a book by C. Wright Mills called *The Power Elite,* and my question was, "Did the power elite create, sort of, the masses, or did the masses create the power elite, so they wouldn't have to deal with all these issues?" He pondered that for a while and didn't really have an answer, so I felt it was sort of a draw.

But, you know, my freshman year is when my interest in photography really started developing, and at the same time, I was very into—as I think a lot of undergraduates were—into film. You know, I made a number of Super 8 movies and did one longer film, I think it may have been 20, 22 minutes. About—a film about freshman life if it had been shot by a teenaged Jean-Luc Godard, so, very abstract, but entertaining, and entertaining enough that they actually showed it to incoming freshmen the following year. But I—I had a friend who came up to me after the screening of it who was a sculptor, and later became a hospital administrator and had three children, but that's a whole another story. And he said to me, "You know, your film was really interesting, but it feels like it's a series of still photographs," and I realized he was absolutely right.

And while I continued to have an interest in film and—and briefly was a communications major, because that's where the film department was. And, you know, this was back in the day when, you know, people—majors were just sort of like trying on clothes at a sample sale. And I ended up taking this art class from a professor, Matt Kahn, who, you know, my parents knew, and very, you know, just energizing, and a magnetic personality. And I took his design

class, and I decided, you know, to take his more advanced design class the next quarter, and I realized that I had no real sophisticated talent whatsoever. I mean, the other people were bringing in these amazing projects, and I was like, you know, I cannot only do—not do that, I can't even think about it. So I asked him if I could do photography for, like, one credit or something, and, you know, he kind of became my mentor.

And the interesting thing was Stanford didn't have photography at the time, which was a real blessing in the sense that everything I wanted to do, I had to do, sort of, outside of the university. And I discovered there was this school of photography in San Francisco called the Ruth Bernhard School of Photography. Now, Ruth was a very prominent and historically significant photographer. She was in that whole group with, you know, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. She was most well-known for her nudes, and I think one of her most famous pictures is of Twinka Thiebaud and Imogen Cunningham in the woods—or actually I'm sorry, that was Wynn Bullock. But I think she did the Nastassja Kinski-with-the-snake-in-a-box photograph. So I took a class at her school, and it happened to be taught by this photographer Roger Minick, who was running the, sort of, student photo lab at UC Berkeley. And Roger was the most amazing printer, and a great photographer. He had a book come out not long after called *Delta West* about the Sacramento River Delta and all the small Chinese communities, which were a vestige of all the Chinese who were brought in to work on the railroads and had developed these communities.

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And then I later took a course with Ruth on the nude. I believe there were four other students in the class. They were all, sort of, in their 30s or 40s. They all looked like salesmen of one type or another who seemed interested in photographing the nude women who were brought in as models. I actually still have my negatives from all those classes. But it was, kind of, a great education because it had to be self-motivated, so I was, you know, reading things, and I was doing my photographs, but other than getting some, you know, art credits from Matt Kahn, there wasn't really any formal structure.

The last quarter of my sophomore year, Matt invited me to be part of a graduate seminar that he held at his home with, sort of, design students, and they were—a couple of them were from, you know, Hewlett-Packard, who were being—Hewlett-Packard was paying their tuition to, sort of, study design, and it was such a stimulating experience. At first, you know, we met every other week; we would meet at Matt's home. His wife was also a designer, and, you know, he had a studio in the—out in the back and, you know, just being really immersed in art, and that sort of Bauhaus—I mean, when Matt came to Stanford, he had gone to Cranbrook as an undergraduate, came to Stanford, and started teaching. He had students who were actually older than he was, but he just had a very, very dynamic personality. And, you know, to be asked to be part of this was just like, oh, my God, you know, I'm really—you know, there's something special happening, and, you know, I continued to pursue photography.

I had, you know, one moment of sort of feeling like I should be doing something that's really serious and important. And so I started taking some physics classes, and my father said to me, you know—because being a—he said, "You know, you really—there's no need, you know, for you to do this." And I quickly realized that, and actually took that quarter off and realized that one could appreciate something without feeling like you had to do it.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Right.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And, you know, that sort of brought me—I became an art major and, you know, even though the majority of my classwork was independent study with Matt, you know, I took lithography with Nathan Oliveira and, you know, a drawing class, and never took painting. It was probably a good thing, because it would've been a mess. But, you know, by my senior year, I decided that, you know, photography is where I wanted to go, and I discovered that Walker Evans was teaching at Yale, and I thought, "Well, that's where I want to go," yeah.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah. Were your—so as you started to drift more towards pursuing photography, was your family supportive of that choice?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, you know, I mean, I was very, very fortunate. My parents were so incredibly supportive. I remember my mother telling me years later that she said to my

father, "I'm just so worried, how is David going to make a living?" And my father said, "It doesn't matter, he's happy, and—," which is wonderful and they were—

MATTHEW CRONIN: It really is.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —emotionally supportive, they were financially supportive, as were my three younger siblings.

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MATTHEW CRONIN: Wow, that's a really nice environment.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah.

MATTHEW CRONIN: I feel like that can really help nurture that, like, drive and encourage that, like, extracurricular pursuit of it.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah. No, it—you know, I—I was so incredibly fortunate to have the family that I did. And so, I applied to Yale and got put on the waiting list, and it was interesting at the time; photography was a very small part of what was a three-year design program, very, very strongly influenced by the Swiss design from Basel. You know, Josef Albers taught there, and you know, the design program was very, very well-known and very strong. And I remember going back there, when I reapplied the following year and had an interview.

And I had spent part of the summer after I graduated from Stanford going to the Rochester Institute of Technology. I'd been accepted at RIT, and I'd been accepted at the San Francisco Art Institute, but I didn't really want to go to either of them; I really was focused on Yale. But I went to RIT that summer, and it was, again, very fortuitous. Two things happened: One, it had a huge photo program, and I was, sort of, in—they were just about to start an MFA, so I would've been in, like, the first MFA class. And you had to take this intensive photography class if you didn't have the equivalent of an RIT undergraduate background, which of course, nobody did, unless you had gone to RIT. The other thing I discovered while I was there was this incredible photographic paper. Well, it was really design paper, but a photographer named Les Krims was printing on it, it was called Kodalith. And by diluting the developer with water, you could get these, what I thought were the most gorgeous sort of sepia tones in the paper, but it was a very, sort of, fugitive process, it wasn't intended for this, so you were really developing by eye, and you learned. Like, if I take it out and put it in the fixer at this point, it'll stop. You know, what is that point that I need to anticipate where it's going to be. And so I was—you know, became immersed with Kodalith.

And when I came out for my interview at Yale, I brought all these prints, and you know, people hadn't seen this material. I think I even had something that I printed on a glass plate, because they made Kodalith glass plates. And I remember one of the graduate students, who was teaching at RIT, said he thought about going to the bookstore one night and just opening up all the boxes of Kodalith, so that, you know, people would stop using it. But it was just this incredible, I found, material, and you know, that was the material that I used when, you know, I was in graduate school, and when I collaborated with Garry Trudeau on *Hitler Moves East,* and it gave this sort of vintage, antique feel to the work, which I, you know, absolutely loved.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Did you have sort—any sort of control in terms of contrast, with that paper? Was it different grades in terms of boxes that you could use, or did you have to use filters that you would use with the negative in the enlarger?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Basically, I didn't use any filters. It was very interesting because the blacks became very intensely black and inky, but if you left it in there too long, it would start to sort of spread. So, I think, one of the things I liked about it, it was the complete antithesis of Ansel Adams's Zone System, which, you know, as an undergraduate, I remember going out there with my light meter and my 35mm camera; which, in retrospect, you know, the Zone System was really intended for, you know, large-format view cameras.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Right.

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: And taking my little notes, and so being able to, sort of, totally discard that was such a blessing. It was a very spontaneous process, and I think I loved that about it. And I remember years later, you know, eventually—I mean, designers used to use Kodalith, but as solid black and white for letterforms and then they'd cut them out, and they would use Kodalith film for, sort of, the same reason.

Eventually, sometime in, I think, the late '70s, Kodak stopped making Kodalith paper. And I actually ran into Les Krims at a Friends of Photography conference in Carmel, you know, this was years later, and I asked him, you know, about Kodalith and, you know, like, you know, "Can you still get this?" And he goes, "Oh, that was such a hard paper to work with." You know, he apparently—I—when I moved to New York, I met someone who had lived with him for a while, and I guess he had like a giant freezer full of the stuff, but it only lasts so long.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Right.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So, I remember when they stopped making it, and, you know, Garry and I had finished the book, and he turned to me, and he said, "Well, I guess you're going to have to find something else to do."

[They laugh.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: Did you have an impulse to try to, like, hoard as much of it as you could to prolong the—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: It was—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —life of the medium?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah. You know, it was a little too late, I mean, when I started. I eventually found some lith papers and—but it wasn't the same. I mean, I had—you know, I had a decent amount. I had enough to do, you know, *Hitler Moves East* and—but there was a big Eastman Kodak distributor in South San Francisco, and I used to drive up there and, you know, get it from them. And every time I'd show up, they'd say, "Oh, yeah, it's the guy who wants the Kodalith paper," and they were the distributor for all of Northern California, and I think possibly Oregon and Washington.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Wow.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So, if I was the only person buying Kodalith paper, you know, you could see the writing on the wall that it wasn't going to—

MATTHEW CRONIN: It was coming—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —be around—

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, exactly.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —for a long time. But, yeah, it was a wonderful material to work with. And I think, you know, part of that spontaneity was what eventually led me into working with, you know, the SX-70 Polaroid. When I came to New York in '83, and there was a section of my life where I had been, like every other photography graduate student, you know, applying for teaching jobs, and when I was living in New Haven, I think at one point I was teaching at three different schools simultaneously.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Wow, that's a lot.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: It was, and I remember once driving in my car on my way to the University of Bridgeport and having a mild panic attack because I couldn't remember what class I was driving to teach, and I just said, "Okay, take a deep breath," you know—so as I pulled into the parking lot, I remembered, oh, it's this class. And I did get a job teaching at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, but it was only, you know, a one-year thing. And, yeah, I kept going to the College Art Association meetings, and, you know, here I was, I had published a book. The George Eastman Museum in Rochester, at the time it was I think called the George Eastman Home or, you know, George Eastman House, I'm sorry.

MATTHEW CRONIN: House, right.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And they had put on a *Hitler Moves East* exhibit, you know, after the book came out. And, you know, I didn't come out for the exhibit because I was living in California, and, you know, you just didn't, sort of, think of those things. It was interesting that Charlie Stainback, who was, I think, doing graduate work there and worked on the exhibit, many years later was the curator for my first retrospective at the International Center of Photography, and he was talking about the show.

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And the reason I think I got the show was that a—my college girlfriend had a friend who was doing something at the Eastman House. And I remember coming to New York for the College Art Association meeting, and I had this big case with, you know, all these Kodalith prints that I'd overmatted from *Hitler Moves East*, and I remember handing these off to her, and she put them in her VW bug and drove up to Rochester.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But, you know, with these—you know, with having gone to Stanford and Yale, a museum show, and book, you know, I just wasn't able to get a job. And part of it was the time, because it was a period when art departments were under a lot of pressure, as were universities, to have a more diverse faculty in terms of, you know, hiring women. And what they would do is that they would hire a woman and give her, like, a three-year contract and then not rehire her, so they weren't tenure track positions.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Right.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So the women were never advancing. And it became pretty clear to me, you know, that—how frustrating this was going to be.

MATTHEW CRONIN: I can imagine.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And I do recall being in an interview at one of these conferences, and it was in what we called the, sort of, bullpen, because there were all these tables. If it was a serious interview, it was held up in the—you know, the hotel room, and this, I guess, assistant professor was boringly interviewing me, and, you know, I knew where this was going. And he was—at the end he said, "Well, you know, is there anything else you'd like to add?" I restrained myself from saying what I was thinking, which was, if you're open to tenure track, I'm open to sex change, which I'm sure would have been meet with this, like, "Oh, jeez, what an asshole." But, at that point, both my younger brothers were headed off to business school; my youngest brother Dan to get a PhD, and my middle brother Michael to get an MBA. And my father had always said to us, you know, "I'm not worried about you kids, you know, you're smart, you know, you can always rely on your intelligence."

And I was visiting one of my classmates from Yale in New York who was a photographer and who had taught at Yale for a while, and I went through a lot of soul-searching. And, you know, the book had come out, and I felt, you know, I've accomplished something. I don't know what it is, I don't know what it's going mean in the future, but I've accomplished something, and maybe I need to think about alternatives. Business school was particularly appealing because it's two years, you know, law school was three years, and business school seemed to offer potentially a vast array of options. So I decided to apply to business school and took the, you know, the SAT equivalent, I think it's called the GMAT or something, and much to my shock, I did incredibly well.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: You know, I'd really wanted to go to Stanford: A, because, you know, I was living at my parents' home in California and, you know, Stanford was there. And I remember going over to interview with the dean of admissions, who was very nice, and he said, "Well, you know, the problem is, when you were an undergraduate—" I was 30 when I started business school, so probably 29 when I was applying. He said, "When you were an undergraduate, you know, they actually gave out real grades." So, you know, I forget what my GPA was, you know, 3.3 or 3.4. He said, "Nowadays, everybody has these inflated grades, and it's hard to correlate that."

[00:10:09]

And I ended up getting accepted to Dartmouth and to UCLA, and turned down by Stanford and Harvard, and I was all, sort of, you know, planning on going to Dartmouth. And I was out in New York, I was actually staying with Garry and Jane, they weren't married yet, but they had a nice apartment on the Upper East Side. And my mother called, and Garry said, "Oh, you know, your mom called while—" I think I was out, like, I don't know what in the hell I was doing. But apparently MIT had called and asked if I would be able to come up for an interview, and, you know, fortunately I was in New York, it wasn't hard to do. I went up there and had an interview, and to this day, I have no idea why I was accepted to go there. But again, it was one of those fortuitous things, because Stanford had about 300-and-something students in their, you know, opening class of business school, Harvard had like 600-something, MIT was a hundred, and they had a somewhat older student body. You know, the average age at Stanford and Harvard was maybe 23 or 24. You know, people had gone to college, they'd worked somewhere like at a bank, or had done something relevant and decided to go to business school. So, MIT, the students were a little bit older, and we actually—there was a group of us, I think there were five or six—we called it the 30 and Over Club, but somewhat more eclectic.

There was a woman who had been writing her dissertation at Oxford on medieval literature and decided she wanted to go to business school. And I remember the—one of the women who worked at the administration, at that—at the Sloan School, her husband taught the statistics class. And I remember seeing her at, you know, Harvard Square one time, you know, as I was coming out of the subway or whatever, and she was asking me, you know, how was I enjoying, you know, or how liking, and I said, "Well, you know, I find that, you know, it's really great, and the student body is kind of, you know, eclectic." There was a guy there who had been a river-rafting guide who decided he wanted to go to business school and, you know, start his own business, and she looked at me and said, "Yeah, but there's nobody quite as eclectic as you are."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And it was—you know, it was a real challenge because everybody seemed to have had some background in economics or finance, and I felt that MIT needed to do something about their, sort of, PR, because the absolute first thing that happened when you arrived on campus was you had to take the economics test and the math test. So I've been studying so hard all summer on the calculus and—because I had taken, like, two quarters at Stanford. Thank God, they got rid of the requirement for math and language, so I was able to graduate. And my youngest brother Dan kept telling me, "Okay, you know, the calculus, it's not that big a deal, you really want to be studying the economics," and they gave a list of what you were supposed to know. And so I was studying that and I thought, well, you know, I know this. What I didn't realize is when they said know, they meant know like you know your own birth date, like, it was just instantaneous.

And I—I remember my first economics class, and I didn't realize at the time that if you didn't do well in the economics class—in the test, what you had to do was take two, sort of, basic economics—two semesters of basic economics, which would have served me so much better. Unfortunately, I passed the test, so I was taking Professor Pindyck's class on—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —mathematical economics or whatever. He could write differential equations faster than I could write English. I mean, I was so completely lost; I mean, I just like, you know, what am I doing here, and it turned out, you know, I did survive. My—what saved me is I took the marketing class, and I discovered I really like this and I'm actually really good at it. And so, my second year, you know, I was taking, you know, a bunch of marketing classes, including one called marketing strategy taught by Professor Glen Urban and—who was, you know, very, very well known in his field. I remember I would tell my youngest brother Dan who my professors were, and he'd go, "Oh, my God," you know. So this was the only sort of case-based class at MIT. Harvard was all, you know, about cases.

And I worked—because I had already been to graduate school and I was older, I was very, very focused. And my second year I was ahead, like, a minimum of three to four weeks in

every class, and in the marketing strategy class, I was probably even further ahead. So I would write up my case study and then rewrite it and rewrite, you know, go over and over. And I ended up being one of only two students who got an A-plus and I was—and in fact that semester, I got four As and a B-plus, and I was like, "God, you know, almost made it."

But I remember my father, we were on vacation, I think we were in the Caribbean or—which was a nice change from Boston where it was, you know, like—you can walk around and it would say minus seven on the thermometer outside of Harvard Square. And I remember my father saying, you know, "Your mother and I are just really proud of, you know, what you've done." And I had spent the summer—you know, the summer between first and second year, you get, you know, like, your summer job, and that was also hard because most of the people who came down to MIT to interview, you know, I was like this old guy with not a strong skill set in anything.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I ended up getting an internship at a management analysis center, which had an office in Palo Alto and one in Cambridge. But I used to walk by the one in Cambridge, I always—you know, you'd see the sign Management Analysis, and I thought, "Oh, that's where MBAs go when they need analysis," because—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —you know, they're so fried by what they're doing.

And after I graduated, it was, kind of, the same thing, you know, it was so hard finding jobs. And the person I had worked for in Palo Alto hired me to be his assistant in his, sort of, consulting practice, which was—you know, management consultants at that time, this would've been in 1981, were like—you know, I guess they're still that way, but, you know, it was like Bain and McKinsey, I mean, they were so extravagantly paid. And I remember there was—one of the, you know, magazine—you know, the alumni magazines or whatever, sent, and they had like a graph of starting salaries for people in, you know, my class, and it showed a high of 75,000. And I remember my mother saying, "Oh, that's much too high for somebody who's just coming right out of school." I said, "Mom, that's actually my salary." She said, "Well, in your case, you deserve it."

[They laugh.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: I imagine that's a bit different than what a chart for MFA students would've looked like.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Well, you know, it was funny because I used to, in my mind, keep thinking, okay, how many times greater is this than the highest salary I ever had, which was around $9000, I think, at UNLV. I mean, it was—it was crazy, and—

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But I still drove my 1971 Chevy Vega station wagon. I remember once pulling into the parking lot and there was another, you know, management consultant there, and he said, "Oh yeah, I have a loaner too today," and I said, "That's not a loaner, that's actually my car."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And I avoided the pressure from—you know, to, like, buy a fancy car or whatever, but it was funny. You know, I was wearing, you know, three-piece suits, and, you know, I'd go into this wonderful men's wear store, Tierney's, at Stanford Shopping Center, and, you know, they'd say, "Oh, nice to see you, Mr. Levinthal," you know. Before, you know, I would've had jeans and a T-shirt, and it'd be like, could somebody call security?

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: You know, it was—you know, suddenly, it was a lot of money. I wasn't spending it on anything in particular, but—

And I found that whole experience of being a management consultant and having gone to business school the real key. It was like learning a foreign language. Like, what you were telling people was actually common sense, but you had to pose it in a way that used the

language that they were familiar with, and then they'd go, "Oh, you know, that's a really good idea," you know.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Were you making art during this period of time, or—?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I wasn't. What happened was, very tragically, the—John Mortimer, the man I was working for, and he was, like, 52, and I think he had five kids. He lived up in Woodside, they had a big house, they had—I think they had horses, and, you know, he was very proud of the fact that he could—he was up and ready to call offices in New York at, you know, nine o'clock their time. I mean, he—and, you know, they had a pool, he was—you know, looked like he was in great shape, and his wife was—had been a nurse.

And I was at this company, you know, we had a meeting scheduled for the morning, and the president of the company came out and said, "John's wife called, and she wants you to come over to El Camino Hospital, and John's there," and I thought, you know, oh, I hope he's okay, you know, maybe all this incredible workload, and whatever. So I get there and I go to the little desk and I say, "I'm here to see John Mortimer," and the woman goes, "Are you a member of the family?" And I said, "No, you know, I'm his assistant, and, you know, his wife called and asked me to come." And the woman took me in to see her, and she was with a friend, and he had died. He had been up showering, and they had a houseguest or something, and she'd gotten up because she felt he was in the shower for a really long time and, you know, were going to run out of hot water or whatever, and discovered him, you know, lying there—

MATTHEW CRONIN: Oh, wow.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —and, you know, as a nurse, you know, obviously tried to revive him and, you know, called the ambulance. But I guess it must've been some, you know, congenital heart issue that, you know, you don't really find unless you're—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —are looking—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —for it.

MATTHEW CRONIN: —right.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And sadly, I know that's happened to the daughter of a very good friend of mine, you know, and she was in her early thirties. So, you know, John passed away, and I certainly felt I couldn't continue, I just was not qualified and had no—you know, that didn't make any sense whatsoever. You know, I tried to finish up what I could, and ended up eventually finding a job with a start-up software firm called SoftLink, who had a brilliant idea, but the people who started it were grossly incompetent. You know, one of them, you know, had gone to Stanford business school, and my brother knew him, and that's sort of how I got the connection. The other partner—they had both been in the jewelry business, I think, like appraising diamonds or something together, and started—decided to start this company. The other partner, and this is not easy to do, had managed to flunk out of Arizona State University, which I think even dead people can't flunk out of there, but he had managed to do this, so.

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And the concept behind SoftLink was actually quite brilliant. Software at the time was very expensive. So their idea was to provide what they called trial-use software that was locked, so you couldn't write to memory, but you could use the software. And if you decided you liked it, you would get a code from the company; you know, you'd pay for it, and they would unlock it for you. And as I said, you know, software is expensive; there wasn't that much of it.

