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At The Modern, *Laurie Simmons: Big Camera/Little Camera* Explores Gender Identity

We chat with the artist about her new retrospective in Fort Worth.

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Even before a *New York Times* report revealed President Donald Trump's plans to roll back the rights of transgender people, artist Laurie Simmons already was thinking about shifting her activism toward transgender rights.

Simmons was not just looking at the next stage of her activism, but her art as well, which is the subject of a new retrospective at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

From the '70s until 2010, Simmons staged dolls in monochromatic, domestic settings, examining traditional gender, femininity, and scale. The photographs, sculptures, and movies spanning four decades are dark, comedic, and full of juxtapositions, such as "disparity versus scale, fact versus fiction, and the personal versus the psychological."

Born and raised in New York, Simmons studied sculpture at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. Before pursuing art making full time, she photographed objects for a miniature dollhouse manufacturer.

The show's namesake is from 1976 part of her *Early Black and White* series. Placed at the corner of the first gallery, the photograph juxtaposes a miniature camera with an actual camera given to her by her father (a dentist and amateur photographer, who Simmons quips should have found another hobby).

"She was just trying to figure out the camera. She is creating these environments that would lead to these staged dollhouses," says senior curator Andrea Karnes, who worked for more than two years on the exhibition.

While Simmons does not consider these photos formally part of her career, Karnes pressed Simmons to include them. "They inform these [later] environments so much," she says.

Karnes notes in her catalogue essay that the artist's work is not autobiographical. Yet, Simmons is keenly aware that a changing world – from photography's shift to digitization to changing concepts of the gender binary – is all part of her trajectory, which she described as linear, a constant line weaving her personal and professional lives. So, her latest work shattering her past conceptions of gender should almost not come as a surprise. Of her career, she says, "it's been an unbroken chain of thought for me from the moment I started to make to work. The only thing that has changed is my attention on gender stereotypes as preparation that I have a trans child."

As her perceptions changed, so has her work. She created and starred in movies, an idea she considered for some time. Her first movie, *The Music of Regret* from 2006, is a full blown musical and a formal way of moving onto her next work, or to bury her past, as she has described it. Other appearances include the 2010 movie *Tiny Furniture*, directed by her daughter Lena Dunham, and the 2016 autobiographical movie *My Art*.

She transitioned in other ways as well, moving from miniature dolls to human size ones, like in her *Love Doll* series from 2009-11. On a family trip to Japan, she discovered sex dolls with blank faces and mouths a jar. Designed for men, the dolls are a witty look at sexuality, and serve as a contrast to the far more serious *Color Pictures* series of 2007-09. Those images place cut out pornographic images of women inside her classic dollhouse scenes.



Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll/Day 23 (Kitchen)*, 2010

“The women didn’t seem like professionals, they seemed more like college kids who needed money – they just looked so young and vulnerable and real,” Simmons told Karnes. At that point, Karnes said, Simmons also began to not just observe and create work, but to feel for her characters.

Simmons and her husband, artist Carroll Dunham have two children. Lena, the actress and writer, is a cisgender woman, and Cyrus Grace, an actor and author, is transgender. They appear with others in the artist’s latest series called *Some New*. Sharing the same room with her *How We See/Look* photo series from 2014-15, both series are Simmons’ first formal foray into using humans as subjects.

The first series features close up photographs of models of various ages and ethnicities. At first, they look like close-ups of the staged scenes of dolls with open eyes and hollow gazes. Their eyes, however, are closed; the stares are actually painted onto their eyelids. The second series features models covered with body paint with her signature bold colors in the background.

Among the subjects in the *Some New* series are Simmons’ children. *Lena (Pink)* and *Grace (Orange)* are placed next to each other. Lena sits on an orange shabby love seat with her legs over the chair’s left arm. Her pants are black and her shirt a long sleeve, vertically striped black and white shirt. She is on the phone, her mouth is agape, her eyes staring right at the viewer. Cyrus, with short crop hair and meticulously shaped sideburns, is wearing a white shirt, light blue tie and blue vest and blazer. The focus is on Cyrus Grace’s gaze, looking to the left, head tilted down. The eyes are piercing but soft.

Other than her children, the series intimately focuses on friends, including the artists Shirin Neshat and Hayden Dunham. One piece, *Penny (Harlequin)*, however, is free of paint; it is a portrait of the family dog, whose fur already includes an array of colors. The portrait is an amusing contrast to the bedazzled and austere human subjects.

Looking forward to her next work, Simmons is actually taking a look back at a favorite childhood game.

“My sisters and I’s favorite dress-up game was how to dress as we called ‘half man, half woman.’ We’d cut pants in half and make a skirt on one side and trouser pants on the other and put a mustache on one side and push our hair back. It was our favorite game with my sisters,” she says.

Her upcoming work will recreate that gender bending game. The increased visibility and awareness of trans identities, as well as having a transgender child, is also guiding her activism.

“I find all of this just so odd, I find myself squarely rooted in trans activism, and non-binary world, and use of new pronouns, and understanding all these things I thought I’d never know about,” says Simmons. “It’s interesting for me that I find myself here. It guides my activism and where I want it to go. There’s a lot to be done and everyone I know is activated.”