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Doll Parts: Artist Laurie Simmons on Her Surreal New Show

Pop feminism, Japanese love dolls, and masks—of all kinds.

By Kristin Anderson



How We See/Peche (Pink), 2015, pigment print 70 × 48 inches (178 × 122 cm).

Come March 13, artist Laurie Simmons (yes, the mother of a certain Girls star; but venerable long before Ms. Dunham burst onto the scene) will debut *How We See*, a show of six new works at the Jewish Museum. Acid-hued studio portraits of models (including Ajak Deng) with uncanny “eyes” painted atop their closed eyelids unpack ideas of identity and perception that Simmons touched on with her *kigurumi* series. For those works, the artist dressed subjects in the larger-than-life “doller” costumes favored by a segment of the cosplay community, but here her women go unmasked—albeit no less enigmatic. We sat down with Simmons to talk about masks, moving forward, and *How We See*.

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This show is an extension of the kigurumi images that you have done previously, with the full costumes. How did you arrive at that particular subculture?

The whole focus on Japanese culture started when I discovered the love doll—that series [of the same name] in 2009. I just couldn't get away from the idea that I was going to find inspiration in Japan. I had never been there until 2009, and then when I got there, it was a real head-scratcher: Like, where have I been all these years? Why haven't I been here? Why didn't I ever live here? It was such a—I wouldn't say a strong connection, because I felt like a stranger all the time I was there, but I felt really jazzed about and inspired by everything I saw.

How did the transformational qualities of the kigurumi costumes—as opposed to this series—differ? Did your models' behavior shift once they had these eyes painted on?

Absolutely. I had a number of models that I would use over and over, and those models in the kigurumi costumes had very distinct personalities come out when they posed for me. Their kigurumi personalities were very different from their real-life personalities. It was an opportunity for someone to really act out or be more physically aggressive or to be a little bit sexier than they would be in real life.

You used two transgender models [Peché Di and Edie Charles] for *How We See*. Can you speak about that choice?

I worked with two makeup artists, and one was James Kaliardos. I told him the kinds of models I was looking for, and it turns out he had worked on the beautiful, moving Bruce Weber shoot for Barneys [*Brothers, Sisters, Sons & Daughters*]. So he connected me with these two young women, and it just seemed like a really organic way of finding models.

And you worked with Rachel Antonoff on the costumes?

I love her work and the way she likes to draw on her clothes. I think all the people I work with blur the boundary between “artist” and “makeup artist” and “fashion designer,” and I feel like in this project, I invited the people in to be artists and kind of work on their own. I never told the makeup artist what kind of eyes. I let them decide what kind of eyes to draw. And Rachel just gave me a bunch of blouses to use, and in the case of the picture of Edie Charles, it was really clear that I was going to make a ponytail to match a ponytail!

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Did you intend for the clothes to serve a very specific purpose?

Conceptually, I wanted a kind of consistency in the pictures, which is why I just invited one designer to give me clothing. This series is by no means over, and I feel like every time I invite a new makeup artist, the eyes change. Like in this show, it's Landy Dean and James Kaliardos. They're both really wickedly good painters. I mean, that's the thing about using a makeup artist. I talked to a lot of makeup artists, and even terrific makeup artists, some of them admitted to me that they didn't feel like they could pick up a brush and paint an eye. You have to have a very specific facility to be able to do that. I just love the idea that maybe these [works] cross over a little bit into the fashion world because I'm using models and because I'm using makeup artists who work in fashion. I have my eye on that world a lot, as a lot of artists do.

I know you've mentioned Margaret Keane paintings in past interviews as some of the first works of art you remember.

It was the first piece of art I owned. I think I got it on my 11th birthday, and I thought I had a real painting—of course, now I know it was a print, but I really thought I had a real piece of artwork and my parents framed it for me. I actually gave it to my daughter. The feeling of the background is so much like this—this kind of rich gold, almost lacquered-on color. And I was really excited. I thought I had something pretty cool.

Keane works are certainly something that's in the zeitgeist now [thanks to Tim Burton's *Big Eyes*].

Absolutely, because when I shot the *kigurumi* pictures, I didn't have Keane on my mind at all, and my sisters both said, "I guess you did this because of your Keane pictures." I forgot! It's so in my subconscious, unconscious memory—whatever you want to call it. But I totally forgot that connection, and then of course, after the *kigurumi* stuff, the movie came out, which I was really excited about. So it all kind of unfolded in that odd way.

Have you had any reactions from the cosplay community to your images?

There were a couple of posts on my Instagram or on Twitter or something, where people were annoyed and said that I didn't know anything. And the thing is that I agree with that. It's not my world at all. But as artists—particularly in the 21st century—we're all image scavengers, and we borrow and find things. It's not really a journalistic approach, but it's like I need to know every single thing I can right now in the next month of my life. It doesn't mean I'm part of that community, but it's like total visual immersion, which means research and hitting the Google button, what I saw in Japan. I feel like when you're an artist, it's narrowing down and tuning into this really small portion of something to be able to pull imagery out of it.



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How do you see people who do this? How does that relate to their identity, in your mind?

I'm really intrigued by the idea that there are so many ways to change your identity now, the possibilities for altering your image, like on Instagram and on social media. And of course with cosplayers, a community where you can play dress-up as a grown-up. I mean, Halloween was so hands down my favorite holiday. And I feel like when I was a kid, the day after Halloween I would start thinking about next Halloween and who I could be, what I could be, what I could dress up as. And that would change every month...I still love it, the idea of wearing a mask. You know, I put on a [kigurumi] mask myself once. I felt really claustrophobic in it. I'd much rather shoot it than wear it.

It was frustrating to me for years and years that so much of my work dealt with nostalgia. But I couldn't help it. There was so much imagery that I was drawn to from my childhood, in a seriously looking-back kind of way. And I feel like the kigurumi and in these pictures, it's the first work that I've ever made about the future. I'm thinking so much about social media and where it's going, about Instagram and selfie culture, and portraiture in general. Like, how does this story end? So I'm excited that I feel like almost for the first time I can look at my work and not think about another time in history, but think about this moment.