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SINCE 1902

LAURIE SIMMONS:  
THE EYES HAVE IT

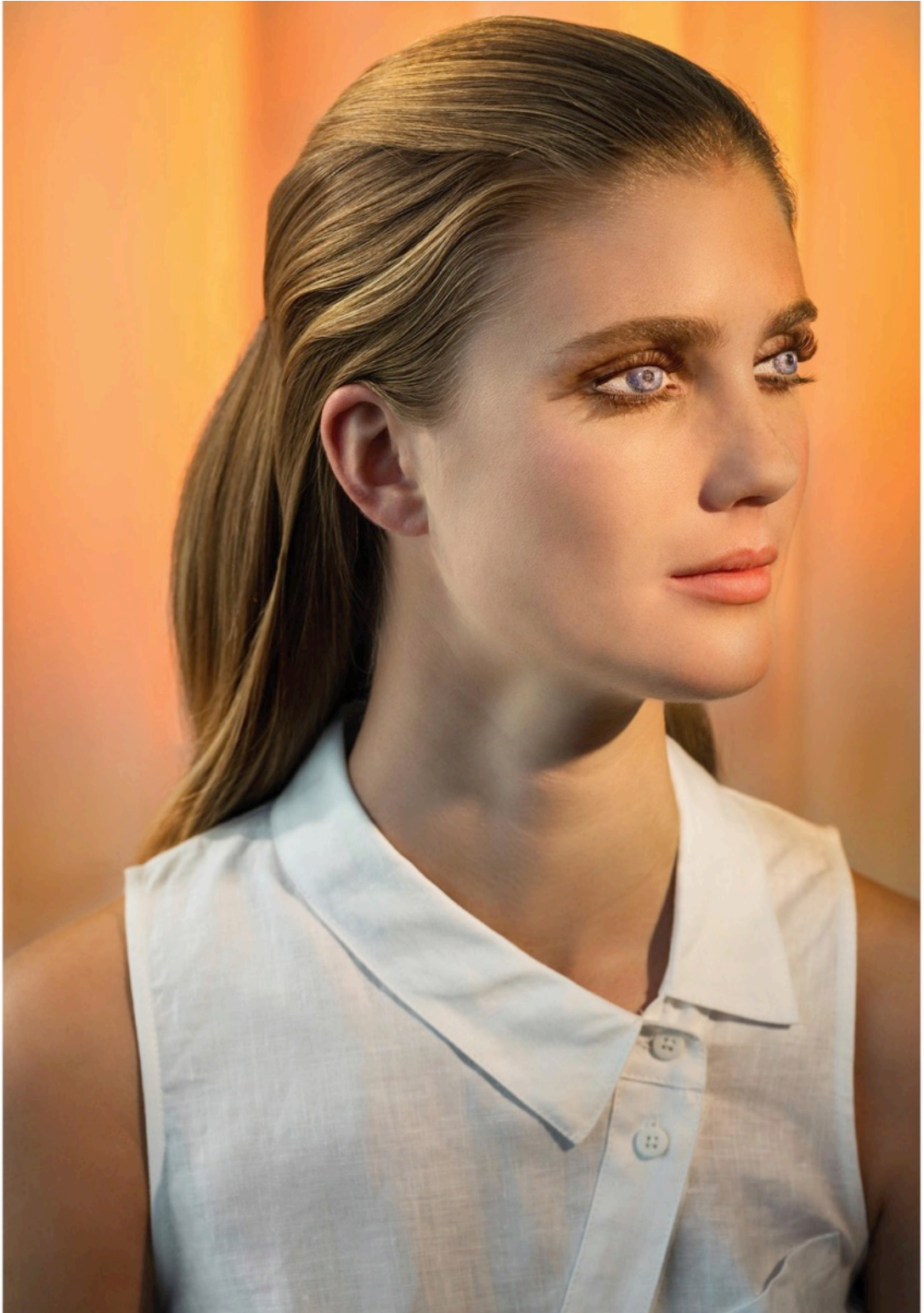
DAVID SALLE  
ON PAINTING TODAY

BRAZIL'S SIZZLING  
ART SCENE

ON KAWARA:  
IT'S ABOUT TIME

MARCH 2015

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# EYES WIDE SHUT

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Laurie Simmons's new work ventures closer to the human

BY ANDREW RUSSETH



**O**n a frigid afternoon in January, the artist Laurie Simmons was in her airy second-floor studio in rural Cornwall, Connecticut, sipping coffee and talking about her recent work. For the past few years, she said, she's been asking people, "What's your favorite movie about an artist?"

She put the question to me. Maybe Ed Harris's *Pollock* (2000), I said. And hers? "I'm looking for one," she said. "I think that's why I want to make one."

Shooting on her first feature film was set to begin in a few months. "It's a narrative feature called *My Art*," Simmons said. "It's the story of a woman artist of a certain age who, um . . . who teaches. She's had some shows, and she has friends, and she has a really OK life. She's single, but her dream is to push her work to another level and to have another show and have it written about. That's her goal. Her goal isn't to meet a man and fall in love."

Simmons stars as the artist—"a performance artist," she explained. "What she does is, she re-creates her favorite scenes from movies, but in a very flat-footed, DIY kind of way. She's a feminist; she's thoughtful."

