



was that the big guys weren't so keen on children's toys, "so the idea of putting a doll into a photograph was just downright embarrassing".

Simmons took a series of "preposterous" jobs — she worked in a backgammon shop, babysat a dog and almost married someone who needed a Green Card — while planning her doll-less assault on the art world. Then Carroll persuaded her to show her work with dolls and miniature interiors to a gallerist, who duly went crazy for it. It was the beginning of Simmons' career. "My work is about the experience of being a woman. The interior space is such a metaphor for the inside of a woman's mind."

Not long ago she made an art film with Meryl Streep, which shows how well her work is now regarded. Yet: "Our career has been a series of peaks and valleys. We've had really difficult times economically." Not a bad thing for the children, she thinks. "When I was a child, the two taboo subjects at the dinner table were sex and money. Everything was kept from me, even my father's financial struggles."

"My daughters know that when you're an artist it is a precarious life. You have money and then you're broke, so you sell your house or get an extra teaching job. And if you find work you love, that would perhaps trump financial security." You can imagine what a soothing effect this

might have on any young person starting out in the world. Lucky Lena and Grace. "Life is long and there are so many phases and stages, so many lives within a life, and it's important to understand that."

The first clue she had that her older daughter might be on to something artistically was shortly after Dunham cast her as her onscreen fictional

“I had been such a wild child, nothing my kids did could top it

mother in her first feature film, *Tiny Furniture*. To Simmons the film seemed "deep and rich for someone so young", and indeed it went on to be critically acclaimed and win prizes.

What was Dunham like as a child? There have been parents, Simmons admits, who have asked her, only half-jokingly, for any tips on how to raise a superstar like her daughter. "We always spent a lot of time together because she had a lot of trouble finding friends to play with and she related incredibly well to adults. When Lena was still at junior high school, she would say: 'Parents, what are we

Lena Dunham, creator of *Girls*, above, and her mother, the artist Laurie Simmons, right



doing this weekend?" And I would say to my husband, "Isn't she supposed to want to be with her friends? Isn't she supposed to be trying to smoke pot?"

"For some people, seeing a child with no friends her own age would be upsetting, a child who didn't seem interested in schoolwork, a child who had no interest in sports whatsoever. Now these things were fine with me, but I think for other parents, who wanted to raise kids to be high achievers and excel at school, be on the sports team, have lots of friends, look a certain way ... I never cared about that."

She adds: "I'm the one in the family who would get angry and talk back, and the girls would just cover their eyes. I would really have to tone it down." Regrettably, she says: "It probably comes from my own childhood. If I feel authority closing in I can really turn into that brat." She taps her chest: "It's in there. That rebellious teenager is in me. And it's interesting that neither of my daughters nor my husband really have that. Maybe they haven't had to." Simmons herself was a difficult child, she says. It's difficult to imagine, she looks so respectable.

"I am so respectable now. But I was so great at lying to my parents." Her greatest accomplishment, she says, was, at 17, convincing her parents that she was at a ranch with a female friend when in fact, "I had run away to California with a boyfriend". On other occasions, "I got caught smoking pot". In the classic Jewish suburb where she lived on Long Island, this behaviour seemed demented.

Simmons' parents dealt with it by deciding that she was "an artist". She says that while growing up "being an artist seemed to me to be the thing that was going to get me through."

The upshot of it all was that, when Simmons became a mother to teenagers herself, "because I had been such a wild child and caused so much grief for my parents, nothing our kids did could top what I did. I never felt

the challenges with our daughters. There were interesting conceptual problems but they always seemed like they had solutions or were things they could grow out of."

As a young artist without children, Simmons had worried about what the impact of becoming a parent would be on her work. "There are these myths that you would lose your creative juices. That everything would be subsumed into motherhood. When we finally decided to have children it was more because I was afraid of how I would feel later on if I didn't. My work is very bound up with the ideas of regret and the path not taken and I thought: 'I think I need to try this.'"

It took her a year after the birth of each daughter to get back to work, "but I was determined. My husband was amazing. We would just put the baby in a sling and go to the studio. The first few months after having a baby are very confusing. I really dislike saying this but I feel like each time I had to forge a new identity."

