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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

A DOLL'S HOUSE

Laurie Simmons's sense of scale.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

At nine o'clock on a wet Monday morning in June, Twenty-fourth Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues was parked solid with mega-trailers and tech-support vehicles. Thick black cables snaked into the back of the Gladstone gallery and up a flight of stairs to the second floor, where a film crew was shooting a scene for the second season of the HBO comedy series "Girls." Two women, playing an art dealer and a young woman applying for a job, sat on opposite sides of a circular table. As they talked, a gallery assistant came in with a cup of tea for the dealer, who glanced at it, saw that it was too strong, and stopped the girl on her way out. "Molly, look at me," she said. "This is simple. Cup. Hot water. Tea bag. In, out, in, out. Understand?" The dealer, who was being played by the artist Laurie Simmons, looked right for the part—tall, dark-haired, and self-assured—and her line-reading was subtle: she sounded patronizing, but not unfriendly. Perched on the edge of a canvas chair in front of me, wearing blue plaid headphones and watching a monitor, was Simmons's twenty-six-year-old daughter, Lena Dunham, who conceived, wrote or co-wrote, and starred in all ten episodes of the show's first season and directed five of them. Dunham kept jumping up between takes and going around the corner to give directions: "Too nice, Mom," and, later, "A little too strong." After six or seven takes, Dunham said, "O.K.," and the crew moved in to set up the next scene.

Simmons came out at this point and introduced me to her exuberant daughter and to Judd Apatow, one of the show's executive producers. Simmons and Apatow talked about the late Andy Kaufman, her childhood friend, whose comic genius had been a big influence on them both. Dunham moved off, and Simmons asked me if she had been believable as an art dealer. I said she was a dead ringer for Barbara Gladstone. "Oh, Barbara's not my model," she said, laughing. "At first, Lena had me as a 'Devil Wears Prada' type, but I felt a dealer like that would never be out-and-out nasty. I stuck to the script, until Lena said, 'You can really go for it,' and then I had fun. I think this is probably it for me, though, because the girl doesn't get the job. It's not a recurring role."

Simmons had a more substantial part in "Tiny Furniture," the 2010 independent feature that brought Lena Dunham to the attention of Apatow and other film and television satraps in New York, Los Angeles, and points east, west, north, and south. Dunham wrote and directed the movie, and played the leading role as Aura, a recent college graduate. Simmons played her mother, Siri, a successful New York artist; much of the action takes place in Simmons's duplex loft studio in Tribeca. Dunham's younger sister, Grace, played her younger sister in the film, but their father, the painter Carroll (Tip) Dunham, declined to be in it. Although Lena is writing fiction, not autobiography, she never hesitates to mine her own experiences or expose her own demons. "Lena has always wanted to share everything," her mother told me. "I used to think, Please don't let her call me on her cell phone when she's losing her virginity."

As Lena sees it, being the daughter of two artists was a great piece of luck. "To have two parents making their life doing what they want to do, and being able to do it, and my own understanding of how difficult that was—I loved feeling I was part of that process," she said, a few days after our meeting on the set. Grace, who is six years younger and (like her mother) six inches taller than Lena, feels pretty much the same way. Now in her junior year at Brown, Grace told me that she was brought up in an environment that "encouraged you to look for the things that made you different from everybody else," and be-

cause of this it had been relatively easy to tell them, a few years ago, that she was gay. Although the battles in this family can be fierce and explosive, the bonds are never in doubt. "In fact," Lena said, "I feel that nothing would be going on with me now if I didn't have the parents I have."

Laurie Simmons found her way into art in 1976, five years after she graduated from art school and three years after she moved to New York. She had decided, mainly because she had no real facility for drawing or painting, that the camera was her "weapon of choice," but she had no idea how to become an artist, or to support herself while trying. "My parents really did the thing that's in the first episode of 'Girls,' " she told me. "They cut me off. 'No more money.' I wasn't resentful. I realized, O.K., that's the way it is. I took preposterous jobs, and sponged off boyfriends. I worked in a backgammon shop, and painted houses and interiors, and put up wallpaper. I applied for a job photographing toys for the catalogue of a downtown toy company. I didn't get the job, because I wasn't very good at it—in one of my pictures there was actually a fly sitting on a toy table, which I hadn't noticed. But I'd taken some things home to photograph, and one of them was a tiny bathroom sink. I put water in it, and placed it against a piece of floral wallpaper—and I saw something. The wallpaper had a pattern of ivy leaves that were almost as large as the sink, so the scale was jarring. There was something about space, and time, and light, and, with the wallpaper, about nostalgia." She considers "Sink/Ivy Wallpaper," a four-by-six-inch black-and-white photograph, the first example of her mature work.