And I remember going up to Marin, there was this guy from New York who'd been a salesman of some kind, and was a New York City salesman, let's put it that way. And he had started this company that had—I think it was VisiCalc and VisiWord—you know, a software program that was, you know, selling, you know, that was very popular. And I went up there, and I think we had lunch, and he said he would take on all the software that SoftLink was selling, and he would guarantee 75 percent unlocking fees, which was like, you know, printing money. And I drove back to Santa Clara where we had our humble little offices in a strip mall, and I was, like, really excited, I mean, this is like—you know? And I was, quote,

director of marketing, God knows, you know, I guess—I think there were seven people who worked at the firm at the time. And I went back and I, you know, was talking to Reed, who was the president, and to his partner, and I said, "Oh, you know, I think this is great." And they were like, "Well, you know, that guy, he's always seemed a little kind of sleazy to us." And I was like, "Are you not seeing the fountain of gold that's pouring down at your feet?"

And I had actually hired someone at SoftLink to be the PR person, who was a friend of my brother Michael, and who was, you know, a venture—worked in a venture capital firm. And Heidi had gone to Stanford and actually worked in the very early days at Apple, and she had worked with the one PR person in the entire Bay Area who worked with high-tech, who had made—helped make Apple such a huge success with, you know, the logo and, you know, how they presented themselves. So suddenly, you know, every venture capital firm wanted PR for their start-ups. The guys who had started the company who are engineers had absolutely no use for PR, that was a total waste of money, but the venture capitalists, seeing how, you know, the Apple stock price had just been enormous when they went public.

So Heidi had always wanted to, sort of, start her own PR firm, and we were both pretty unhappy at SoftLink, because it was clear that they just were too stupid to get out of their own way. And I remember they were looking for some venture capital funding, and shockingly, they actually got some, despite, you know, the venture capital people interviewing some entrepreneurs and other VC people who said—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —"God, I wouldn't touch that company with a 10-foot pole," but, I don't know, they got a couple million dollars or something, and the two principals proceeded to go out and buy themselves a nice car.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Needless to say, SoftLink, you know, joined the small percentage of Silicon Valley firms that just didn't make it.

So Heidi decided that she and I should form a partnership and start a PR firm, that there was this great need for it. And we did, and we hired these two Stanford undergraduates who had been interns at SoftLink who were, you know, really smart and very well—you know, just great to work with. And we rented a shared space at 3000 Sand Hill Circle, which was an extremely prestigious address. It was this development, you know, up Sand Hill Road, and, you know, there were a number of tech companies and consulting, you know. I mean, venture capitalists, you know, were starting to build buildings there, and they had offices near, you know, so it was like a great address. It would be like saying, you know, 500 Fifth Avenue or something like that.

Now, we never let anybody come to our office, which we were sharing with a small architectural firm, and we pretty much worked out of grocery shopping bags, and I think we had at least one desk, we might have had two, but very quickly, we were able to get a number of clients. And, you know, we had—the venture capital world at that time was so sort of like a family in a sense, because they were all having to share. Nobody could fund a company on their own, so they were sharing information, and it was very collegial. And, you know, my brother Michael would, you know, refer companies to us, and—or say to them, "Oh, you should go see New Venture Communications." That was the name of our company.

And by the end of the first year, we actually had billings of a million dollars, which was really shocking, and I think there were seven employees. They were all women except for me, so there were constant jokes about, you know, how I was running a harem. And one of our, sort of, neighbors in 3000 Sand Hill was a woman named Debra Radabaugh, who was a—sort of a placement, you know, person, who would find jobs for—you know, but in high-tech. And her husband was the founder of a small company called Electronic Arts, which of course is, you know, huge, but at the time was a start-up, and so things were, kind of, going well.

When I had been at SoftLink, I had started dating this woman from San Francisco Art Institute, a recent graduate who's a painter, and I was totally enthralled. I'm not sure if you had asked her if she had ever realized that we were in a relationship, but I thought we were, so. And we would talk about art, and to impress her, I started taking photographs again, and, you know, the relationship went absolutely nowhere, and—but it sort of rekindled my interest in photography. And those years when I had been looking for, you know, teaching

jobs and I was sort of like, oh, you know, I'm not making art, I don't have a studio, I don't have this and that, as soon as—you know, I had this new motivation.

Now, my parents were both in Washington, D.C. My father had gone to DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, to head up two divisions, and they were living at the Watergate and really having a great time. My youngest brother Dan and I were living in their home in Atherton and, you know, sharing cooking, and—well, you know, running the house, so to speak. And we had a darkroom in, sort of, the workshop that I'd used for many, many years. I took just a folding card table and set it up in my sister's old bedroom and started photographing things on it, and I realized, you know, it had all been about motivation, you know, I didn't really need a studio or whatever.

[00:05:35]

I eventually actually rented a small office in San Mateo that I remember the guy showing to me, and he said, well, you know—and it was really like a narrow office, it had a little skylight. There were no—he said, "Well, you know, there are no windows." I said, "That's perfect." And, you know, I had access 24 hours, you know, seven days a week, and you know, I did set up my little studio with my little toys and, you know, kept working away. And I got to the point where I said to my partner Heidi, you know, "I'd like to spend more time on this, you know, maybe I'll come in four days a week, or whatever." And I remember, you know, I would go back—I said, go back east, I'd come to New York on business occasionally, and I'd bring my portfolio and, you know, show it around and—

On one trip in particular, I left my work at the Marlborough Gallery, and the director of their prints and photography was this wonderful man named Bruce Cratsley, who's also a photographer. And, you know, I was going to all these things, you know, with my three-piece suit on because I had, you know, supposedly business stuff that I was doing. And I went to pick up the portfolio, and the woman at the desk said, "Oh, Bruce would like to speak to you," and I thought, well, that's great. You know, I went and met with him, and he said he was planning on doing this show in the fall called *From Plato's Cave* [*sic - In Plato's Cave* – Ed.], and it was about, I think, basically staged photography, Ellen Brooks and Laurie Simmons and Jim Casebere, and he wanted to know if I'd be interested in having some of my work, and I was like, you know, My God, are you—absolutely.

And during that same trip, I met with this curator at, I think it was Artists Space, and I've forgotten her name, but she was wonderful. And, you know, we were talking, and she, you know, was sitting there and saying, "Well, you know, if you're really serious about this, you know, you should probably move to New York." And I was going, "Okay, that sounds like a great idea," and that's what, you know, I decided to do.

I mean, I should say, just as an aside, one of the things I really enjoyed when I was on these trips back to New York is when I'd be at a gallery or, you know, the International Center of Photography, some place, and they'd say, "Oh—" you know, this is all pre-cell phones, so they'd say, "Well, where can we reach you while you're here in New York?" And I'd say, "Well, I'm staying at The Plaza Hotel." And I was staying there because this was in the early stages of—I think United Airlines was the first to start, sort of, giving you rewards for traveling. And The Plaza, you know, they had these very small rooms, but they were very inexpensive, and, you know, if you did it through United, you know, it was—you got some big discount. I mean, it was like $60, $70 a night or something. And, you know, it was small, but it had everything you needed, and it had the—the cachet of, you were at The Plaza. And, you know, that was kind of the turning point for me.

And, you know, I remember making a trip to, you know, look at like a place to rent, which was—in 1983 was a horrific experience. And, you know, people would show you subbasements and say, "Well, there's a fixture fee of $20,000," and I'd go like, "For what?"

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: My absolute favorite, you know, because I knew about Tribeca, and like that was really cool. And I remember going, seeing this—some loft down there, and there was a pair of handcuffs attached to one of the waterlines up top, and I—you know, and they're—and because there were so many people interested, you know, it was like groups going—you know, a group of people, right, and I felt like asking, well, is that part of the fixture fees?

[They laugh.]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: You know, I fortunately found this place that was an illegal sublet—I didn't know that at the time—and was able to rent on 19th Street. And the owner of the building, you know, not long after I had, kind of, moved in, you know, the doorman and the super, this woman from Puerto Rico, she and her husband knocked on my door, and like, "Who are you and what are you—?" And I said, "Oh, you know, I sublet it from so-and-so." And I remember the owner—you know, I—he wanted me to come in and meet with him. And I brought with me my most recent statement from Dean Witter, which is where I did my banking and whatever, and there was a significant amount of money in there. And I remember showing that to him, you know, as sort of my bona fides, and suddenly, he became very friendly.

[They laugh.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: It's funny how that works.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And offered me my own lease, at actually less than what I was paying these guys on the sublease, and I ended up staying in that building for 12 years.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Wow. When you were bringing your portfolio to different galleries, what type of work were you making at the time, what projects were you sharing?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I was bringing—you know, that's a very good question. I was probably bringing the *Hitler Moves East* work because, you know, I had the book, and that was the most known of that work. I might have brought some of the, you know, early hand-colored work that I called *Modern Romance*. And that would be—my guess would be the emphasis would be on the *Hitler Moves East*, because that had been reviewed and, you know, as I say, I had the book. And—although, I do remember this one dealer, I think Marjorie Neikrug, who had—there weren't that many photo galleries, and I think she—I didn't know this at the time, but I think she had fled Germany because of the Nazis. She was not thrilled to see that work. [Laughs.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: I can imagine.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I think she left—you know, said, you know, "Why are you showing me this, this horrible stuff?" "Oh, okay, well, I promise I won't send you any Hanukkah cards, and—" But, yeah, you know, I guess I've sort of erased that from my memory, exactly what I was showing, but that would be my guess, it would've been the *Hitler Moves East*, and maybe some of the overmatted, hand-colored work, because that's what—the black-and-white work of the little figures was what I had at Marlborough, so it would've been that work and the *Hitler Moves East*, would've been my guess.

And, you know, I moved to New York thinking, okay, I'll be here for a while, and there were times—you know, I used to go visit my sister in Santa Monica, and the LA art scene was just, kind of, booming in the mid-'80s. And, you know, I was in two shows at the LA County Museum, and, you know, the weather is beautiful out there. And I do remember coming back, and my sister was always sending me, like, the real estate section from the *LA Times*, just as—you know, just something to think about, and at one point, I did actually, sort of, look around and, you know, there were some very cool sort of artist studio areas, and things like that.

And I remember coming back from a flight to LA, and getting in the elevator at 251 West 19th.

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: We had two elevators, and there in the corner was, like, a yellow puddle, that I could only hope was from a dog, and I remember calling up my sister and saying, "Send me that real estate section again—"

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: "—and I want to think about this more carefully."

But, you know, things started to evolve more, I became—I started using the 20x24 Polaroid Studio; I was getting a lot of support from Polaroid. And at a point where I might've thought about, you know, seriously moving to Santa Monica, I think Charlie Stainback was starting to talk to me about, you know, doing a retrospective show at the International Center of Photography. And, you know, and it just—and there were other things that were happening that just seemed like—and, plus, LA was sort of tapering off. You know, they didn't have the sort of concentration of galleries that New York had, so when one or two closed, and—it was a bigger deal. You know, in New York, there were—you know, galleries would close all the time, but they'd be replaced by four more. And so there was a lot of—you know, a feeling like this was the place to be, and everybody in the world was coming through New York. And the art fairs were, you know, just kind of—I mean, I remember going to the Armory Show when it was actually in the Armory, and then in the hotel where, you know, galleries would take a room and set up stuff, and the ones from out of town would sleep in the room, right? And you could never get from floor to floor because the elevators were always jammed up, so you had to walk up and down.

And, you know, I was here for, you know, everything that was happening in the East Village in the early '80s, which was exciting. And I had a gallery called Area X, run by this woman Bobbie Sioux Xuereb, who had been hired at UNLV to run their, sort of, slide library and things at the art department, and so we knew each other. And then when she came to New York—her husband's business was based in New York—and she started up her gallery and, you know, asked me to become part of it. So, you know, I was here for a lot of that sort of early—early growing pains of the young art world, which is all very exciting. You know, unfortunately, there was no guidebook about how to navigate that, so I made a number of, you know, unintentional missteps that I, you know, regretted, but I was unaware of what the protocols were, and—you know. But all in all, it seems to have worked itself out. [Laughs.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah. Well, I'm sure some of those missteps, maybe two or three steps down the road, ended up leading to fairly important opportunities in some capacity or another.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, just—

MATTHEW CRONIN: It isn't fun getting there.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, and, you know, you have a relationship with a gallery, and then you feel like, well, you know, what's the next step, and they're not really sure, and so, you know, you take another direction, and then, you realize, might've been better just, even if they didn't know what they were doing, to have stayed there. But there's no way, you know, you can, you know, foresee that or—

MATTHEW CRONIN: Right.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —you know, maybe knocking on David Zwirner's door when he was a start-up gallery, you know, down in—God knows where it was, but it was a pretty—I remember going to an opening there, and it reminded me of going to The Fillmore in San Francisco, if The Fillmore was, you know, 200 square feet, but the noise level was the same.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Not that I think that he necessarily would've taken me on as an artist, but somebody had said, "Oh, you should go check this gallery out," and I thought, oh, I'm going to be wearing hearing aids soon enough, maybe now isn't the time. But, you know, I think that's sort of the way things progressed, you know; very few people have a straight trajectory.

[00:05:05]

And in fact, you know, there was this—these two wonderful—I guess I'd call them books of the East Village art world. One was done in '85, I think. They were almost like a high school yearbook-type thing and—but softbound and Timothy Greenfield Sanders did a lot of the photography of, you know, gallery and gallery staff, and, you know, there were all these photos like—and articles, but it was very much, you know, about that particular time. And, you know, I'd look—occasionally, I'd look back at those, and they're very interesting, you

know, to see pictures of friends when—you know, way back when, including a picture of myself. But so much of what was so sort of the moment has completely disappeared, and a lot of the trends and artists who were part of that as well.

I remember once I was having lunch with Jay Chiat, who is, you know, the founder of Chiat/Day and, you know, a very big collector and patron of the arts and a wonderful, wonderful man. And we're sitting there, you know, eating, and he said to me, "You know, you know, what I like about you, David?" He said, "You're just sort of like progressing, you know, you keep moving and keep moving. You're not, like, making this, you know, stratospheric jump and then disappearing. You know, you're just, you know, sort of like the tortoise—"

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, slow and steady.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: "—slow and steady," and I said, "Jay, thank you, I mean, that's kind of how I feel." And the interesting thing is, I remember when I first got to New York, because I'd gone to business school and I, you know, worked for a couple years, I had an understanding of business. And so when I would go talk to a dealer, I'd realize, you know, they're running a business, they're—you know, and I have to be cognizant and sensitive to that. And I remember Jay Gorney, who had a gallery down in SoHo, and he made a studio visit to me on 19th Street once, and we were talking, and he said, you know, "I think your work is great." He said, "The problem is, you know, I've got a photographer, and I can sell out his show and lose money that month. It takes me the same amount of effort to sell a painting for five or ten thousand dollars as it does to sell a photograph for a thousand." And, you know, I understood that, and I know I had friends who would just—you know, they'd drop off slides, and then they'd call and, you know, "I haven't heard from you," and I was like, you know, I'll hear from them if they have something, you know, they want to say.

And the other thing I would do is I would devote, I don't know, like a month or six weeks, where I pretty much would just stop working, and send out slides and write letters and, you know, in some of the photography journals there was, like listings of University of Birmingham, or University of Alabama at Birmingham, you know, looking for shows. And there was another school in Pennsylvania that I sent some work off to that, you know, responded and said, "Oh, you know, we'd love to do a show," and I would send off a portfolio, and, you know, they'd do the show. And it turned out that many years later, my extremely talented studio manager, Erin Hudak, also had a show at that same institution, and, you know, they did like a little foldout kind of catalogue. But I would devote time to doing that.

And also, whenever I went to an opening, you know, I always thought of myself as really kind of a shy person, you know, and I would make a point of trying to meet, like, one new person, just, you know, one person that I could add to my, sort of, Rolodex, and in a non-obnoxious way, but just, you know, expand that, that sort of universe. And many years later, my friend, Ellen Brooks, we were at an—some opening, and she said, "Oh, David, you're so good at this, how do you do it?" And I felt like saying, Ellen, it was like—you know, it was a job, I just learned to do it and got better at it, and used to—

[00:10:18]

I had one friend whose husband was a senior administrator at MoMA; not on the art side, but —and, you know, they would introduce me to people, like at an opening. And immediately after, you know, they would leave, the people I'd be talking to would immediately, "Oh, I'm going to go refresh my drink," like—you know? Or you'd be talking to people, and they were constantly, like, looking over your shoulder, like there's got to be somebody, you know, more important for me to talk to, and, you know, you just learned to sort of live through that.

And I do remember coming back from openings at the 303 Gallery when it was actually on 303 Park Avenue South, and they were showing some of my work, but, you know, it was—there was a real sort of clique of art, and they would all go—after the openings, there was some bar that they would all go to. Now, I wasn't—I didn't drink at the time. I started drinking when we did our renovation on the loft, which I think drives a lot of people to drink. But I would take the M23 bus back from—you know, from there, and have saltines and, you know, tomato soup. And I would say I'm going to work, you know, as hard as I can, and I—you know, I'd sometimes work till two, three in the morning, and that, you know, I'm going to make people look at my work, because I'm just going to keep at it constantly and do this, and, you know, I treated that as a job. I mean, the making of the work was something

separate, but the getting it out there and, you know, communicating with people, that was a job, you know, and you had to treat it, I think, as a job, you know, not take it personally when people just, sort of, you know, brush you off.

And from galleries, as I say, you know, I perfectly understood because, you know, they're running a business, but even at these openings, you know? And I remember once being in an opening at the Queens Museum, I think it was, with someone who—there was a curator who came over and, you know, was saying—you know, said, "Hello, and how are you doing?" And this guy launched into—it seemed endless, but it was probably, you know, four or five minutes just, you know, "I'm doing this and that," and I just thought, Oh, my God, Warren, I never want to become that, you know, this is just—I mean, the curator said—you know, looked at me and said, "Oh, yeah." But then he said, "Warren, how are you doing?" Just this —just endless stream of stuff coming out. And, you know, finding that sort of civil balance by, you know, engaging with people and—but never pushing yourself onto people.

And I do remember, you know, there were some—you know, art consultants were also a big deal, and there was one art—this one art consultant who I had gotten to know who, you know, liked my work. And I had this friend call me and say, you know, "She said she was going to come over for a studio visit, and I've called a number of times to try and set it up," and I just said, you know, "Deborah, you just—you know, you can't push these things because, you know, it'll—it's irritating. You just—you know, they'll call when they call, and calling, you know, every week or so is not helping the process or yourself," so.

And, you know, it can be anxious, you know, if somebody said I'm going to call or, you know, I'm thinking about a show or whatever, and you don't hear from them, you know, the anxiety can build up; but, you know, it's a process. And, you know, along the way I've had the opportunity to meet and interact with just some incredibly amazing people, like William Christenberry—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —who was sort of a protégé of Walker Evans and, you know, from Alabama, and much like Walker, a great rambling storyteller. And it was actually an interaction with Bill that led me to create what eventually became the *Blackface* series. And it was totally—I was down—I'd come down to DC to do an interview with Merry Foresta for this magazine that the Friends of Photography had started, and it was a beautiful magazine and beautifully done and, you know, wonderful illustrations. And she was interviewing Bill Christenberry and myself; Bill, about his, sort of, Klan pieces and the houses, and me about *Mein Kampf*, and, you know, she was going to combine the two in her article. And because Bill is such a good storyteller, and I'm an amateur storyteller, at one point, I don't know how we got into this, but we started talking about the film *Birth of A Nation,* and—you know, which is, you know, having loved films, and I knew the film well. And we ended up having dinner at Bill's house, and I think Andy Grundberg and Merry were there, and Bill and his wife. And it consisted of Chinese take-out and some very good bourbon that Bill had brought down from the attic along with a copy of the novel *The Clansman*, which was the basis for *Birth of a Nation*.

And in my mind, I kept thinking, you know, I could—I could use that movie as a template. I've got Civil War soldiers, I've even seen figures of Confederate officers dancing with women in hoop skirts, you know, this could be a project. I said, you know, the one thing I didn't have were figures of African Americans. It just so happened that, I don't know, a week or two later was the—this very, very large antique show in Atlantic City called *Atlantique City*. And there were dealers from all over the world having all kinds of things; you know, furniture, comic books, toy sets, just anything you can imagine. And they took over the convention center, which I think in the old days is where they had the Miss America contest, and it was enormous. And my girlfriend at the time was a professor at the economics department at Penn, and she had a car, and we drove down to Atlantic City.

And I started going around looking for, you know, African American figurines, and while I had some passing familiarity with Black memorabilia, you know, the Aunt Jemima cookie jars and, oh, some of the salt and pepper shakers, I was totally unprepared for the enormous range of objects that were there. And I came—you know, I think I had like at least four grocery bags filled with this stuff that, you know, we drove back to New York with, and she

was very appalled.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: It was like, "What?" And I remember—you know, I have this habit, like, I'll just acquire things. I'm not really sure what I'm going to do with them, but I'm just acquiring the stuff. And I remember taking a couple of the pieces of Black memorabilia to the Polaroid Studio the next time I was shooting just to see, you know, how are these things going to photograph?

And I forget what series I was working on, but I think I was using like a black velvet background to absorb all the light on whatever the subject matter was, so it might've been the *Desire* series. And I put one of the objects up there and photographed it with the 20x24 Polaroid, and I was just stunned, it was so powerful. You know, it was this object coming out of this darkness, and all of its, sort of, power and anger, you know, you could just sense. And I immediately said, you know, "To hell with *Birth of a Nation*, you know, this—I'm going to focus on these objects," and—which I did.