Simmons continued, "My goals are twofold: to present an accurate picture of a 60-something woman—somebody who isn't either a teenager or on the verge of dementia, which are the two Hollywood polarities—as she lives in the world and, at the same time, to realistically convey how that somebody might go about making her work." She paused, and let slip an ironic smile. "Not too big a goal, I know."

Bits and pieces of her fictional artist's life story overlap with Simmons's own biography. Simmons is 65, and the photographs that she has made over the past 40 years—she is still best known for her early set-up pictures using dollhouses and figurines—are thoughtfully feminist. That said, she has achieved far more professional success than her protagonist. She may not have quite the household-name status of her Pictures Generation peers Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, but she has been in gallery and museum shows around the world.

In a few days Simmons had a show opening at the Arts Club in London; in May the Saint Louis Art Museum will show selections from a few of her series; and on

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March 13 she unveils a new body of work at the Jewish Museum in New York.

Dozens of proofs for the photographs that will be in the Jewish Museum show, titled "How We See," were set in rows on a table in Simmons's studio. Each was a close-up of a beautiful young woman posing in front of a ghostly neon-colored backdrop. Something felt off about the models' faces, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Their eyes looked peculiar, maybe too real.

"They're much more subtle than I thought they would be," Simmons said, picking up a photograph of the fashion model Ajak Deng, in which her eyes are a metallic sienna. In fact, the women are posing with their eyes closed. Makeup artists painted the eyes onto their lids, picking up a strain of cosplay, or *kigurumi*, the Japanese-originated subculture in which people dress up as cartoon characters or dolls.

"It's about as close to the opposite of portrait photography as you can get," Simmons said, "because my job is to get these girls to pose in a way that makes it seem that they're looking at me." (Interestingly, she remembered

that the first artwork she ever owned was a poster of a painting by Margaret Keane of *Big Eyes* fame.)

"It felt like I was blind," Peche Di, one of Simmons's models, told me. "It increased my empathy for people who cannot see. At the same time, I was in a meditative zone with heightened awareness."

Di, who poses with sparkling hazel-colored eyes, also had a personal connection to the project. "As a transgender woman," she said, "the doll-girl community played an important role in my transition. When I was younger, I used to dress up as Japanese anime characters. These were mostly female, and dressing like them helped me grow into my own identity."

In recent years Simmons has been moving increasingly

PREVIOUS SPREAD *How We See/Lindsey (Gold)*, 2014. ABOVE, FROM LEFT *Blue Hair/Red Dress/Green Room/Arms Up*; *Yellow Hair/Brunette/Mermaids*; *Blonde/Pink Dress/Standing Corner*; *Brunette/Red Dress/Standing Corner*; *Yellow Hair/Red Coat/Umbrella/Snow*; *Redhead/Pink & Black Outfit/Orange Room* (all 2014).

toward art made with human-scale surrogates, which has caused her work to grow more uncanny, more unsettling. In 2009 she began making work with a high-tech Japanese love doll, which in turn led her to *kigurumi*. She's also shot disturbing-looking male medical dolls, whose eyes stay closed. "This kind of realism, this kind of picture, where you really don't know what's wrong, or what I've done to alter or invade the space, that's kind of new for me," Simmons said proudly.

"The idea that she can see them, but they can't see her—this funny idea of the creepy photographer—is super interesting to me," said curator Kelly Taxter, who's organizing the Jewish Museum show. She likened Simmons's new work to a kind of post-Pictures practice, one that is attuned to the ways in which users construct and disseminate their own images on sites like Twitter and Instagram, where Simmons has a strong following (about 67,100 followers as of press time).

As it happens, Richard Prince took a screenshot of one of the "How We See" images on Simmons's Instagram account and printed it as his own artwork for a show at Gagosian in New York. Simmons went to see it and was not happy.

That was surprising to me; Prince's move felt like no more than the logical, perhaps slightly bland, next step for a Pictures artist navigating the digital present. "I was pissed off because my work had been stolen by him," Simmons told me. "And then I thought, 'Wait a minute. I've spent my life stealing.' I'll call it 'borrowing.' I've spent my life borrowing. It was really this cascade of emotions." In the end, "I think I was sufficiently pissed

off that I had to get back into the studio," she said. "Ultimately, it had a great effect on me."

Simmons said that she'd been thinking a lot about how the Internet and digital imaging relate to her work. "Photography ended up becoming a medium that could be used to tell lies," she said. Similarly, the Internet "seemed to be a place where we could all tell amazing lies about ourselves: about the way we look, about who we really are. In a chat room, who is this little girl you're talking to? Is she a 65-year-old perverted man?"

Simmons's new photographs meet this strange moment in time with a lightly surreal splendor, combined with a dash of humor, and her work on them is continuing apace. "Invite the makeup artist, invite the model, pick a color, paint the eyes, put the blouse on, and you're good to go," she told me. "I feel like this formula is failure-free."

Her Instagram account is another matter. "I have an uncomfortably large following, which has actually kind of paralyzed me because I don't know who to be on Instagram," she said. "At this point, it's big enough that I don't feel like sharing pictures of my children and dog. If I put up a picture of the weird Christmas cookies we made, I get over 1,000 likes, but if I put up my own work, I get a few hundred likes and a lot of people saying, 'Ew, creepy!'" ■

OPPOSITE *Walking House (Little)*, 1991/2014 (left); *Walking Glove*, 1991/2014 (right).

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