

LIFE

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Latex doll images inflate the appeal of V&A photographer

INTERVIEW
LAURIE SIMMONS

BY CHARLOTTE OLIVER

LAURIE SIMMONS has an impressive doll collection, albeit one that might unsettle your average Barbie fan. Miniature figurines, ventriloquist dummies, mannequins — and one uncannily realistic Japanese sex doll — populate the photographer's Brooklyn studio, all having once come to life in front of her camera lens.

"For me, the inanimate can often say and do more than the living because we take a second look in a way that we wouldn't with a picture of a person," she says. "I give them a kind of life through my photos."

For more than 40 years, the New York-based artist has produced images offering her slant on the American dream — that is, one based on excess, domesticity and a society obsessed with image.

She has held exhibitions and fellowships around the world, collaborated with fashion designers including Thakoon Panichgul and Peter Jensen and, in 2006, directed a three-act musical that showcased musicians, puppets and actress Meryl Streep.

She also happens to be the mother of the actress Lena Dunham — creator of the *Girls* TV comedy and (with tongue lodged firmly in cheek) self-proclaimed voice of her generation.

Indeed Simmons, 65, starred in Dunham's feature film *Tiny Furniture* four years ago, playing the art-imitating-life role of a mother and successful photographer whose daughter returns home after university with a heavy dose of student debt and self-entitlement.

The movie, which won Best First Screenplay at the Independent Film Awards, was shot inside the family's New York apartment and — adding to the house of mirrors — followed Dunham's character as she sought inspiration from her mother. Its title referred to Simmons's signature subject of small figurines.

But it is Simmons's 2009-2011 series, *The Love Doll* — in which the photographer documents her growing familiarity with a life-size latex doll from a Japanese sex shop — which has now brought her to London, specifically to the Victoria & Albert Museum. Here, her work is being displayed alongside that of 10 other international artists for the Prix Pictet Global Photography Exhibition, which takes "consumption" as its motif.

"It's always been a big theme of mine; that kind of push and pull between who you are and what you own," Simmons says. "My very first pictures were small dolls in doll houses, almost subsumed by the objects they lived with. I'm interested in a woman or a family's disappearance into their life in a certain way."

Simmons cites Japan as a major source of inspiration, having first visited a few years ago with Dunham, and then again with her younger daughter, Grace. She loves the way the country "embraces childhood as an entire nation," explaining: "You walk through Tokyo and you just feel assaulted by tiny animated characters chirping at you [and]



Laurie Simmons and (below) one of the photos from the exhibition

windows full of toys. It makes me feel very alive to feel bombarded like that. I have the opposite of agoraphobia. I am very interested in looking at the world through a child's eyes."

By employing the dolls in her work, she makes social statements about the woman's role at home — passivity and, up to a point, captivity.

But she also hopes to make a more general statement about society's obsession with symbols, status and superficial layers, a view inspired by her childhood.

"Every visual aspect of my work comes from the first 17 years of my life," she recalls. "I grew up in the post-war Jewish suburb of Long Island, where the value system was totally based on how we presented ourselves."

"The most important thing I

remember about religion was what we wore to synagogue on High Holy-Days. It was so important to go and dress properly. My mother worked hard to make sure we looked as perfect as the commercials we saw on TV."

"But, of course, I didn't want to go and wear the right thing. I was a rebel and a renegade."

In keeping with her work's social critique, Simmons says she has eschewed labels since adolescence, something her conservative parents struggled to accept. "My mother and father were first generation American," she says. "They were so enamored by the country and wanted to assimilate by living in the right house, driving the right car and buying the right product."

"They found it very painful when I protested against the Vietnam War in the 1960s."

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FEATURES

Simmons shoots to thrill in London

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Now living geographically close but culturally far from Long Island in the hipster hub of Williamsburg with her painter husband Carroll Dunham, she describes theirs as a far more laissez-faire approach to family life.

"I don't go to synagogue but I have no objection to going, or to observing Judaism," she says. "And, while I didn't marry a Jew, my children identify as both Jewish and Wasp. They're thrilled to have dual heritage."

The photographer's latest project again takes its inspiration from Japan with a series of images that follow the kigurumi craze—that is, humans wearing dolls' outfits and masks. Where before she gave life to the inanimate, she now appears to be animating the living.

It is perhaps her career-long fascination with human behaviour and performance, plus her own rebellious past, that leave her expecting rebellion from the next generation.

But surprisingly to Simmons, her children seem to enjoy her company.

