
YORAM WOLBERGER
SOLDIERS

The Archaeology of False Idols, *Mark Mian.*

Across the room and from their humble origins as toys, Yoram Wolberger's life size enlargements of classic cowboy and Indian figurines might appear as glorified tokens of childhood nostalgia. Looming heroes in candy colors, they evoke that age when such figures can appear larger than life. Once standing to inspire so much imagined reality, now they leap out as cartoonish monuments to childhood fantasy.

Closer, the sculptures reveal features formerly too diminutive to affect their function. Wolberger's back-to-life-size enlargements are in the same world as Andy Warhol's pop portrayals and Jeff Koons's kitschy adaptations, but his creativity is purely focused on uncovering the flaws in icons that we do not, or choose not, to see. Thus, he faithfully reproduces each sculpture from multiple scanned images of a miniature dime-store figurine, using an exacting process of precision 3D digital enlargement and hours of meticulous detailing.

Each sculpture perfectly echoes every production flaw of its original: the faulty seams, distorted proportions and semi-translucent flashings that are the unmistakable, and ironically individual, birthmarks of its mass production. The cowboys are "true blue". The Indians are red, like "redskins" never were. Towering in threatening poses of colonial conflict, they can no longer be judged simply as playthings, but instead as monstrous inventions of ethnocentrism. However playful their appearance, Wolberger's figures are nonetheless critical monuments to untried historical stereotypes in the bygone era of childhood innocence.

The Medium of the Mundane

That the foreign-born artist himself played with such toys during his own childhood is testament to how seamlessly cultural bias may be transmitted through innocuous media. This power of media to subliminally convey social norms is a topic whose antecedents are worth considering.

In 1931, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World presented an absurd and eerie vision of a futuristic utopia that embodied the seemingly progressive values of our society so driven by the promise of 'better living through technology'. Central to such myths is the replacement of nature's spontaneity with the predictability of a constructed world, and worldview.

In Huxley's world of engineered happiness, children are no longer born of mothers, but eugenically designed and hatched in vitro. Through years of subliminal conditioning, somnolent children are indoctrinated with the reassuring rules of neophobia, narcissism, classism and racism that uphold the stability of their designed social order. Deluded by their programmed reality and attachments to state-fabricated icons, they float through life unquestioningly content in their frictionless society – each one an individual plastic stereotype, a life size figurine.

When disillusionment destroys one's faith in the established order, it is natural to question the solidity of every brick in the building. With eyes newly opened, one reassesses the trusted icons and expressions that were once permitted to cement our ideals of morality and normalcy. For Huxley's protagonist, the rude awakening occurs on a trip to a 'savage reservation' containing the last vestiges of unconditioned native Indians and wilderness. There, he witnesses the paradoxical beauty and ugliness of humanity untamed. Upon his return to his synthetic society, the familiar becomes suspect, his socially conditioned sense of security betrayed by his unsanctioned experience.

Is trust in the familiar an invitation to unconscious influence and eventual alienation? Object-associations and attachments form automatically through repeated exposure, as our brains work relentlessly to wire reliable order into our worldview. For Wolberger, unrealistic promises of perfection are found embedded even in the innocuous objects of everyday life. Cultural beliefs are implicitly encoded in the mass production of the characteristic tools and toys that pervade and define what is 'home'.

Brave New World is a pronouncement against the mass production of cultural ideals. Such ideals compose the dehumanizing fiction of state-conceived models of perfection, and the loss of human individuality and freedom. Huxley's warning here is simple: when there is no more room for human error – there is no more room for humanity.

Wolberger writes:
"Human error and its consequences can be simultaneously disturbing and beautiful. We are not 'perfect'. Our blemishes – as the faults of our culture's icons and stereotypes – are in fact what make us human. We are 'all the above' – beautiful and ugly, compassionate and mean, and so on.

Through my work, I am struggling with the need to accept the faults along with the disillusionment they bring of being denied the perfect world that we were promised."

How is this promise inferred? In Understanding Media (1964), Marshall McLuhan famously states, "the medium is the message": that the very vehicles of communication may themselves subconsciously influence our understanding, beliefs and behavior. Within society's seemingly mundane trappings, Wolberger discovers an overlooked medium that impresses the collective unconscious. In humble domestic surroundings he identifies trivialized objects as icons saturated with hidden meaning and unconscious suggestion, both personal and cultural.

Sculptural Archaeology

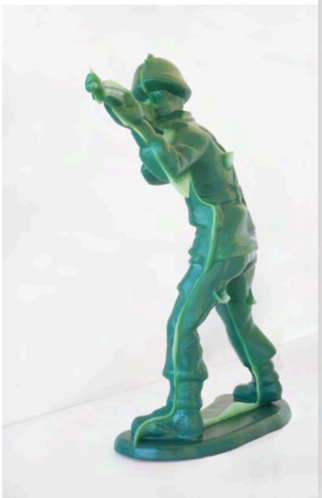
Wolberger's body of work encompasses a variety of everyday objects; toys, models, appliances, furniture. His method is the painstaking manipulation of these iconic artifacts. Grossly enlarging, dissecting or reconstructing them, he overthrows their utilitarian context to expose associations normally concealed by their continuity with the environment. His pieces are at times ironic and personal, even tender, while at others they are highly critical.