Simmons had bought a cache of nineteen-fifties doll-house furniture from a failing toy store in upstate New York, where she lived for a while after art school. In her loft on lower Broadway, she began building little rooms for the doll-house furniture, and photographing them. She made kitchens, and bathrooms, and polyglot interiors, arranging and rearranging them, putting in cardboard partitions covered with wallpaper samples, experimenting with light and shadow by shooting at different times of day. "I thought people might actually believe these rooms were real," she said. The idea that a photograph could lie excited her. She was sharing the loft with Jimmy DeSana, a photographer who freelanced for the *Village Voice* and the *SoHo Weekly News*, did album covers for Talking Heads, and made strange, disturbing images of the gay community. DeSana helped her build a darkroom in the loft, and taught her how to process her own black-and-white prints. Most of the artists she was getting to know then were immersed in conceptual art, in which theory trumped technique and art critiqued society. "I was sort of embarrassed about using doll-house furniture, and photographing dolls was unthinkable," she said. "After months of shooting empty rooms, though, I decided to put in a doll." She used the one that came with the furniture, a housewife in a frumpy purple dress. Even so, the associations were mortifying—she worried that the images might seem feminine rather than feminist, and lacking in conceptual rigor.

Simmons in her Connecticut studio with props from her film, "The Music of Regret."

She and Tip Dunham had been friends for several years, seeing each other at art openings and loft parties, and occasionally going on double dates. Dunham was an abstract painter, at a time when nearly everybody agreed that

PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURIE SIMMONS

painting was dead. "I thought he was so cute, so nice, and so much this Waspy type of guy who would never go for a Jewish girl," she said. "He lived in a sixth-floor walkup on Sullivan and Houston, and he knew Dorothea Rockburne and Mel Bochner and other important artists. I'd gone over to see his paintings, and one day I asked him to look at my work, and he really liked it. I respected his mind, so I was hugely excited." They began dating, and Dunham, who'd always said that he wanted a Jewish girlfriend, moved into the loft on lower Broadway.

A friend of Dunham's worked for Helene Winer, the director of a nonprofit gallery on Hudson Street called Artists Space, where the focus was on emerging artists. Dunham asked him to look at Simmons's photographs, and he took a box of them to show Winer. "Helene called me up," Simmons recalls, "and said, 'Come on over, we'd like to give you a show.' I couldn't believe it. I went to Artists Space to pick up my box of photos. The receptionist at the front desk gave me the box, and opened her desk drawer, where she had a box of her own photos, and said, 'You show me yours and I'll show you mine.' It was Cindy Sherman. What impressed me the most was that Cindy's photos didn't look like she'd studied photography. They had dust spots. I thought, Wow, she's a crappy photographer like me." ("It just felt like we were artist soul mates," Sherman recalls.) "So other people were doing photography that wasn't like what I'd been seeing at the Museum of Modern Art, doing messy stuff that delivered a lot of information," Simmons said. "I met Helene. It was one of those days that are about the rest of your life."

In the nineteen-seventies, when the only ism that critics could attach to art's multiple new directions was "pluralism," more and more artists were using photography as a conceptual medium, a way to reflect and comment, ironically or otherwise, on the media-saturated environment of television, advertising, movies, rock music, and other manifestations of popular culture. Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine rephotographed existing images and presented the results as their own work—this was called appropriation. Jack Goldstein made Warhol-influenced films: one showed Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's figurehead lion, roaring ad infinitum. Cindy Sherman's soon to be famous "Untitled Film Stills," several of which were shown at Artists Space in 1978, were single-image dramas in which she transformed herself into an amazing variety of female characters, from primly dressed office worker to film-noir femme fatale. Both Sherman and Simmons were making what came to be called "setup photography," constructing intricate tableaux in the studio and then photographing them as if they were real. Neither of them had work in "Pictures," the first group show of this new, conceptually oriented image-making, which appeared at Artists Space in 1977, but Sherman and Simmons soon came to be identified with the Pictures Generation, one of those ungainly critical categories which lump together artists who have relatively little in common.