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And not that long afterwards, I was out at something at BAM, and a curator from the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Philadelphia was there, and, you know, we're saying hello, and she said, you know, "I've been meaning to—I want to get in touch with you while I'm here, I want to talk to you about, you know, a possible exhibition," and she was thinking of a retrospective. And at that point, I had already committed to ICP for my respective—retrospective. But I said, you know, "I've just started to work on something that I'm really excited about, and I'd love to show you, and—" You know. So she came over, and I was showing her some of the prints, and she seemed very interested. And I remember going down to Philadelphia to meet with the director of the museum, and they said, you know, "Great, let's do this is as a show." I'm not sure I even had a title for it; I'm not sure that I'd even begun to call it *Blackface*.

But there was—and again, this was—you know, my antenna must've been somewhat down, because they wanted to do the show very quickly, like in less than a year, and that never happens in a museum. You know, something must have occurred; you know, a show's been cancelled, you know, a building burned down, you know, whatever, but I didn't really think twice about it because I was so absorbed by this. And I really, you know, threw myself into it completely, and was shooting a lot and going to these Black memorabilia shows, which were in and of themselves fascinating, because most of the dealers and most of the people coming were African American. There—there's a big one in Silver Spring, Maryland, every year, and I remember there was one here in New York at, I think, the City University, you know, down near Battery Park, and—but it was fascinating, because it was a fascinating environment to be in, with this diverse group of people who were all focused on the same subject and were kind of comrades in talking about it, which was great.

I remember going out to dinner with a group after one of these shows, and there was this woman—African American woman from New Jersey who's an architect, and she—her collection was in slave memorabilia, like the ankle chains and the bracelets and things that the slaves were made to wear for identity purposes. And I remember looking around the table, and it was sort of, you know, pretty much half Caucasian and half African American. And we were just talking back and forth about a subject that we all cared about from all these different perspectives, and I thought, This is really so wonderful. You know, I'm sure if I were to talk about this now, in some sort of public arena, you know, I'd be slammed on Instagram before I caught my next breath for not—for a variety of reasons, I'm sure, many of which I can't even think of at the time, but it was very exciting.

And unfortunately—I remember talking to the curator over the phone, and she wanted to come to New York with one of the board members. And, you know, they came to my home, and, you know, by that time, I was on 20th Street, and, you know, I was showing them the work and we were talking. And the board member was very concerned about how is the community going to respond to this work, and I said, "Well, you know, one of the great advantages of the museum being part of University of Pennsylvania, is you're an academic institution. It's the perfect opportunity for forums and symposiums and, you know, panels to talk about this."

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And I remember—and again, I should've, you know, been more aware of this, but the curator and the board member asked me, oh, was there a nice place to—they wanted to have lunch—a nice place to go to have lunch. And I mentioned this wonderful restaurant across the street, and they went by themselves. Now, I was, you know, so anxious to get back to work that I didn't really think about it.

But a number of weeks later, I came back from the Polaroid Studio, and I remember it was a Friday, you know, probably around five-thirty, six, and I pick up my mail, and it is this letter from the ICA. And I opened it up, and it's essentially two short paragraphs saying that the board has decided that they are not going to support the exhibition, and I was just devastated. I mean, I had put so much, you know, time and effort and rushing to kind of get this body of work together. And, you know, it was Friday, I couldn't call, there was nobody to speak to. And I remember, you know, finally getting in touch with her, Monday or Tuesday or whatever, and she really had nothing to say. She said—you know, I'm not even sure she said I'm sorry, you know, but, you know, there was no explanation.

And I remember there's a friend of mine who wrote reviews for the *Village Voice* and articles, and he ended up doing, sort of, an article about this. You know, it's like a full-page article with a photograph of me in the studio. He wanted me posed, because at the time I had the Black memorabilia on the shelves, and I also had a couple of objects of Klan figures, and, you know, Rick wanted to take a picture that included some of that. I said, "Rick, don't even bother writing the article if you're going to include—I mean, that—that's not what the body of work is about, but it'll be what all the conversation's about."

And there was another friend of mine who wrote for the *New Yorker,* and the *New Yorker* did this short piece, it was like a column, but it was facing one of my images, and not up from the *Blackface* series, I think it was a cowboy image, you know? And—but it talked—[coughs]—excuse me, it talked about the exhibition being canceled. And—and it was—it had sort of a humorous take on it, because Mark is a very funny writer. And the following week, I think it was the following week, or it might've been the week after, there was—like, the *New Yorker* has this, this sort—"Letters to the Editors" in front. The director of the ICA wrote saying that they had canceled the show, because unlike my prior work, there wasn't, sort of, this atmosphere around the figures like, you know, some sort of scene. And I kept thinking so, okay, I could put a riverboat with Stephen F. Foster music behind it. You know, clearly, they didn't want to do the show. And it turned out, when I was able to talk to the chairman of the African American studies program at Penn who was going to be writing the essay for, you know, the catalogue—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —and we had a long conversation, and there was all these things that I had no idea that were going on. He was unhappy with what the museum was planning as far as additional programs. I mean, he was very nice; I mean, we had—we talked for at least 45 minutes or so. And I realized that, you know, in my, sort of, drive to get this all going, I had completely ignored the politics of what goes on at a university, or what goes on in a museum. And because of that, you know, I wasn't able to make any contact with any of these people. Now, it may or may not have had any impact.

I do remember saying to the curator—I called her the next day after our conversation with the board member, and, you know, I said, "Well, you know, how was the train ride back?" And she said, well, you know, she's still really concerned about the community. And I said to her—as sometimes I'm not able to restrain my sense of sarcasm, this being one of the times. And I said, "Well, you know, there's a really easy solution, we just put a sign outside that says 'White Only.'" There was no laughter from her end of the phone. I, of course, thought—you know, I wasn't expecting any laughter, but it was just like, you know, give me a break, you know, I'm happy to talk to the community.

And, you know, I had a similar situation when I had an exhibition of the *Blackface* work at The Menil in Houston, because they had a lot of work in their collection. I'll get back to that in a moment, but—and they're the most wonderful institution to ever work with; I mean, not only is it such a beautiful museum in such a beautiful setting, but it's all about the art. You

know, there's no gift shop, there's no—you know, you come in to this great space, and they collect—if it's something of interest, they collect it in depth.

But before, you know, we did the show—and I guess the show was in the early 2000s, probably 2007. I'm judging this by how old our son Sam is, because we went down there for a week, and we stayed in one of those homes that are built around The Menil and—for a week. And they had had me—you know, I made a separate trip to meet with some local African American artists and, you know, talk with them about it, and to also do a presentation to one of the board members at their home with a number of docents and, you know, other people involved with The Menil. And I remember I knew one or two of the artists from, you know, the time I had spent in Houston at other points, and I remember we were walking around and, you know, looking at studios and looking at some of their art. And I remember one of them said to me, "I don't know why they wanted you to come down talk to us. Of course, this is fine, you know, what—?" You know? But, you know, I could understand it, but the problem is the ICA wouldn't even take it to that step to, sort of, talk to the community.

And what happened to me was I did actually meet with a lawyer. I had a fax of a letter that the ICA had written to the Whitney extolling the work, because they wanted to partner with the Whitney on possibly exhibiting the work. And I remember showing it to this art attorney, and, you know, we talked, and—because I had invested not just time but a lot of money in terms of procuring these objects and, you know, the Polaroid time. Even though, you know, I was getting a big discount from Polaroid, there was still a lot. And, you know, I sat there, and I thought about it, and I thought, I just don't want to be known for this, you know. I feel like—you know, he was saying, you know, you've got a great case, but, you know, it's going to take a long time and all this, and I just thought, "No." So I had, you know, a decision to make and, you know, was I just going to, sort of, stop? And I just said, "No, I'm going to continue with this work," and eventually, and—can we take a short—

[00:05:29]

MATTHEW CRONIN: Oh, yeah—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —break?

MATTHEW CRONIN: —absolutely, let's take a short break.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I need to visit someplace.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Well, and we'll end the session right now, and we'll pick back up in a little bit.

[00:05:38]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —Charles, who—I loved his work, and Spike [Lee] was a collector of his, and I think some of Michael [Ray Charles]'s paintings probably were in *Bamboozled*. And Michael had been a basketball player and was very solidly built, large individual. And we were having breakfast one morning during the symposium with his wife; very sweet and very petite. At one point—Michael used to put a penny, I think, in the corner of his paintings as sort of a symbol, a Lincoln penny, and he was being attacked for using the background of minstrel shows and minstrel art as the, sort of, basis for his painting. And his wife was sitting in the first row, and I remember she got up, and she started talking to whoever it was, may have been Chris, and there's Michael, you know, all, like probably six-foot-four, or six-foot-five, saying, "It's okay, it's okay, honey, I've got this."

And he said to me at breakfast that time that, you know, if I ever got criticized, just to give him a phone call, he would have my back. And I remember he, you know, came over once to visit my studio, and there—I think I still had a lot of the Black memorabilia out, or wherever. There's one piece in particular that he was attracted to, and I remembered just saying, "Here, you know, take it as a gift." And I remember going to one of his openings in SoHo, and Spike was there in one of his orange suits.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But, you know, I miss the fact that there was a community of sorts. Now, you know, a lot of the onus, you know, falls on me for not, sort of, keeping up with all this, but I just don't see public discussions of these issues being really possible, or shall I say much more problematic than they would've been.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Do you think your—the perception you had towards the body of work—*Blackface* changed, before and after presenting it there? Did it change in any sort of way, like recontextualize it for you or anything, or—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I don't think—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —just, did it shift? I'm just curious.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I don't think it did. What did shift a little bit for me, and I've thought about this a lot recently ever since Donald Trump became prominent, that I remember—because I've always loved history. In fact, if I had been a history major in college, I probably would be a lawyer today, because that was not boring the way Poli Sci was. But at the end of the war in Europe, General Eisenhower, who was the supreme commander, required that German citizens who had been living near or around the concentration camps be made to tour the facilities. And, you know, you see these pictures of them, you know, with the handkerchiefs over their mouths because of the, you know, the stench. And I thought that, in some ways, what I was doing—and I don't want to put it anywhere on the same level as that. But because the objects are so isolated in this—you know, emanating from this dark background, that they're somewhat confrontational to a white audience in that same manner. Like, you know, you're responsible for this, you know? Not you as an individual, but white people in general, who were buying this, displaying it, collecting it, admiring it.

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The artist, Carrie Mae Weems, and I don't want to misquote her, who's a wonderful artist, an incredible artist, and she once said that she could completely, sort of, equip her kitchen, have everything she needed for her kitchen from Black memorabilia, which is true, you know; spatulas, pots, pans, cookie jars, you know, glasses, whatever. And, you know, it's—I remember as a child, we would—sometimes as a, you know, a special night out, we'd go to—this was like in the '50s, there were fried chicken restaurants, you know, chicken in a basket, and I think there was probably, like, Aunt Jemima salt-and-pepper shakers or something like that in the environment. And, you know, just not realizing how pervasive that was. And there is even a pancake place called Sambo's down in Carmel. Of course, Little Black Sambo was actually from India, but, you know, we can forget all of that. So, I'm going to need to take a little pause—

MATTHEW CRONIN: Sure.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —I'm sorry.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, no worries.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: It's—

MATTHEW CRONIN: We'll, pick this back up shortly. Let's see, I think it's—

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: This is Matthew Cronin with David Levinthal back from another short break. David?

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I guess one of the reasons that I've been talking so much about the *Blackface* series is that there were so many things about it that were unique to me—you know, having an exhibition cancelled; having the criticism, at times, mostly much later on, of my right to be doing this work as someone who is not an African American. And I think it's something that hopefully in the future, possibly the distant future, will not be the kind of issue that it is today.

You know, I was commenting on the need for individuals like myself who are not African American to, sort of, understand and appreciate the—what's now become a buzzword—the

systemic nature of what these objects represent. And—but you can only, I think, understand that by dealing with it, not by dismissing the issue. And I know that—I was rereading, I don't know why, for some reason, a review of my retrospective at the George Eastman Museum in which this one young art critic had written quite extensively about what she felt were my failings to incorporate, particularly in my Western work, any references to or understanding of the issues of Native Americans, or what I prefer to call tribal people, because they weren't Native Americans. They were here before anybody called it America, so I feel tribal peoples is more appropriate, but—you know

And I read the review, and I thought that my role as an artist as I see it is not to be all-encompassing, but is, in my particular case, I think drawing on my own personal history of, you know, when I grew up. You know, being born in '49, I was part of what I call a, sort of, first-television generation, with the little black-and-white TVs, and predominantly filled with westerns.

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I think I remember reading once that somewhere around 50 percent of the early television shows were westerns. And there were certainly the serials that were on Saturday morning, and Roy Rogers and Gene Autry and *Wild Bill Hickok*, whose advertiser was Sugar Pops, "They're tops," you know, these things that, sort of, are embedded in your mind and will never disappear. And, you know, I've always felt that wanting to draw upon that visual history, and visual memory, I felt that a large part of my work is almost like a Rorschach test for the viewer. You know, they're—there's not a lot of detail often. I mean, there are, you know, on certain occasions more so than others, but it's really referential. You know, you're looking at an out-of-focus cowboy on a horse, and you're filling in all this information based on your own memory and your own experience, and they're certain iconic pieces of our shared history, and certainly the West is quite prominent.

And I remember I happened to be giving a talk in Salzburg at the Salzburg Institute, which was a foundation, I think, that was run in conjunction with Harvard University, and they would have symposiums there. And I was invited to do a small show of my *Wild West* work, and the historian David McCullough was there giving a talk. And, you know, it was a very intimate environment, there weren't that many people, I remember, you know, sharing meals with David and his wife. And when I was doing a little talk about my work, I made the comment that my work was about a West that never was, but always will be. And out of the corner of my eye, I saw David give this wry little smile of approval, which was such a tremendous compliment in my eyes—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —because he's such a masterful writer and a historian, but it's true. It's sort of like the last scene in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, where the reporter rips up his notes that he's been taking from the character portrayed by Jimmy Stewart who's, you know, sort of demythologizing what had occurred and, you know, basically saying, hey, you know, you print the myth. And I think that's a lot of what my—certainly my western work is.

But I think even in my other series, it's—the work is meant to be evocative. It's not meant to be historical, it's not meant to be all-encompassing. It's like these little slices, and it will evoke different things in different people. You know, it's—if somebody asked me, well, what's my work about? You know, I don't really have a specific answer, because it's really about what the interaction is between the viewer and the artwork that—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —they're looking at, and what that brings to mind for them. In some work, obviously, there's a historical construct, like *Hitler Moves East*. But one of the things that Garry and I took great advantage of was that when we were doing this work, you know, in the '70s, the war in the Eastern Front, there is in fact a BBC series narrated by Burt Lancaster called *The Unknown War,* and I forget how many episodes it was, 15 or more, that was just coming out in the U.S. on PBS. But there wasn't this, you know, large amount of visual imagery that people were familiar with.

And I remember when they—the book came out in '77, I was at, I think, the big—you know,

the book fair happened to be in San Francisco, which was convenient because I was living in the Bay Area. And I remember somebody asking me why I hadn't, you know, chosen to focus on D-Day or the war in the Pacific. And I said, "Because there's so much preconceived imagery from, you know, the John Wayne movies, from all the photographs from *Life* magazine that, you know, people envisioned the flag raising at Iwo Jima, or the storming of the beaches at Normandy, and—" You know, dealing with the Eastern Front gave us just so much freedom. Yeah, we could set up a scene and, you know, call it *Tank Battle Outside Smolensk*, who would—who could argue with that?

So the—you know, the one constraint was that at the time, there were almost no figures of Russian soldiers and—but, you know, we were—I was certainly looking at a lot of documentary photography, and—but there was no—there was no preformed image that I had to be aware of, or adhere to. You know, I could make the snow out of Gold Medal flour, which by the way works great as snow. And in one particular session that Garry came over to my apartment in New Haven, he was standing off to the side with a can of Dust-Off and, sort of, spraying the Gold Medal flour, which sort of—the figures were larger. They were, I think, 1/35th scale or something that, 1/32, and it would almost adhere to their plastic bodies in the way that snow would adhere. So there was just, you know, enormous visual freedom and creativity that, you know, was there to utilize. And I think that, you know, that is what ended up making the book so powerful and as long-lasting, because it wasn't specific.

And, you know, there have been a number of instances where it would've been possible to make something that was more defined. I mean, we never thought of making *Hitler Moves East* as an antiwar statement, but the text, if you actually read it, which involves a lot of letters from German soldiers from Stalingrad and other writing, that the, sort of, fatalism and nihilism that comes across, you know, portraying the horror and the futility of that war. Now, obviously, it's from one perspective, predominantly, but, you know, we are—were able to glean some quotes and comments from Russian sources as well.

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But since Garry—neither Garry nor I had any proficiency in either German or Russian; we relied on translation. And fortunately, there is this one German soldier, Benno Zieser, who died at Stalingrad and kept a diary that was published in English, and a copy of which was housed at the Hoover Library at Stanford, which is their famous institute on war, revolution, and democracy, and that I had access to as a Stanford graduate, which, you know, was—Benno is quoted quite a bit in the book. He was very articulate about the situation that he found himself in, and as were—and this I found very interesting. There was a government documents library at Stanford at the main library, which was filled with all these Defense Department publications, and there were a lot from post-World War II where Defense officers had interviewed German officers and soldiers about the fighting on the Eastern Front. Because, you know, very soon after the end of the war, it became clear that there was going to be a cold war, and possibly a hot war, and understanding what it was like fighting in the Russian winter or in the Russian geography was considered significant. So there were a number of books based on these interviews that were absolutely fascinating, because they were essentially very clinical. Like, you know, this was what we had to do in this weather, and just, you know, the logistics and all of that. So there were all these great resources, which I read, and there's a very extensive bibliography in *Hitler Moves East*, and I actually read all those books.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But it was just amazing to me, but it made perfect sense, you know? Of course the Defense Department would be doing something like that and publishing it and, you know, storing it in libraries.

MATTHEW CRONIN: How did you come to start to work in the studio and move into a project like *Hitler Moves East*?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I started my second year in graduate school, and again, it was one of those totally coincidental, fortuitous circumstances. Our second year, we were supposed to undertake a thesis project. I had no idea, you know, what to do and, you know, or what I was thinking about doing. And I happened to be wandering through—there were two department stores in downtown New Haven. I was wandering through one right around, you know,

October, sort of the beginning of the Christmas holiday shopping period. And I don't know, maybe it was just, you know, my natural instincts, but I wandered through the toy, Christmas toy department, and I came across this Marx dollhouse, a metal dollhouse, and, you know, I remember the Marx Play Sets from my childhood. And I thought, a dollhouse, a dollhouse has rooms, I could make a photograph of each room and combine them, and that could be my thesis project.

Once again, sort of, not dissimilar to my experience about going to the Pacific Coast and expecting the sun to rise out of the water, when I got back to the house I was sharing and I had—it was a—like, a large summer house, so I had an extra room that I could use as a studio. It didn't—I wasn't really using it as such, but it was there, and I put the dollhouse together and started trying to photograph it. Now, lithograph tin is highly reflective and not easy to photograph, so it very quickly became clear to me that, you know, trying to light something like this—and the only lights, you know, we had available at those times were those big, large, sort of round lights that you would bounce off the ceiling or something, which didn't help with the—with all the reflection.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Now, were you working with a view camera, or a 35mm?

[00:10:01]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: No, I was working—I worked pretty exclusively, actually absolutely exclusively, with 2-1/4 Rollei camera, which I loved. It was much like a Hasselblad but significantly better, because built into it was a bellows that you could extend quite far, and give you, like, one-to-one magnification. And you could also flip the lens around, and it became a macro lens, and it could tilt, and it did all these things that, you know, with Hasselblad you'd need extra equipment to undertake. And I had gotten that I think the summer of my junior year at Stanford. We had gone to Europe on a family trip, and I was the cause for a slight diversion into Germany so that I could buy this camera, at what I thought was going to be a very—much better price. And I'm not even sure—it probably was available in the U.S. or—but maybe just barely, but I—that was the I camera used, you know, for years and years, and all the *Hitler Moves East* images were taken that.

So after my failure with the dollhouse, I went back to the toy department and wandered through and saw a plastic bag of cowboys and Indians and two boxes of World War II soldiers, one German and one British, made by the Britains company, which were—had a lot of detail in them, and I had remembered them, you know, Britains toys from my childhood, as well. So I did the archetypal graduate student thing, I purchased these, and I had them giftwrapped and then I photographed them giftwrapped. This was, you know, back at the art and architecture building at Yale one night, and then I photographed them, sort of, torn open a little bit, the box of toys pulled out, and then soldiers coming out of the box, and I photographed them on like a white seamless paper.

The moment I took the Britains figures out of the box and set them up and photographed them, there was like a little plastic tree and a little plastic, sort of, brush, and I think there were probably five soldiers in each box. The moment I started photographing, it just—it was like I was transported back to my childhood when I used to play with Britains soldiers on the floor and, you know, set them all up and do all these things, and I just became fixated on that. And this was shortly before the, you know, very long winter break, and I was meeting my family in Aspen to go skiing, and then going back to California for another four-and-a-half weeks, or so. And I have been—I guess I was talking about, you know, the photographs, I'm sure; you know, my father is always inquisitive, you know, what was I doing. And I remember my youngest brother Dan was young enough that, you know, he wouldn't ski the full day, and he and my mother would go and have, you know, hot chocolate or something. And I remember one night he was telling me that he had found this toy store in Aspen, and in the window was this very—this box of HO scale, which is very small scale, 1/72nd scale. There was like a World War II battle scene on the cover of the box, and I went over and found the store and bought—I think they had a couple different sets. I bought whatever they had, and the boxes were, you know, probably 12-by-24, or 28 inches, and the illustration—

[00:14:59]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —was very graphic. It was like in comic books when I was a kid, you'd

see these ads for Roman figure—you know, you'd see this elaborate illustration of Romans fighting, you know, the Goths or someone, and very colorful in detail. And, you know, for one dollar, you would send off to the Helen of Toy Company in Troy, New York, which I always loved. I still—

MATTHEW CRONIN: It is an amazing—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —I still have some of those—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —name.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —yeah, yes, the name was. And, of course, you'd get this little box, and the figures were plastic figures that were monochromatic and bore no resemblance to the illustration. The same was, sort of, true of these World War II sets. There were two boxes of figures, and then there was like some, sort of, plastic creation, whether it was an artillery at a beachhead, sort of, you know, supposedly Normandy or something, or a pontoon bridge. And the boxes were colorful, but, you know, the figures were all monochromatic and small.