"For my generation, there was a tremendous fissure between us and our parents. I was so used to not wanting them to come into the room when my friends were over.

"So I am still stunned when my kids say: 'Please join us for dinner'. Or 'please hang out with us'. I'm just like: 'Are you kidding?'"

Laurie Simmons features at the Prix Pictet exhibition at the V&A, London SW7 until June 14. She also has a solo display, *Kigurumi and Dolls*, at the Wilkinson Gallery, London E2 until June 29



A well-heeled doll from the V&A display and (opposite) boxing clever

THE MONEY MENSCH

Mobile bill savings? Here's a number to try

CAN YOU halve your mobile bill? The flood of new hand-sets, Samsung's S5 being the latest, makes many people think it's all about the tech. It's not. Choosing a mobile is like choosing a car. Don't just think of the upfront cost, it's the year-on-year outlay that can cripple. Yet if you know what you are doing, you can save hundreds of pounds.

DO YOU PAY MORE THAN £15 PER MONTH FOR YOUR MOBILE?

This is the key benchmark price, for the simple reason that the cheapest unlimited minutes, texts, and a decent 2GB of data sim-only deal costs that. So if you pay more each month, unless you have extremely high data usage or are paying for a flashy handset, you need to ask yourself why.

MATCH YOUR EXACT USE TO YOUR TARIFF

If you're on a mobile contract, the

CASH-SAVING TIPS FROM MONEYSAVINGEXPERT.COM'S MARTIN LEWIS



aim is to match its inclusive minutes, texts and data to your usage. Underuse tends to mean you're over-paying on the monthly fee, overuse usually means you're paying too much for any additional minutes, texts or data. To help you work this out, www.billmonitor.com logs into your online mobile statement, analyses your bill and presents its top pick tariffs.

IF YOU DON'T NEED A NEW HANDSET, THE BEST DEALS COME FROM SWITCHING TO A SIM-ONLY SET-UP

You can do this if you're out of contract and you can take your number with you. For all but very low users www.giffgaff.com, which piggybacks on the O2 network, is competitive. It is pay-as-you-go but offers contract-style bundles without the contract.

So for £7.50 per month you get 200 minutes, unlimited texts and 250MB right up to £20 per month for unlimited texts and data, plus 2,000 minutes. It is worth noting that this is not yet on 4G (the fastest mobile broadband standard). Virgin has my top pick all-rounder deal with unlimited minutes and texts, plus a decent 2GB data, for £15 per month. Virgin piggybacks on the EE network.

SOME HANDSETS ARE LOCKED TO THE SIM ON A PARTICULAR NETWORK

If your new Sim is not on the same network (or piggybacked on it), then you will need to unlock it. This can often be done at no cost with a code. For help go to www.mse.me/unlock or to the brand new Samsung Galaxy S5, the cheapest route for most is

to buy the handset unlocked upfront (it is £529 from GiffGaff and £570 elsewhere) and then just go for a cheap Sim-only deal. If you can't shell out upfront, see my Cheapest Samsung Mobiles Comparison Tool at www.mse.me/samsung.

CAN'T DO SAMSUNG'S YIN WITHOUT APPLE'S YANG?

Again, the key route is to buy the phone (£516GB is £570 at Carphone Warehouse) and use a Sim-only deal. If not, then try my Cheap iPhones Comparison Tool at www.mse.me/iphone.

HAGGLE OVER YOUR CONTRACT

If you don't want to switch, and are near or past your contract's end, you are carrying a powerful weapon — your loyalty. Everyone has a handset, so networks fight hard to win custom from elsewhere and keep their own. The aim is to get through to "customer disconnections", whose job is to keep you. You can get some corking deals to stay put. Last

November, I polled users of my site who had tried to haggle. A huge 73 per cent of Virgin Mobile customers, 67 per cent of EE customers and 62 per cent of Tesco Mobile customers succeeded.

INSURE THE WHOLE FAMILY'S SMARTPHONES FOR £10 PER MONTH

Most networks charge around £10 monthly to cover one handset, but it is possible to cover ALL family smartphones for that. The trick is to switch to www.nationwide.co.uk FlexPlus bank account which charges £10 per month (so £120 per year). This includes cover for the whole family's mobiles (maximum £1,000 per phone), provided you all live together and the children are under 19 (or 22 if in full-time education). It also gives worldwide family travel insurance (maximum age 74) and European breakdown cover for the account holder. If you are just seeking the cheapest standard policy, my best-buys are at www.mse.me/mobileinsurance.