"Tip likes to talk about how I'm not part of the Pictures Generation," Simmons told me. We were sitting at the table in her Tribeca studio, a pristine space whose wall of white cabinets and shelves holds a forty-year accumulation of props, archives, working prints, and related materials. "It's one of his favorite subjects, how different I am." As Dunham later explained, "Laurie's relationship to picture-making is much more straightforward than theirs, and much more emotional. She really wants her pictures to feel a certain way." Instead of irony, feminist agendas, and other conceptual overlays, Simmons's doll-house images convey something deeply personal—childhood, of course, but not just any childhood. The doll, almost always alone and female, a housewife, goes about her household activities (cleaning, cooking, watching TV) in a nineteen-fifties suburban environment whose claustrophobic loneliness evokes the terrors of the American dream. Sometimes she acts weird, standing on her head in the kitchen or falling off a chair. The strange emotional pull in each picture comes from the artist's obsessive need to make it.

Simmons's first show opened at Artists Space in January, 1979. She didn't want to include any photographs that had dolls in them—the associations still embarrassed her—but Helene Winer insisted. The postcard-size prints of

what Simmons considered her strongest work, the "Black Series," which showed doll-house furniture in rooms with reproductions of recognized art works (Greek vases, Old Master paintings), hung on one wall of a narrow corridor, and the doll photographs, which she had shot in Cibachrome and processed at home—were on the opposite wall. "And of course all anybody wanted to talk about was the dolls," she recalls. The *Village Voice* called the work "novel and intellectual." Almost immediately, she was invited to show at PS1, a contemporary-art space in a former public school in Queens. Under pressure to find a new subject, and still uneasy about female dolls, she used Dunham's childhood set of cowboy figures on horseback, which were modelled on Wyatt Earp and other TV paladins. She shot the mounted cowboys outdoors, at Dunham's parents' place in Lyme, Connecticut, using a Nikon that Dunham had given her—he had stopped using it several years earlier. Dunham, who didn't have his first show until two years later, also at Artists Space, joked that he would now be known as Mr. Laurie Simmons. Barbara Gladstone and Max Protetch were both interested in showing Simmons's work, but when she heard that Helene Winer was leaving Artists Space to start her own gallery she decided that was where she wanted to be. Winer opened Metro Pictures in 1980, in partnership with Janelle Reiring, and Simmons was one of their first artists, along with Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Troy Brauntuch, and Cindy Sherman. The Pictures artists now had their own gallery, and Simmons would show there for the next twenty years.

Laurie Simmons remembers telling her kindergarten class that she was going to be an artist. "That was already part of my identity," she said. "It's interesting that I never gave it up." She and her two sisters (one older, one younger) lived in a four-bedroom house in Great Neck, Long Island. "My father was more proud of that house than of anything," Simmons told me. "It was an imitation Tudor, with half-timber walls, one of an upscale group of houses built by the Levitt family before they did Levittown. It meant so much to my father, a first-generation American whose parents came from Russia, to own that house and have his kids grow up in that beautiful suburban town, with its perfectly assimilated Jewish community, which, for someone like me, was pure hell. You had to be a cheerleader or a football player or a National Merit Scholar, and I couldn't conform to any of that. One of the reasons I wanted to be an artist was that I just had to get out of Great Neck. Of course, everything in my work has its genesis in my growing up there."

Her father, a dentist who became an orthodontist, was a big man—six feet three inches tall—with a big personality. His office adjoined the house. Laurie loved to go into his waiting room and read *Life* and *Look*, and watch tropical fish devour their young in the vast aquarium. Samuel Simmons enjoyed his work, but he had other, unfulfilled ambitions. He took evening classes in sculpture, and memorized jokes, and kept a baton in the living room, where, on Sundays, he would put Sibelius or Tchaikovsky or Beethoven on the stereo and conduct. His wife, Dorothy, came from a more prosperous Jewish family, and she had social ambitions. She was what Simmons describes as "an enabler, a housewife of her time."