And I started setting them up on the floor of my room, and I borrowed some—my brother Dan, again very helpful, had a Kinder City play set of blocks of—wooden blocks, with, like, little windows painted, you know, buildings, and you could put a little chimney on them, and they're some different sizes. So I used those as sort of a city, and I would set up my little—these little plastic figures on the floor and, you know, knocked them over when they were dead. And essentially lying on the floor with my Rollei, which, you know, gave me this very narrow depth of field, which I started to understand, allowed me to create a sense of semi-realism because things were so out of focus. And I took hundreds and hundreds of photographs, made all these prints.

And I came back to Yale for, you know, our sort of portfolio thesis review, "What have you been doing," and my classmates brought in, you know, these beautifully overmatted—my friend Jerry Thompson was using the same developer formula that Edward Weston had used, and, you know, Jerry was—everything was so meticulous and absolutely gorgeous prints, you know, that he had shot with an 8x10 camera. And when it was my turn, I came in with, you know, like four or five boxes, Kodalith boxes and just started stacking prints in front of the various faculty members. And there was a visiting artist, Linda Connor, who is a photographer from San Francisco from the Art Institute, and there was pretty much silence except for Linda saying, "Ah, these are amazing, these are wonderful," you know. And it wasn't like they—the faculty at Yale was, you know, like saying, oh, don't do this, but it was just nobody had ever seen anything even vaguely similar to it. But Linda's enthusiasm was so supportive, and I used to use the analogy, you know, when you take high school physics, they put a hockey puck on dry ice, and you just touch it and it just keeps moving because there's no friction. So Linda was like that, that little push. You know, that was all I needed and, you know, just—I was just so into it.

And, you know, we had a kind of a shared—you know, the darkroom, there was a shared washer for all the prints, so they'd all be circulating around; you'd see, you know, other people's prints and stuff. And I remember there was this one photograph I had done. I had taken a very small plastic airplane that had been painted, and I hung it from the ceiling of my little room and had swung it back and forth over, like, a little scene. And I remember there was one of the graduate students in painting, was down in the basement for some reason, and was like, "Oh, were you flying in, like, the plane next to this?" And I looked and thought, "How much marijuana have you been smoking?"

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: You know, "This is a toy," but, you know, because it was so different.

[00:05:25]

There was even one night where one of my classmates—there were 15 of us; four of us were photographers, and the other 11 were all graphic designers, and that was the serious program. We were kind of in nursery school. And there was one night where one of the design students, Michael Graham, who used to do crosshatch drawings—I mean, we always joked that Michael should have been alive during the Middle Ages because he was just so patient and meticulous, and, you know, his desk was just piled with all this stuff. And I had these little tanks, they were quite small, maybe a couple of inches, but, you know, had detail

on them, and Michael asked if he could paint one of them for me. I said, "Sure." And suddenly, it became sort of like Tom Sawyer's fence. You know, I remember one of the other —Mindy, I think, asked if she could paint one, and she started painting it in like black and orange because she'd gone to Princeton, and Mike goes, "Mindy, that's not camouflage," and Mindy said, "It is if I say it is," and somebody—I mean, there were like four of them who were painting beautiful camouflage, and I still have them. And it was—you know, it was like—you know, it was probably around eleven-thirty or midnight, and people just need to de-stress. But it was part of that kind of collegial atmosphere of the basement studio where you went in, you know, at eight-thirty or nine o'clock in the morning and, you know, you'd have a break for lunch, and, you know, we'd go out as a—in various groups for dinner, or whatever. But we were there, that's where we were, you know, all the time. So it just—you know, I became just so, sort of, focused on that.

And it turned out that for his thesis, Garry was creating a faux biography of a German Luftwaffe pilot using only graphic imagery and photographs; so, no text. Symbols and things. And I had come across this book, I guess I was up in Boston or Cambridge visiting some friends, and, you know, they have all those book stalls in the Harvard Square. And I saw this book by this German writer Paul Carrell, and it was called *Hitler Moves East,* and it was written in a style that was very similar to Cornelius Ryan in *The Longest Day*. You know, it read like a narrative, it wasn't, like, dry history, it was, you know, filled with personal anecdotes from various soldiers, or instances that—you know, it read like a novel. And I remember reading that, and, you know, they were—you know, it was—I think there might've been a few illustrations in it, some documentary photographs from the Eastern Front by, you know, German photographers. And it became something that, you know, I enjoyed reading it. I wasn't focused on the Eastern Front at all at that time, but—

And it turned out many years later, when we did the—I guess it was the 35th, or—we did an anniversary edition of *Hitler Moves East* to help raise funds for the Wounded Warrior Project that Garry was very involved with. And we were able to coerce our friend Roger Rosenblatt to write, like, a new preface for it. And Roger was asking me about, you know, the original book that I had found, *Hitler Moves East*, and I—thanks to, you know, Google, I was able to research Paul Carrell, and find out that in fact that was not his real name. His real name was Paul Schmidt, and he had been the secretary to Count von Ribbentrop, who was essentially the secretary of state for Hitler. And Paul Schmidt-slash-Carrell had been, I guess, questioned at Nuremberg, but you know, his—he was just a reporter, he was just a newspaperman, never charged with anything. I remember when I discovered this, sharing this with Garry, and he said, "Well, I guess we weren't that careful about who our sources were."

[They laugh.]

[00:10:59]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But I remember at the time when I was in graduate school, thinking of using titles for my photographs, and maybe taking them from *Hitler Moves East*. And I remember the process, and I thought about it, you know, basically using the titles from some of the illustrations, and I came to the conclusion that the photographs weren't ready for that. I don't know what or how or why, but again, very fortuitous because, you know, the work grew so much.

Now, what happened was, you know, Garry and I exchanged some—you know, he gave me some pieces from his thesis project, and, you know, I had given him some of the Kodalith prints, and he happened to have them up in his house in New Haven. You know, obviously, he, you know, was very involved with *Doonesbury*, and at one point his publishers John McMeel and Jim Andrews saw my work, and, you know, they knew Garry's work, and they said, "Why don't the two of you do a book together?" And, you know, my response was, "Well, that sounds cool," you know?

And I do remember when we got the contract, we got an advance of $1500 that we split, and when Garry—before he gave me the check, he said, "Now, just remember, if you cash this check, we really have to make this book." Now, we were supposed to turn the manuscript in in a year. Three and a half years later—there was a lot going on. You know, in the interim, Garry received a Pulitzer for *Doonesbury*, *Doonesbury* became, you know, huge, but we also —we would get together like once a week or so, and we had this routine. We'd go over to the Yale gym, we'd play squash, Garry would insist that we run on their indoor track for some

reason, and then we'd go over to the International House of Pancakes. We'd drive over, and I would always have, like, dollar-sized pancakes, bacon, and hashbrowns, and Garry had some mega plate of something. And we would walk, you know, in the parking lot, and Garry would always say, "Oh, I ate too much." I mean, it was always, always like this. And then we'd find some sort of war-related movie to go see like—I don't know if it was Alex—Alec Guinness who did, like, *The Last 10 Days of Hitler* or some—you know, we'd go to the megaplex in Orange, Connecticut, and not making any progress at all with what we were—I mean, I was, you know, building scenes and photographing, but I was still using the really small figures, and they were unpainted. And, you know, I was trying to set them up in a somewhat more historical or, you know, logical set with the little tanks and things. And one time, I happened upon these four Russian soldiers in their winter jackets, sort of, running with their rifles, with bayonets I think, and they were painted, and I photograph them—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —and I'm—you know, I remember showing them to Garry, and he said, "Oh, this is great, you should paint all the figures." Now, at which point, you know, HO scale figures are really small, and I had hundreds and hundreds of them, and I actually did end up painting a small group of Germans in four-color camouflage in that scale. I don't know how in the world I accomplished that. I can't blame Garry for my poor eyesight, I had poor eyesight before that, but it certainly didn't help.

And at around that time, I came across these larger plastic figures that were unbuilt. They came in—again, the box with great artwork, but when you opened it up, they were like a chest, there were legs, there were heads, there were arms, but you could put them either in the positions as they were pictured on the box, or you could create variations, which was very useful. But their size was great, you know, they were, I don't know, two inches tall maybe, or maybe a little bit less, but—and they were in very active poses. With the plastic figures there was a very limited number of poses. There was one in particular of a German soldier running with a machine gun and carrying the ammunition, who was a great figure because he was so active. He was featured in a lot of my photographs, and Garry used to refer to him as the German soldier with the lunchbox. So with these larger figures, I had a lot more flexibility, and they were much more detailed.

And I also learned from somebody at one of the hobby stores, a hobby building trick, which is you paint them while they're on the screws and then take them off and glue them, and then you can just repair the little piece—it makes life so much easier, and that just opened up a world of so much more detail. And so I was able to create these more active figures, and, you know, get close to them, and I would say probably 70 percent of the photographs in the book are with these larger figures. There's still some with the plastic figures that were in there, some of the painted ones. And there's one photograph in particular that, every time I look at it, I don't really cringe, but I feel like if I'd only known it was going to take so long between when Garry finished designing the book and when we went to press. It's a picture of two of the painted Russian soldiers in their great coats, in rubble, in what is supposed to be Stalingrad, and a German soldier with his arms up in the air surrendering. The German soldier is actually, sort of, tan colored, because he's a member of the Afrika Corps, but he was the only German who had his arms raised, and he was wearing shorts, which was—given that it was, you know, winter in Stalingrad; under any circumstance, you want to surrender, but every time I look at that, I think, oh. Now, most people probably don't notice that, you know, it's like a little—

MATTHEW CRONIN: But I'm sure it might be the only thing you see in that picture.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: It is—I just see that and I think—you know? Now, would I have been able to make a German soldier with his arms raised? Maybe, from, you know, the larger figures, I could get two arms that kind of went up. But, yeah, it was—you know, the whole project, I felt like there were three iterations of the work. You know, the very early work, sort of the second work with the—you know, the smaller figures, and then this sort of last stage when I had this apartment in New Haven. I had a four-by-eight-foot table, and then another table on the other side, and the four-by-eight-foot table, I had divided into like three, sort of, different scenes.

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One of the things that was so important to me was how do you create the Russian steppes, and I tried all kinds of things like paintbrush bristle—you know, and nothing worked. And I happened to be walking through a Caldor's; I don't think they still exist anymore, but they were in Connecticut, and they were like a big sort of—not Walmart but, you know, everything you needed was there at the Caldor's. In order to get to the parking lot to exit, I had to go through the gardening department. And as I'm walking through, I see this bag that says potting soil, and then there's another thing that said "grass filler seed," and I thought, why not? So I built this little, you know, probably three-by-three-foot square of—you know, I poured the potting soil and I put the grass seed on it. And I would water it with, like, an empty—one of those large family-sized Coke bottles with some holes put in the cap, and the stuff grew, it was amazing. And because it was indoors, the grass was kind of pale, so it really photographed much more like a wheat field. And I remember I had a good friend who, when I went back to California for Christmas, wanted to use my apartment because he was writing his dissertation, and he just wanted a place he could go, you know, away from his wife and just type away. And I told Bob, "I'm happy to have you stay there, but every, like, couple of days, could you water my little grass, and be sure to cut it with the scissors, because otherwise it would go from wheat field to jungle." So next to the jungle, I used the rest of the potting soil. I took a, like, you know, one of those big garbage bags and built the dirt, sort of, around it, and took the bags sort of up on the ridge a little bit and created a lake, so I could photograph like, you know, tanks going across the river, or whatever. And I think the third part of that setup was, I think, buildings, and across the way was this other table that was all buildings and, you know, railroads and stuff.

And I remember the day Garry came over to, quote, unquote, help me. We were fueled by Hostess powdered sugar donuts, licorice, gigantic bottles of Coca-Cola; you know, it was like a 12-year-old's fantasy. And that's where we created that sort of famous shot of the soldier blowing up in the air where, on my little grass hill, I put some figures, and Garry took one of the figures and stuck a pin in him, and then sort of put him into the dirt. And I had gotten in this explosion powder from one of the theatrical stores in New Haven, because New Haven was a big center of drama. You know, there's the Yale drama school, but there were all these independent theaters there in the city, and so it was easy to find stuff like that. And I sprinkled a little bit on, and we lit it with a cotton ball, and it went *poof*.

And Garry said, "Here, give me that," and he started shaking the powder on—you know, behind the scene in this little, sort of, ravine, the way a 10-year-old would sprinkle salt on French fries at the bowling alley, you know, it was just massive amounts. So we lit it with a cotton ball, there was this sound like a shotgun going off in a closet, the cotton ball flew across the apartment, bounced off the window. Fortunately, it was the middle of the day, and there was I don't think anybody else in the apartment house. And I got this, you know, very dense negative with—just printed up so incredibly beautifully.

Now among the other things we did with the little town scene—first of all, Garry said, "I have a great idea, let's burn the whole city down." And I said, "Garry, you know what happens when you burn plastic, it just sort of goes up and it just, sort of, settles down."

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So he took one of these very small, little airplanes and made like a little, sort of—not really a hook but something you could thread some string through or thread through. And the idea was that we were going to slide the plane—we're going to light the plane on fire and slide it down the thread, and, you know, I set up the camera, so I could photograph it. Neither of us realized that, you know, the plane on fire was going to burn through the thread, so the plane, sort of, goes and then does a nose dive straight to the floor.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But it ended up being a great photograph, that's in the book with the flames coming out the back of the plane.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So we had a lot of fun, and I remember Garry saying to me, "God, if I had known you were having so much fun, I would've come over more often, this is great."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So it was—you know, it was a very interesting time because, like I said, when I would—even when I was a graduate student, you know, because it was Yale and because Walker Evans was teaching there, everybody would come to visit. Irving Penn came, you know, a number of people came, and they—I remember the head of the graphic design program would sometimes say, "Oh, David, get some of your photographs and show them to so-and-so," and the reaction was always like, "I've never seen anything like this." You know, the—which was, you know, very gratifying in some ways. I mean, it wasn't clear what they necessarily thought about it for, or—

MATTHEW CRONIN: Almost like an ambivalent—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, it was—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —type of reaction?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —no, it was just like, oh my God, this is, you know, really interesting, I've never seen anything like this. You know, this was, you know, long before Garry and I had the book project in mind. And I think, you know, we ended up on the title *Hitler Moves East* because of the paperback book that I had, which, you know, gave us some focus. You know, it was going to be the Eastern Front, and we definitely needed focus because we had no idea, you know. And, you know, we started—you know, I started looking at a lot of documentary work, and like I said, there was more and more coming out. The Russians had opened up their archives somewhat and so there was a lot more material. Before, the only material was really from German war photographers. So there were things that I could, you know, start to structure or at least think about, and, you know, particularly the snow scenes and, you know, the wheat fields and the fighting in the city.

And often—not often but occasionally—it didn't matter to me about the scale, because sometimes the way you photograph it, you wouldn't know that, you know, the building in the background was much bigger than it should've been, but it—you know, it photographed, it sort of fit in. Or, you know, I'd create rubble and have the soldiers, sort of, climbing over the rubble, and you know, just shooting and shooting and shooting. And I was able to use the darkroom at the art school, which was great, and, you know, printing and printing.

And then eventually I moved to Las Vegas because I was teaching there for a year, and—but I was able to fly back to the Bay Area almost every weekend, because this was 1975. There were all these flights from San Francisco to Las Vegas and Las Vegas to Miami, and they were all these big 747 planes flown by, oh, you know, a lot of airlines that have disappeared. But they were always trying to fill up the seats between San Francisco and Las Vegas because, you know, you had these huge planes. So, literally, a flight from Las Vegas to San—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —Francisco was like $15.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Wow.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And—so, you know, I'd—so I'd fly home and print in the darkroom, and I taught Tuesdays and Thursdays, so if I left Thursday night, I had, you know, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and then I'd come back on Monday, so I could get a lot of printing done. And it wasn't every weekend, but it was, you know, a lot, because, you know, I was trying to do all the prints for the book. And, you know, I would simply send Garry boxes and boxes of prints, and finally, he brought in Steve Byers, who was a classmate of ours in the design program, and who was—he and Garry, sort of, sat down and, you know, started editing and laying it out and, you know, putting it into some sort of coherent book form.

MATTHEW CRONIN: How many pictures do you think you had made in total, up until that point?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Oh, God, I have—

MATTHEW CRONIN: It's like—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —I have—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —incountable, or uncountable?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —no idea. I believe in the book there were somewhere around 60-something, 65, somewhere in that neighborhood, but there were hundreds and hundreds of prints that I made. And at a certain point Garry would ask me to scale a specific print to a certain size, or maybe print a certain part of the print. And it was funny, because I remember going to visit Garry at his mother's in Connecticut. They had this—she had this beautiful home on these grounds in Pound Ridge, I think it's Connecticut and not New York, but it was very lovely. Garry had this room where he had all this stuff laid out, and he was giving me back a lot of the prints. And he was very apologetic because he'd used, like, a red felt pen to, like, mark things on the photographs. And I was like—there's no shortage of photographs! And now, you know, I have all those prints separated because they have the hand of Garry Trudeau on them. But, you know, they put together, you know, the boards, because it was still—that's how you did things in those days, and they shot the film, the film was shot by Eastern Press, and, you know, the book eventually came out and—

So it was—yeah—for me, it was really the genesis of everything that I've done since. I mean, it not—it would not have happened without *Hitler Moves East*. I don't know what I would've done, but it just started everything. And the—for whatever success the book had and, you know, there was a—I put together a little traveling show that went to a number of university museums, and to a gallery in Albuquerque. And it's funny, because the person who ran that gallery in Albuquerque is now at Buffalo and so, you know, there's these interactions from years and years ago, and he's been trying to organize an exhibition of my work at University of Buffalo, which, you know, got—COVID-postponed. But Bob Hirsch, you know, is somebody I've known since the late '70s when the book came out, and I was, you know, sending things around and people were responding by saying, you know, "Yeah, I'd love to do a show."

And one of my classmates became a teacher at CalArts in Southern California and arranged to do a *Hitler Moves East* show, and, you know. I was smart enough to go to—well, first of all, I needed to go to those because I was giving a talk, but there, I pretty much spent like an entire year just working on that show and, you know, sort of promoting the work. And it sort of delayed my starting another project.

You know, I always had loved Edward Hopper's paintings, and I had an idea of trying to recreate some of that imagery with toy figures, which I never—at that time had not undertaken. I mean, you know, I ended up going off to business school. When I started photographing again, you know, in my sister's room, that's what I started with, were these tiny, little figures and making these little rooms with dollhouse, you know, wallpaper, and cutting the little windows with an X-Acto knife, and that eventually became *Modern Romance*, which is more than I'd ever envisioned. But with the inability to find a teaching job and, you know, spending all that time working on *Hitler Moves East*, which I don't in any way regret, but I wasn't making new work. But when I finally did, you know, three and a half years later, I ended up doing that.

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And I remember trying—prior to that, trying to set up a little scene of a railroad track and train, and a little girl standing off to the side, and I may have that photograph somewhere. I—probably if I shot it, it was like an SX-70 Polaroid, but, you know, I never had the energy or the motivation to like, oh, this isn't working, you know, I think I'll go to business school. But it—you know, it all came around. You know, that was the first project that really came about, that and photographing, you know, the cowboys and Indians again with the SX-70, and then being invited by Polaroid to use the 20x24, and it just, you know, sort of took off from there.

MATTHEW CRONIN: I think that that's amazing, and I think this might be a good place to break for the day.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Okay, all right.

MATTHEW CRONIN: So let's—this concludes session number one. Thank you very much, and we'll—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Oh, thank you.

MATTHEW CRONIN: —pick this back up tomorrow.

[00:06:59]

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MATTHEW CRONIN: This is Matthew Cronin interviewing David Levinthal at the artist's studio in Jersey City on October 5, 2021, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two. Good morning, David.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Good morning, Matt.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yesterday when we were talking, I was struck by something you said about when you first started photographing figures, and lying on the floor really took you back to being a child, and I was wondering, what you were like as a kid?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Well, I was—I'm the oldest of four, so I remember my sister once saying to my mother, you know, this is after my sister had had children, like, "How did you manage, you know, four children?" And my mother said, "Well, David was just like another parent," and I thought that was, you know, a compliment from my mother. I'm not sure—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —my siblings felt the same way. I think I was always very—I don't want to say introverted, but I enjoyed, sort of, time by myself, and, you know, I enjoyed reading, I enjoyed playing with my toy soldiers.

I forget how old I was, but my parents had gone to Europe. My father had science meetings that he went to every summer. He said the main purpose of the meetings was to decide which wonderful European city they would hold next year's meeting in. And they had spent—I think it was in London, and they had spent some time traveling, and they brought back this enormous box set of Britains toy soldiers. They were, I think, marching and—you know, but it was like a two-layer, big box. And I enjoyed, you know, setting those up on my floor, and acquiring more Britains toy soldiers. And I made a map of my floor and divided it into essentially different territories to—you know, for each, sort of, group of figures, and then I would have sort of battles between them, and have to redraw the—you know, lines of the territory. And I particularly remember the Black Watch charging Scotsmen who were always very successful, because, unlike a lot of the, you know, other figures who were just marching, they were charging with their bayonets, so therefore they would win most of the battles.

And I was always quite fascinated with history, and I remember at the Menlo Park Library, which my mother would sometimes drop us off at or drop me off at, they had this incredible two-volume *The West Point Atlas of Military History*, which went through all the American wars with these wonderful maps and the little, sort of, demarcation of units and how they move. And so there'd be, like—say, the Battle of Yorktown, there'd be a number of maps showing different parts of the battles, and I absolutely was fascinated by this.

