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ARTS

## In *My Art*, Laurie Simmons's Directorial Feature-Film Debut

BY EVE MACSWEENEY  
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Photo: Courtesy of Film Movement

Laurie Simmons's debut feature film, *My Art*, in which she also stars, is a must-see for, in particular: women, people interested in how art is made, and those who like to laugh. Besides its visual richness—no surprise since Simmons is an artist—it's director and heroine puts a devastatingly funny and subtle lens on such subjects as success, ageism, loneliness, absurdity, dating in your 60s, inhibition and disinhibition, collaboration, and ruthlessness.

A lot, in other words. The story is carried through a deceptively simple narrative of a 60-something art-school teacher, Ellie, as she bids goodbye to her class for the summer and heads off to a friend's borrowed country house to devote herself for a few precious weeks to her own work. Taking a swing around the Whitney Museum before she leaves, Ellie bumps into a former student, played by Simmons's daughter Lena Dunham, now a successful artist who complains about her hectic schedule of international shows. "I'm so jealous of you," the young woman laments. "I am never going to be able to get out of the studio this *entire* summer."

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Looking back on the scene, Simmons says, "It's the idea of the humble brag. I've taught intermittently for many years, and you always have to contend with your students becoming successful. To them you are always their teacher and you are going to be *so* happy to hear about their success. . . ."

Another of Ellie's richer and more famous artist friends tells her, equally irritatingly, "I think you should embarrass yourself more." Yet embarrassment, it turns out, is one of the chief pleasures of this movie, and revealed as the source of creation. Simmons is marvelously unselfconscious as an actress playing a highly self-conscious artist who likes to re-create classic movie pairings with herself in the roles of assorted screen goddesses.

Polite but prickly, Ellie is single, childless, and devoted to her ailing dog. She arrives at her friend's house to find a refrigerator full of "medibles" and a cluster of local characters—out-of-work actor turned gardener, local café owner, et cetera—whom she gradually draws into her enactments. (The cast includes Parker Posey, Robert Clohessy, and John Rothman.) Simmons repurposes, among others, Marilyn Monroe in *The Misfits*, Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco*, and in one memorable scene, Sissy Spacek dancing under a tree with Martin Sheen in *Badlands*. "Ellie's personality really came out in the vignettes," notes Simmons. "That's why I thought it was important for me to play her. Because if she was too talented, it would have seemed wrong. They needed to be flat-footed in the way an artist would make them."

Despite her awkwardness, Ellie becomes a magnet in a community fascinated by her activities, as she pulls her ideas together and realizes them through her impromptu troupe. At the end, mission accomplished, she retreats into a stiffer demeanor, leaving her coconspirators slightly confused. "It's the part of every artist that has to be a vampire," Simmons says. "What I really liked about Ellie was how focused she was on moving ahead in her work. She can be momentarily rattled, then returns to her resilience and her persistence." (Flip back to Lena Dunham, who describes her mother thusly: "Basically, her parenting style is her directing style; total freedom until it no longer served us well.")

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Simmons, who herself has a busy season ahead with shows in New York and London and an upcoming retrospective—"I'm old enough to call it a retrospective," she jokes—at the Ft. Worth MoMa and MCA Chicago, is not new to film. In 2006, she made a 45-minute short, *The Music of Regret*, starring Meryl Streep. But it was observing, and participating in, the shooting of Lena Dunham's 2009 film "Tiny Furniture" that opened a door for her. "The fact that she had been able to make this movie so cheap, with a digital camera, was a breakthrough for me," Simmons says.

She still considers herself an artist who's made a movie rather than a director, which is probably why the film is so good. It's full of sly visual jokes—in the Whitney scene, for example, Ellie pauses, noncommittal, in front of a painting by Simmons's husband, Carroll Dunham. But Simmons insists that the humor of the movie is more or less unintentional. The end project, says Lena Dunham, "Broke my heart." During filming, Simmons says, "Every morning when I woke up, I would read the Sides for the day and anything that seemed like broad humor, anything that seemed like a cheap joke, I crossed off. So anything that's funny, I feel like it's real-life funny."

Exactly.

*My Art opens today at the Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, New York City. On Sunday January 14, a special screening will be held at the Quad to benefit Planned Parenthood, followed by a talk with Laurie Simmons. Tickets, \$50, include a complimentary DVD of the film.*

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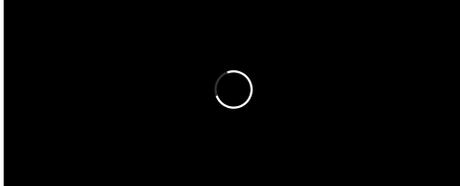
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