They are an extremely close family now. Simmons says she feels more artistically productive than ever. To this end she's just given Dunham a tiny role in her own feature film (her first), although she doesn't anticipate having finished it until next year.

Simmons stars and the film is about the lives of women her own age. "I feel like there's the Hollywood version of life at this age and then there's the real version. If you ask 'What do you want?' they wouldn't say, 'I want a man. I want to get married.'" She says that, contrary to how they are portrayed, "a 60-year-old woman is not old and dying."

It's curious how many women seem to complain in the press about having hit 60 and "become invisible", she says. "The idea of a sort of invisibility being foisted on you by culture — I'm not sure if that's true." She thinks about this for a moment. "I don't feel invisible. I feel more visible." Lena, I envy you your mother.

The Prix Pictet is at the V&A, London SW2, to June 14 (prixpictet.com). Laurie Simmons: *Kigurumi and Dollars* is at the Wilkinson Gallery, London E2, to June 29 (wilkinsongallery.com)

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Why I won't go shopping on the high street

Kevin Maher



They first tried to appeal to our sense of nostalgia. Then they tried to call it civic duty. Then they hired Mary Portas. And now the latest attempt by an anxious establishment to drag us back out to the ailing high street is directly invoking our paranoid fears of cyberheft and online fraud.

Yes, communities minister Brandon Lewis has reacted to the kerfuffle at eBay over the theft of customers' personal details by suggesting that the only secure way to shop in modern Britain is to do so on the high street. Shopping online may be efficient, Lewis has said, but it's susceptible to online crime. "By shopping on the high street," he added, "you just don't have to think about that."

I'm not buying. Literally. In fact, you could steal all my personal details, siphon off all my spare cash, mock up my criminal doppelgänger, defraud me of my house, car and every single possession bar the underwear beneath my jeans and you still couldn't drag me back to the high street. In short: for shoppers the high street is hell.

And not just any hell. It's a place of perverse torment that lives in the gap between the promise and the real. Or between the teasing suggestion that a high street store is there to meet your needs as a consumer and the crushing confirmation that it's all ultimately a



strange headache-inducing charade. Think about it. The ramshackle edifice chaotically strewn with unbuyable, mismatched junk and deliberately understaffed with low-lidded adolescent dolts who only exist to shout flirty comments to each other then disappear into the stockroom for hours, compounding your suspicion that they're watching you from the CCTV booth, just waiting and counting the seconds until you snap.

This isn't hyperbole. Have you ever even tried to buy a pair of trainers in a high street sports store? Sorry, wrong size. Sorry, wrong style. Sorry, I'm off to the stockroom. Sorry, we're not actually having this conversation because I sound like a helpful sales assistant and we all know they don't exist. It's not just the low end either. It's everything — stationery chains, upmarket department stores, commercial clothing outlets. They've got nothing to sell (at least nothing in your size, colour, style, shape, flavour or make) and they sell it badly.

They know that they're doomed. That it's only a matter of time before they become anonymous, staffless warehouses. Which is why they're constantly pushing "click and collect".

While we're at it, is there anything more depressing than, say, taking 45 minutes out of your day to visit a well-known department store to buy your youngest child a five-pack of vests and socks only to get the blank-faced knockback: "Have you tried online?" Yeah, silly me. I thought you were a shop and not just a big multi-storey reminder to use the computer.

So, by all means, close them down. Board them up. Nuke the high street. In the meantime, you'll have to do a lot better than the threat of cybercrime to make it viable again.

The art of selling water

You've got to love Coke. Or, at least the corporate kingpins who dictate its product launches. For coming soon to a (presumably understaffed and decaying) high street store near you is Glaceau Smartwater, the new mineral water from Coca-Cola.

The global drinks manufacturer is boasting that the water, which comes from the Abbey Well plant in Northumberland, is purported to vapour distilling before precious electrolytes are added. Because, says a company spokesperson, "This gives it a crisp, clean taste that is different to current brands".

