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Interview with Laurie Simmons

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This past spring, the artist Laurie Simmons had two shows up simultaneously in New York City. “Clothes Make the Man. Works from 1990-1994,” at Mary Boone Gallery included photos depicting the less than flattering inner-thoughts of ventriloquist dummies; and “2017: The Mess and Some New” at Salon 94. Among the work on view, were striking portraits of women, including her daughters Grace and Lena Dunham whose clothes had been entirely painted-on. The dummies were from the early Nineties and, as Simmons recalled, not so well received at the time. But 20 years and a new world order had given them a new sense of relevance and urgency—visual, social, and political. As Simmons prepared for a major retrospective of her work, “Big Camera/Little Camera” (14 Oct 2018 – 27 Jan 2019) at the Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, I interviewed her in her apartment in Manhattan. Simmons, who had only just moved in the day before, was surrounded by towering piles of yet unpacked boxes. She had an appointment with her chiropractor later that morning, and a flight to Los Angeles the next day. The world outside was in its usual state of chaos but inside it was all possibility and potential. “I feel really good here,” Simmons said. And she meant it.

You are preparing for a big career retrospective. Is it hard to look back at old work?

It’s funny when you’re an artist your own work goes in and out of fashion with you. Like the show at Mary Boone, those pictures of dummies got a terrible review in the New York Times when I first made them, so I put them to bed for a while.

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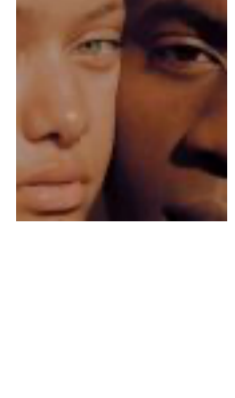
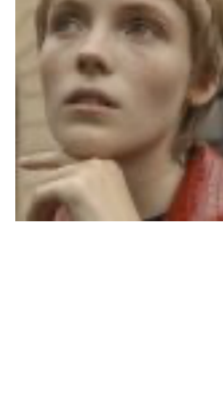


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But maybe the whole climate of the #MeToo makes this story of a woman giving inner thoughts to men compelling. At the time I don’t think people could really connect to it. But if you stick around long enough people who never came to your work find a way in.

Maybe it’s better that way. It gives your career longevity.

When I had my first show at Artists Space in 1979, I imagined my life like game show. There were two doors: one door had a big dollar sign on it, and the other just had sort of a blurry picture of a newspaper—the money door or the critical response and acclaim door. And I thought, I’m going through the critical acclaim door. Of course in the late 70s, nobody was making any money; the expectation for an artist was not to make any money.

Today there are a lot of people trying to become artists with the explicit goal of making a lot of money!

That is so true. Who knew that being an artist was a glamour job?

Was that true for men as well as women?

Yes, and in fact it was sort of a stain on your – we didn’t say brand then – a stain on your reputation if you made money. People were teaching and figuring out how to stay alive.

I have always admired the way that you managed not only to have a successful career, but also to have a family, to raise two incredible daughters. And you are still married to their father, who is also an artist. That could not have been easy.

It’s a lot. My career has been a slow burn with many peaks and valleys. And it’s still a complicated animal this thing I call my career – managing it, managing to stay with it during the slow times. Which is why I made a movie. Which is why I branch out and do a fashion job. It’s a challenge to stay interested in my own work because as you know family is very engaging and the world is very engaging. I feel like I could dump everything and just be a full-time activist!

A young woman I used to work with was talking to me about having children or not. A professor had told her that every child you have is a book you aren’t going to write.

Was it a man?

I believe so.

Well Marina Abramovic has been very vocal about not having children and so is Tracey Emin. I can’t tell you how many young women artists have come to me to express their fears about having children, and told me that their art dealer, their professor, their friend told them that if they had children they could expect to not have a good career. Margaret Thatcher had children; Meryl Streep has children; Ruth Bader Ginsburg has children. Artists are not allowed to have children? Writers are not allowed to have children? What century are we living in? Some of the most high-powered women in the world have children, so I don’t understand. It’s bullshit. And I am capable of getting very angry about it.

Your show at Salon 94 includes portraits of your daughters, Lena and Grace. Was this the first time you used them in your work?

