

The Boston Globe, February 17, 2016

# The Boston Globe

Scenes of domestic life at the Addison

by Mark Feeney



Laurie Simmons's "Untitled (Woman Standing on Head)."

ANDOVER — It begins with a camera, two cameras, actually; one's real, the other a toy. It ends with the blurred face of a female doll. In between come heartbreak, absurdity, attention to detail, sociological acuity, deadpan humor, deep disquiet, and psychological complexity masquerading as visual simplicity.

"It" is Laurie Simmons's 1976 photo series, "In and Around the House," a pathbreaking contribution to feminist art — except that the shocks of recognition it offers are in no way restricted to those lacking Y chromosomes. Feminism can be as universal, or as limited, as art can. It's all in the conception — and execution.

In honor of acquiring a complete set of the series, the Addison Gallery of American Art, at Phillips Academy, in Andover, is displaying all 59 of the black-and-white photographs through April 17.

The house in question is a dollhouse. Simmons photographs a small, nondescript female doll (no Barbie in either scale or personality) in various domestic situations doing various domestic tasks. "I was simply trying to re-create a feeling, a mood," Simmons has said, "a sense of the Fifties that I knew was both beautiful and lethal at the same time."

An allusion to Ibsen's "A Doll's House" is implicit. No less relevant is another literary title, Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique." But Simmons makes sure that "In and Around the House" is first and foremost a visual work. The way that light falls on a wall in "Bathroom II" reminds us how closely thought through the series is — how arranged.

Simmons's marriage of painstaking detail and consistent unreality creates a sense of spun-sugar claustrophobia. The parenthetical in "Untitled (Woman Standing on Head)" is self-explanatory. What isn't explained is whether her stance is the product of delight or frenzy. The scattering of plates and utensils argues for the latter. Something as innocuous in another photograph as a pair of tiny high heels is unsettling. The fact that "Three

The Boston Globe, February 17, 2016



"Untitled (Woman's Head)" by Laurie Simmons.

"Bottles of Beads" looks like a set of pharmaceutical containers is deeply unsettling. Most unsettling of all is "Falling Off Chair," which shows a piece of furniture hanging on a tow truck hook — odd enough, but so far so good — near a doll lying on the ground: far too odd, and not good at all.

Simmons is married to the artist Carroll Dunham. One of their daughters is Lena Dunham, of "Girls" fame. It must have been quite a household. One wonders what toys — well, a particular toy — little Lena might have played with.

To complement the Simmons exhibition, the Addison has mounted "Walls and Beams, Rooms and Dreams: Images of Home." Drawn from the museum's permanent collection, it runs through July 31. The show consists of nearly 90 items, ranging in date from the 1830s to 2013: paintings, photographs, prints, drawings, even models (one of them by Simmons, with Peter Wheelwright).

The show begins with two galleries of interiors and ends with two galleries of exteriors. That's logical enough, right down to there being a sort of hinge between interior and exterior. It takes the form of four photographs of dwellings where interior and exterior are all but interchangeable: a pair by Ezra Stoller, of Philip Johnson's Glass House, and two of Julius Shulman's Los Angeles Case Study houses. What would Modernist architects have done without glass?

Within that logic, multiple surprises emerge, from an early John Singer Sargent of an unaristocratic interior, "The Blue Bowl," to the chocolatey gloom of an Oscar Bluemner painting, "Radiant Night," being at such variance with its title. Is a prison cell a residence? Of course it is, as a 1968 Danny Lyon photograph attests. Dorothea Lange took five photographs of Florence Owens Thompson and her children before the one that became known as "Migrant Mother." "Walls and Beams" offers one of the others. The biggest surprise of all may be a 1945 Walker Evans painting of a shed or shack. You read right, a Walker Evans painting. It's not bad.

Also drawn from the Addison's holdings is "One Thing Leads to Another." It runs through March 20. The leading can be thematic: portraits of women by women; portraits of women by men; masks; dance; motion. It can be serial. All sorts of playful juxtapositions ensue. Some Aaron Siskind and Barbara Morgan photographs of dancers (and, in Morgan's case, one called "Tossed Cats"! ) hang near a Sol LeWitt painting called "Somersaulting."

The Boston Globe, February 17, 2016



"The dashing leading man" by Cindy Sherman.

Several of the themes — masks, portraits of women by women, serialism, and motion, as in motion pictures — come together in the 18 photographs from Cindy Sherman's "Untitled (Murder Mystery People)." The greatest pleasure of the 2012 Sherman retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art was getting to see in its entirety her "Untitled Film Stills" series. This series turns that one on its head. Here we see characters from an imaginary movie thriller: the butler, the detective, the maid, etc. Sherman portrays them all. Sherman did the mystery people in 1976, a year before starting "Untitled Film Stills." It's like getting to watch a dress rehearsal. One thing really does lead to another.

**Laurie Simmons: In and Around the House**

**Walls and Beams, Rooms and Dreams: Images of Home**

**One Thing Leads to Another... Selections From the Collection**

At Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 180 Main St., Andover, through April 17, July 31, and March 20, respectively, 978-749-4015.