

FOREWORD

Buy Me Something explores consumer culture, identity, and desire through the act of photographing. When Nat Ward asked me to write for his book on toy culture I thought about my own experience as a consumer, a parent, and a cultural critic. I wondered how I would examine this topic and ask the right questions. Then again, what are the right questions when one considers the experience of toys, specifically dolls? In this book, dolls range from Barbie, to baby dolls, to action figures! This project is a highly charged one, one that invites the viewer to look closely at their own experiences from consumer to collector; from child to adult. As we turn the pages, it is an emotion experience. We have all shopped with one of our parents, sometimes with both. The photographs push us to imagine the desires of young faces and the complacent expressions of the parents. They also invite us to consider the power of advertising through packaging, television commercials and print ads. Ward has combined all of these experiences in one book: fashion, body image, fantasy, violence, work, marriage, race and soft-core pornography. Ward juxtaposes all in this as he locates them within children's toys. It is equally surprising to consider how typography and the power of language are used to entrap the young consumer.

As I turn the pages in this book I think about the first time I purchased an action figure for my own son in the mid-1970s. It was the time of the Vietnam War, nurses and soldiers were returning home; it was after the Civil Rights Movements and the Women's Movement was still active. As a young mother, I questioned the role and influence toys had on child's play. I wanted my child son to have positive options. GI Joe was popular, Match cars were zooming through store aisles and Barbie was stabilized as the ideal body type and doll for every young girl. Some thirty years later, I see only a slight shift in what young mothers are purchasing for their children's psychological and emotional development. There is a diversity of body types in action figures and dolls today. Ward's project builds on that experience. As he walks through toy stores and captures the excitement and disappointment on the faces of the young children he reminds us that photographing is an emotional experience for both the subject and the photographer. Ward shows that he is connected with the children, both boys and girls, because there is a sense of history and memory that we all experience projected in most of these images -- the photographers' own history as a child consumer and the memory of viewer. For example, (Plate 6) his photograph of a young boy contemplating a large stack of boxes of wrestling dolls, Hulk Hogan, Rey Mysterio as he holds a box in his hands. We can only imagine what he is thinking about as he escapes in this quiet moment. Is it that he wants another one? Or does he want to be as strong as Hulk Hogan? Ward also photographs the actual dolls in a realistic way that one feels as if he is photographing a live sports figure dribbling a basketball (Plate 7); his point of reference as he photographs a group of dolls in a glass display case reflects the face of a young girl, her expression mirrors the nattily dressed dolls wearing flower tee shirts and zippered jackets all in formation.

Ward is adept at finding the right vantage point in which to connect with the subject and what they are experiencing. He is a keen observer. His photographs are insightful as we see how young minds are influenced by the prescribed body types of dolls, specifically (Plate 1) the display of dolls with brown eyes, grey eyes, blue eyes, (Plate 19) the type

on the packaging that reads “to be highly praised and appreciated by consuming public”, (Plate 14) the little princess doll and veil “a wish come true” all become signifiers to how the culture of advertising is shaping how we see ourselves. Ward’s photographs document and interrogate the existence of how popular culture through the manufactured “typed” dolls influences young girls in their choices, from baby dolls to housewife to super model; for boys, from bodybuilder to action figures to race car drivers these images all speak to desire. Ward’s work celebrates and explores both real and imagined experiences. They define and re-define exploitation, they also attempt to locate a way for the viewer to enjoy the experience of play through the imaginary. They are wonderfully constructed images that transform the viewer to freely associate with either the subject or the object of desire. I know through looking at these photographs that *Buy Me Something* is an experience that continues to evolve.

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