And I guess I was somewhat of a precocious child. I remember coming across this ad for the History Book Club in some magazine that I was reading. I think it might've been the *New Republic,* and I was, you know, still, you know, barely a teen, I'm not even sure I was a teenager at the time. But if you subscribe—if you became a member, as a gift, you received this two-volume *West Point Atlas,* so I decided to subscribe. I think you only had to buy three books a year. You know, they'd send you things on a monthly basis, but, you know, you could return the ones you didn't want.

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One of the books I received was *Operation Barbarossa* [*sic - Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945* –Ed.], which I believe was written by Alan Clark and—which was about—[coughs]—excuse me—the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. And, of course, you know, many years later, I work on creating this book with Garry about essentially that same conflict, but history was always interesting. I remember reading Bruce Catton's series of books on the Civil War, which were again in that, kind of, almost narrative style, so that they—it wasn't like reading just sort of dry history, it seemed very active, and you were very engaged. And I think those interests are things that really guided me a lot in things that many years later I ended up working on.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, one of the things I think is really fascinating about artists, and I think about myself in this case as well, is the things that we engaged in, for either hobbies or a fun pastime, in childhood, that finds a way back into the working process down the road. And I think it's particularly evident in your work given a lot of the subject matter and, like, the way you construct pictures.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, I know it's—I think it's very true. I even remember, I believe in seventh grade, we were studying U.S. history, and each student had to make some sort of presentation. And I remember I brought in the American Heritage Game of the Civil War, which had, you know, the Calvary figures, and the infantry figures, and I think—and artillery pieces, and I used that to describe some battle. And I remember one of my classmates going like, "How am I going to compete with that?"

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But, you know, I was very intrigued by that and some of the early strategy games from this company called Avalon Hill that were initially just, sort of, generic, but then very specific to, say, the Battle of Gettysburg, or—one of their games that I played a lot with a friend of mine was Stalingrad, and I don't think I ever lost, regardless of whether I was the Russians or the Germans. I had a very good strategy for both. But, yeah, all those things are sort of there under the surface and then, you know, as you're developing as an artist, I think sometimes—you know, most often very unconsciously, but sometimes, you know, a little bit more consciously.

I remember when Garry and I were working on *Hitler Moves East*, there was this magazine that I subscribed to called *Strategy & Tactics,* and, you know, you always got like a little, sort of, war game included. But at that point, the war games had become so complex, but they had one that was the Eastern Front, and I felt obligated to acquire this, and the maps just by themselves completely would cover the floor of my apartment. In fact, in the photograph of Garry and I that's on the inside flap of *Hitler Moves East*, I think you can sort of see in the background, there's sort of a map on the wall. That's a small portion of the map from this game.

There were so many pieces. You know, it was down to like minuscule detail, and the instruction manual was the equivalent of trying to read a book on how to program in COBOL back when, you know, I was in high school or something, just virtually indecipherable. And you could never—no one could ever remember what the rules were unless they were completely addicted to this. I never actually played the game; I don't think I ever even punched out the little squares of the different units, but I did put up the map on the wall.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: It made me realize that, you know, there was not enough time in my lifetime for me to even begin to understand how to play this game, so.

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But it is, it is true that, you know, a lot of stuff sort of comes back, and, you know, even with the figures that I work with today, a lot of my cowboy figures are from this German company called Elastolin, and when I was a child, I think, for a very early Christmas present, I think in the photograph, it's—I'm three and a half, or something like that, but I'm lying on the floor with these figures and a—sort of a wooden house, and the figures were all hand-painted and made in Germany. There was this process of putting, sort of, a clay-like material called composition, which I think was like clay and sawdust mixture, and with an inner wire armature. And then they were meticulously hand painted in this little town called Rothenburg ob der Tauber outside of Nuremberg, that was kind of the toy—Nuremberg was the toy capital of Germany, and this was one of the last remaining entirely walled cities in Europe. And you could buy these figures, you know, individually. There was a little store in Palo Alto, and, you know, I'd go down there with, you know, a couple of dollars or whatever, and I'd buy like, you know, one cowboy figure. They also made some, you know, military figures, like World War II Americans, but it was really the cowboys that I was most fascinated by.

And for some reason when I was a junior in college, and this had nothing to do with, you know, my interest in photography, but I kept thinking about these figures. I still had a few that managed to survive my two younger brothers, and, you know, they were also, you

know, fragile, I mean, and a number them, like the composition had broken off part of the standing figure's rifle, or whatever. But I went to visit the store where I used to get them, it had become now a, sort of, luggage store, but the owner was still the same person. And I remember asking him, you know, if these figures were still available, and he said, "Oh, you know, they stopped making them because all of the older women in the town had, you know, essentially passed on, and there was nobody really interested in keeping this up."

Now, years later, you know, they started making them out of plastic, but it was a very well-molded plastic and very well painted. And they were made, I think, in Macau, and—but it was essentially the same figures, but they've been translated from this, sort of, early cowboy that looked more like a Tom Mix cowboy to, sort of, more contemporary-looking cowboys that could have been in a '50s western. And, you know, there again, that was something from my past that became very much a part of my present.

And it was interesting, at one point they also made the little, HO-scale figures that I used in the *Modern Romance*, and I wrote a letter to the company. And I think was going to Europe for some reason, and I think maybe meeting my family—

[00:14:59]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —for a trip, and I went to Nuremberg and—specifically so I could go to Rothenburg ob der Tauber, and they wrote me back, they said, "You know, we'd be delighted," you know. It was a very sort of *Twilight Zone* experience, because I took the train from Nuremberg and we arrived in—you know, it was like this little, two-car train, and we get to the station. You know, the—you—you know, you open up the, you know, German or European trains, you open up the door, you step out, there's nobody in the station, there's nothing. And, you know, I walk to the town, and it was completely closed. I mean, every shop was closed; you know, you could look in the windows. And I remember walking around, and I finally came upon a couple of other tourists, and, you know, we walked back to the railroad station, and eventually, a train came, the doors slid open. There was no evidence that there was anybody running the train.

[They laugh.]

And we got in and I'm thinking, "Okay, well, it's going to take us somewhere," and it took us back to Nuremberg.

It turned out that that day was a state holiday. And I'm not sure it was—if it was Bavaria, but I, you know, realized that when I got back to the hotel in Nuremberg and saw, you know, the news, and I thought, oh, you know, everything's closed. But, you know, you're walking around this walled city, and you could, you know, climb up the steps, and—but there was not a single person in the town.

Now, the trip was not fruitless because Nuremberg, being the toy capital of Germany, the following day I went around to these stores and got a suitcase full of what are called flat figures that are painted on both sides, and you can also get them unpainted, but they have a sense of three dimensionality to them. And—but was it was an interesting experience—[laughs]—and I do recall, I had so many of them, that in the taking the train to meet my family in Italy, you know, they have custom inspectors. This was pre-European Union, and, you know, they were looking through my suitcase, and they saw all these toy figures. And I remember these two customs guys were just like—their eyes were popping out. I think they thought like I was a salesman of some kind, which is an issue I've had sometimes coming back to the U.S., going through customs when I'll have a suitcase full of toys, even though there's no duty on toys. This one customs woman was insistent that I was, you know, bringing these back for sale. And, you know, I think I fortunately had one of my catalogues or something, but even that didn't seem to persuade her. But it's—you know, the world of toys, just, sort of, going off on a slight diversion—

MATTHEW CRONIN: Oh, please do.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —it's been kind of fascinating to me. You know, you'd get into these—all these different subcultures. Like, with the HO figures, it was sort of the HO train subculture. And, you know, knowing the stores; I mean, I knew the stores in the Bay Area. There's a—one that had taken over an old supermarket in this shopping complex where there was a

Sears and so it was enormous, but it was all about models, and particularly train models. And that's where I got some of the early Airfix war sets that my brother had first spotted in Aspen. And, you know, I started adding little things like telephone poles and trees, and I found a bridge that was already constructed. And when I was, you know, doing the toy soldiers during my break from—from Yale, again it was one of those, you know, great graduate student kind of ideas. I thought to myself, I've got this bridge, and I'd set up my little Kinder City. I made a little river out of butcher paper and I think blue paint or something, and I thought, I'm going to light the bridge on fire.

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I'm going to turn out the lights, going to light the bridge on fire, because the fire will be real, but the bridge is a toy, and there'll be some sort of great sort of gestalt happening with that. And I tried to be careful; I put several layers of aluminum foil underneath my faux river and proceeded to light the bridge on fire and take these photographs, and they were incredible. Even more incredible was the one I took after the bridge had burned, and I turned the lights back on. It reminded me so much of the documentary photographs I'd seen in *Life* magazine of destroyed bridges in Europe during World War II.

Now, unfortunately, despite my forethought and planning, I neglected to understand how hot melted plastic can be. And we had the—downstairs, where all the kids' rooms were and the sort of playroom, we had linoleum flooring, and my experiment had melted a very small part of that linoleum, and so I went upstairs, and I told my mother who was in the kitchen. I said, you know, "I'm really sorry, you know, I tried to be careful, but, you know, this happened," and she looked at me, and she said, "You know, I never liked those linoleum floors." And the next time I came back to California, we had beautiful parquet floors in all the kids' rooms and downstairs in the bedroom.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So it was sort of, you know, a win-win situation.

But, you know, going to these stores, and it was always sort of fun because there was this one in particular that was down near San Jose, and, you know, I had sort of made a circuit of them. And I remember going in there, like on a Saturday or something, and there was a group of men, you know, some of them—they're there sitting around talking about the old railroad yards up in San Francisco. And I remember, you know, I was picking out a bunch of things and I brought them to the counter, and one of the guys said to the owner, who was also part of this conversation, he said, "Hey, you got a real customer there."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But it was just—you know, it was interesting listening to their—you know, their stories, and, you know, they were always so helpful if I was—had an idea about something and didn't know quite what it was.

And there were a lot of things that were intended for a model railroading purpose that I could repurpose for other things. And they were these, sort of foam, what were supposed to be canyon walls that were kind of orange colored. And when I started working with the cowboy figures at the Polaroid Studio, I used them as a base, and I would put little bits of lichen to cover the base of the cowboy figures, and they photographed beautifully; it's sort of like desert rock.

But, you know, I've immersed myself in so many different worlds. There's also the, sort of, toy-collecting diorama world, and going to these toy shows. And I remember, I think *Hitler Moves East* was actually reviewed in one of the toy model magazines that got—and I remember going into San Antonio Hobby, which was this big toy store that was in the former grocery store, and, you know, I was a frequent patron. And the guy at the cashier, you know, I think I was using a credit card, and he recognized my name from the review, and so we talked a little bit, and I told him, you know, how I had gotten a—a lot of stuff from the store.

I also had a very—at one of these toy stores when I was buying the little tanks that—you know, that were maybe three inches long at most, the ones that my friends, classmates—were camouflaged for me. So I was in line and all those plastic, with the trucks and the tanks and things were in this case, and, you know, there were these little kids, and they'd get like one. So when it was my turn, I went up there, and I said, "Okay, like, I want three of those

tanks, I want two trucks, and four of those," and there was a little boy standing behind me with his father. And my girlfriend at the time who was standing with me told me later, the boy turned to his father and said, "That's what I want to be when I grow up."

[They laugh.]

[00:10:53]

MATTHEW CRONIN: Do you think that—well, with a lot of your projects, I think the subjects can be considered, like, heavy, from maybe like in terms of its subject matter. Do you think there's a purpose of having, like, a sense of joy and play within the work to get to some of the meat beneath the surface, so to speak?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I don't think necessarily play, and I'm not sure I'd use the word joy. I think there's more of a, sort of a satisfaction, you know, when I create a setup, and I—that's always the starting point, I'll often add figures as I'm going along, or if it's a larger setup, you know, pull certain figures out and sort of tighten it up in some ways. But it's more—it's like, you know, I have my stick figure notes, which someday will be enshrined in some museum somewhere, and people will go, "Oh my God, no wonder he became a photographer, because he certainly can't draw to save his life." But I'm sort of visualizing in a way, you know, the thought process I have when I sketch that out, or in the case of my current work on, you know, Vietnam, referencing documentary photographs.

The *Vietnam* series has become for me, in some ways—maybe I'm influenced from having watched *The Godfather Coda*, but I feel like *Hitler Moves East* was the genesis of everything that I went on to do. *Vietnam* to me is sort of the synthesis of all that, and it's really—I don't want to say it's the last major project, but, you know, I've been working on it for longer than I have anything else. I started collecting some of the figures, which were very hard to come by, they just weren't making them in—you know, I think the first ones were maybe the late '80s.

There was one Marx playset. Marx used to make these, what they called their miniature sets, which were HO scale, and they were all painted. In fact, on the side of the box, it said hand-painted by artists, and I always thought, well, you know, if things don't work out, there's an alternative. But they had a guerrilla warfare set, which was from the '60s and not very detailed, you know, the figures were relatively crude, but that was sort of it. And I think it was in the late '80s that King & Country started producing some figures, and they were very simplistic and almost stereotypical, particularly in the way—they had several African American soldiers but, you know, they—those figures would've been at home in the *Blackface* series. You know, the eyes were white, the lips were red, you know, it was definitely—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —a caricature. And I continued, sort of, because I was going to, you know, these toy shows and collecting shows, and, you know, I was very cognizant of, you know, what was coming out. And in the '90s there started to be a few things, but I think, you know, I've been collecting since then, and it's now, you know, 2021, and I'm, you know, having some beautiful custom dioramas made for me by a European artist. But I've been shooting, I think, as early as 2010, you know; not a lot, but starting I think in like 2019, 2018, it became more and more of a focus, and definitely 2019, 2020, and certainly now in 2021, that's exclusively, you know, what I'm shooting, and there's so much material.

I just met with George Corsillo who has designed my last four books, and a wonderful designer to work with, and again a Garry Trudeau connection. Because, a number of years ago, I did this series that I titled *I.E.D.* about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I had an exhibition at a gallery down in SoHo, Stellan Holm Gallery. And I remember Garry was at the opening, and we produced—the book had been produced by this publisher powerHouse. And Garry said to me, "You know, David, the work looks so beautiful, I wish you had a book to match that," because I was not that pleased with the book. It was—felt very pedestrian, and he said, "I want you to talk to George," and George and I just immediately hit it off. And I think our first project together was for an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and it was a large show called *War Games* about, sort of, my *Hitler Moves East*, my cowboy work, you know, and other aspects of my work that were, sort of, centered on, you

know, the western work, and things like that. And the book was gorgeous, and we proceeded to continue working. And so we just met last week to, sort of, start the process for the *Vietnam* book. And I do feel that the book and the work are, kind of, a culmination of everything I've done and all the skills that I've acquired. And sometimes even while I'm working, it can be something will happen that's very revealing. You know, obviously, I watch a lot of films, and *Platoon*, I can't even count the number of times. And it seems to be on some channel somewhere almost all the time, so if I'm channel surfing, and there's *Platoon*, I'll just jump into wherever they are in the film.

But I remember recently—I always have my notepad handy for ideas—a scene towards the end of the film where the two characters, Tom Berenger and Willem Dafoe are running through the jungle, sort of towards each other, and I decided to try and do a very close shot of a running figure in the jungle. And as I was photographing it and focusing, I found that using that narrow depth of field, by focusing, sort of, slightly off the figure, which gives them this sense of movement, you know, I created this image that I'm—was just thrilled with where it literally looks, you know, like he's running through the jungle. You can make out, you know, sort of, the hand on his helmet, and he's got his M16 in his other hand. But there's this sense of movement and that it was so present in that image, and it's present in some of my other images but more as an effect of, you know, I've got something sharper in front and something in the back looks like it's, you know, more out of focus and therefore moving.

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But it's made me want to go back to a number of scenes, or not necessarily a specific scene, but something like that and start using that technique. And it's something, you know, like I said, I've used a number of times but not quite to that same point. And so, you know, I'm working, and suddenly, it's like, that's a great idea. And it can be simple as—something as simple as I did this one setup, that was like a long line of tanks and armored personnel carriers and a lot of soldiers, kind of, walking across a field. And I did—you know, the first shot was, sort of, focusing on the back row and—you know, and then you'd sort of see—I forget, I think I had like six or eight lines of, you know, four soldiers. I'd—I used up all my, sort of, walking figures that I had. And I decided to raise the camera up and tilt it slightly so that I could get more view of the soldiers, and it really transformed the image, and it made it more powerful and more intriguing to me.

So I find, when I'm working, I'm always open to experimenting a little bit, you know, seeing if something might work in a way, or just looking at something from a slightly different angle. And I think there was one scene in particular where I used every single helicopter that I had, which was seven, and managed to set them up so that they were sort of increasing in height as you went back using these acrylic blocks that I have, which I had to kind of cover up with lichen, so, you know, you wouldn't see the reflections off of them. But it became this amazing photograph that was something I really wanted to capture, because so much about the Vietnam War was about helicopters, and you'd see all these photographs where, like, just a sea of helicopters coming in. And then I started adding some figures coming out of the helicopters but still keeping that same background, which, you know, by the time I had the figures in front, you really didn't—you couldn't see all the helicopters, but you could kind of feel them. You would get the sense that they were there, and, you know, when you saw, you know, sort of, these black lines crossing that those were the propellers.

So I—I'm always very open to the process and not wedded to, you know, any fixed idea. Where I start may be based on a photograph or a sketch, but where I end up simply by the process of photographing and thinking, well, what about if I put this figure here, and, you know, it will transform the image, it will become something completely different. But I find that's where I think the work really goes in the best direction.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Right, you have to, like, work past that initial impulse—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —to get to something—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —or—or—

MATTHEW CRONIN: —surprising—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —through it.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And the initial impulse may still be a good photograph—

MATTHEW CRONIN: Right.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —but suddenly, it leads me to something that I hadn't really thought of, and just a change in perspective. You know, maybe turning a building around, so I'm shooting through the doorway instead of this figure coming out of the doorway.

MATTHEW CRONIN: And have you always had that sense of, like, openness and experimentation, or is that something that has sort of been afforded to you through, like, a digital camera, or has that allowed you to pursue that even further than maybe before?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I think a lot of it has to do with using a digital camera. You know, for 20 years, I was basically using the 20x24 Polaroid, and while I would, you know, experiment, and, you know, I had a pretty good idea of what and where—where I wanted to start. And, you know, I worked with John Rudder who ran the studio, and then the wonderful thing was John took care of all the technical, you know, the lighting and everything. And, you know, over that period of time, we obviously got to know each other, you know, very, very well and, you know, he sort of knew what I was looking for. You know, the camera is enormous and very heavy and, you know, moving it around, and for my work, the bellows were, you know, extended out pretty much all the way.

When I first started using the Polaroid camera, I believe the price was $25 per exposure, or per print. Now, I was getting subsidized by Polaroid, so that every day I rented the studio I got a free day, and with the free day came 30 exposures, but, you know, I was shooting much, much more than that. But at the time, you know, $25, you know, it would cost me more to get a Cibachrome print made. So I was experimenting up to, you know, a certain point, but, you know, it was different. It's certainly different than working digitally.

And it was interesting that, at a certain point, Polaroid decided to—the artists who they were supporting, they decided to sort of change it so that you had to buy two days to get a free day. And, you know, I remember talking to Barbara Hitchcock, and I said, you know, "I'm totally fine with that," and she said, "Well, just write me a letter and let me know." So, many years later, I was up in Boston visiting with Barbara, and we were talking, and she said, you know, "You were the only artist who decided to continue," and I was kind of shocked, because it was still a 30 percent discount, but apparently the other artists were upset that it was no longer a 50 percent discount. And I said, "Well, you know, maybe it's byproduct of my having gone to business school, because 33 percent still sounded pretty good to me."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And—but, you know, then, you know, the prices continued to rise, and it got to the point where it just—you know, I had experimented a little bit with a Canon digital camera and never really went anywhere, because I felt like I was sort of going back to school and having to learn and stuff. And I felt like what—it was going to take some other motivation, and again, this winds its way back to my good friend Garry Trudeau and his brilliance and insightfulness. I decided, because there was—and I found this so fascinating. While the war in Iraq was actually being fought, King & Country, and another firm, Figarti, were both producing soldiers and civilians and—from that war, and I thought, this is so unique. You know, when I was playing with Civil War soldiers, you know, the Civil War had been over for quite some time, and even World War II, I don't think they were making soldiers—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —probably because of the war and shortages, but it seemed almost like they were creating things in real time. And when they came out with the Humvees for battle, they had a Humvee out not that long afterwards. I almost felt, like, are there toy people on the proving grounds watching these things come off the line and then making them? So I started doing some photographs, and I was using my 2-1/4 Rollei, which I had used, you

know, for *Hitler Moves East,* and I was photographing in color, color transparencies. And I was having lunch with Garry, and I brought him some of the things and, you know, just showed him a couple of the sheets, and he said, "You know these are really beautiful." But, you know, Garry was quite involved, he'd gone to Kuwait and, you know, he was —*Doonesbury* was very immersed in the war in Iraq, and Garry had become very involved with the Wounded Warriors Project. And Garry said to me, you know, "If you really want to photograph this war, you have to do it digitally, because that's how it's being recorded."

And I realized he was absolutely right as always, and I went out and got a used Hasselblad and started using it. And, you know, it took me a while, you know, to get used to it, or sort of into it, but—and my assistant Erin was helping me step-by-step, you know, like I was using a walker. And I was photographing all this at my home; I didn't really, you know, have a separate studio. And it became—what became so fascinating to me was that there was no limit to what you could photograph. I mean, you could just—it was endless, and you could really move things around and experiment and not feel like, well, that's going to cost me $125, and, you know, do I really want— you know, you weren't thinking about that. And that was, you know, really the beginning of my using a digital camera, which is, you know, what I've continued to work with to this day. But it was really that *I.E.D.* project that, sort of, made it become, you know, the main—really the sole tool for me.

