

March 25, 2015

Unblinking reflections on the internet age

VISUAL ARTS

Laurie Simmons: *How We See*

Jewish Museum, New York

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Laurie Simmons is a surrealist at heart, discovering eeriness in the most run-of-the-mill places. Her latest show at New York's Jewish Museum features almost conventional fashion photos of conventionally beautiful models. Everything in the pictures is normal and familiar, except for the staring eyes painted on to the women's closed lids. These peepers look deeply creepy: realistically detailed but too big, too fixed, too vacant, making the humans who wear them look as if they'd been 3D printed in silicone.

Simmons' small but profound installation, "How We See", contains only six large-scale photographs but its impact is mightier than that number suggests. The women's psychedelic perfection leaps from the walls. One "gazes" straight ahead, her not-actually-eyes boring into our collective consciousness. Another glances off to the side in a typical three-quarter portrait, yet whatever reflectiveness we associate with the pose is manifestly fake.

"How We See" deals with narcissism and blindness, the need to be seen and the shallowness of our insights into others. In truth, Simmons implies, we barely perceive each other at all. We crave approval and demand empathy but don't notice when others ask the same from us. "Look at it from my point of view," we demand while regularly refusing to reciprocate. By covering up the face's most putatively expressive features, Simmons reveals that what we observe in others is a lie we tell ourselves to make sense of a much more complicated truth.

In this searingly pessimistic series, Simmons finally whips off her soothing old mantle of nostalgia. She grew up in a Tudor manse in Great Neck, Long Island, and spent much of her career reproducing that domestic cocoon in miniature, building tiny household sets, populating them with plastic women and photographing them up close. These constructed memories of her childhood home dwell in wistful shadows and expressive light. The dreamy and ironic images riff off the comforts and limitations of 1950s femininity. Real life, she suggests, is just an imperfect replication of a vivid fantasy.

Lately, though, wistfulness has blurred into a sly kind of ghoulishness. The change started in 2009, when Simmons visited Japan with her daughter, Grace Dunham. (Her older daughter, Lena Dunham, has established a reputation



'Tatiana' (2015)

for her own brand of unblinking realism by creating the HBO show *Girls*.) In a shop window they spotted a weirdly animate "love" doll and were beguiled by its freakish charm. Simmons ordered a couple of the pliant sex toys to be shipped back to her studio in the US, where she dressed them up as brides, geishas and ordinary young innocents in parkas, wandering like sleepwalkers about the grounds of her Connecticut home.

The resulting photos have an unholy seductiveness, recalling ETA Hoffmann's tale of Olympia, the automaton so convincing that she inspires crazed extremes of love. Freud used the word "uncanny" to describe ghastly harbingers of death, typically incarnated in puppets, automata and spectral shards of the human body. Simmons' lifeless subjects share that sensibility. They look more or less normal, but also just horrifying enough to evoke Hans Bellmer's S&M dolls from the 1930s, as well the murderous dummy in the 1945 horror film *Dead of Night*.



'Lindsay (Gold)' (2015)

Simmons claims to detest dolls, but they form the core of her obsessions. After the "Love Doll" series she embarked on a project inspired by Japanese kigurumi culture, where men and women dress up in public as life-sized puppets. Simmons persuaded friends to don the costumes, turning them into *Twilight Zone*-like amalgamations of the living and the dead. All the outfits included masks with huge, painted anime eyes — but no eye holes, which means the wearers had to be led about and posed like marionettes for the photographer's lens.

Since she was a girl, Simmons has enthusiastically embraced the role of puppeteer. In 1980, when she was in her thirties and already quite well established, she commanded her father to dress up in a sailor suit and dance with her satin-gowned mother. The upshot was "Sam and Dottie Dance", a stagy yet intimate sequence that induced in the artist a vertiginous sense of power (probably quite similar to the way Lena Dunham felt when directing her mother in her feature film *Tiny Furniture*).

"I felt like a voyeuristic child witnessing something I wasn't supposed to be seeing," Simmons once confessed. She even made a Laurie Simmons puppet for herself to manipulate, giving fresh meaning to the phrase self-control.

The work at the Jewish Museum crosses into new terrain. Over the course of her career, she has progressed from miniature to life-sized dolls, to real people dressed up as dolls, to live models with dolls' eyes. Each phase represents a step away from mechanical soullessness, though she seems to shy away from reaching full humanity. In Hoffmann's story, it's the sight of Olympia's eyeballs lying on the ground that drives the hero to madness. Visitors to the Jewish Museum might have a similar experience. What, they will ask themselves on first impact, is wrong with this picture? The falseness unveils itself slowly, shockingly.

The models are at once wide-eyed and blinkered, all-seeing and totally myopic, which feels like a metaphor for life online. "More and more, we're interacting with people whose identities are unclear to us," Simmons recently told an interviewer. "We don't really know who or what we're seeing. There's a kind of blindness and lack of clarity with the way we live now that's stunning. It's stupefying." Those models are us. With our powerful but untrustworthy instruments, we get incomprehensible glimpses into the lives of "friends" we've never met and instantly call up evidence we can't assess from cameras that understand nothing of what they record. We inhabit a Panopticon for the sightless.

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