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Laurie Simmons' Doll Girls at the Jewish Museum: A Dialogue With Jeremy Sigler

The artist on Jewish mothers, '1950s American' dummies, childhood superheroes, phallic red lipstick, and Japanese sex toys

By Jeremy Sigler | April 29, 2015 12:00 AM

The title of the current Laurie Simmons show at the Jewish Museum is "How We See." As long as I've known Laurie, I've found that she genuinely does want to know "how we see." (I was a studio assistant for her husband, painter Carroll Dunham.) She enjoys hearing what people have to say about her latest photographs of "Doll Girls" that stare out with preternaturally large sparkling eyes. The models use makeup and even cosmetic surgery to take on the appearance of dolls—not dolled-up girls, but dolled-up dolls. But "How We See" also applies to Laurie Simmons herself. How do I see Laurie? In the course of our conversation we kind of got into it.

When I think of you, Laurie, I see you in your studio gossiping on the phone like a teenager.

Remember the phone? We don't have the telephone anymore, thank God.

Growing up, we had this wall-mounted phone in the kitchen, and it had one of those expanding cords that could stretch as far as three rooms away. It was amazing!

There's no place for a phone person anymore. And you know what? I'm too busy now to be a phone person.

Busy with what?

I'm working on a film right now. And I have been writing the script for about three years—telling a story verbally that I never could have hoped to tell with my art in the past. I have been so starved for language.

Yeah, and you're all about talking. Being around your family, I have had the opportunity to listen in on the most wonderful and humorous ongoing dialogue, comprised of four very distinct voices.

We are verbal. [laughter]

Yet much of your work with dolls and dummies seems to speak metaphorically about the struggle to get words out.

My struggle, to be honest, was having my own language stifled. As I look back, one of the problems I had as a young artist was that I never had the confidence to speak out about my real intentions. I was just grateful to be written about. But in those days I never really believed what was being said about my work. I would read what was written and just think: nope.

That confirms my impression of your ventriloquist dummies. In a famous piece from the early 1990s, you took a group of identical dummies and hung them in a line on the wall. Each sat upright in its little chair.

It was called "Clothes Make the Man " (1990-1992). There were six of them; they were only differentiated by their suits, or pajamas, or whatever. It's one of my favorite pieces, to tell you the truth.

They seem to provoke the art critic: "Just pick me up and say what you want with me. I'm yours." So much of what gets written by critics or scholars in one particular moment, doesn't often stick. Artworks change.

Yes, and I change my mind too. Now I see many of my works differently than I once did. I guess it is my prerogative to change my mind, right? I think it's fine to edit; I don't mind when I hear that an artist or a writer has changed dates or omitted facts. As artists or writers or musicians—it's our history! We're the ones making the rules and we're the ones who should get to break them.

Yeah, well, try omitting something off the Internet. The other day I begged my editor to go back and make a few changes to a review I wrote that had been posted about six months prior. So my editor said, "I don't want to let you go back and 'gild the lily.' "

Maybe the challenge for the critic is writing about the work in real time, where there is no going back, and no delay. I should be able to read a piece of criticism and hop on a subway and see that work while it is up.

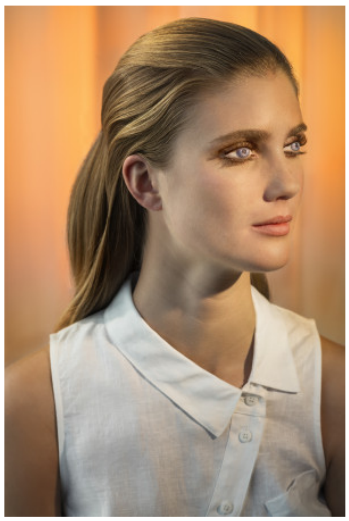
I love the scene in *Don't Look Back* shot inside a claustrophobic phone booth right after the concert lets out, as a journalist dictates his review of Bob Dylan's performance, line by line, right into the phone.

That kind of critic is dying a slow death. There's so much less of that sort of "working the beat" these days. And it's really a challenge for the critic to operate in what I consider a complete "take-down" culture. Everyone is a critic now. Everyone gets to weigh in.

And the trolls are trolling. Within 24 hours of posting, there will be like four comments rebutting some troll's inflammatory cut downs. And readers are drawn to the violence.