I don't think I went back to the 20x24. I might have done some space toy photographs, which was a byproduct of having a young son and, you know, with my father's background in, you know, having worked with NASA. And I remember, you know, I had all these space toys because I had done a commercial project for IBM, a very large project with—back in the days where their ad budgets were unlimited. And I was working with Ogilvy & Mather and to create—as the art director said, "We want you to take something that's incredibly boring, which are computer peripherals, and make them interesting." And I was in this conference room, and there were probably 18 people sitting at this table, and they—he said, "Well, what —what do you—how do you think you'd do that?" And I paused for a moment, and I said, "Vintage space toys, because the vintage toys had such a projection of the future," and they loved the idea.

You know, I had a budget of $50,000 to buy vintage space toys. And, you know, they—they got a week of Polaroid Studio time just to experiment, and then there was going to be another two weeks, I think, of shooting. I mean, you know—and it was so funny because we had—there were a lot of people from the agency and from IBM who would come every day, and, you know, they'd have their laptops, and I remember asking one of them once, "Well, why are you guys here?" And they said, "It's a lot more interesting than being at the office."

[They laugh.]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: But not only was I paid a very significant amount of money on a daily basis, but we had catered breakfast and a catered lunch. And there was so much food, that I remember the assistants and the interns at the Polaroid Studio would, like, take the food home to Brooklyn for, you know, breakfast and lunch and dinner. It was—

MATTHEW CRONIN: I've done that move myself plenty of times.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —it was copious amounts of food. Now, it was true that we were, you know, working from, really, eight in the morning till eight at night. I mean, it was—I would get back to my studio, and I would just like collapse and just, like—but for what they were paying me, it was, you know, worth getting up in the morning.

But at one—you know, I had all these toys, so Sam is, sort of, interested in space, and I thought, "Why don't I take some of them, we'll—you know, go down to the Polaroid Studio, or I'll go down, I'll just sort of fool around," and Sam—my wife can bring Sam over, you know, after preschool, or whatever. And so Sam comes to the Polaroid Studio, and, you know, he seems to be enjoying it, and he's playing with a bunch of the toys. And I remember, you know, the vintage toys were not inexpensive, and at one point, he was playing with something, you know, on the floor, and my wife said, "Well, how expensive is that?" And I said, "Oh, you know, for vintage space toys, it's probably not that much, I think it's like four or five hundred dollars," and she said, "Sam, put that back on the table, you know, pick up something, you know, rubbery or whatever."

But it was—and when I started photographing them, I was having so much fun that I extended it, you know, I—over, I guess the course of a month. You know, I probably went four more times or something like that, and created this short series of about less than 40, maybe 30-something, 35, 36 images of space toys, and, you know, courtesy of IBM—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —which let me keep all the toys after the shoot, which—you know, they didn't want them, and so I ended up with this very great collection, which I later supplemented.

In fact, it was funny; I, you know, became known in all the stores that sold vintage space toys in New York. And there was one in particular that was not that far away, and they had a Robby the Robot character. It was, I don't know, three and a half—you know, very tall, and it was expensive. It was either [$]750 or $900. So, we're at the Polaroid Studio, and one of the things IBM wanted photographed was this sort of credit card-sized card that was used to store data. And the art director from Ogilvy was saying, "Well, you know, I have this vision of it, something that's being held in a, like, mechanical hand or something," and I said, "Well, you know, there's this Robby the Robot figure that I saw at the store, and I didn't get it because it was expensive, and—" He said, "Get it, call them up." So I, you know, called them, and, you know, they knew me, and I said, "Do you still have that?" and he said, "Yes," and I said, "Can you hold it for me? I want to buy it," and I said, "How late are you open?" He said, "We're going to be open until you get here."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So it's—you know, it—it's sort of always been kind of fun for me to become immersed in all these different, little subcultures, whether it's the collectors of Black memorabilia, the toy soldiers, the dioramas, the museum-quality painted figures. Each one has its own kind of separate culture and identity, and it's fun to, sort of, mingle with that. And, you know, the stuff that's there—I mean, there's always something amazing that, you know, when I go to these shows and, you know, getting to know, you know, some of these dealers from Europe and elsewhere. And I've commissioned this one couple from Switzerland who make museum quality dioramas, mostly based on N.C. Wyeth paintings that they're very drawn to.

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And they've—I've purchased a couple of things and commissioned a few things from them, and they're—you know, you really enter into this world. This one piece is a bar fight, and the bar that they made has, you know, this beautiful mirror and the bottles, and so there's the reflections, and the figures are just, you know, unique. They're all sculpted and, you know, hand-painted by them. So you dip into these, you know, different worlds and draw, not only things to work with but, you know, sometimes ideas and inspirations. And conversely, if I have an idea, you know, based on maybe a famous painting, I can contact someone and say, you know, "Can you make me a diorama of this?" And, you know, they can produce it and allow me then to, you know, use that as a subject to work with.

And I remember, I got—there's that famous painting of Marat in his bathtub, you know, dying, and with, I think his manuscript, on the side of the tub. And I had someone make a little diorama of that for me to photograph. It was just—I don't know—you know, I've always loved, sort of, classical painting and historical painting and tried to draw upon that for imagery. And I remember one photograph that I did, I tried to recreate Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* using toy figures, and, you know, with very, very creative lighting was actually able to make it kind of work so that, you know, it came across as that, and so it's—yeah.

When we—when I was doing the work that became the history book, it came about in part because the George Eastman Museum was planning a retrospective. And I was working with Lisa Hostetler who was the curator, and who's written several essays for several of my publications, and just brilliant and so much fun to work with. And she was over at the—at my house, and we were talking about that, and I said, "Lisa, can I show you some things that I've been working on?" And Erin had been making some small digital prints of some of these scenes that I've been shooting with, you know, knights and, you know, just all kinds of different periods. And Lisa loved it, and she said, "You know, I have these two galleries that are sort of mine to curate. What about if we do a show before your retrospective, like, I don't

know, a year and a half, or two years before the retrospective to sort of introduce your work to our audience in Rochester?" And I said, "Oh, that sounds great," and she said, you know, like, "Do you have an idea for, you know, what you call this body of work?" And I think I remember sitting there at the table with Erin, and I said, "Well—"

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: "—maybe we'll call it *History*." Because it allowed me to go anywhere I wanted to, whereas in the past, if I were doing a Civil War scene, I'd feel like I needed to do a whole Civil War series and really extend it out. But with a title like *History*, I could go wherever I wanted and take as few or as many photographs. I could photograph a figure of Lawrence of Arabia, I could photograph, you know, knights jousting, I could photograph, you know, early America and the Revolutionary War, or anything, and didn't have to feel that it had to be an entire series in depth.

And originally, we—you know, the museum was going to do a small catalogue, and I have—somebody I—Donald Rosenfeld who used to have a gallery called Spike Gallery that I had showed with, and Donald's really a film producer, and has been for many years. And Donald has been so supportive and so generous over our over-20-year relationship. So when Lisa said something about, you know, we'll do, like, a little catalogue, Donald said, "We should do a book, let's do a book." So, you know, in comes George, and we start designing, you know, what became the *History* book and—which is, you know, a beautiful book. And then, you know, we did this show at George Eastman, and I forget, I don't know, we had maybe 15 or 18 very large prints, because I had started printing sort of 60-by-70-inch prints, which were the largest prints that my printmaker Gabe Greenberg could do on his Epson printer, and I loved the scale. I loved that it became something almost painterly in a way, and that it really would draw the viewer in, because there was so much landscape.

I had this one figure of the pose that John Wayne used to have in *The Searchers*, where he's sort of standing, you know, looking out into the horizon and, you know, with a rifle on his shoulder, and there's, like, a—the skull of a cow, you know, in the dirt. And so you have this photograph of him, and then this enormity of the scene around him that so captured the sense of *The Searchers*, and at that scale, and it's, yeah, now become my sort of favorite format now. You know, there's some restraints to that. Obviously you can't hang pieces that big, or that many of them, so I do make, you know, smaller digital prints, but as far as, you know, museum exhibitions, you know, that's my, sort of, preferred scale to work with.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, it really changes the way that, like, a viewer gets to engage with it. And I'm glad you brought that up, because I think—I was thinking about scale a lot with your work, having seen some of the larger prints and thinking about how that balances out the scale of the subjects that you're photographing. I really love the way that they're, like, being blown up to these quite massive proportions.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Well, you know, it's interesting; I think I first sort of came across that idea in its maybe basic form working with the 20x24 Polaroid, because when I was photographing, like, the small *American Beauties* figures or, you know, the cowboy figures, you don't really have a sense of scale looking at the Polaroid of how big that figure is, and it was particularly true with *Blackface*. You know, it could be a very small object, but in the Polaroid, it looked much, much larger and much more directed to you as a viewer.

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And that's one of the things I've always enjoyed about working with the toys and the figures, is you really don't have a sense of scale. So I think it makes the viewer utilize their imagination more to sort of visualize what it is they're looking at. And I know, you know, particularly when I would show people the little HO figures that are in *Modern Romance*, I mean, they're tiny. You know, I would move them around with tweezers and Elmer's glue to get them to stay in one place. And in—you know, with like the SX-70 instances I did of those, there really isn't a strong sense of scale.

But particularly now, with using the digital camera and, you know, the figures, there's just, kind of, no clue, which I really love. You know, it could be virtually any scale. It's all about, am I getting the sense that I'm trying to get in the image? And so, like, you know, when I was doing that helicopter scene, there were like three different scales of helicopters, but it didn't

—it didn't end up mattering because you weren't seeing them that sharply. It's just—you know, it's sort of like, what's going to work? And so I may use something that's meant for a railroad tunnel entry, and I used it in *Mein Kampf*. It actually in some ways created the *Mein Kampf* series, because I'd been in Graz, Austria, for this small—it was like a three-person show. Jim Casebere was one of the other artists, and Graz is, you know, is a small, a relatively small town, although it's one of the larger towns or cities in Austria, home to both Arnold Schwarzenegger and Kurt Waldheim. Quite a conservative—it's—I used to call it the Orange County of Austria, and my Austrian friends would say, "How can you tell?" Because the whole country is so conservative.

So as I always do when I'm somewhere, I wander around, and I found this, sort of, military memorabilia store, a very small shop in Graz, and I went in, and I saw couple of figures, Elastolin figures, and they were—one of them was of Hitler, and I knew that, you know, technically you weren't allowed to, you know, sell or show things like that. And there was a young woman working at the register, and so I asked her. I—there were two marching figures who were just German soldiers from World War II, and I said, "Oh, I was interested in those two and, oh, and this other figure." And the Hitler figure was actually broken off from its base, so you could see inside of it a little bit. And she said, "Oh, you know, you'll have to come back when my father's here," and I said, "Oh, that—" you know, she told me approximately when he'd be back.

So I went back to the gallery, and I was talking to the gallery owner, and I told him about this store, and he goes, "Oh, yes, you know, the guy who runs it, you know, publishes this very conservative newspaper." And, you know, as I looked around the store I saw, like, a photograph of an SS tank commander, sort of, in his tank, you know, and, you know, it all started making sense, and there was all kinds of, you know, old memorabilia from military and things. And the other artist in the show was a photographer named Richard Ross, and Richard, you know, was six-two, or whatever. And by his own definition, he said the map of Palestine is written on my face, and he said, "I'm not letting you go back there by yourself, you know, I'm going with you."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And so we went back to the store, and the owner was there, and we started talking, and very quickly it became sort of toy collector and toy collector. And, you know, I pointed out the figure, and he said, "Oh, you know, it's not a vintage figure," and I said, "Yes, I could tell, you know, it wasn't composition," and we started talking, and I said, "I didn't realize that they were still making these figures." And he said, "Oh, yes." I said, "Where?" And he said, "Here in Germany." Now, which I found amusing, I didn't say anything, giving him the benefit of the doubt, maybe he was thinking in a European scale perhaps, but we were standing in Austria at the time.

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And he proceeded to give me the contact information for the man who had the molds from, you know, the '30s, and was making these figures and painting them, and who happened to be located in the Black Forest; seemed very appropriate. And I remember I sent him one—you know, one of those aerogram letters, you know, you fold up and send off, and I didn't hear back from him, and I sent him another one. I think I ended up sending him three, and I was at the point where I was going to write something to the effect of, "Yours truly, heil Hitler," when I got a response from him in German, which—you know, and a sheet, or a couple of Xerox sheets of the figures that were available also in German, which I had—you know, could sort of figure out who the figure was of. And I remember I ordered a significant number of these figures, and, you know, it was so interesting to me.

Now the initial idea I had when I saw the broken figure of Hitler was to do, sort of, August Sander-like portraits of these figures, and I had been able to find some other vintage figures of, I think, Göring and Goebbels. And I remember taking them to the Polaroid Studio and trying to—you know, like doing this closeup. They really didn't help hold up to that kind of scrutiny. There's a side story to this, which I will get to. So I was—so I tried a number of things, and I was just, like, you know, this—this clearly is not going to work. But whenever I'm working on a project, I always love doing research; you know, reading, you know, watching films, and I happened to watch *Triumph of the Will*. And there's that scene where they're marching through the streets of Nuremberg, and they come through this sort of archway. And I thought, okay, you know, I've got this railroad archway; sort of stuck them in

there. I think I tried to stick some buildings on either side just to—and I remember taking a photograph, and it just—it worked. It worked so powerfully and beautifully. And, you know, without that, I wouldn't have done that series.

Now, at the time, there was no name for the series, and the focus was really on, sort of, the pageantry of the Nazis, sort of pre-World War II. You know, I did a picture of two—a mounted drummer and someone holding a flag on a horse as well, also very much kind of Nuremberg rally-type thing. And because, you know, I was doing a lot of this research and a lot of this reading, you know, you kept—I kept coming across images referencing the Holocaust. And at one point, you know, I had these small figures from the *Desire* series that were not the larger six-inch figures, but they were, you know, sort of three-and-a-half inch, and I had gotten them just because they existed, and I thought, Well—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —maybe I can use these as, you know, women. There is that incredible photograph, actually a series of four photographs, of the women being forced across the field at Birkenau. And, you know, I tried, sort of, setting that up in sort of a snow-like-type scene. And I found that imagery so personally moving that the series, sort of, became redirected to also focus on the Holocaust. And I actually ended up getting a National Endowment for the Arts grant to pursue my project. And I was going to Austria a fair amount, because I had a gallery there and I was in some museum shows, and, you know, I was probably going twice a year, or something like that.

And on one of the trips, through a friend of mine, James Young, who was a Holocaust scholar, his field was, you know, English, but he taught Holocaust studies at UMass Amherst and had become a very well-known person in that field, and I'd met him at an exhibit at the Jewish Museum. I—I've decided I wanted to go visit Auschwitz and Birkenau, like, take the train from Vienna, and James knew this woman. There was a controversy at one point. They were—there was a building that was outside of Auschwitz that was going to become a convent, and there was a lot of controversy about it, and they ended up making it a, quote, study center. So James knew the woman who ran that, and I was able to get—you know, to be able to stay overnight there.

So I take the train, you know, this overnight train from Vienna, I get into Oświęcim, and I forget what the Polish name of the city is, but, you know, it's like—it was sort of like going to Rothenburg ob der Tauber, only there was a station, there was kind of a platform outside, and there was a dirt road, and that was pretty much it. Like, the idea that I was going to find a taxi to take me to this study center—fortunately, the study center wasn't all that far away, so I managed to walk there. And it was—I think it was in May; it was, like, gorgeous weather.

It turned out that, you know, there was nobody staying there other than, you know, the staff and myself. So I was in this large dorm room with sort of metal beds. Eerie enough, when you think about it, when you realize that you're right—literally across the road is Auschwitz. I spent the night there, which was interesting, slightly unnerving, went over, you know, after I had breakfast downstairs, and literally walked over.

And Auschwitz was fascinating. There were, I think Polish schoolchildren in the area were required to come, you know, and visit, so there were a number of buses, and there were a number of tourists. And it was really set up kind of like a museum in a way. And, you know, I walked around, and, you know, it was very interesting. And they—and then I—you know, Birkenau is, I think, like a kilometer and a half away, it's not very far, so I took a taxi to Birkenau, which is so much more vast than Auschwitz. Auschwitz had been a Polish cavalry headquarters, so it was large, but not—you know, Birkenau was just massive. And I got there, and there was—you know, you walk through that gate that—made famous by *Schindler's List* and by so many photographs, there was pretty much nobody there.

And I remember walking up the tower, and it's about three or four stories. You know, it—you're up and looking out, and you see the railroad track, and you see, you know, the rocks from the rail bed. And there were a few people, but they looked so almost toylike that they didn't seem real or human, which was an indelible image that I will forever remember. And I of course had my notebook with me, and I—you know, there was no tour or anything, you just walked around. And there were parts of it outside of this, sort of, main building where,

you know, the officers had lived. A number of the buildings where the roofs had fallen in, or they were becoming decrepit.

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And I remember talking about this with James Young when I got back, and he said, "There was a real debate among Holocaust scholars, like should you maintain Birkenau, or should you let its deterioration become the monument?" And I had read that there was a pond, sort of, in the back as you got towards the woods, where had they dumped a lot of the ashes and the residue from the ovens. And it said that, you know, if you stuck your hand in the pond and sort of pulled out some of the mud, you could see little white shards of bone, which I did, and you could. It was—I mean, again the contrast of being in Birkenau on this gorgeous spring day with, you know, a few clouds and blue sky, and walking through these barracks with, you know, the triple-high bunks and, you know, seeing the enormous building that had the lavatories for, you know, 80 people at a time or, you know, whatever, was an indescribable experience. And, you know, I was madly sketching away thoughts for—you know, I was pretty close to finishing the project, but there were definitely some shots that I did based on, you know, that experience.

And it was interesting in some ways, because the—you know, the focus of the book, or the project, really shifted. And I remember thinking about a title, you know; how am I going to bring this all together? And I came up with *Mein Kampf*, because I felt it encapsulated both the early pageantry and it was sort of a precursor of the Holocaust. And I'll never forget, I was walking with my friend Garry and our mutual friend Roger Rosenblatt, and I had been able to get both of them to agree that they would write a little something; James Young wrote, sort of, the main essay. And so we're walking along, and I think it was Garry, and probably it was Roger, who said, "Well, what is the title of this book?" And I said, "*Mein Kampf*." And their reaction, and I said, "Roger, this is the only time in your life you will ever be listed in *Books in Print* along with Adolf Hitler as an author," and, you know, we all kind of —they—Garry and Roger, you know, I think somewhat reluctantly, but, you know, wrote their pieces.

Many years later, Roger still—we still laugh about this. He said, "People say, 'Roger, I never knew—you wrote *Mein Kampf*.'" And I would say, "Roger, you know, you should inquire about the royalties, because I know they sold a lot of copies of that book." But, yeah, I know, no, it was definitely a sort of—you know, and Garry sort of commented on the fact, it was kind of an in-your-face title, but it seemed very appropriate.

[00:10:05]

And one of the first major museums and exhibitions of the work was at—in Houston at the Holocaust Museum, and I was very, very conscious of—you know, I was dealing with a subject that was so raw and so sensitive, and I didn't want people, particularly people who had been affected, you know, survivors and families, to feel that the use of toys was in any way diminishing or denigrating that experience. And I was so touched and moved and grateful when, at the opening a couple, who were both survivors, the husband came over and said, you know, "My wife is—she's too emotional to speak to you, but we want to just to tell you how much we'd been moved by your work," and I felt like that's exactly what I was hoping for. I mean, you know, it was—like, filled me a sense, first of all, of relief, but also joy knowing that I had gone up to that edge, but I hadn't gone over it, and I still made work that, you know, was powerful.

And so the little side story I wanted to tell you about Hitler and Göring, there was a toy shop in Vienna that I would always go to run by this man who was probably around a little older than I was. He'd been a little boy during World War II, and this—his shop was like tiny, narrow space, but they always had, you know, all these Elastolin and Hauser figures, vintage figures and flats and all kinds of things. And the first time I went in there, there were some of the German figures of soldiers with swastikas on their arms, but they had been covered up with tiny pieces of white tape. And I remember, you know, I, of course, was fascinated, and as I always do, I purchased quite a few things, and I remember saying to him, "Oh, you know, why is there the tape on there?" And he said, "Well, some people get upset when they see the swastika."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But he was a very, very nice guy.

And, you know, I would—I was going to Vienna a fair amount, and I would always go to his store and buy things. And I was actually, I think, on my way to Salzburg on that trip, and I come in, and he goes, "Oh, Mr. Levinthal, I'm so glad to see you. I've been saving—I have these three figures, Elastolin figures." They made—because there was, like, a sort of a baking process, the faces, you know, could get somewhat distorted. So they made a special series using porcelain heads that were hand-painted, so they wouldn't change, and they did that of Hitler and of Göring, and they were—he had two different Hitler figures and a Göring figure. So I used essentially my entire honorarium for going to Salzberg to buy these three figures, and they had come from a friend of his who had had them as a child during, you know, the '30s. I mean, they were in just pristine condition. They looked like probably, you know, he had done his chores for an entire week, and this was his reward, was to get a little figure of Hitler. I'm not sure, I'm making that up, but they were gorgeous. And, you know, and they did hold up, they photographed really nicely, and I still have them, but it was so—I mean, just the whole scene of walking in there and him being so excited. He said, "I've been saving these Hitlers for you," and, you know, I told that story to Garry and—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —he said, "David, you're the only person for whom that story would ever make any sense." You know, we—Garry and I had a similar experience when I was doing the *Mein Kampf* work, which was all shot with the 20x24 camera. I wanted to set up this scene of the ovens, and I kept thinking, you know, how? Obviously, nobody makes a toy model of it. So I got this sort of half, kind of barn, in scale type or—I didn't make all the barn, I just sort of left it open. And in wandering around, you know, my dollhouse stores, I saw these washing machines that were doll scale, and, you know, they had that circular sort of thing in the front. So I painted them sort of red, a dark, dark red, kind of pulled off, you know, the part or, you know, made the door swing open. And I think I had like three of them, and had set up some railroad track and like a flat car, in sort of HO scale that a body could be, you know, put on. And I think I had one where I had these railroad workers, because they had coveralls that I thought could sort of pass putting someone—a body into the oven.