As the middle child, Laurie got the sense very early that her behavior baffled everyone. "In the second grade, I was put out in the hall almost every day, because of a kind of wild enthusiasm that couldn't be contained—I guess today it would be called A.D.D. I didn't understand, because I loved everything that was going on at school. Our mother assigned each one of us a specific role, something to excel in. My older sister, Susan, had a beautiful voice, and they decided she was going to be a singer. Bonnie, my younger sister, at different times was going to be an equestrian and a linguist—she learned Russian, French, and Spanish." Laurie was the artist. She drew all the time, and her father used to annoy her by saying that she had "an artist's brow." Looking back now, she sometimes wonders whether calling her an artist was her parents' way of explaining her unruly behavior. Her sisters eventually became successful in other ways—Susan as a lecture agent whose clients include Bill Clinton and Henry Kissinger, Bonnie as a doctor, who runs the large emergency department at Lutheran Medical Center, in Brooklyn. The three of them are close. "Laurie is my best friend," Bonnie told me last spring. "I know lots of people think she's their best friend, but she's it for me. I talk to her five times a day. She's the person I go to for everything."

The supreme tragedy for a Great Neck high-school student was not getting into a good college. Simmons graduated in the bottom quarter of her class, but it didn't matter, because she had said that she would only go to art school. When she got a rejection letter from the Rhode Island School of Design, her first choice, she remembers weeping on the kitchen floor for hours. "It was one of the many times when I thought my life was over," she said. Her parents had more or less lost control of her by then. As a senior in high school, she spent weekends in Manhattan, hanging out at Café Wha? and other trendy spots with her gang of pot-smoking non-achievers. The summer she graduated, in 1967, she ran off to Haight-Ashbury, in San Francisco, with a seriously unsuitable boyfriend. Her parents were frantic when they found out that she wasn't at a dude ranch in upstate New York with a friend. They persuaded her to come home. Both the Tyler School of Art, near Philadelphia, and the Pratt Institute, in New York, had accepted her, and she chose Tyler because it was farther from Great Neck.

Tyler was a highly traditional art school, and most of the students there seemed to have the technical skills Simmons lacked. Her drawing teacher told her that she should forget about being an artist. She dropped out of her photography class because she didn't see how photography could be art. Although her father had given his daughters Brownie cameras when they were kids, and replaced them as newer models came out, she had never thought about becoming a photographer.

Tyler students were encouraged to take their junior year abroad, and things

changed for Simmons when she went to Rome in the fall of 1969. "My world opened up," she said. "I bought my first pair of Italian shoes, and I just fell in love with Italy." She hung out with her friends in cafés, learned enough Italian to get by, went into Catholic churches to hear the music, wore layered clothes. She discovered Renaissance painting, and travelled to Paris and London and Morocco. After that, her senior year at Tyler was a letdown. When it was over, she went to visit two Great Neck friends who were living on a communal farm near Roscoe, New York. "One of them had just figured out that she was gay. She was leaving the commune, and she told me to take care of Eric, her former boyfriend. So I did. He became *my* boyfriend." They went to Europe together. In Amsterdam, they picked up a used Citroën 2CV and set out for Afghanistan, a hippie mecca. Simmons began keeping a diary on this trip, and she also documented it with her 35-mm. Yashica. They were driving through Turkey, sleeping and cooking in the back of the car, when the heat became so overwhelming that they turned back, sold the car, and returned to the upstate commune, where they broke up. It was 1973, and Simmons was ready to move to New York. "I just felt, I'm doing it," she recalled. "I'm going to be an artist, I'm going to have a boyfriend, I'm going to have a dog—for me, that was having it all."