Which is fine, but also intriguingly dated. What era is this? The mid-Nineties? Where are we? Sitting around a West End restaurant, chatting to the waiter, distilling? Electrolytes? Get over yourselves. It's water.

'No mother wants to watch her daughter in a sex scene. I had to cover my eyes'

How did Laurie Simmons, mother of Lena Dunham, raise a superstar? It was an unusual upbringing, she tells Stefanie Marsh

In an elegant conservatory, over a pot of green tea, the woman who spawned the deliberately annoying, understatedly clever, loveable, self-hatingly plump and self-conscious feminist icon of the present age is looking like a demure, well-behaved tourist. You'd take her for a university lecturer or a niche designer with an interest in fine jewellery. Her daughter — the feminist icon — her mother now recalls, fondly, "Was always a ... different ... child. Lena's characteristics were very specific."

The woman in question is in fact an artist of some note and her name is Laurie Simmons. She is a tall, well-dressed woman in her sixties with a nice turn of phrase, subtly tailored to her environment (she's from New York, but here she says "loo" not "bathroom") and a warm, strident, intelligent manner.

She is here for a few days because she has a show in east London and because a series of her photographs, *The Love Doll*, has been shortlisted for the Prix Pictet, a photography prize, and will be shown at the V&A. Her husband is Carroll Dunham, another artist (also famous). Later he will come by our table to say a polite hello.

The couple have two daughters: Lena, 28, and Grace, 22. Two years ago, Lena Dunham's comedy-drama television series *Girls* premiered on the American channel HBO. Set in New York City, it is funny and true to life, and because of this also sometimes mesmerisingly excruciating to watch. It is less stilted than *Friends* and more profound than *Sex in the City*. Young women in particular like

Girls for its realism, its wit, its psycho boyfriends, dead-end jobs, petty internet arguments, puppy fat, bad teeth, bisexuals, neurosis and frequently underwhelming, sometimes doggy-style sex: the unspoken themes of modern life if you are aged between 20 and 30, in New York at least.

The show was a hit and because Dunham not only drew from her own life when she wrote it but played the lead too, she became a star. She turns up frequently on chat shows wearing homey knitted jumpers or sun dresses and only a little make-up, looking very normal, in fact alien, among the sun-kissed body fascists that populate the stellar end of American television.

Presumably Simmons, a veteran of the New York art scene since the early 1970s, is not perturbed by the contents of her daughter's continuing (they're making a fourth series) TV adventures? "Well, I am her mother," Simmons protests, amused and shocked at her own reaction at the time. "No mother wants to watch her daughter have sex or be in a sex scene. When I went to the premiere I had to cover my eyes." It's even tougher for Dunham's dad to sit through these couplings, apparently. "So to pretend that it's really natural and that we're very relaxed about watching the sex scenes — that would be just crazy." Still, she says, "I have an enormous amount of respect for her work. She's going to do what she does and go forward. And be embarrassed."

The reference to Dunham's embarrassment-faced future is not a mother-to-daughter slur. For Simmons embarrassment is a "touchstone", especially in her work. Some people feel the fear and do it anyway. Simmons feels the embarrassment, "and I plough through". When she feels embarrassed she knows it's a sign that she's on to something.

As a young, "brash" artist, Simmons was embarrassed that she was drawn to making art that included several, to her mind, rather sissy little dolls. "The generation of feminist artists before me, they kept themselves apart. They used materials like their own hair, menstrual blood. And I thought, 'I don't want to be a segregated, women's idea of art making. I want to play with the big guys.'" The problem

I'm not old but I still get conned

Commen who target the elderly are going to face stiffer sentences, according to new guidelines from the Sentencing Council. Which, on the surface, seems to be fair and just. Because no one likes to see a silver-haired granny get done over by a mucky

geezer in a Transit van. And yet isn't it also just that tiny bit ageist? Implying that the elderly are helpless dullards at sea in the world and constantly in need of our protection? Plus, part of me resents the way that it downgrades the cons afflicted upon the rest

of us sprightly, bright-eyed youngies. The guy, for instance, who came in to "clear" my drains and just messed about at the back of the house for a couple of hours before charging me £300. Is his crime less offensive because I'm not a pensioner yet?