Now, Garry, I don't think, had ever been to the Polaroid Studio, and he was going to come down that day just, you know, to see me work and whatever, and he had to cancel because there was some meeting that came up about a film project or something. And so I got home, you know, I called him, and I said, "Garry, I wish you could've come. I got the most amazing shot of a crematorium for the series." And again, Garry said, "David, you're the only person for the—the context of that would—was—would even be comprehensible."

But, yeah, I mean, a lot of—you know, particularly on that series, a lot of what I was doing was kind of problem solving. And I remember, you know, I had the prints, I was living on 19th Street at the time, so, you know, and I had all these flat files full of Polaroids. And my girlfriend at the time was a curator, and I remember once, she was saying to me—you know, I was showing her some of the prints, and she goes like, "Don't you have trouble sleeping at night?" And I was going, "No, not, not really." Because it was sort of like, how do I get this, you know, how do I get—? You know, I made barbwire fencing by taking dowels, and using that sort of expandable silver-colored thread, you know, that you get at Christmastime, that would sort of reflect light off like it was barbwire, so I had a little section of that. Just, you know, how does this effect come about? And, you know, the crematorium scene was, you know, clearly a prime example of that.

But another was, I was really sort of—the series was, kind of, almost over, and I kept thinking, I haven't photographed a guard tower, which is such, you know, an iconic symbol of the Holocaust. And I kept thinking back to the exhibit that James Young had curated at the Jewish Museum, which it was basically about young artists, you know, artists in their, like, 30s, so I was disqualified, who were, sort of image—imagining the Holocaust. And one person had done like a little miniature concentration camp using—I forget the fashion label, but that he had cut out all—he used the boxes to create it, and it was very, you know, famous. But he had, you know, the guard tower, and I suddenly thought, "Guard tower, that looks just like the watchtowers in the Marx Fort Apache playsets that go on the corner of the stockade." So, of course, I had one of those, I probably had several of those. I got some wooden dowels, I think, painted them dark, dark brown or—and put them on the four

corners, and that became my guard tower, and it was perfect.

[00:05:44]

You know, I photographed it by itself, I photographed it with, you know, a soldier walking in front, a soldier walking with a German shepherd, you know, shooting through my faux barbwire. And I used, sort of, a blue sky background, which was kind of reminiscent of what I experienced when I was visiting Auschwitz and Birkenau. And that image became the cover image of the *Mein Kampf* book, and it was the last image in the series. When I got there, was, it's like, that's—you know, I've covered everything that I wanted to cover and more, and I've gotten this great, sort of, signature image to sort of end the series with.

MATTHEW CRONIN: How do you know when you're done with a series?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: You know, it's sort of like I—I think I was talking about this the other day, it's you get to a point where you think, you know, I've got all these figures, and I've got all this stuff, and I could do more, but I don't really feel the need to. And I think maybe the first time I felt that way was with the *Blackface* series, because I just, you know, gathered up so much material. All the memorabilia is now safely stored at Yale University as part of their both American history and Black studies and art programs, and I was very glad that it could all be kept intact. And they also have the only complete set of all the Polaroids from that series, so it's all nicely gathered there.

But I think that's the first time I really recall saying—you know, looking at the objects and then, well, I could photograph that, but I think I've really—and there were, I don't know, 230-some different Polaroids that I made, and there was a lot, there was a lot of work. And it seemed like there wasn't really a need to go beyond that.

And I think—I don't know if that was true of the *XXX* series. I'm sure there were some figures that I didn't photograph. I think that because the figures were—most of them were fairly large, like, 12 to 16 inches and very, very detailed, and I think I photographed most of them. It was funny because, you know, when I was a bachelor living in my loft, I had them all on like Metro shelves, sort of, in the studio, and to me, they were just, sort of—you know, they're kind of there and, you know, as something I was working with, and—

I remember I was—there was a collector's group from the Whitney was going to be coming over, and the director of the Whitney. And my dealer in LA who I was working with, I think it might've been—it actually might've been Paul Morris—I take that back, said, "David—" And I didn't have any art hung on the walls, because I liked sort of the emptiness of it, the sort of—the white walls. So, you know, I was going to lean work against the walls. He said, "David, you've got to put the *XXX* figures." I had this large, sort of, storage room in the back that—he said, "Just, you know, you've got to wheel those things in there."

[00:10:20]

And it was very good advice because I sold a lot of work that day, and I'm sure if the *XXX* figures had been out there that would've been the subject of a conversation.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: As it—you know, nobody ever, sort of, brought that up to me. My wife Kate told me that when we were dating, she used to fantasize—fantasy is maybe the wrong word, because it was not a happy fantasy—that those—the *XXX* figures would come alive and come into the bedroom and you know, like, cut her up into pieces. And prior to our son being born, I was informed that they all had to leave, and I believe I said, "But he's a boy," and her response was, "Yes, and you're an idiot."

So I'm—I would say, getting back to your question of when, it really—it's sort of—you know, it's really just sort of a feeling.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, like a gut feeling?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah. I mean, the thing about the *Vietnam* series is that they're constantly making new figures. I just saw a picture of some forthcoming figures that looked really interesting, and I can't wait for them to come out sometime this fall. But I think there'll be, you know, a certain point where, you know, it's just, I've done that. In fact, two of the

figures that are, I think, going to be available this month are camouflaged Special Forces officers just sort of standing, and I was looking at them and, you know, thinking, "Well, you know, I can't wait to order these." And the more I looked at them, the more I thought, "You know, I've done that shot, I've done that with better figures than these, and I'm sure I'll get them," but it's not like this compelling need. And, you know, I have a lot of material and, you know, I'm constantly coming across different ways to look at them. I have a number of dioramas that I've purchased from eBay that I've photographed that I want to, sort of, relook at.

And one of the interesting things that's happened to me over the last, I guess, six years, is I started working with these museum-quality dioramas. Now, a lot of them now come—they're on like a lazy Susan, so you can turn them and things, but it was a very different experience than setting up the figures individually. And I found what was appealing about the dioramas was people had taken off the base, the metal base, you know, placed the figure into a scene, built the terrain around them. You know, they were—you know, I didn't have to go around putting lichen to try and hide things, but it also meant that that was the position that they were going to live in, and, you know, you had to photograph with that in mind.

And so the work that I'm doing now really combines those two. I mean, I've gotten to the point with the *Vietnam* series that almost all of them are things that I've set up with individual figures. But I still have, you know, some of these dioramas from Pat Gallagher, and that I continue to—I mean, they're so beautiful that I'm just drawn to, kind of, reinvestigating them, but—

[00:14:59]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —yeah, it marked a kind of interesting change for me. And this one company in Spain that—Andrea Miniatures, that I'm a very familiar client to them. They, you know, have—not only have these wonderful figures that are sold individually, but they made these great dioramas. And it was interesting to me because often, I'll get a really good photograph of, like the charge of the Scots Greys, by pushing all the figures close together, closer than—you know, so there's literally no space, but they photograph and they sort of open up. Whereas if I had a diorama of them charging, it wouldn't be—they'd be spread apart almost, too—I'd have to go wider than I wanted to go.

So it's interesting working with the dioramas because they are so detailed and so, you know, any angle that I work with, you know, there's nothing I'm having to hide or cover up. But with the individual figures, I can really—you know, there are limits obviously. You know, they have a base, sometimes I'll get, you know, a very elaborate scene set up and, you know, one of them will fall over, and then the next guy will fall over. It's like—because they're—I have them on like a grass mat, and it's not the most stable surface. But, yeah, it's kind of a combination of the two, and it was—it was interesting to make—to incorporate that.

And I have, you know, a large number of these beautiful dioramas that I've never photographed that, you know, are kind of begging to be photographed at some point. The issue often is getting inside of them. You know, there'll be a very large diorama in HO scale of a battlefield in World War I, which is great, but you almost—I'm almost forced to photograph around the edges. I had this one model builder make this incredible diorama in—you know, using the plastic kits and plastic figures of the fall of Berlin, that was enormous. I mean, it's like three by four feet, just—and so detailed and, you know, like cutaways into rooms, but I was really limited. I mean, I got some wonderful photographs out of it, but I was really limited because I couldn't—you know, even holding the camera, you know, I couldn't really get in there to work on all these, you know, wonderful details. So it's—you know, the dioramas are sort of appealing, but also limiting in some way. And I do feel like in the two dioramas that I have from Pat, because he also photographs his dioramas, maybe he's more aware of that. They—they're more open in front and allow me sort of more—a little more freedom to explore.

But it was—you know, as I say, there's an interesting tradeoff, and, you know, I think that's—I'm always going to find that'll be the case. And, you know, sometimes I'll find a figure that I just have to have that ends up, you know, not photographing as I may have imagined it, but then I'll go back to it years later and get something—you know, I'll be more creative in what I'm looking for. Maybe I'll get closer to it instead of trying to cover the whole figure, you

know, seated on a horse; I'll come in closer, you know, maybe take it from the front, so the horse's face is in focus, or slightly in focus, and then the figure is more soft. But, you know, in my idle time while I'm wandering around this, you know, I don't know, twelve-hundred-square-foot space of toys and models, I'll sometimes look at something and go, you know, I've never thought about that, but this could be really interesting. And, you know, that happens all the time.

[00:05:08]

I had gotten these four figures from *The Wild Bunch,* a film that I love, and, you know, I love Sam Peckinpah's films in general. And I set them up, and they were for—from King & Country, and they just—you know, there just wasn't enough detail to say, you know, that's William Holden, that's Ernest Borgnine. You know, they were like almost slight caricatures of them. And so I turned them around, you know, and photographed them from the back, and I tried to put some sort of adobe building, that kind of wasn't working. And then my memory of the film, which I think was not quite correct, but I remember them, sort of, walking through an archway. So I took my *Mein Kampf* archway that was also used in my *[Die] Nibelungen* series. It's been very, very useful to me; set it up and put them, you know, their backs towards the camera, and it was great, it was exactly the feel that I wanted for *The Wild Bunch*. I'm very sad that archway—it's been a long time—it's starting to crack a little bit. It's kind of painted foam, but it still has utilitarian value. I have a little tape on the back to keep it, sort of, from tipping but, yeah, it's really—

You know, I always feel a lot of what I'm doing is kind of problem-solving in a sense, visual problem solving. I know what it is I'm trying to get; I'm, you know, looking at—you know, right now I'm looking at a diorama of a helicopter taking off from a rooftop in Saigon, and never really been satisfied with the picture. You know, I have all these people going up the stairs and, you know, if I pull back, it becomes too toylike. Thinking, okay, I'm just going to go really close, you know, and just—we'll see what happens. There may be nothing, but it may actually work. And so I'm constantly going back to things that I've done before, and particularly within this *Vietnam* series, because it's gone on for so many years, finding—you know, I've photographed the same figure in many different scenes, and in each one, it's worked differently. And like I said, with that one figure that I threw slightly out of focus, it was like a revelation. Like, I can make him look like he's running, and the fact that he's by himself, there's no distraction of other figures that might be in different stages of focus. So it really comes across as, you know, he's Willem Dafoe, or he's Tom Berenger, you know, in *Platoon.*

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, and then all these other possibilities start to open back up.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, like hey, you know, I could, you know, rethink this particular scene and go back to my jungle woodland table as opposed to my city and, sort of, grassland tables that—so I can have multiple things going on, which is really wonderful. I always like to have something, even if it's at the really early stages set up, so when I come here and open up the door, there's something for me to, kind of, focus and think about.

MATTHEW CRONIN: What does your normal day look like in the studio?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: You know, it's—

MATTHEW CRONIN: There is no normal day. [Laughs.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, I mean, it—you know, sometimes I'll have as many as three or four things set up, so I already know where I'm going. But in the course of that, I'll find—I'll think of something else and maybe change it. You know, I'll work—you know, realistically I start work at maybe ten-thirty, eleven o'clock, by the time I, you know, take the PATH train and, you know, get from there to here, and, you know, turn on the monitor and get everything, you know, the camera ready, and—but it's—you know, I'll start working, and at some point, you know, take a break for lunch, and really, it'll depend. If I'm, you know, really involved with something, I might have lunch at two or, you know, something, then the day sort of slows down a little bit. But, you know, if I'm working on something and I'm—you know, it's really exciting, I might leave here at five-thirty and get home at six-thirty. I text my wife, so she knows in advance that I'm going to be running—

[00:10:18]

MATTHEW CRONIN: How productive the day is going?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yeah, or how late I'm going to be, and, you know, often at the end of the day, I just sit here and think about, you know, some of the work that I've done. In the past, I would try and take little screenshots using my iPhone of certain images, which was horrible because there was always, like, reflection and, you know, scatter and stuff. Now we have this wonderful system where what I'm shooting is automatically transferred to the computer back at home, so Erin and Ryan can work on things.

MATTHEW CRONIN: And those are your assistants, right?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: My assistants, and I always tell people if they call, and Erin's not there, don't ask me a question, because I will invariably give you the wrong answer and you're going to have to call back when Erin or Ryan are there, and they'll correct whatever information it was that I told you. So—just, I'm happy to talk with you, but just don't ask me—don't expect to get an answer to whatever questions it is you might have.

And Erin has been working with me for almost 17 years, you know, and it—it's really wonderful. I mean, I basically have to retire without her, because she knows everything and really anticipates what it is, you know, I need; is a wonderful second set of eyes when I'm, you know, looking at things, and because I don't have these, you know, horrible cell phone things to look. I used to have to take the drive back to the studio, and we'd put it in and then it would download. So now, you know, we can get these gorgeous JPEGs, and, you know, I can send them off to people like my friend Pat, to you know, Donald Rosenfeld, and they can actually see what it is instead of seeing there's some sort of moiré pattern going across the JPEG. So it's—you know, that—you know, that's kind of a typical day. And sometimes I'll spend—after lunch, you know, I'll get distracted and start wandering around and, you know, thinking about things and ideas, or maybe this will go with that or, you know, just sitting here at the end of the day for, you know, 15, 20 minutes, and just kind of unwinding.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, I think that part of the day is often underappreciated.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Yes, yeah.

MATTHEW CRONIN: But it's—I find it very important. Should we take a short break?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Sure.

MATTHEW CRONIN: All right, sounds good. Thank you, we'll pick this back up shortly.

[00:13:23]

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MATTHEW CRONIN: This is Matthew Cronin resuming the interview with David Levinthal after a short break. David, you've talked a lot about your life in the studio and your personal life as a child. What's your personal life like today?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Well, I think that's a very good question. You know, I have a wonderful son who's 17. I'm—my wife and I are learning what it's like to be the parents of a teenager. He was a teenager earlier, but somehow at the age of 17, there is a lot more independence, and, "I'm going to the park, I'll be back later." "When will you be back?" "I'll be back when I get here."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Somehow I think I've—he's inherited my sense of humor and sarcasm.

And our house is filled with two other children who both have four legs, Ringo and CJ. When Sam was little, like a lot of children, he kept saying, you know, "I want a dog, I want a dog." And I remember saying to him, you know, he was probably like three, I said, "Okay, when you're nine, we can get a dog, you can get a dog when you're nine," thinking, that's so far off into the future, you know, like, who knows what'll happen? And he turned nine, and my wife was, you know, researching, finding a dog. She was looking for a schnauzer in New York City, and we ended up with CJ who is, sort of, part terrier, part dachshund, who came to us from Houston through this wonderful group called Rescue Road Trips and Shaggy Dog Rescue. And I remember, you know, Sam was saying, like, "You thought I was going to forget, didn't

you?" And we went to pick up CJ in New Jersey in this, sort of, parking lot.

They—Rescue Road Trips is—they have like an 18-wheeler that they converted into a truck that can transport dogs, and there's so many rescue dogs in Texas. They come up, sort of, the East Coast. And so the night before—my wife is a cake decorator and designer, and a very talented artist, and she and Sam made this wonderful, sort of, sign that said "Welcome Home CJ" and, you know, drew all over it. She also made cookies for the truck driver, dog cookies for the truck driver and—in the shape of dogs, not—not for dogs.

And I remember CJ, who was I think about nine months old. The driver was handing him to Sam, and CJ had a lot of energy. The first thing he did was pee on Sam, and Sam was so excited because he went, "He marked me as his territory, I'm his." And the next scene I remember is CJ on a leash pulling Sam through this snow that was in the parking lot because, coming from Houston, I'm sure CJ had never seen snow before. And, you know, we —I had a rental car, we, you know, drove back to the city and made abortive attempts at trying to train CJ, but in fact, as is the case with most dogs, CJ ended up training us.

And about a year-and-a-half later, the family that was fostering CJ, my wife had stayed in touch with them and, you know, sent them pictures. They were a little nervous about CJ coming to New York City, and actually not that long after we got CJ they were coming to visit, because their daughter was in the military and stationed in New Jersey. And we all went out to this little Italian restaurant that had, sort of, an open front, so CJ could be included.

[00:05:13]

And I remember the husband and I walked over to school with CJ to pick Sam up, and he commented recently because I had—you know, he's constantly sending, you know, sort of, general emails about things, and—as I guess people do, other than myself. And I had sent him an email just thanking he and his wife for, you know, bringing CJ and later Ringo into our family, because we just—they're like the center of our world. And he wrote back and he said, well, you know, they're so happy that CJ and Ringo have such a happy home. And he said, "I remember when we were walking to school to get Sam with CJ, and all these people were saying, 'Hi CJ, hi CJ,' not hi David, but hi CJ." That carries on to this day from when I take them for a walk in the morning, they have a group of friends who work in some of the stores, like Pottery Barn, and, you know, all come out to greet them. So they're a big part of our lives, and it's made me disinclined to—

You know, I want either my wife or I to be home so that the dogs aren't left by themselves and—which makes traveling more difficult. But fortunately, one of my nephews has a wonderful friend, Annie, who loves dogs and absolutely loves CJ and Ringo. And she has a dog of her own, but her niece was saying to her, "Why can't you have CJ or Ringo instead of Molly?" You know, which is—but she's stayed at our place sometimes when we've gone on, you know, trips, and sends us a constant stream of videos and pictures of, like, her doing yoga with the dogs assisting. And so, yeah, that's a big part—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —of our lives, particularly my life, because CJ as he's gotten—CJ, we think, you know, because he's a rescue, we think he's about nine, we're not—eight or nine, we're not really sure. And he's in a—as he's gotten older, he's gotten into a very cuddling stage where he—if I'm lying down, he'll come over and just sort of snuggle next to me until he gets bored, and then he wanders over to the other side of the bed. So, yeah, it's—a lot of my life revolves around the two of them. They're wonderful conversationalists; I enjoy our walks in the morning.

And, you know, it's—being an older parent, you know, my wife is 12 years younger than I am, is—you know, children weren't something that I really thought about, and even, you know, I would say marriage, to a certain extent. I don't know if that's because—like there— you know, I'm sure there are a lot of reasons for it. I was a great uncle to my nieces and nephews and a lot of fun; not always the most responsible. Responsible in terms of their health and safety, but, you know, it's like, "Sure, we can have ice cream now—"

MATTHEW CRONIN: That—

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —"doesn't really matter."

MATTHEW CRONIN: —sounds like a great uncle to me.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: [Laughs.] So it's—you know, there are challenges to that. You know, I'm not as accessible in terms of, like, doing sports. You know, Sam and I used to ski, I don't really ski anymore the last few years, but yeah, we still go skiing. And my brother Michael has a—he lives in Park City, Utah, so, you know, we're very fortunate, and actually during COVID last year, he invited us to come out. He has a beautiful guesthouse, and we stayed there for a month from, sort of, mid-October to mid-November, and it, you know, was a beautiful time. And fortunately, Annie was home with CJ and Ringo, so we didn't have to worry.

[00:10:43]

And, you know, we used to—I mean, Sam's done, you know, a fair amount of traveling when he was younger. Donald was producing a film that was being shot in London and in Venice, and he invited me to come and do some photography on set, you know, sort of one of those wonderful boondoggles, but it was very generous of him. And we went to London for a week, and then we were in Venice for about a week, and Sam was, I believe, in second or third grade. He was at a progressive school where those two grades were kind of mixed together. You had the same two teachers for two years; one year, you were the younger kids, one year, you're the older kids. So, because he was going to be missing some school, he was asked to do, like, a journal-slash-kind-of-diary of the trip, and it was a wonderful trip. You know, we were in Venice at the, sort of, end of November, beginning of December I believe, so it was very empty. I mean, you know, you'd walk into the main plaza and there were so—there's hardly anyone there, which is very unusual for Venice. And, you know, he went to Paris with my wife for a trip when a friend of hers was going to do some photography and bringing her daughter who was the same age as Sam, and they had like a little, I guess, the equivalent of what we'd now call an Airbnb. And, you know, he's been to Brazil, Spain.

You know, we haven't done much international traveling in—recently. You know, part of it is me, I am less comfortable traveling. I've had ongoing, I guess you would call chronic health issues since I was a junior in college, you know, ulcerative colitis, so there are times in my life where traveling has just been not the easiest thing to do. And now that I'm, you know, in my early 70s, it's more and more challenging, so I do it less and less.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And, you know, I feel like, you know, that affects my wife and my son, and so they'll sometimes go on trips. They'll go to California to visit some of my wife's family, or I know they were talking about, over this past summer, possibly trying to go to Europe with some friends. But, you know, obviously because of COVID that became, you know, impossible.

And, you know, in the not-too-distant future, if we survive, I mean my wife and I, Sam will be headed off to college. We're just beginning that, you know, as a junior in high school that process, which is itself challenging. I remember my wife asking Sam, you know, like, what does he think he'd be interested in, and, you know, I know he's expressed an interest in robotics, particularly as it involves medical technology and—

[00:14:59]

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —but at the—at that particular conversation in the kitchen, he was saying something like, "I don't—you know, I don't know, you know, really what I'm interested in," and my wife said, "Well, you know, you need to, you know, give it some thought and make some decisions." And Sam said, "Well, I'm not really into making decisions," and I said, "I have the perfect place for you. You can be in the military, decision-making is actually discouraged," and he basically told me to go screw myself.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And that's the polite version of it, of what he said.

