



SALON 94



Fort Worth Modern's Laurie Simmons show explores artist's fascination with how we create personas

Lauren Smart Oct 13, 2018



Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll/Day 23 (Kitchen)*, 2010, Fuji Matte print, 52 1/2 × 70 in. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94

Laurie Simmons, the photographer and filmmaker, is running errands and she's having a bit of a meltdown.

"I mean the sheer variety of what's presented to us. I'm in the store right now trying to pick out some socks and underwear," she says when I catch her on the phone in downtown Manhattan. "It's just another example of the sheer number of personas we have to choose from."

Throughout her career, Simmons has thought a lot about personas — the way people, particularly women, use clothes, makeup and environments to try on a way of existing.



Artist Laurie Simmons (left) with her daughter, writer and director Lena Dunham (right), in Dunham's 2010 debut film 'Tiny Furniture' that was heavily based on their real lives. (Joe Anderson An IFC Films Release/The Dallas Morning News Archives)

Since picking up a camera in 1976, she's used it as a tool to make observations about this human devotion to keeping up appearances. This career-long exploration is the subject of the exhibition, "Laurie Simmons: Big Camera/Little Camera," at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, which opens Sunday, Oct. 14.

The New York-based artist first made a name for herself with images of plastic dolls in post-World War II domestic settings. First in black and white, then candy-colored. It was her way of exploring the attempted perfection of her childhood in postwar suburban America.

"In those days, it was important for people to be defined by their similarities," Simmons, 69, said. People would be unique but in very micro ways. If you had a blouse in pink, I might want it in yellow. In our house, our furniture was just a variation of our neighbors'."



Laurie Simmons, *Woman Opening Refrigerator/Milk to the Right*, 1979, Cibachrome, 3 1/2 x 5 in. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94

From a very early age, Simmons was a rebel. She grew up in the Far Rockaway neighborhood of Queens, New York, in the '50s and '60s, the first generation raised by the television. Her mom loved to use the word “different” to describe her — a badge of honor for Simmons.

When she moved to SoHo in the early '70s, armed with an art degree from the more conservative Temple University, her rebellion struck again. This was the male-driven New York art world of conceptual and process art, filled with painters like David Salle and Julian Schnabel. Photography, to Simmons, felt like a radical act — especially, as a woman; especially, the way she was going to do it.

“I didn’t want to be a painter, I didn’t think there was room for me. I wanted to use the camera as a tool, the way a painter uses a brush or a sculptor uses a chisel,” Simmons said. “I had these ideas I wanted to get out and it just felt like the photo was the right way to do it.”



Laurie Simmons self-portrait, 1980 (Laurie Simmons/Laurie Simmons)

Simmons would go on to become a contemporary of Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, but first she undertook a self-education in new media. And she invited her friends over so she could practice portraiture. Simmons submerged her subjects in a world of her creation, turning her bedroom into a set: a brightly colored wallpaper covered in cherries with bedding to match. The Modern’s curator, Andrea Karnes, discovered these photographic experiments three years ago during a visit to Simmons’ studio and decided to include them in the show.

“It’s such an amazing forerunner or predictor of what was to come in her career,” Karnes said. “Even at the beginning she was creating these environments.”

In addition to this never-before-seen early work, the exhibition will include a dollhouse Simmons used in her early photography along with some of the props — or “tiny furniture,” as her oldest daughter Lena Dunham would name her debut movie in 2010. The movie borrows from their family life. Dunham, who would go on to create the critically acclaimed

HBO series *Girls*, filmed *Tiny Furniture* in the SoHo apartment Simmons shares with her painter husband, Carroll Dunham.

In the film, Simmons plays Lena Dunham's cold, distant artist mother who uses miniature couches and tables in her photography. (In our conversation, Simmons is warm and generous.)



'Walking House,' 1989, Laurie Simmons, pigment print.
(Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth/Laurie Simmons)

Simmons toys with scale in much of her work, whether it's the props in the photos or the size of the prints. Frequent visitors to the Modern may recognize Simmons' *Walking House*, a black and white photograph printed to be nearly 7 feet tall. It is part of a series in which Simmons perches primarily domestic objects — a house, a toilet, a cake, an hourglass — atop a pair of sleek female legs that belong to either a doll or a human. Here, both the female body and female desires are objectified.

Other highlights of the exhibition include her work in film. In a three-act musical short film, *The Music of Regret* from 2006, starring Meryl Streep, Simmons brings the walking objects to life as a way to move on to new work.

"I felt that I needed to stop mining my childhood for work," Simmons said. "I felt like making a movie, which was a huge challenge, was a way to gracefully end it all." Throughout the run of the exhibition, the museum auditorium will occasionally screen *My Art*, her feature-length film about an older artist who is searching for inspiration. The Modern

also will show *Geisha Song* in the gallery, which is part of Simmons' love doll series from 2009-2011, in which she used high-end Japanese love dolls as models.

But Simmons doesn't photograph dolls anymore. At least, not plastic dolls.

For the past few years, she has photographed living, breathing humans. In 2014, she became interested in the practice of kigurumi, a form of cosplay, in which men or women dress up as dolls.

Most recently, Simmons has been practicing what might be considered traditional portraiture again. But look more closely and you'll find the models' clothing has been painted on with almost perfect realism — even, in at least one photo, down to their socks. In all things, Simmons remains interested in unreality. Of course, in 2018, it's hard to know what's real in any photograph.

"I think that everything has been turned completely upside down by first the internet and, of course, social media. Whoever you encounter on social media, you never know what that person's truth is," Simmons said. "We've reached a point where we present avatars of ourselves."

Lauren Smart is an arts writer and critic. She teaches journalism at Southern Methodist University.