Simmons and Dunham moved to Brooklyn in 1998. They lived in Brooklyn Heights for six years, and then returned to Manhattan in 2004, when the renovations were completed on the Tribeca building they had bought jointly with a group of artists. Their living space is on one floor, and her studio is one floor down. During my next visit, Simmons and her young assistant, Rachel Howe, pulled out photographs from the mid-seventies to the present decade—many different series of works, some of which had never been exhibited publicly. Simmons has been enormously productive, but her efforts haven't always met her expectations. For her first show at Metro Pictures, in 1981, feeling that she should work with real people instead of dolls, she began experimenting with a waterproof camera, and eventually talked several friends into flying to Jamaica and letting her photograph them, nude or semi-nude, in an improvised underwater ballet. "I still love that work, but it was a mistake," she conceded. "It was too far from what I'd been doing, and it confused the hell out of everyone." She went back to dolls after that—Japanese plastic dolls called Teenettes, which she shot in color-coördinated interiors, and later photographed against rear-projection backdrops of the Parthenon and other famous tourist sites. She was using professional labs now, and her prints, like Cindy Sherman's, were much bigger. "Cindy, Robert Longo, Troy Brauntuch, and one or two others were forging ahead then, getting known, and it seemed like the way to do this was not to be making four-by-five-inch photos," she said. The art market heated up in the nineteen-eighties, with new buyers and new money coming into it. "I wasn't really fixated on the money part, but I wanted to be part of the conversation," Simmons said.

She and Dunham got married in 1983. They had a very small wedding at Temple Israel, on East Seventy-fifth Street, and went to Greece for their honeymoon. She was too focussed on her career to think about having children, but two years later she was pregnant. "It felt like an inevitability," she explained. "Tip was for it, I was thirty-six, and I've always been obsessed by regret—I didn't want to reach a point where I wished I'd done it." They still lived in the loft on lower Broadway. Dunham felt that it was important to get the baby out of the city, so when Lena was born, in 1986, they rented a house for the summer in Roscoe, not far from the commune where Simmons had stayed. When they moved in, that June, Simmons had a bad case of postpartum depression. "The most sympathetic person was Tip," she told me. "He laughed and said, 'Well, Miss Can Do can't do.' He jumped in and took over, doing more than fifty per cent of the child care, because we didn't have any help. He'd put Lena in a Snugli and take her to the studio and make drawings and paintings—he seemed to be able to balance everything in a way I couldn't. I *adored* the baby. But I remember, on one of our first trips up to Roscoe, I walked into a supermarket—Tip was in the car with Lena—and I said, 'Excuse me, sir, what aisle are the diapers in?,' and burst into tears. It was like an identity crisis, I was just so unprepared."

It took her nearly six months to come out of it and start working again. Her new subject was ventriloquist dummies. As a child, she had been fascinated by "Howdy Doody" and other marionette and ventriloquist shows on TV. She wanted to work with male surrogates for a change, and talking dummies, with their ambivalent characteristics—human and inhuman, child and adult, cute and nasty—struck her as a rich source. A little research led her to the Vent Haven Museum, in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, where the history of ventriloquism is illustrated by a collection of more than seven hundred figures. Simmons made four trips to Vent Haven, photographing ten or more figures each time. She also photographed other objects that vents work with, including a talking handkerchief and a talking baseball bat. A selection of the dummy pictures was shown at Metro Pictures in 1988, along with a photograph that ushered in her next series, called "Walking and Lying Objects." Jimmy DeSana was dying of AIDS, and Simmons wanted to say goodbye to him in her own way. She borrowed, from the American Museum of the Moving Image, in New York, a giant camera costume that had been used in the 1978 film "The Wiz." DeSana, in white tights and ballet shoes, wore the camera at a jaunty angle, and she photographed him that way. (The idea came from a television commercial she'd seen as a child, in which packs of Old Gold cigarettes on legs danced across the screen.) By this time, Simmons had come into her own as an artist. Her photographs were technically impeccable—no dust spots—and she had learned to use light and shadow, scale, and placement to give them a dramatic cohesion. The 1988 show was a success—there were five prints of each image, and everything was sold.