So it's, you know, having that age difference. On the other hand, I think being older as a parent and being—particularly as an artist, being, sort of, secure, both, you know,

intellectually and financially at this point in my life, that you give your child a certain sense of security. That, you know, if I had a child—I mean, I can't even imagine having a child when I was in my 20s or, you know, even late 20s, or even 30s. I wouldn't want to have been my child.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: I was the child, you know. So there—you know, like everything in life, there are tradeoffs, and I feel, you know, that I've been able to give him a balance of things, and the, sort of, security is part of that.

And I think some of the most fun that I've had has been—there was a time, when Sam was much younger, that he got very interested in photography, and, you know, he would set up his little Lego Star Wars figures and photograph them and became, you know, as kids do, very sort of into that, and focused on that. And I was—you know, since I was shooting at home, you know, the camera was there, and so he's using, you know, the digital Hasselblad. And there were instances where he was asked like what camera he was using, and he would blithely say, "Well, I'm using a Hasselblad," and people, you know, would be like—sort of, their eyes would roll.

And the fact that we were able to do two exhibitions together, one in Sun Valley and one in New York, was so much fun for me, and to see both our names up there on the wall. And I remember the show in Sun Valley, with Erin's help, Sam had made a large presentation of, I don't know, was it a hundred? It was a hundred, like, 5x7 prints, digital prints of his Star Wars figures, and it was done as a, you know, single installation at the gallery, and then he had a digital print of his 20x24 Polaroid. And I remember we were walking around the gallery, and Sam was saying, "Well, Dad, how many pictures do you have in your show?" And I said, "I don't know, Sam, I don't know." And he said, "I have a hundred and one in mine."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: And what was really cute, there was a collector in Sun Valley who was based in San Francisco, but they had a home in Sun Valley, and he collects a lot of video art and installation art, and he bought Sam's big installation piece and—which was, you know, very exciting. You know, it was a decent amount, you know, I forget what it was, but it was maybe $1500 or something, and I didn't tell Sam how much money he had gotten, but I put it into his little savings account.

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And apparently, after we had come back to New York, someone had come into the gallery, a family whose son was a little older than Sam, and had seen the digital print of the Star Wars 20x24 Polaroid and according to the dealer exclaimed that he really wanted that piece for his bedroom. And so he purchased a copy of that, and I—he was extolling, like, that was like the greatest thing he'd ever seen was this. So it was obviously, you know, a lot of fun for me, and collaborating with Sam.

And when we did this show in New York, I remember Erin and I went there to hang—I was also doing photographs of Lego Star Wars, and I think they were, like, 17x22 prints. And we were hanging the show and doing, sort of, creative hanging, you know, with it, partially due to the subject matter. And Sam was—came up, and he was pointing out that he felt several of the prints that I was hanging were actually things that he had photographed. And I said, "Well, you know, I think—I'm pretty sure, you know, I photographed those," and then, you know, "I'm sure those are mine." So I struck a compromise with him, and I said, "I'll tell you what, Sam, you point out the ones that you think, you know, are—you created, that are in my part of the exhibition, and if they sell, you know, we'll split the sale, or whatever," and that satisfied him. Although he kept—originally I think there were, like, three that he picked out, and after that, he decided that there were six.

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So, increasing his chances for—and it was—

You know, the opening was just so delightful, and I think I may have spoken about this earlier, but, you know, those were just really special moments. And, you know, you get that as a parent, and it's really wonderful. And, you know, just having one child, obviously all the

focus is on them, but, you know, it's something, you know, I'm thrilled about. And as I say, you know, being older, I'm conscious of that, and that I'm not going to get younger, and, you know, I want to be around as long as I can.

I know Sam is—he said he really wants to make me a grandfather. I've told him that, you know, there's no need for him to rush into anything just to accomplish that but, yeah, that would be—obviously that would be wonderful. And, you know, I have tried to—you know, I've lost a lot of weight in the last year, 50 pounds, which, you know, brought me back down to, sort of, normal size for—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —my ever-decreasing height and ever-increasing age. But, you know, I—I'm very much a creature of routine and, you know, with all the different medications I take, I have a sort of routine. And, you know, I'm doing it early in the morning when I'm maybe not fully awake, and I'll think, "Did I take that?" I said, yes I took that, because I always take it after I've taken whatever else it is, and—but there's that little bit, a moment of, like, uncertainty, and you don't you want to double up on your medication.

MATTHEW CRONIN: No.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: So I'm—you know, I'm conscious of being older and I'm conscious of not being as physically active, but I feel like I balance that off with, you know, other things that I try and give to Sam. And, you know, it'll be very interesting when he goes off to college. He's already made it clear that he wants to not be in New York, and he said he's very—destinations, sort of, is important to him. So he's mentioned warm weather climates, you know, Miami, Hawaii, and the Bay Area. But I don't know, you know, I don't know if he's just, sort of, saying that to pull our leg a little bit.

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But, you know, our main goal as parents are that he be happy, which was really the goal that my parents had for me, which allowed me to, you know, become the artist that I am today. And I want to be as supportive of Sam as they were of me, and, you know, he may end up—who knows what? You know, he's right now interested in, sort of, technology and, you know, engineering, things that would make my father extremely happy and very proud, but we'll see. I mean, it's—the world is so much more complicated now than it was when I was growing up. I mean, part of it was, you know, there was sort of a program. You know, you went to school, you went to high school, you went to college, you did something, but you follow that sort of path. And now there's so many alternatives, and I think it's much harder.

And in some ways I think the same was true of photography. You know, when I was starting out, there was—if you were an artist, you were doing black-and-white, and, you know, occasionally, there'd be photographers like Eliot Porter who, you know, worked in color and did dye-transfer prints that were just almost like paintings, but there weren't that many choices, and then things started to change. You know, obviously, Kodalith, and there were a lot of alternative processes, cyanotypes, you know, all kinds of printing processes, but it was still relatively narrow, and it just kept expanding and expanding. And I remember, you know, years ago when I used to, you know, give some lectures and do portfolio reviews, it—if I was up at a university doing a talk, you know, they'd ask me to view some senior's or, you know, upperclassman's portfolios, and I was—always marveled at the range of what people were doing.

In fact, I remember one time when I was at CalArts, you know, when I had my *Hitler Moves East* show, and I was sitting in on some advanced seminar in photography. And it was interesting because none of the students—you know, they're putting their work up on the wall—none of them put up a photograph. You know, there was somebody put up a poem, somebody else had, you know, something else, but it was like, you know, it had become—it expanded so much, which was great. But I also felt that in some ways more challenging, because you had so many choices and possibilities in how you wanted to express yourself through your artwork. And, you know, we certainly see that today. I mean, there is no one definition; in fact, you know, I'm from that period when, you know, photography was still fighting to become, quote, an art, and it was—you know, it was always considered sort of a stepchild for a—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —long period of time. And I think, you know, partially through the efforts of photographers like Ansel Adams and others where, you know, in the minds of viewers, it became more, quote, art-worthy. And—but it—you know, there were very few, quote, photography galleries, and none of the major galleries, you know, showed photography. And, you know, sort of having lived through that process, you appreciate how much things have changed and, you know, where photography is considered an equal of other contemporary art forms. And frankly, you know, artists like Cindy Sherman and her incredible success, just elevating the stature and the prices for photographs, you know, bringing it into that same arena as painting in terms of what collectors would be willing to pay and retroactively affecting, you know, older artists.

I mean, I remember when I first came to New York in '83, Walker Evans, you know, you could buy a Walker Evans photograph for almost nothing, and, you know, then, through exposure through several books and, you know, significant exhibitions, Walker's work, which had always demanded attention and was, you know, certainly extremely significant in the history of photography, was now highly sought after and very collectible.

When I was a senior in college, I had read Edward Weston's *Daybooks* and, you know, loved his work. There was a small gallery up in San Francisco that had some of his photographs, and it's where I had gotten a copy of *The Daybooks*. They had, like, a nice, little sort of, quote, bookstore. And I remember going up there and talking to the woman who ran it, and she—you know, they had been around, you know, for a long, long time, and during the early days of, you know, the f/64 Group. And so she had—there was one particular Weston print that I love, which was a wrecked car on the beach, and I really wanted that print. And I think she had, I don't know, eight or 10 vintage Weston prints that he had printed and signed, and they were a hundred dollars. And one of them was his famous, you know, nude in the corner of the deck with her arm up, and I said, you know, "I really wanted the wrecked car," and at the time, his son Brett, who lived in Carmel, was making prints from his father's, you know, large negatives, and he would make a print, and that would be $25, so I got the wrecked car for $25. You know, a hundred dollars was a fair amount of money back in 1970 for a college student, but, you know, I kept thinking many years later, to have a vintage Weston print printed by him and signed by him, you know, would've just been priceless.

And along that line, when I graduated from Yale, Walker gave, I think each of the four of us, a print that had been made by Jerry Thompson, who was a classmate. And Jerry was, you know, such a meticulous printer. In fact, he would make these prints for Walker, you know, that Walker was selling, and, you know, Jerry told me this story one time. He had—there was some woman in, like Westport or somewhere, who wanted a print—or Danbury, or something. And Jerry's printing and Walker came in, and he saw the print in the garbage, because Garry—Jerry deciding, oh, this is—you know. And Walker started picking it up and go, "Well, this can be for, you know, her," and he was starting to sign it. And Jerry said, "No, Walker, I'm going to make a really good print on this."

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But the print that Walker gave me was of a minstrel show poster that, it's sort of on a wall that, you know, coming off. And again, we used a reproduction of that in my ICP, you know, retrospective catalogue in the, sort of, front page—pages. But I thought, how interesting years later that I'm doing the *Blackface* work, and here's this wonderful print that I have that's signed to me from Walker sort of dealing with that, that same subject. You know, totally a coincidence, but just interesting nonetheless. But, yeah, I do feel, you know, one of the things that comes with age, there are a couple things, but one of them is, sort of, having that history.

The other thing that I find also fascinating is, you know, Garry Trudeau and I have known each other for over 50 years, which is half a century. And I was thinking about it the other night that, you know, when you can start measuring your friendships by, well, I've known so-and-so for a quarter of a century, or I've known so-and-so for, you know, 50 years, it's really kind of thrilling because you have so much shared experience, and sort of, you know, when you're having conversations, you're drawing on the same history. And I think that's one of the things that makes life so fascinating and rewarding is to, you know, have those relationships outside of your family that are so long-standing. And, you know, of course, again, it reinforces exactly how old you are—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —but it's—I think it is just a wonderful thing. And, I mean, it allows you to reflect on so much shared experience, and that's very comforting and wonderful.

MATTHEW CRONIN: It sounds really amazing. I mean, I'm thinking of myself and which friends of mine might be there in another 15 or 20 years. What do you think you—what's next for you in terms of your practice, do you think?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Well, I have, really, two projects: One is finishing the *Vietnam* work and doing the book, which, you know, given the amount of work that I've already shot—and again, I think it's sort of like the *Hitler Moves East* project in a sense, that my guess is that most of the imagery in the book will be of a more recent vintage. Not—you know, there'll still be other pieces from other time periods, but when I look back, you know, when Erin and I go through and look at some of the JPEGs from 2019, 2020, I can see things. You know, there are definitely things that are really strong that I really like, but I see things that I've done better recently that, sort of, carry the same kind of impact. And I think that's always the case for me is, you know, with *Hitler Moves Eas*t, there was also being able to use different figures that gave me more flexibility. But the more you're engrossed in a project and continue with it, the more, sort of, skills you develop and are able to utilize. So that's one big project.

The other project is that I want to do—and, you know, George and I—George Corsillo and I have already talked about this. I've been photographing, you know, the cowboy figures for 50 years. I mean, I did, you know, some when I was in graduate school very early on, so early on that I had forgotten about them until I had this show at the Fort Worth Modern, and one of my classmates, Melinda Blauvelt, she and her husband were living there. He was in—worked for an investment firm and mergers and acquisitions in the oil industry, I think, and it was the Wild West, sort of, cowboy show. And Melinda said, "Remember those cowboy pictures you took in graduate school?" And I had completely forgotten about them, because they were so subsumed by, you know, the toy soldiers.

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But I had set up that, you know, opened up that plastic bag that you would've found in a grocery store toy department, and set up some of the cowboys and photographed them, completely forgotten. And I had made, you know, maybe 12 prints on Kodalith. So that would've been probably 1972. So starting at that point, you know, I've continued to work with them over the years. It's one of the few—it's probably the only subject that I've returned to various times, first with the Polaroid camera. You know, I shot most of the western Polaroids from end of '87 to '89, and then I went back in I think '94 because I had found some new figures. And I did—I did another short series of prints to help fund the ICP retrospective exhibition, and, you know, I've gone back to it, I think, one more time with the Polaroids as well.

And I've done some—you know, a lot with the Hasselblad and, you know, digital images, but I really attribute that to, you know, my childhood where every kid, every boy had a Mattel cap pistol and holster, and, you know, it was just—that was the popular culture of that time. So it's been a recurring theme, and, you know, every time I watch one of those classic westerns like *The Searchers*, or—and in fact, I had this routine when I was shooting the cowboys at the Polaroid Studio. There's no particular logic to it, but I would go to this little restaurant called Elephant & Castle. I would get a bacon cheeseburger and a milkshake, you know, walk back to my place on 19th Street, watch—you know, I had a video of *The Searchers*, watch it because I so love the colors that John Ford had in that film, and that was my prepping. You know, none of it was at all necessary, but it would just—was, sort of, a kind of ritual that I had and just, kind of, to remind me of what the palette that I was looking for.

But, yeah, the cowboys, you know, I think that's why it's a recurring theme. And when I finished the work on *Vietnam*, I'd been collecting a number of newer cowboy figures including—King & Country just came out with cattle drive figures. I think they're, like, eight longhorn steers, and so far they have, like, three trail riders, but they're going to be expanding upon that, and I have these western, you know, buildings. And actually, this one scene that I photographed and that I have a diorama of the gunfight at the O.K. Corral from the Andrea Miniatures people, is the subject of an augmented reality project that I'm currently working on.

Despite my having a degree from MIT, I have no idea how to explain—

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DAVID LEVINTHAL: —exactly what we're doing. But I'm working with this wonderful group headed by a man named Wilson Tang. And Wilson was the, sort of, art director, special effects person for a number of the *Star Wars* movies, and, you know, his work is just amazing. So they've taken this diorama, or essentially the pieces from the diorama, and—he's based in Vancouver, and they've managed to—you know, they've mapped each figure and the buildings and created this interactive piece that is really more than cutting edge. I mean, it's something that people have not done before, and it will essentially allow the viewer to walk into the diorama and experience it. And by locating certain triggers, certain actions will happen, like maybe a puff of smoke from a gun or some dialogue, but it's been a really interesting experience.

When I was first approached about this, I, you know, said, you know, "I—this would be great, I'd love to do it." When I found out that I didn't really have to do anything other than, sort of, approve what Wilson and his group were doing, that was wonderful—

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: —because I certainly had no—you know, nothing, no input that I could give from a technology standpoint. But it's been really interesting, sort of, seeing the work being created this way. And literally, it'll be on your iPhone, and you'll walk around in this space. And as Wilson has pointed out, you need, like, a 20-foot square so that—you know, you don't want to be doing this on your iPhone while you're crossing the street. But it's a very immersive environment, and it's going to make its appearance at Art Basel Miami later this year and at the NSU Museum in Fort Lauderdale. So, again, you know, it's a Western theme. It's, you know, taken me back to, sort of, my roots, so to speak.

So, you know, compiling a book that, sort of, surveys that 50 years of work, at that point I feel like, you know, provided I'm still around and annoying my son, you know, I have a lot of dioramas that I've never photographed, and, you know, I can see photographing them. But I don't really—there's no, like, series or anything like that. I think, you know, maybe something will come up, but finishing up *Vietnam* and, you know, publishing a book of that, and then following that up with a book of the western photographs, that'll take me well into my 70s. That, you know, that's as far as I can see.

Now, I know my wife, a number of years ago, was asking me, like, about, you know, retirement, and I said, "Well, you know, artists don't retire, they just die," which she didn't find as amusing as I did. But, you know, that's—you know, I'm realistic, you know; I'm 72, I think, you know, if things work out that way, and I'm able to accomplish those two book projects, I will be very, very satisfied looking back at my career and saying, you know, this is what I've been able to accomplish. And, you know, if I do things beyond that, that's wonderful. I don't see any reason to stop, but there's no overarching, large project that I can envision at this point.

[00:05:11]

MATTHEW CRONIN: Yeah, I mean, it's very clear that you've done a lot with your practice, and we've talked a lot about almost everything. Is there anything that you feel like we may have missed during this interview and conversation?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: No, but, you know, having this conversation just now reminded me of a discussion I had with one of my early dealers here in New York, who sort of—it wasn't really a complaint, but she said, you know, "You're too prolific," because it was like every year or so, I'd have, like, a new body of work that I was working on, you know. And I kept thinking, "When is that a bad thing?" You know, it's like—so, you know, I have produced a lot, you know, I've been able to explore a lot of different subjects, and, as I look around the studio, there's certainly a lot that I haven't explored yet that's sitting here waiting for me. But I feel very, very satisfied with what I've been able to do. And particularly with the books, I remember I always used to tell students, you know, if you ever get the opportunity to do like a catalogue or whatever, do whatever you have to do to make it as good as it can be, because those things last forever.

I did a sort of self-publishing project. I had a show at the University of San Diego, which is a small private school in San Diego, and—of *Modern Romance*, and we did a little catalogue, and it was well done. I got a designer that I knew from the Bay Area to work with me on the design, and my friend at the university, who was an English professor, you know, wrote the essay. We were—we had gone to college together, and it was a nice, little publication. And I formed a publishing company called Aaron Press named after my nephew, who's the first grandchild in the family, and, you know, we continued to have some sort of name on there. And I remember it was—you know, we—I used my parents' address as the company address or whatever. And I remember my father, there was a phone call, you know, he picked up, and somebody wanted to speak to the publisher at Aaron Press. And my father said, "Well, he's on his tricycle out in the driveway, but if you leave a message, I can have him get back to you."

[They laugh.]

DAVID LEVINTHAL: But the reason I bring that up is that many, many years later, you know, I would get somebody calling me about the work from this little catalogue. You know, these things have a life, and it's important to do the best you can at presenting the work in those formats because you really have to live with it, and you want to live with it in the best way possible. So when I look back at, you know, the publications I've had, it's a—it's sort of a wonderful legacy, and I feel extremely fortunate that I've had all those opportunities over the years and, you know, having it all really start with *Hitler Moves East* published in 1977.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Wow, that's really incredible. If there is nothing else for us to cover, I think we can wrap up this interview, if that's okay with you?

DAVID LEVINTHAL: That is fine. I think I've exhausted almost all my good stories. I have a few in reserve, but bringing them up back now would I think be very, very tangential.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Well, I would like to thank you so much for your time and generosity, and for me, this was a complete privilege to be able to sit and talk with you and hear all that you've had to say, so.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Oh, well, thank you so much, and I am so honored, not only to have had a significant exhibition at the Smithsonian, but to have this oral history become part of the Archives there. And, you know, it's incredibly gratifying to know that, you know, this will be there for people to look at. And my journals, which I started keeping as a freshman in college—I will digress slightly.

[00:10:25]

Stanford had a program when I was—they were called freshman seminars; they just started it that year. And it was a group of eight students, and there'd be one faculty member, or one, you know, leader of the seminar, and there was one on constitutional law that I was dying to get into, because that's where I wanted to be, and didn't get into that but did get into this one, I think, the second and third quarter of the year, that was on—it was taught by a graduate student in philosophy. And one of the things he asked us to do—you know, we met at—he was living in, sort of, the pool shack of somebody's home in Atherton. So we would meet there once every two weeks, and he wanted us to keep a journal that was just stream of consciousness for, like, a half hour, which was something I'd never done, but once I started doing, I became very, sort of, immersed in it, and kept it going for years and years and years. I think I finally stopped sometime before Sam was born, but I donated all those journals along with a lot of other archive material to the Smithsonian.

Before sending all that stuff off to them, I thought, "Well, maybe I should look at these." There might be—you know, I'm sure there are things in there that are terribly embarrassing or whatever. And I remember picking up one of the journals at random; I forget how many there were, like 10 or 12, and starting to read it and think, oh, my God, if people read this, it'll be you—you know, Ambien will go out of business, because this will just put you to sleep. And I said, "You know, I just don't care, if there's something embarrassing in there, you know, let somebody find it." But it was—you know, it was a fascinating process, and I must say the graduate student who was leading this class was apparently also taking LSD, I think, three times a week, so he would have like a private meeting with us on campus once a month or whatever. And I remember going—and we were supposed to bring our journals, and I was going to one, and he was saying, "So, remind me again, who are you?" And I was

thinking, you maybe want to think about cutting back to maybe once a week on the LSD. But, you know, it was the mid-'60s and—

But, you know, again, all these are pieces of who I am and what I've become today. And, you know, I go back and think about them from time to time, and again, it's—there are a lot of wonderful memories. There are a lot of, you know, things I wish I could've done differently, but I don't think there's anyone walking on the face of the earth who doesn't feel that way, with maybe the exception of Donald Trump. But, yeah, I'm just—you know, I'm so grateful for, you know, our being able to do this, and for being able to talk about my life and my work and myself and know that, you know, I'll be able to be passing that on to hopefully someone.

[They laugh.]

MATTHEW CRONIN: That was really amazing, and thank you so much.

DAVID LEVINTHAL: Well, thank you Matt, this was great.

MATTHEW CRONIN: Thanks. That concludes the oral histories and interview with David Levinthal.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]