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Barbie Turns 50

Barbie-Inspired Art

Anna Vander Broek 03.05.09, 6:45 PM ET

Photographer David Levinthal's exhibit *Barbie!*, a series of Polaroids with Barbie as subject, reopens this week at the Gering & López Gallery in New York City 10 years after the exhibit closed.

Levinthal created the Barbie series in 1998 for Barbie's 40th birthday and is displaying the remaining photographs for a second time to celebrate her 50th. Thinking back to the shoot in '98, Levinthal recalls how quickly he realized the significance of the doll.

"We had a stylist on the shoot," remembers Levinthal. "The first day she came to the Polaroid studio, pulled out a miniature steamer and started steaming the tiny dresses and combing out Barbie's hair, I realized we were entering a totally new domain."

In Pictures: Barbie Art

Barbie has fascinated artists since she set her permanently arched foot into the spotlight. The blond beauty has been a muse for countless artists from Pop Art prince Andy Warhol to architect Robert A. M. Stern.

"She was the ideal fashion model," jokes Levinthal. "She wasn't staying up all night at parties. She was always ready to go at 9 a.m."

Artist Peter Max, known for his Cosmic '60s style, painted a portrait of Barbie in 1994. He too was shocked by her celebrity. "The show with [Barbie's] paintings became one of the most attended show of all," says Max.

In 1994, Mattel, which makes the doll, asked designer Craig Yoe to organize a collection of Barbie-inspired art, resulting in a book entitled *The Art of Barbie*. At the time, Yoe collected the works of over 100 recognized artists who had created art centered on the plastic princess. Since then more artists have produced Barbie art--such as Chris Jordan's "Barbie Dolls" in 2008.

Artists' attraction to Barbie may stem from the doll's timelessness and cultural influence. Or it may simply reflect her popularity: 90% of American girls between the ages of 3 and 10 own one or more Barbies.

"Barbie has the quality of the undead," says Carol Peligian, an artist in New York who created a mixed-media Barbie series in the early 1990s. "Everyone loves to play with the idea of [an] impossible creature."

Andy Warhol, known for his famous paintings of popular stars like Marilyn Monroe and Jane Fonda, added Barbie to his list of celebrity portraits in 1985. Warhol treated Barbie as a celebrity subject, just as he would any starlet. "For Warhol, it didn't matter if you're real or if you're not," says Barry Blinderman, director of University Galleries at Illinois State University in Normal, Ill.

Not only is Barbie iconic, she is also valuable. Warhol's Barbie, owned by Mattel and currently on display in Barbie's Malibu Dream House, in Malibu, Calif., would likely fetch hundreds of thousands. Peligian estimates her Barbie piece "Icon" would be worth about \$5,000 today. Levinthal's Barbie Polaroids sell for about \$12,500 each.

Yoe has had ample opportunity to sell his own Barbie artwork, also featured in *The Art of Barbie*, but he can't seem to let her go. "I could retire if I was willing [to sell]," he says. "But losing Barbie isn't worth it."

In Pictures: Barbie Art

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