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Laurie Simmons talks about her MCA photography show and how daughter Lena Dunham helped her explain her work



Artist Laurie Simmons has an upcoming exhibition, "Big Camera, Little Camera," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. (Pinar Istek / Chicago Tribune)

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The images bring both pleasure and a sense of dislocation. A housewife at her counter, holding it together. Cowboys riding through a meadow, seeking that happy trail. Doe-eyed young women in bright colors against winter landscapes.

Each of these photos, and most of the other scores of images in "Big Camera, Little Camera," the new Laurie Simmons retrospective that fills the fourth-floor galleries at MCA Chicago, is not what it first appears to be.

The cowboys and the housewife are dolls, looking natural in their roles but at the same time a little trapped. The young women are part of *animegao kigurumi*, a Japanese subculture of people dressing as dolls, seeking to alter their own humanity.

And collectively — and with a sly but barbed sense of humor — they challenge you to think about what, if anything, is real: in our gender roles, in our cultural assumptions, in our perceptions of others.

This is a late-career retrospective for the 69-year-old New York artist, and we can see that almost from the beginning of her work in the 1970s she has been applying filters. Even the very recent series *Some New* looks at first like something Simmons has rarely done: unflinching portraits of human beings. But still — in, for instance, her children Lena Dunham dressed as Audrey Hepburn and Grace Dunham as Rudolph Valentino, both of them not in clothes but in body paint — there are layers of remove.

“She is always, you know, shooting mannequins as people or people as mannequins,” said Naomi Beckwith, the MCA senior curator who has helped guide the show into being. (It appeared first at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and was curated by Andrea Karnes, of that institution.) “For her photography is just a tool by which she records these actions and this kind of play that she does in her studio. And in that sense, I would say the set building that she does and the body painting that she does, it’s just as much the art practice, almost a performative art practice, as the snapping of the photo.”

Simmons may be best known outside of the art world as Lena Dunham’s mother (and a star of and inspiration for “Tiny Furniture,” the indie film that brought Dunham to the public eye). But she and her husband, the painter Carroll Dunham, have been central to the New York art world for decades. “She’s very much part of my art historical education,” Beckwith said. “She was part of two things for me that were really important. She was part of this new explosion of an understanding of what photography is and does, especially in the late ’70s and ’80s, when you have the growth of the conceptual art movements and when ideas began to separate from the objects and the artist feels more freedom to play with the medium -- also when pop culture becomes a big part of art practice. And then secondly, she also was part of this group of women that just came into the art world at that time, almost en masse, and started to set the tone and conversations around what the voices of women were going to be in art history.”

Indeed, one of the things that’s most striking throughout “Big Camera, Little Camera” is how much its concerns, teased out from the 1970s onward, seem of the present moment. It’s a notion that struck Simmons, too, as she helped put together the retrospective.

“I think from the very moment that I picked up a camera, you know, after art school when I first got to New York in the ’70s, I knew I was an artist and I knew that I wasn’t a street photographer. I knew people who were working out in the street who were waiting for ‘the decisive moment,’ all of the stuff that we know about,” Simmons said in a phone interview before the exhibition opened here. “But I knew that that wasn’t me, and I was afraid to go out on the street with my camera. I was way too self conscious. And when I picked up a camera — it doesn’t sound so radical now — but I thought only about its potential to lie because it had been always, since its inception, touted as this tool that could tell the truth.

“I thought, ‘This is such a great tool for lying.’ And, you know, all of the things that I was interested in that the camera could do, I only needed to wait like 40 years and the internet could do it all,” she said. “I didn’t know that I was a person tapping my toe, waiting for internet culture, waiting for all kinds of crafty ways to lie about your own identity and the way you look and who you are and scale and place. If I had discovered the Japanese cosplayers, the kigurumi kids who dress up like dolls, if I discovered them in the ’70s, I probably would’ve stopped working then because I was looking for them all along.”

She kept working, of course — she calls herself a “worker bee” — through one series after another: the cowboy dolls; models in thrift-store fashion shot to look like magazine ads; images clipped from porn and placed into domestic settings; various takes on doll houses; ventriloquists’ dummies posed in chairs, as sculptures. (Lined up on a wall, these are a particularly effective moment in “Big Camera, Little Camera.”)

There’s also a photographic series of male dolls with mostly lascivious thought balloons. Those photos weren’t well received at the time, but have been more positively re-interpreted in the #MeToo movement, Simmons said.

Having a famous and not particularly reticent daughter has helped change her philosophy on explaining her work, the artist said.

"We used to be a really private family, but I guess that's over. Because my daughter Lena has had so many health issues and so many things have happened publicly, and so much positive, so much negative, I think that our family really knows how to circle the wagons and protect each other," she said. "My husband and I are a little bit old-school in the sense that we always had this idea that the work will speak for itself. And I have adapted more to, you know, I really love talking about my work. It's really important for an artist's legacy to leave your own information about the work. So I've really changed about that. ... When you have a millennial kid who's an oversharer, you're going to have to get used to, um, some changes."

For instance: Early on, she photographed dolls in pristine kitchen settings, photos that have been frequently interpreted as commentary on the constriction of societal roles for women. But in her own mind, that is not what Simmons was aiming at.

"When I made my first pictures of women in doll house interiors, right out of the gate they were construed as a critique of the housewife in the kitchen," she said. "They were about a kind of look back and are quite tender. They were a look back at life in the '50s, the way I grew up, and it was much more about appearances and the way that post-World War II America had a very seamless relationship with the surface of things. Meaning that your house was supposed to look like pictures in a magazine, like ads in a magazine. ... So even in my 20s, when I looked back at my own past, I had a hard time separating my lunch from a Campbell's soup ad.

"I don't know if I had the language to call it 'consumer culture,' but it was a lot about the facade. It was a lot about my experience growing up in post-World War II suburbia and how everything seem to be about appearances. And of course as a child, if you're perceptive, you know that if you scratch the surface, things are not perfect. So I would say it was a lot about kind of chasing perfection in a certain way and trying to understand why it was so important for everyone to have to look a certain way."

This has led to a kind of ongoing misperception and a double bristling at a term regularly applied to her, "feminist photographer."

"I never started out my work as a critique of the, you know, American women being held hostage in the home. And my idea of being a feminist artist is that every woman who is an artist is a feminist artist, but it was never solely my subject. That's one way I feel like I've always been misunderstood: that yes, there is a feminist through-line through everything I do because I'm a woman artist, but it is not the only subject. I feel like an artist because I make sculpture, photographs, films. So, you know, when I get upset is when I see 'Laurie Simmons, feminist photographer.' I'm like, 'Ouch, that's not what it is.'"

But in looking at the retrospective, she does see a through line, she said.

"It's been some iteration of 'woman and interior space.' And I feel like that's true for me whether the figure is female or male, whether it is literally an interior space or not. That's the thought, that's the ghostly thought. That's the subject that runs through everything. And maybe the interior space is in my own mind or whatever, but they all feel connected by that one simple phrase. If this is a really long movie, that would be my tagline: 'Woman and interior space.'"