



DOCUMENT NO. 94—LOVE DOLLS DON'T LOVE YOU BACK

LAURIE SIMMONS CAST JAPANESE “LOVE DOLLS” IN CONNECTICUT SETTINGS. UNLIKE THEIR SEXED-UP AMERICAN SISTERS, THE WHOLESOME FRAGILITY MAKES THEM ALL THE MORE INSIDIOUS. FOR THE ARTIST AND HER TEAM, THE SERIES BECAME A RESCUE PROGRAM.

BY STEPHEN FRAILEY, PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURIE SIMMONS

Objectifying women is notoriously a man's sport except in the hand of artist Laurie Simmons whose sly and tender work implicates the many feminine stereotypes that drive consumer culture just as it fosters our most intimate fantasies. Ranging from collage to photography and most recently film, Simmons, who is based in New York, has widely exhibited her work. A recent foray to Japan in search of the local sex doll scene provides the basis of a recent photography series that stars one of the exquisitely ersatz creatures. Posed in all-American settings, Simmons creates a clash of orientalist cliché and the kind of comforting images only a good-old mail-order catalog could deliver. Stephen Frailey finds out what Simmons' sexy spooking is all about:

Stephen—*Is there irony in your title for this series, "Love Doll?" It may be generic, but the figure seems forlorn, without love.*

Laurie—No, I rarely go for irony in my work—at least not consciously. When I discovered the sex dolls in Japan I understood that, there, they are called "Love Dolls" as opposed to the American name, "Real Dolls." They seem more tender and adoptable than their coarse, sleazy, and fake American cousins. It makes sense given the Japanese obsession with anime and manga girls that a real-life embodiment of those characters would appear—though I've heard that Love Dolls were created around 30 years ago so men with disabilities could enjoy female companionship...True? I don't know.

Stephen—*Come to think of it, there is enough irony in popular culture! Contradiction may be a better term for what she represents: the impossibility of love...Does her specific cultural—Eurasian—identity have any place in your thinking, a Japanese girl who has been 'imported' to Connecticut where you live and work?*

Laurie—She is a peculiarly Asian fantasy, exquisite and insanely well sculpted. Before I left for Japan in the summer of 2009, I wished desperately to bring something back that would change my work. I didn't count on it being the size of a family member; everything around me has become a potential stage. Until I dressed her like a geisha in the final pictures she lived and acted like an American—but sort of like one who had just fallen to earth from another galaxy...

Stephen—*I am thinking of mail-order brides and adoption; isn't there a cultural stereotype in her Asianess?*

Laurie—I was very aware of her *Japaneseness* when I first got her. She seemed to spring from that culture so completely. I was told there were Love Doll hotels where men could go for the night—for a fee. I ordered her online and picked out her face, hairstyle, eye color and other delicate details. But she assimilated quickly when I bought her clothes and posed her in rooms in Connecticut. So she was adopted in a sense, though I must reiterate the doll is not part of my family. It's a prop.

Stephen—*She is also wholesome looking—does that influence her sexuality?*

Laurie—She is wholesome and not tawdry, unlike many of the others which are scary crude. For that same reason, going to the doll showroom in Tokyo, was insidious and creepy. One side of the room featured a display of dolls in their tweens in plaid parochial school uniforms. The underage schoolgirl fantasy is alive and well in Japan—Yuck! I had no interest in exploring or exploiting that subject. My assistants and I joked about our Love Doll rescue. It took me a year before I could attempt a naked picture with the doll. I guess you could say I was protective.

Stephen—*Was your choice of attributes purposeful?*

Laurie—I could have picked enormous silicone looking breasts, but I was going for something natural and Japanese dolls are more restrained in that way.

Stephen—*Is her apparent affluence a deliberate part of the narrative?*

Laurie—I posed her in a house that I'd waited my whole life to buy with the express purpose of using as a studio. If I'd gotten her some years ago I would have shot her in a crumbling rental house by a lake or a funky ranch house in Hampton Bays. She is where I am now in my life. But her clothes are from Target.

Stephen—*Why does she become a geisha?*

Laurie—I finally gave in to the Asianess...While I was assimilating the doll, I was also catching up on Japanese culture, reading fiction like Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's "Makioka Sisters" and watching the movie version, as well as "Memoirs of a Geisha" and films by Kurosawa. Then in October 2010 my sisters gave me a framed watercolor of a "Maiko" (young geisha) as a birthday gift. I painted it when I was 10 and my older sister had somehow kept it. The watercolor looks like a Japanese girl with my face (I don't remember making a self-portrait; it's odd). So, I started to think about my first exposure to Japanese things in America—clichéd things like cherry blossoms and kimonos, geisha dolls and Benihana and my father's cameras—he was an amateur photographer. I always thought being a geisha seemed like a good deal. You danced, dressed up and went out instead of staying home with the kids.

Stephen—*Is that a human female figure with the geisha in the last image?*

Laurie—The final photo in the series is the Love Doll as a geisha with my assistant Rachel. Somehow I discovered last summer that Rachel had a very elaborate tattoo of a Maiko covering her entire back. She'd gotten it when she was 18 and it's absolutely gorgeous. She had been working for me a long time and I never knew. The synchronicity is pretty amazing, don't you think? The strange thing is that once I photographed the doll as a geisha it seemed impossible to tell in the pictures whether it was a small doll or a human-scale Love Doll.