During the next four years, Simmons photographed more than two dozen objects with legs—"Walking Cake," "Walking Purse" (with her sister Bonnie's legs), "Walking Gun." In most of the pictures, the objects are their normal size, and the legs are from small-scale figurines; in a few cases they are sitting or

lying down. She also did several variations on the dummy theme, not all of which were well received. (The *Times* reviewer Charles Hagen panned her 1994 show of daydreaming dummies with thought balloons as "predictable jokes.") Simmons had established her reputation as an original and provocative artist who explored the strange power of human surrogates, but the emblems of greater success—the soaring prices and the international acclaim that had enshrined a few of her contemporaries, including Jeff Koons and Cindy Sherman—were nowhere in sight. Although the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney owned her work, she had not had a museum survey show or a retrospective. When the Baltimore Museum of Art decided to give her one, in 1997, it seemed a major breakthrough. Most of her significant images were on view, from the early doll pictures to the vastly enlarged "Magnum Opus," an ironically titled summing up of her more recent work; twenty feet long by eight feet high, it showed six of her walking, sitting, or lying objects on a mirrored floor. The reviews were mostly positive—"one of the more important photographers of the postmodern era," the Washington *Post* critic noted. But the work's quiet perversity was out of tune with current attitudes about art stardom. It lacked the knockout bravado of Koons's "Balloon Dog" sculptures and Sherman's monumental impersonations of figures from Old Master paintings, and the show did not travel to other museums. "That was one of the heartbreaks of my life," Simmons told me. "I was pretty down afterwards."

She kept right on making work, but in 2000 she left Metro Pictures, discouraged because she felt that her things weren't selling. Within a month, she was commissioned to design a doll house for commercial production. Working with the architect Peter Wheelwright, who had been Dunham's college roommate, she designed a modernist house with sliding doors in bright colors, and miniature art works on the wall by Dunham, Sherman, Peter Halley, and other artist friends. Priced at two hundred dollars, "Kaleidoscope House" sold briskly, at MOMA and several other museums. Dunham referred to this period as Laurie Simmons Enterprises. The art critic Jerry Saltz, who had become a close friend, gave her an out-of-print how-to book called "Instant Decorator," and told her that it would be her next body of work; Simmons hated it when people tried to give her ideas, but one rainy day she and her daughters were amusing themselves over the book's cornball interiors and she got interested. Simmons cut images of people out of magazines, pasted them into rooms in the book, and rephotographed them. The result was a series of photographs that her new gallery, Sperone Westwater, had no trouble selling. After that, there were more doll houses and more shows, and then, in 2005, Simmons fell in love, deeply and passionately, with a real house.

The village of Cornwall, in the northwest corner of Connecticut, is basically one wide street, with big trees and gracious old houses on both sides. Laurie Simmons saw the handsome red brick house at one end of it when she and Dunham and their daughters were spending summers in a rented house at Twin Lakes, a vacation community about fifteen miles away. The house, Georgian and spacious, with high ceilings, outdoor porches, and a big central kitchen, had once been the main building of a boarding school. Simmons used to drive over from Twin Lakes, park across the street, and look at it. "If that house were a man," she joked to Dunham, "you would be finished." Dunham thought the house was beautiful, but he said she had to stop thinking about it, because they could never afford the upkeep. (The market for Dunham's paintings then, like the market for Simmons's photographs, was active but not spectacular.) The house remained unsold—Simmons kept checking with the local real-estate agent handling it—and even though her daughters were nearly grown up, she couldn't help feeling that this was the house she had waited her whole life to own. They bought it in 2007. They had decided they could both work there, and use the basement for storage instead of paying a warehouse, and give up travel and summer rentals and various other expenses. "The house really delivers," Simmons told me. She has made photographs in every one of its large and generous rooms, which she and Dunham decorated—sparingly—with comfortable old furniture and with paintings, drawings, and sculptures by their friends. "I feel like this house told me what to do," Simmons said. "I'd spent so many years

pushing furniture around in my little tableaux—it wasn't nearly as intimidating for me as it would have been twenty years ago." Dunham paints in the barn, which is just beyond the vegetable garden. They kept the Tribeca loft, but the house is the center of their life. "It's actually bigger than the house I grew up in," she told me.

