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Doll's Play

By Judith Thurman



Laurie Simmons's new show at the Jewish Museum, "How We See," is inspired by the Doll Girls phenomenon, where young women alter their appearance to look like fashion dolls or cartoon characters.

PHOTOGRAPH © LAURIE SIMMONS

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Last Thursday, the clue for 1 Across in the *Times* crossword puzzle was: "1962 Kubrick film," six letters. Answer: "Lolita."

The next morning, I took the Eighty-sixth Street crosstown bus to the Jewish Museum, to see a new Laurie Simmons show, inspired by Doll Girls—young women who alter their appearance to look like Barbies or Japanese-anime characters. The girl sitting next to me on the bus was reading "Lolita." She looked about the age of Nabokov's heroine—the doll girl of another era. As we passed H&M, display workers were dressing the window mannequins. Spring is here, and it's time to bare some flesh. The plastic skin of a naked mannequin is, however, always unsettling. (I was already thinking about Laurie Simmons. Unsettling mannequins are her speciality.)

As a bus went the other way, the girl glanced up from her page, over her glasses, exactly as Sue Lyon did in the posters for "Lolita" that were plastered on New York buses fifty-three years ago. Lyon, the nubile blonde in the title role (she was fourteen when they cast her), was sucking on a lollipop that was, like her dark glasses, red and heart shaped. In the most shocking scene of the film—shocking for its time —Humbert Humbert (James Mason) gives Lolita a pedicure. He was grooming her in both senses.

When I got to the museum, it was filled with cheerful octogenarians in sensible shoes. (This is a crowd that shops at Harry's.) Most of them, apparently, had come to see "Helena Rubinstein: Beauty Is Power," a large show of Rubinsteiniana—flattering portraits, important jewelry, opulent couture, and art from the collection of a formidable entrepreneur, not to mention a spendthrift. But Rubinstein's fortune was entirely self-made: she was born in a Polish shtetl, in 1872, and parlayed a recipe for homemade face cream into a global cosmetics empire. The show has been open since October (it closes this week), so it doesn't seem that there was any intent on the part of the curators to juxtapose it with the much smaller Simmons show of six photographs, upstairs. But the two exhibits do speak to each other.

The makeup business is a form of doll's play, and Rubinstein loved dolls' houses. Some of the miniature interiors that she commissioned are on display. One has a Murano chandelier, Persian carpets, and French-château furniture. Another is the atelier of a gentleman painter: slanted skylight, narrow mezzanine overlooking the vaulting studio space, easel by the window, and bohemian disarray. These dioramas are charming, but they are also claustrophobic, and they inspire creepy thoughts. The divan in the atelier, for example: Did its wolfish proprietor seduce his young models on it? Such notions may have been the influence of "Lolita," but a doll's house invites voyeurism—the invasion of a private space.

A girl's body is also a private space, and child psychiatrists use doll's play as a diagnostic tool, especially in cases of suspected abuse. Simmons's art uses dolls and mannequins in a related fashion—to explore the boundaries between innocence and perversion. She once bought a customized sex doll in Japan, then dressed it and undressed it for a series of photographs. They were published in a book, "The Love Doll," which you can buy at the museum's gift shop. In the introduction, Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn writes that "the surrogate sex partner arrived in a crate, clothed in a transparent slip and accompanied by a separate box containing an engagement ring and genitalia." Simmons starred as a dollhouse-obsessed artist much like herself in an indie film, "Tiny Furniture," by her daughter Lena Dunham.

Mothers and daughters and feminine role-play: that is a theme here. Little girls love messing with their mothers' makeup. But when Rubinstein was a little girl mothers didn't wear makeup; only actresses and prostitutes did. Rubinstein was determined to change that—she made painting your face respectable. "Nature always needs help," she says in an old film clip that runs on a loop in the exhibit. In another video, a group of docile, dewy-eyed young test subjects look as if they are being mummified in one of Rubinstein's salons. (They are actually just getting facials.) A lady next to me on the banquette laughed ruefully as she watched it. She quoted Yeats to her friend: "We who are born woman know that one must suffer to be beautiful." We also suffer being ridiculous.

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This 1957 portrait of the cosmetics magnate in a Balenciaga gown, by Graham Sutherland, is among the Rubinsteiniana on view in the Jewish Museum's exhibit "Beauty Is Power."

PHOTOGRAPH © ESTATE OF GRAHAM SUTHERLAND

The title of the Simmons show, "How We See," is meant to be ironic or, more accurately, meta-ironic. First, there is not much to look at. Simmons photographed six plastic-looking professional models from the collarbone up against Life Savers-colored backgrounds. The models themselves are like Life Savers, too—they come in slight variations of the same sugary taste. The wall text notes that prominent in each portrait "are the girls' preternaturally large, sparkling eyes, which stare out at the visitor with an uncanny, alien gaze." (They are actually staring into space.) "Their arresting strangeness arises from the fact that they are painted on the models' closed lids, a well-known Doll Girls technique."

The girls and young women who identify as Doll Girls post images on social media in which they have transformed themselves with wigs and makeup—sometimes also with surgery and starvation—to look like a favorite doll or animated character. I am tempted to digress into the dialectical tension between the terms "anime" and "inanimate"—right next to the Simmons show is an installation based on the work of Gilles Deleuze, the French metaphysician, that plays with the same idea—but I fear that this is T.M.I. It's worth noting, though, that Simmons's doll girls have been rendered blind.

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The title of the Rubinstein show is, I think, ironic unintentionally. Beauty is power? For the beautiful, certainly, and for beauty's eponymous purveyors, many of whom were, like Rubinstein, women of modest backgrounds. (Estée Lauder was a girl from Queens, and Elizabeth Arden—the former Florence Nightingale Graham—came from a small town in Canada.) Purveying beauty made Rubinstein so rich that when she was turned down for an apartment on Fifth Avenue, because she was Jewish, she bought the building. But power doesn't make you beautiful. Helena was a fireplug of four feet eleven. She had the looks of a priestess, not of a sacrificial virgin.

Mason Klein, the curator of the Rubinstein show, is aware that some museumgoers will not buy his premise, so he writes, "If latter-day feminist debates have focused on cosmetics as objectifying women, they were seen in the early twentieth century as a means of asserting female autonomy. By encouraging women to define themselves as self-expressive individuals"—painters, no less—"Rubinstein contributed to their empowerment." He concludes, "She offered women the ideal of self-invention."

If a female artist objectifies women ironically, is that empowerment? Perhaps it can be. As the Rubinstein show informs us, some suffragists wore rouge as a gesture of revolt. It aligned them with the "hussies" and "fallen women" who refused to let men's definitions of a "good" or a "bad" woman, or of lawful and shameful desire, cheat them of an erotic life. But Simmons's work also suggests how the "ideal of self-invention" can be self-subverted. When a young girl goes to extremes to embody the fantasies of a lecher, not to say of a pedophile—when Lolita and Humbert have the same taste for doll's play—beauty is victimhood.