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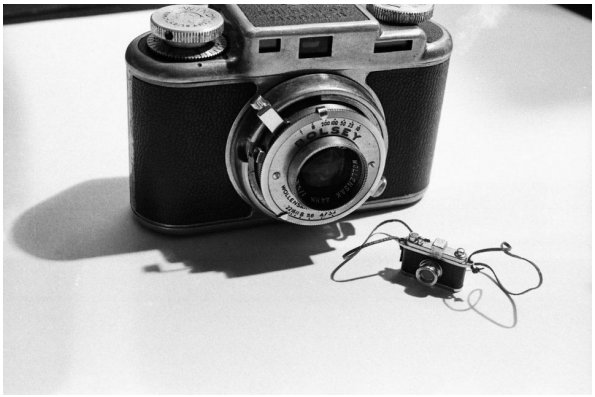
# Laurie Simmons Discusses Her Retrospective And A Career In Scrutinizing "Kodak Moment" Perfection

**Adam Lehrer**

Pioneering postmodern photographer Laurie Simmons, an artist who has always scrutinized memory and nostalgia, is currently the subject of a traveling retrospective *Big Camera, Little Camera*. The exhibition, which is about to close at The Modern Art Museum of Ft. Worth on January 27 and will soon travel to MCA Chicago where it will re-open on February 23, was organized by the Ft. Worth museum's senior curator Andrea Karnes and examines Simmons' career from 1976 to the present: 140 photographs, a small selection of sculptures, and two films.



Laurie Simmons, 'Big Camera, Little Camera' COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The exhibition specifically hones in on Simmons' career long dedication to identifying and unraveling archetypal American gender roles and the contrast of "Kodak moment" perfection of American surfaces with the often more complicated and sometimes darker realities beneath. Best known for using photography to give life to dollhouse miniatures, Simmons has used her practice to examine suburban housewives, cowboys, and props that hold symbolic meaning in American culture, and more. It is particularly fascinating to look back on Simmons' work now: we are now in a time when those exteriors of American perfection are beginning to crack. The dark undercurrent of American life that Simmons' work has hinted towards has bubbled to the surface in the form of documented racism and misogyny, false information, widespread poverty, and an utterly chaotic political situation.

To understand Simmons' work, one must first understand the artist herself. An influential artist of the much historicized "Pictures Generation," if there is any artist who earned the right to be intimidating, it's Simmons. However, Simmons is incredibly empathetic and disarming. During our conversation in December, we drifted into multiple digressions on film and television, family and friends (Simmons is also well-known as the wife of artist Carroll Dunham and mom of writer/actress Lena Dunham and writer Grace Dunham). She expressed interest in me, and what I do. And I think that desire to understand is at the root of all of her work. Because, while Simmons might be scrutinizing American stereotypes and surfaces, she certainly isn't judging those that subscribe to them. Her art is, in contrast to much of what we associate with postmodernism, very humanistic.

Simmons is merely trying to understand how these ideas come to fruition, and to understand herself and her relation to them.

Laurie Simmons '#267 Men's Room' COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Adam Lehrer: Your retrospective in Ft. Worth is entitled *Big Camera, Little Camera,* after your picture of the same name. That picture refers to your photographic practice of manipulating scale, but it also made me think of your amateur photographer father and him giving you your first camera. It felt resonant to the title in some way. I was curious, what it is about that picture that is enduringly relevant?

Laurie Simmons: It was the right image to sum up everything that I've done: from fact to fiction, from humans to surrogates, from big to small. Black and white to color from male to female. Basically I use the same subject over and over. But I also jump between those polarities all the time. I have actually also come to think of it as a tender father-daughter portrait because my father did give me a camera. He was a dentist who had a very small office connected to the house. He was an amateur photographer with a dark room in the basement. I would follow him in the basement and it seemed like that place, bathed in the red light with the chemicals in the tray, was magical.

Adam Lehrer: Did your father understand what you were doing with photography?

Laurie Simmons: No. He understood photography from the LIFE magazines that he had in his den and that was the extent of it. He was very visual in a way and had an artistic streak but he was first generation American: he fought in World War II and he believed that he was supposed to have a respectable profession. For him photography was squarely rooted in the idea of hobbyism. But what was really crazy was that my father had this special Polaroid setup so that he could photograph his patients' smiles. So when I was around 11 or 12 I brought my toys to him so he could take close-ups (laughs). I think the idea of getting really close to small objects was in my brain for a long time.

Laurie Simmons, '#221 Walking House'  COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Adam Lehrer: (laughs)  I wanted to talk about your choice to fetishize and look at the 1950s in your early work.  You said that you found a dichotomy in this decade, both “its beauty and its lethality,” what was specifically beautiful and what was specifically lethal?

Laurie Simmons: I grew up in a community where people were trying to assimilate quickly. There was so much emphasis on the way things “looked.” That idea of “Kodak moment” perfection is at the center of all my work. You'd look at LIFE Magazine and see that looking perfect was everyone’s priority. But the perfection of the way things looked was at odds with how I felt. As a child I think you can pick up that things are not the way they seem, that there is a darker underside. Little kids can listen to their parents and hear them fight and hear them discuss money and know that their aunts and uncles are having marital problems or that people die. The more you learned about the real world, and the more it seemed to be at odds with my mother's perfect kitchen.


Laurie Simmons '#030 Opening Refrigerator Milk in the Middle’  COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Adam Lehrer: You always seem to have kept true to your initial fascinations, but from that impetus you've been able to explore feminine domestic roles, masculine roles, roles of the family. It seems like you've never really had to abandon that initial idea despite building this massive visual world.