One morning in July, when my wife and I were visiting them in Connecticut, Simmons took us to see Twin Lakes. The house they rented there for eight summers, on a lush green hillside overlooking the water, is still called the White Lodge. When they first saw it, she said, it looked like the Addams Family house—rusted bed frames were piled up in the closets, and every night bats came out of the attic and flitted around the dinner table. The two girls loved everything about it. Simmons wanted us to meet their former Twin Lakes landlords, John and Sally O'Hara, two elegant patricians. John O'Hara's family had owned several of the houses there for generations, and rented them to approved, budget-conscious vacationers. We sat on their porch, and Sally said, "We're all dying to know about Lena. We haven't seen her show, but Mary"—who works at the local marina—"has seen every episode." "You know what?" Simmons said. "I strongly suggest you don't watch 'Girls.'" The O'Haras, she explained later, were terribly nice and staunchly Republican.

On the way back to Cornwall, we talked about Lena. "She didn't have a lot of friends in school," Simmons said. "As a child, she was diagnosed as having obsessive-compulsive disorder and put on medication for it. She had her own adult world. Lena would say, 'Parents, what are we doing this weekend?,' and I'd say there was an opening at the Sonnabend gallery, and she'd say, 'Great!'" Cindy Sherman recalls going to a party at the Dunham apartment, and Lena, who was in high school, saying, "Cindy, it's so good to see you. We should have lunch sometime." One Friday, when her father was having a show at Sonnabend, Lena invited six of her classmates to the opening. Dunham's paintings were no longer completely abstract; many were inhabited by rectangular shapes sprouting male genitals. When Lena arrived at school the following Monday, the girls accosted her and said, "Your father paints penises." "Those aren't penises," Lena replied. "They're guns." The girls stopped speaking to her after that. "We felt terrible, as though we'd damaged her socially," Simmons recalled. When Lena and Grace were eight and two, respectively, Simmons took them to visit her friend Lisa Yuskavage, the painter, in her studio. Yuskavage was working on a canvas of a voluptuous, kneeling nude, whose title was "Big Blonde Jerking Off," and Simmons took pictures of both girls in front of it. "We were considered strict parents, but we didn't worry about the art they looked at," Simmons told me. "Now I feel like I'm learning from Lena. When her HBO show opened, the blogosphere was full of really mean criticisms—about racism, about white girls who were privileged—and I know a lot of that hurt Lena, but she just continues to tell her story."

In 2005, the year Simmons fell in love with the house in Connecticut, she made a movie called "The Music of Regret." Co-produced and partially financed by Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, a collector and dealer, it started out as an artist video and gradually developed into a forty-five-minute puppet musical, using male and female dolls, objects on legs, and five male ventriloquist dummies circling around a female dummy who looks like Simmons. (She had commissioned a puppeteer to make it.) In the film, her dummy look-alike turns into a real person, Simmons's friend and Connecticut neighbor Meryl Streep, who sings duets with the male dummies. I talked to Streep, who told me the experience had been in equal parts disturbing and very funny. "Laurie didn't tell me how to be or not be, so I picked up elements of her own droll humor, and sort of took my cue from the dummy," she said. "I've had difficult lovers before, but sometimes"—she paused, and giggled—"he just wasn't giving me anything!" The music is by Michael Rohatyn, Jeanne's brother-in-law, and Simmons, who has always loved American musicals, wrote the lyrics. The film had its première at the Museum of Modern Art, in 2006, and was shown at the Whitney and the Metropolitan and at several film festivals. Simmons wanted it to reach a wider audience, but that didn't happen.

When "The Music of Regret" was being made, Lena was at Oberlin, immersed in film studies. Her mother kept e-mailing parts of the script to her, and Lena sent them back with suggested changes, most of which Simmons used. Afterward, Lena wanted them to make a movie together, a musical about a girl with O.C.D. They spent a lot of time on the script, but the film was never made. When Lena graduated, her parents proposed that she could go to graduate school or make a feature film, either of which they would help finance. She chose the film. Lena made a short film, and then she did "Tiny Furniture," which was shot in eighteen days, in the fall of 2009. Simmons was deeply involved in almost every aspect of its production. When Aura (the Lena character) finds and reads her mother's diaries, she is doing what Lena did during the same, troubled period of her life, between college and career. "My mom claimed she didn't know I was reading her journals," Lena told me, "but I know she did. I was always hoping to find out something about her that no one else knew." In the film, Aura tells her mother, "I want to be as successful as you are," and her mother says, "Oh, you will be more successful than I am, really, believe me."