Interestingly, in the show at Mary Boone there is a picture of a dummy in a field and he’s dreaming about two women – his fantasy is probably about having two women at once. But he was so small I needed women who would scale appropriately with him so in his thought bubble you see the back of Lena’s head and the head of her best friend Isabel Halley who is the artist Peter Halley’s kid. They were about eight years old. I’ve always believed in a separation of church and state. My work is my work and my family is my family. But Lena asked me if I could do her portrait. I said, no, I’m only doing people and things in my life that are very new. And she said: “what about the fact that I have this new body and this new life?” Last year she had gone through endometriosis and had had a hysterectomy. So she convinced me. She decided to pick a persona—to copy a photo of Audrey Hepburn photo. And then once I did Lena I had to do Grace because that’s the way it works in my family.

Did Grace choose a persona?

Rudolph Valentino. Obviously Valentino was a movie star heartthrob but Grace is gender fluid and there is something very beautiful and almost feminine about Valentino – I mean he was no John Wayne.

You had a mid-career retrospective almost two decades ago. What was the cultural/political climate around that one?

I think I was written about as a feminist artist a lot. I mean right now it’s hard to even remember who the president was. I know that right before Grace was born which was 1992 was when the whole Clarence Thomas trial was happening.

The “Is that a pubic hair on my coke?” moment.

I saw Anita Hill at an opening and I just thought, you’re such a star to me. You started everything – and got really screwed for it. She was so ahead of Time’s Up.

If your work was considered feminist then, now it must be ten-fold.

The examination of my work is happening on many more levels—political, psychological, personal. For me if it doesn’t hit those 3 Ps it’s not going to get out of the studio.

What’s the newest work in the retrospective?

The Mess is a rainbow gradient 20-foot long pile of junk from the 99 cent store. Every time I went shopping I would fill up the carts with a different color. I laid it all out in a rainbow and photographed it. It’s about so many things. About how messed up the world is, how toxic the world is. But also about my long-term love affair with plastic, which is problematic. When I was young, plastic was the new material; it was going to save the world. Plastic made everything easy. Plastic was TV dinners. And now we just think of that huge swirling mass of bottles in the ocean. And I’m stuck with this love affair with plastic and the ability to make it look beautiful. The thing about this photo is it’s gorgeous. Plastic is my marble. It’s my gemstone. Give me a light and a plastic doll and some cleaning products and I’m going to make you a really beautiful picture. It’s my thing!

Does art have the power to influence politics or public opinion?

You know my whole life I’ve asked myself if what I’m doing has any relevance or significance. I’m at the point where I think artists themselves can become influencers. Do the people I wish would change their minds get to museums to see the work that I make and have a visceral, psychological, political, personal response to it? I don’t know. But I do think that art can give people hope. But can art foment political change? That’s another question all together.

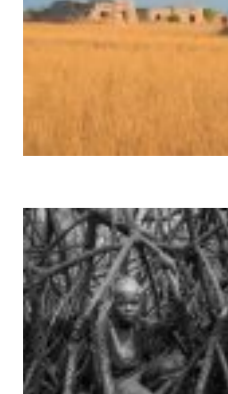
Alix Browne, Vogue Italia, July 2018, n.815, pag. 182

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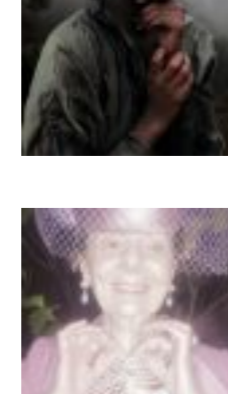
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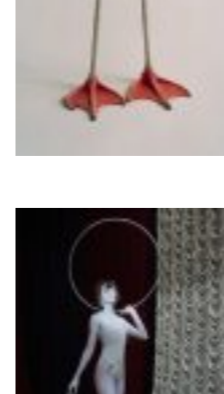
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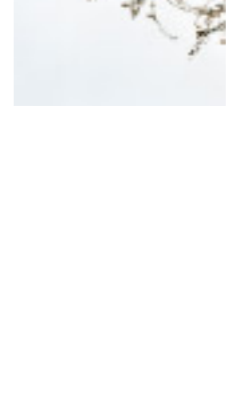
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