Laurie Simmons: I love the way you're describing it. I always feel like I got on a train and from there, it was a straight trip, and more passengers got on board: cultural influences, political influences, and psychological influences. Getting married, having children, traveling, and all of these things kept being added to the story. I feel like I've been telling the same story for 40 years. Just from different angles and with different characters.

Adam Lehrer: When you transitioned from using black to color, did your friend and mentor, the late iconic art photographer Jimmy De Sana, influence your decision at all?

Laurie Simmons: [Jimmy] basically taught me everything about photography because I didn't have a formal education. But for me color was a natural progression in the late 1970s. Around that time I had gone to an exhibition of the artist Jan Dibbetts and saw this rainbow piece that he had made. I was really curious about how it was made. So I asked the gallerist who told me that Dibbets sent his photos down to the store to have them developed. That was a moment of liberation. I just started shooting rolls of color film and having them sent to the drugstore. When I was coming up, we liberated ourselves from that whole "art photography" history: perfect dark room work and 8x10 black and white prints. We realized we could make trashy giant prints, and depart from traditional photo history.

Adam Lehrer: I really love your ventriloquist series and the cowboy series and I was wondering if there was an impetus for you to start thinking about masculine roles and how they were equally as limiting as the domestic roles of femininity. What got you interested in this?

Laurie Simmons: I think the simple answer is that I had my first show at Art Space in 1979. There was an article in The Voice and [the writer] who wrote about my show called me a “feminist photographer.” I was floored. Even though I saw myself personally being a feminist I didn't see that aspect in my work. I thought I was dealing with memory, and the confusion of memory. Even though I was only 27-years-old I felt like my memory was completely fluid in terms of what I remembered and what I didn't, I guess you could say it was "foggy." When I got labeled a feminist, I was embarrassed. I was taking pictures of dolls. I had to start finding ways to appeal to a male audience. So I realized if these feminine stereotypes were ads for Campbell's Soup, then what would the male version be? [Cowboys] were kind of the peak of male masculinity.

And ventriloquism was like high-tech entertainment at dinner parties when I was a kid, but it also became a metaphor for the political awakening I had when I realized that advertising was manipulative and could lull the audience into a trance. Besides the fact that dummies looked creepy and interesting, the idea that you never knew who was speaking to you became socially, psychologically, and politically rich to me.

Laurie Simmons '#37 Man, Blue Shirt, Red Barn' COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Adam Lehrer: It's interesting what you said about the critic calling your work feminist. Critics often label work solely according to an artist's identity, but often art examines the world far more broadly than the artist's personal experience could indicate.

Laurie Simmons: It's very reductive. I always say that things can't leave my studio unless they meet three pieces of criteria: the personal, the political and the psychological. The hardest thing for me at first was that [critics] said that it was a critique of the 1950s housewife. I didn't see that implicit negative in my work. I still meet see myself as more or less a formalist in the way that I deal with composition and color.

Adam Lehrer: Is it gratifying to you to watch what you've created mutate in meaning through history?

Laurie Simmons: I love it. I had a show at Mary Boone and she wanted to show "Cafe of the Inner Mind," a series of photographs of lascivious male dummies with comic bubbles revealing their sexual thoughts. I was thinking about about how I didn't know what a male fantasy looked like. When they were written about this past spring they were so with the ideologies of the Me Too movement. Which was kind of amazing. These things happen in our lives that inevitably and irrevocably change everything.

Adam Lehrer: I also wanted to talk about your film *My Art*. Correct me if I'm wrong but I imagine that that film might have been stressful to make because it's almost like you were imagining an alternate reality for yourself. Were you thinking about what would have happened had your career not taken off, had you not gotten married and had a family?

Laurie Simmons: No, that was one of the only things that I wasn't thinking about (laughs). I was thinking about a lot of the women artists that I know and I was thinking about a more accurate representation of a female artist. Ellie is a compilation of different female artists I'm friends with. I was thinking about making a film that was a coming-of-age movie about a woman who wasn't that young. And even before I started to write the script, I knew that the happy ending would be that Ellie would get an exhibition. That said, the scene where Ellie is setting up her equipment and struggling with her ideas, that I know as well as anyone. That's something every artist has to face. I've had screenings where a young guy in his 20s would say he really relates to Ellie (laughs); those are moments where I'm really happy.

Adam Lehrer: While we're on the topic of cinema, there were certainly a lot of artists that came up during the same time as you, such as Cindy Sherman, Ericka Beckman, and others, that formed dialogs with cinematic history. And I was wondering if film influenced your practice at all?
Laurie Simmons: Film is such a huge influence on me and my work. I'm drawn to a cinematic drama. Lighting. Even the way I shoot is like I have a pretend movie camera in my hand. I got to film pretty later in life and that is one of my regrets. I mean my first film was called *Music of*

*Regret*. I still believe in movies and I still believe in the arc of a movie.

Adam Lehrer: Just to finish up our conversation here, looking over the checklist for the show I noticed some of your very earliest works, the 'Cherry Wallpaper' series, which are portraits, are in the show. You then abandoned portraiture for a long time until your last show at Salon 94. And in the press for that show you talked about the influence of your daughters a lot. But nevertheless, why the return to portraiture after all these years?

Laurie Simmons: The most shocking thing to me was that for someone who has always said "I don't shoot humans" and "I don't do portraits," the retrospective begins and ends with a series of portraits of people. People often ask me if making a film impacted my photography. I think it did: I became much less afraid of engaging with the human face. Also, the [new portraits] allowed me to bring in a kind of painterly aspect, with An artist or in this case the makeup artist, and it allowed me to bring in both a kind of artistry, fantasy and unreality into the picture plane. And that seemed to make it ok to shoot a portrait.