One of the problems with digital culture is that it's possible to think about people without associating them with a) a face, b) a personality, and c) feelings. And so many people have begun to present a false self online and to achieve a kind of invisibility.

—An idea you've been exploring in your work for decades. In your current exhibition at the Jewish Museum, you have gone beyond: with photographs of *real* human models who have made themselves over to vaguely give off the appearance of a doll. My favorite is "Liz (Blue) ." It's hard to tell who is really behind those huge eyes.



'How We See/Lindsay (Gold).' 2015 © *Laurie Simmons, courtesy the artist and Salon 94, on show as part of the exhibit 'How We See,' at the Jewish Museum until Aug. 9, 2015*

Those eyes were painted on top of her eyelids. In the photograph her eyes are actually closed.

In your "Love Doll " shows at Salon 94, your work was not populated by humans pretending to be dolls, but by dolls pretending to be humans. The photographs dealt with highly fetishistic lifelike fantasy sex dolls imported from Japan.

I found a life-size doll in Tokyo and it radically changed the course of my work. I used to take pictures of small things—objects and dolls—and I was constantly building sets. But with a lifelike doll, I realized I could use my own living room and bedroom as a set. The whole world became a stage for my prop.

I think about your work in relation to the 2013 film *Her*. Where the man, played by this painfully sincere and depressed Joaquin Phoenix—a futuristic poet essentially who has a day-job writing greeting cards—falls in love with his own computer's advanced operating system, which is played by the voice of Scarlett Johansson. It's set in the future, but the technology is extremely believable and palpable. The female O.S. is so tangible and honest in the man's mind that he no longer needs an actual human companion to fulfill any need for human contact. It's perverse, yet actually quite pragmatic.

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Even the lifelike sex dolls would become obsolete because the actual physical world is no longer necessary to stage simulated interactions. But the sex dolls you used to photograph seem to work. The people—the culture—who use them must have like steroidal imaginations. It used to be that we'd try to dress up our partners to be more exotic like our fantasies, but now it's the other way around: It's all about trying to get our exotic fantasies to comedown to earth a little and to seem real.

I think you're talking about a kind of depersonalization or personalization that can actually open things up. I have always felt that the face of a doll is a kind of blank space—a tabula rasa—invented for human projection. Even if a person is sitting with what you would call "no facial expression" we would still say that person is expressionless, or sitting in a "state of repose." With humans, unlike dolls, we always assign emotion. In the first part of the 21st century, artifice has managed to feel hyper-real, for me at least. And of course with a Japanese love doll, there's a level of perfection that is pretty much unattainable in real life.

And even if your interaction is not physical, there is an amazing opportunity to provide the most creative and open-minded dialogue. A dialogue that is perhaps more interesting than the dialogue you could be having with some boring *real* person. [laughter]

I assume you played with dolls as a kid. Oops, I almost said, "with kids as a doll." Eek.

'It's absolutely plausible that online life will eventually trump real life.'

It's so funny that you're asking about this now because I had a very long conversation last night with our older daughter Lena, who you know. She said some really nice things about her childhood—like how she'd like her child to have the same type of childhood that she had. And I said, "Well, you never really did anything after school except sit in your room and play." And she said, "Exactly!" I told her how much I regret never recording her younger sister Grace hanging out in the living room playing with her huge box of super heroes. When she and the dolls were in dialogue with each other I chose to respect her privacy instead of listening in. I just have a feeling that I really missed out on something.

Think of all the great tapes you'd have in your possession had you just practiced a little at-home surveillance on your own daughters. [laughter]

You have been exploring "doll-play" in your work for many years. Your pictures at one time struck me as very existential. I'm thinking of the early black-and-white pictures from your "In and Around the House" series form the late 1970s. You created numerous shots of a lonely housewife doll in her dimly lit kitchen. In one, I think the doll is positioned as if she were putting away little toy groceries or something. The pictures are very moody, like Edward Hopper paintings. They make me want to cry.

But let me go back to the dummies, which are less somber, and more gleefully twisted. One of my favorites is of six identical male dummies surrounding what seems to be a Laurie Simmons dummy. It embarrasses me to say this, but that picture has a Jewish quality to it, I think.

