



Abu Ghraib Bobblehead, 2008, Molded Resin

phillip toledano

america: the gift shop

october 29 – december 19, 2009

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hos projects proudly presents a solo exhibition by Phillip Toledano of his installation, *America: The Gift Shop*.
An opening reception to celebrate the artist will be held from 6 to 8 pm, Thursday, October 29, 2009.
A portion of the sales generated by this exhibition will be donated to Amnesty International.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country. – John F. Kennedy, 1963

Lest we forget. – Rudyard Kipling, 1897

The advent of television in the early sixties gave rise to the televised news broadcast, and the opportunity for Americans to put images to stories previously only heard on the radio, or read in newsprint. It was a change that would prove monumental during the Vietnam War. Overnight, civilians possessed first-hand information that was until then, only imagined. Catastrophe, carnage, and the faces of those fighting—both friend and foe alike, came alive in graphic detail. And for the first time, the brutal cost of war to civilians was painfully visible for all to see.

Everyone tuned in. Everyone was aware. But more importantly, because these were new, unseen images, they were a catalyst that eventually brought about an end to a war. Ironically, contemporary images as atrocious, and outrageous, awoken our perceptions of injustice at initial impact, but the sensation is fleeting. Have we become so desensitized by portrayals of violence in the media? Has our collective sense of ethics so deteriorated, that atrocities committed in our name are quickly thrust aside by the latest celebrity scandal? Is it easier to ask for forgiveness, rather than permission for our actions? Where has our compassion gone?

Phillip Toledano's anger with the events of the last eight years festered and grew to the point that he felt obliged to create work that might provoke discussion in an open forum beyond the seemingly ineffective anti-war minority. The secret prisons. The torture and abject disregard for human rights. The use of mercenaries, and their frequent killing of civilians. The Orwellian obsession with security. Through the medium of retail tourism, he serves up a reminder, that we are collectively responsible as a nation to remember.

Everything in America is reflected through the fun-house mirror of commerce. Why not foreign policy?

Bobble head figurines. A snow globe. A cookie jar. Postcards. T-shirts, neon signs, and chocolate bars. These are all things that make up our daily existence. They have a familiar intimacy. And that's why they make perfect vehicles to shock, disturb, and remind. Once the sugar coating of the ordinary dissolves, we are left with the grim truth about where we've been as a nation, and our civilian sins of omission and radio silence can no longer be rationalized.

Conceptually, Toledano's work is an interesting off shoot of the post-modern art studio guided by the artist, but produced by others. Taking the role of think tank leader and director, the artist is freed to work with materials beyond the scope of their personal talents and time. For example, Toledano is an accomplished photographer and while there are photographs that accompany the installation, the aorta is the mass produced object. Outsourcing d.i.y. in this situation is not so much an egotistical indulgence as it is a necessity.

At the end of a trip, we buy a souvenir to remind ourselves of the experience. What do we have to remind us of the events of the last eight years? And who will be held accountable for what has unfolded? How can we look to the future with hope, when the past remains unresolved? What claim do we have to the moral high ground, when our recent past is so stained? Fingers must be pointed, and pointed publicly. Then, and only then, when the world sees us acting as we tell the world to act, will America's honor be restored.

Phillip Toledano's work has been shown in solo exhibitions at The Center for Photography at Woodstock, Colette and the Annina Nosei Gallery. He also has been included in group exhibitions with Randall Scott Gallery, University of SF Contemporary Art Museum, Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Photobiennale of Thessaloniki, Miami Art Space, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, Parallel Lines, Gild, Eyestorm Gallery, Robert Miller Gallery and Paul Morris. Moreover, Twin Palms has released two books, one on his series "Bankrupt" and another on "Phonsex." In the spring of 2010, a third book will be published, "Days with my father." His work has received critical attention from the press by *Aperture*, *IdeaFixa*, *Harpers*, *Joia*, *The British Journal of Photography*, *La Repubblica*, *Technikart*, *Dpi* and *Vision*, amongst others. Moreover, in January 2010 *America: The Gift Shop* will be shown at the Singapore Fringe Festival, whose focus will be art and the law.