Transformed beyond their expected appearance, construction or functioning, Wolberger's arrestingly mutated objects stimulate renewed contemplation of their ideological origins and significance. Typically, his sculptural interventions employ three principal approaches for evicting viewers from their comfort zone of habituated perception.

By slicing and collapsing familiar household objects, Wolberger demolishes reassuring symbols of domestic comfort and stability. Still standing, a refrigerator cut into layers provokes the uneasy feelings of instability and displacement that arise when trusted relationships are cut. Turning things inside out, deconstructing and reconstructing objects into newly functioning configurations, he exposes the intimate personal space housed within and around them. Through such manipulation he explores the construction of meaning at the junction of our physical, social and personal worlds.

Through his process of enlargement, he meticulously magnifies toy figurines and models to expose the flawed faces of our cultural ideals. Gun-slinging cowboys and brutish Indians, the iconic American "good guys and bad guys", idolize society's original villains and heroes. His toy soldiers and chromed sports trophy figurines aggrandize our essential ideals of heroism, patriotism, physical prowess and beauty that drive our economy. A life size wedding cake bride-and-groom garishly mass-markets marital love as pure saccharine sweetness. Lately, he has been enlarging unassembled toy models of war machines to confront us with our society's industrialized vision of peace through rigidly uniform order.

Each of Wolberger's sculptures is a perfectly rendered tribute to the pantheon of imperfect stereotypes upon which our society's continuing order is dependant. Seeking a unified view beyond the contradictions of cultural concept and physical form, his art transcends the realms of the trivial and the traumatic.



Toy Soldier #4, 2017

FANTASY AND FORCE: A BRIEF CONSIDERATION OF ARTISTS AND WAR IN THE AMERICAN CENTURY

(Excerpt from) David McCarthy, Art Journal, December 2003,

Wolberger's use of a toy soldier targets childhood play as the psychic staging ground for state-sanctioned violence, a theme commonly addressed by writers and artists in the past century. Initially designed for those royal offspring who in time would lead actual armies, toy soldiers helped boys assimilate the military ethos of absolute allegiance to authority and unthinking duty on the battlefield. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a booming market for tin and lead soldiers, sold largely to the middle and working classes. After the war, plastics and movable parts provided a degree of verisimilitude previously unmatched. Such toys made warfare a central part of childhood fantasy, helping to mold expectations about duty to one's country, while also reproducing gender stereotypes. Several writers noted that toys were preparation for the adult world, in that they "reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual," as Roland Barthes asserted. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s American artists used toy soldiers to connect childhood fantasy with adult retrospection, while suggesting a direct connection between play and combat. The veteran H. C. Westermann placed toy soldiers of World War I vintage in several sculptures, including Mad House (1958; in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago), to evoke his own youth in the 1920s and 1930s, while also intimating that the toy—as substitute for the man—was inadequate before the sublime forces of the postwar, nuclear world. Ed Kienholz strapped a small soldier to the base of his installation The Portable War Memorial (1968, Museum Ludwig, Cologne). The soldier's presence suggests the dramatic disparity in scale between individuals and the power of the modern state in waging global war.

Wolberger's toy differs from that of preceding artists in its presence and placement. Rendered life size, it is uncannily human. Even the evidence of molding cannot fully detract from its identity as surrogate. Without a framing narrative, the soldier becomes a universal everyman, ever ready for war. Though directing the viewer's attention in the exhibition, it could easily be pointed elsewhere, a perhaps haunting reminder of the ease with which men and women can be deployed for nation and money. Like the ubiquitous Union infantry, Southern rebels, and World War I doughboys found in dozens of cities and towns throughout the United States, Toy Soldier is a production-line memorial ready to take his place in a long line of statues."

Toy Soldiers series, work in Progress. Previous Page: Toy Soldier #5 (Kneeling position). Above: Toy Soldier #6 (Crawling Position)

Given the attractiveness of war and its centrality within childhood fantasy and adult imagination, it seems difficult, if not futile, to take an antiwar stance. Whether this art changes behavior is probably beside the point. That such work is done at all is more important than what it accomplishes. The act of representation-a product of sustained, individual thought-stands in opposition to group thinking, state propaganda, and the heroic fantasies of mass culture, all of which trade in simplification.This opposition is particularly important in an age of outright censorship, collusion between press and state, and collective amnesia, each fostered in the aftermath of Vietnam and the convenient myth that a hostile media lost the war. The historian George Roeder has argued that the first casualty in war is not so much truth as ambiguity. One could add complexity, subtlety, and contradiction. Rendering military strife in black-and-white terms, as in the United States demonization of Japan during World War II or of global communism during the Cold War, helped mobilize American citizens. If they could picture themselves as the victims of a surprise attack or as the last bastion of political and economic freedom, they were more likely to tolerate the political and economic needs of the war state. At its best, antiwar art both witnesses the trauma of combat and situates it within a much broader consideration of culture. This fosters reflection and possibly even action. Perhaps the presence of such art is enough-provided it is exhibited and reproduced-in that it offers overwhelming evidence of continuous opposition.

SOLDIER PORTRAITS SERIES

Soldier Portrait #1, 2016

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Soldier Portrait #2, 2017

SOLDIER PORTRAIT SERIES
(next page):

Soldier Portrait #3, 2017
Soldier Portrait #4, 2018
Soldier Portrait #5, work *in progress*
Soldier Portrait #6, work in progress
Soldier Portrait #7, work in progress
Soldier Portrait #8, work in progress
Soldier Portrait #9, work in progress