Ha, you can only say that because you're Jewish. When asked about what it means to be a Jewish woman in contemporary culture, I'm at a complete loss. Because it's such a part of who I am. I can't begin to untangle it. I don't even know how to talk about it. I wish I did.

But I'm very curious about your take on it. I can only guess that you see "Laurie Simmons" as an over-nurturing Jewish mother.

No! On the contrary!

Sorry, that was a projection. What do *you* see?

Well, not a mother figure. I guess I see a girl more my own age. And I'm like one of the many men attracted to her. And she's kind of basking in her innate ability to capture almost any man's attention!

It reminds me of your doorman, who I met a few minutes ago. I arrived down in the lobby, and announced that I was here to meet "Laurie Simmons," and his face just lit up. And I said, "What?" And he started bubbling over about how great you are, as he walked me to the elevator and pushed the PH button. I think he was like vicariously going up in the elevator with me to see you.

Well, this is fascinating. You have it half right. The reason I made that picture is probably because I'd never gotten that kind of attention when I was younger. So it was like *goddammit*, I am going to make a picture where I am the center of attention.

Do you make the dolls? I don't think of you as a closet fetishist working in secret to produce the doll of your dreams.

No, I hired a ventriloquist to make the dummies. But I did tons of research to find the right face. It needed to be neutral in a very specific "'50s American" kind of way—which meant Caucasian and medium to fair-haired. Nothing remotely ethnic. I wanted the hair in a certain style, and the eyes a certain color. It probably took me longer to figure out *who* that boy should be, then to actually have the boy fabricated.

But more importantly, now I know how you, the adolescent Jeremy, really felt about Jewish girls. They had the power, right?

Well, no, not really, not at that age. I grew up in a very WASPy part of Maryland where I was like the token Jew drinking Southsides at the country club and at the yearly steeplechase races out in the valley.

Sounds like a Philip Roth novel.

Let me ask you about "Pushing Lipstick (Red Lipstick)" from 1979. It is a picture of a girl doll staring at a stick of red lipstick.

The doll and the lipstick are the same size. I was in my studio one day making the dollhouse pictures. And I happened to have my lipsticks on my worktable. I impulsively matched each doll's dress to the color of a lipstick, and put them face-to-face. In those days I left a little setup standing in my studio for months. I was actually learning the craft of photography, so shooting these setups at different times of the day allowed me to experiment with light. My studio was filled with pieces of disassembled dollhouse walls, swatches of wallpaper, mismatched dollhouse furniture and piles of discarded dolls. The walls were all tilted and held up by cereal boxes and canned shortening. Stuff I grabbed at the grocery store to lean props against. So, it was all smoke and mirrors and a big mess, but the rooms in the pictures looked so pristine.

I see the lipstick as a kind of phallic symbol. And as a symbol of the domination over women using the marketing of beauty. I recently wrote on the Helena Rubinstein show at the Jewish Museum that just came down. I learned that HR, being the cosmetic mogul that she was, believed that giving a woman a stick of red lipstick was like arming her with a handgun. I feel like the doll in your picture is caught up in this paradox between power and victimization.

When I first came to New York to be an artist, I felt like I had to shed a lot of my interests in pretty clothes and makeup—anything that might be perceived as feminine or frivolous. There was and still may be the mythology that a woman artist must give up everything for her work. The message then to women certainly felt like "art vs. personal life," and it was pretty much understood that having children would be counter to the image of being a tough, strong woman artist. I still meet young women artists who ask me how I balance being a mother and an artist. This is in a time when Hillary Clinton, Margaret Thatcher, Beyoncé, Sheryl Sandberg (of *Lean In* fame). All kinds of successful or powerful women can now be mothers, and meanwhile I meet women artists who are still wondering if it's OK.

At any rate, I didn't show "Pushing Lipstick" for a really long time; I was far too embarrassed.

But I guess you eventually got up your nerve. And you seem to have gathered more and more nerve with each show. I think some artists (and people) lose their nerve as they age, but not you.

The really cool thing about being older is that I trust my intuition much more. The sad thing about being an older artist is that you can never get those spontaneous private moments back—from before there was an audience. So you really have to find that place. Because there's like BA and AA.

BA? AA?

Before Audience and After Audience. Those years of making work when *nobody* is looking—except maybe your best friend or your boyfriend, if you're lucky.