In the summer of 2009, a gallery in Tokyo was showing Simmons's work. Simmons went over with Grace, who spent a week there. Browsing in a manga bookstore in the Akihabara district, Grace saw a poster of a life-size adult female doll in a schoolgirl dress. It fascinated Simmons, who found a showroom that sold these extraordinarily lifelike, made-to-order sex toys. Grace was grossed out by the salesman's demonstration of how to use them, but Simmons ordered one and had it sent to her in New York. A few months later, she ordered another, with a more Westernized face. During the next year, she

turned her Cornwall home into a life-size doll house. From hundreds of photographs, she selected thirty-one, showing a month in the life of a fully articulated creature who reads, daydreams, bathes, walks in the snow, dons full geisha regalia, and jumps over a stone wall, as though escaping to a new life. None of the poses were pornographic, or even erotic; the doll is nude only once, as she plays chastely with her dog. Simmons's interest lay in the beauty and perfection of these silicone objects, which she managed, with enormous effort and great skill, to imbue with the illusion of an inner life. The photographs, enlarged to life size, were shown in February, 2011, at Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn's Salon 94 gallery on the Bowery, which now represents Simmons. The Whitney Museum bought two of them, and most of the others sold quickly, for thirty-five thousand dollars apiece. They can be seen either as the apotheosis of Simmons's work to date or as the beginning of something new. Her next project, she told me, is to shoot a love doll together with a real man, who'll be naked.

Simmons had left Metro Pictures in 2000, after twenty years, without having another gallery lined up, and she left Sperone Westwater the same way, in 2010. In each case, the spur was ambition—an urge to break out and take her work to another level. "I've lived my life as an artist, with an artist," she told me. "Tip and I were lucky to find each other, and this life that works for both of us. There's a surprisingly large list of things I haven't had, in terms of museum shows and recognition, but I'm so interested in the present right now. I don't want my new work to have anything to do with nostalgia. Artists are ridiculous. We're totally scornful when people in other fields try to do art, but we think we can do anything—act, write, do extreme sports. Young artists have given me that license, because the old distinctions don't exist for them."

Laurie, Tip, Lena, and Grace went to Los Angeles in September to attend the Emmy Awards ceremony. Lena and "Girls" had been nominated for four of the comedy-series awards—best writer, best leading actress, best director, and best series—and she wanted her family to be there. "It was just as exciting and as boring as you can imagine," Simmons told me afterward. "At every commercial, people would get out their cell phones and leave, and there were these designated seat-fillers, dressed in faux evening clothes, who would come down and occupy your seats. My big fear was that I would be mistaken for a seat-filler." Although Lena didn't win any awards, she made a vivid impression in a brief skit, filmed earlier and shown as an introduction to the ceremony, that showed her sitting in a toilet stall, naked, eating a whole cake, and the Hollywood herds pursued her relentlessly. "There was one moment after the ceremony when we were heading to where our car was going to pick us up," Simmons said, "and there were so many people trying to get to Lena that the three of us just held hands around her, protectively. It felt like the beginning of our new life."

For about a year now, Simmons has been thinking about a new film of her own. What she has in mind is a full-length feature, not a documentary, shot mostly in and around their house in Connecticut. "It's going to be very inexpensive," she said. "That's what I learned from Lena." ("Tiny Furniture," which was shot digitally, cost far less than "The Music of Regret.") "I want to make a narrative movie, and I want to be in it. The character I play will not be me, but maybe another side of me. God, it could be so embarrassing for Lena!" She whooped with laughter, and then buried her head in both hands. "So," I ventured, "you might not do it?" "Whatever I have to do," she said, "I'll do." Lena, when I asked her about this, agreed that it was complicated. "I feel protective of her, and probably a little protective of my own turf," she said. "Of course, she made a movie before I did, and that was part of what made me want to do it." For a family that sees no particular virtue in reticence, it's odd that the two of them seem not to have discussed the matter at length.

In a recent conversation with Simmons, she sounded more relaxed about the issue. "I can make a movie and put myself in it, and it will still be a movie by an artist, not a Hollywood movie," she said. "So you fail, so you embarrass—people don't die from that. And, besides, children are supposed to be embarrassed by their mothers." ♦