



SALON 94

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Big Camera/Little Camera, 1976 Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94

ARTS & CULTURE

Modern exhibit plays to the camera with retrospective to groundbreaking photo artist

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First known for photographs of small plastic dolls in domestic settings reminiscent of fashion ads from the 1950s, photographer and filmmaker Laurie Simmons' work is personal, psychological and political. In her images that explore gender stereotypes in mass media, dolls look like women and women look like dolls.

Open through January 27 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, "Big Camera/Little Camera" is Simmons' first comprehensive retrospective spanning four decades.

The show also includes never-before-seen early works, like the 1976 photograph of a 35mm camera juxtaposed with a tiny toy replica. The exhibit takes its name from this image that perfectly captures Simmons' ability to manipulate a viewer's perception of scale. She considers it a portrait of her and her father.

Now 69, Simmons grew up in a suburban house in the 1950s and '60s. Her father was a dentist and as a child she first started developing her aesthetic reading magazines in his home office.

“That’s where my voracious interest in media started,” Simmons says. “But he always seemed to want to go into his office, even at night, to study, read, and mix-up plaster to make his impressions of people’s teeth. He was like an artist going into a studio. He also had a darkroom in the basement where he would develop x-rays.”

Simmons didn’t study photography in art school, but later decided to pick up a camera after moving to New York City in the '70s and became a contemporary of Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger.

“At that point I thought photography wasn’t really art,” Simmons says. “But when I started looking at the conceptual art, performances, and fashion in New York it seemed like everything was being documented by a camera. A camera seemed like the most advanced and current art-making tool out there.”

Eventually, the first camera she used felt like an extension of her hand. “It didn’t even feel like a tool,” she says. “It felt like the place where my hand and eye met.”

Simmons was more interested in making magic happen than recording the truth. Long before digital photography, she manipulated lighting and created miniature scenes with plastic dolls and backgrounds made out of wallpaper and magazine photos. She was hand making temporary objects to photograph.

“They were volatile creations,” Simmons says. “They could fall over at any point. But the camera would capture this one magical moment when everything looked like a place.” The photographs are works of pure fiction presented as reality.

The exhibit includes Simmons’ 2006 40-minute musical short starring Meryl Streep screened on loop. “The Music of Regret” animates Simmons’ photographs of ventriloquist dummies and the walking objects. “Walking Gun,” a 1991 photograph of a handgun prop with female legs, is one of Simmons most significant works. Originally meant to reference film noir, the surreal image later became a symbol of gun safety.

After photographing plastic dolls and ventriloquist dummies for decades, Simmons eventually discovered Japanese dolls that were life-size and

lifelike. In 2009, she photographed these objects for the “The Love Dolls” series.

“A life-size doll meant I could use the world around me as a stage set,” says Simmons, who had spent years finding props to build backgrounds that matched the scale of the dolls she was photographing.

And she photographed humans. Some of Simmons’ newest works are portraits of models with vacant eyes painted on their closed eyelids. Others are portraits of her family.

Before creating and starring in the HBO series “Girls,” Simmons’ daughter Lena Dunham made “Tiny Furniture.” Inspired by their family life, the film features acting from Simmons and her husband, painter Carroll Dunham. A portrait of Lena Dunham in body paint cosplay as Audrey Hepburn is included here.

Simmons’ younger daughter, writer and activist Grace Dunham, is non-binary and her portrait references the process of changing gender. With sideburns and masculine attire painted on her body, her costume resembles a silent film star from the 1920s, Rudolph Valentino.

“He was very beautiful for the time he was a star,” Simmons says. “But gender fluid in his own way.”

Many of her newer works examine Internet and digital culture. “One of the most fascinating things is how we can present different versions of ourselves, better versions of ourselves, idealized versions of ourselves,” Simmons says. “What we see is not what we really see.”

Over the years, Simmons saved the mostly plastic objects used in hundreds of photographs and the show includes a color-coded pile of countless small dolls and props. This ancillary material resembles sculpture.

Simmons also color-coordinated a twenty-foot pile of accumulated junk from her studio and photographed it for her latest work, which signals another new direction. The beauty and toxicity of plastic reference environmental issues.

“Laurie Simmons: Big Camera/Little Camera” is open through January 27 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.