

VISIONAIRE

Laurie Simmons' How We See

By Alessandro Magania



LAURIE SIMMONS WITH MODEL LINDSAY LULLMAN, SHOT BY JAMES KALIARDOS

Laurie Simmons' new series of portraits, titled *How We See* – on view at the Jewish Museum from March 13 to August 9th – stems from the phenomena known as Doll Girls, a global network of people who craft their appearance to look like dolls. Their makeovers intended largely for cyber space, Doll Girls achieve their exaggerated features equally by way of makeup, digital, or surgical enhancement, trivializing any conventional line between real and artificial.

But in the context of Simmons' body of work, often inhabited by real dolls, dummies, masks, and other types of human simulacra, these six large-scale photos present relatively little artifice. Six female models are captured up-close in front of a color-lit curtain, their closed eyelids painted to look like open eyes. Simmons employed the help of two make up artists, Landy Dean and Visionaire's own James Kaliardos to bestow a fictitious gaze on the ladies. They took a *Trompe-l'œil* approach to the task, rendering gleaming, staring eyes with the accuracy of real doll face painting. The models pose like teenagers presenting their best self for a high-school portrait, but a palpable feeling of displacement from performing their job with eyes closed give the photos their unsettling tone over the faked stares.

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A native New Yorker (from the gritty shores of Far Rockaway), Simmons' interest in fabricated identity comes with a distinctly urban level of acceptance toward subjective truth. Long before the internet New York has always provided a platform for self invention, where image defines the self and becomes truth. A truth.

Laurie Simmons: It came from my research on Japanese anime, cosplay and body transformation. I got hooked on makeup tutorials and girls painting anime eyes on their lids. I'd also seen it done in fashion and film. It's very much NOT my idea.

AM: Why did you choose to use models?

LS: I like the reference to fashion photography but I also felt the more classic, beautiful and symmetrical the face the more startling the interruption of the painted eyes would be..

AM: Can you tell me about the process of making these portraits? How did the different element come together?

LS: It became a formula immediately. A model, a makeup artist, (James Kaliardos and Landy Dean) a fashion designer (Rachel Antonoff) for the white blouses and a Warholish colored background.



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AM: Did the actual personality of the girls, or maybe your initial perception of them, have anything to do with how you decided to present them in the photos? What eyes they would get, what clothes, what color background.

LS: I got to know each girl as well as I could during a several hour shoot. Amazingly two of the girls happened to have birthdays on shoot days so we had birthday parties with cakes and candles. What happened in front of the camera was intuitive as shooting always is for me. I never know why I move closer or find a certain angle.

The models were all super lovely and very calm. I don't think it's that easy to sit with your eyes closed for a couple hours.

The eyes were totally determined by Landy and James; color shape etc. The clothes were always white blouses with drawings or embellishment by Rachel Antonoff. In that sense I felt I was inviting other artists in to collaborate.

AM: Wanting to look like a doll presents such a weird dichotomy toward sexuality, on one hand implying a desire to be objectified and to exemplify beauty standards (which, even in the case of dolls, are inevitably rooted in sexuality), on the other trying to preserve some warped notion of innocence. What role, if any, does sexuality play in this series?

LS: I'm not there yet. It takes me a long time to untangle the whys and wherefores of what I've made. I'm still figuring out Kigurumi – my last series.

AM: Do you have any social media profile? If so, can you share an example of a time you caught yourself deliberately playing with perception and how you wanted to be viewed?

LS: I do Instagram and I play with it in the sense that I monitor my followers taste. I'll post a picture of a perfect pink water lily I shot in a river in southern India and get a squillion likes and then when I have their attention throw in an image of my work, which of course gets way fewer likes.

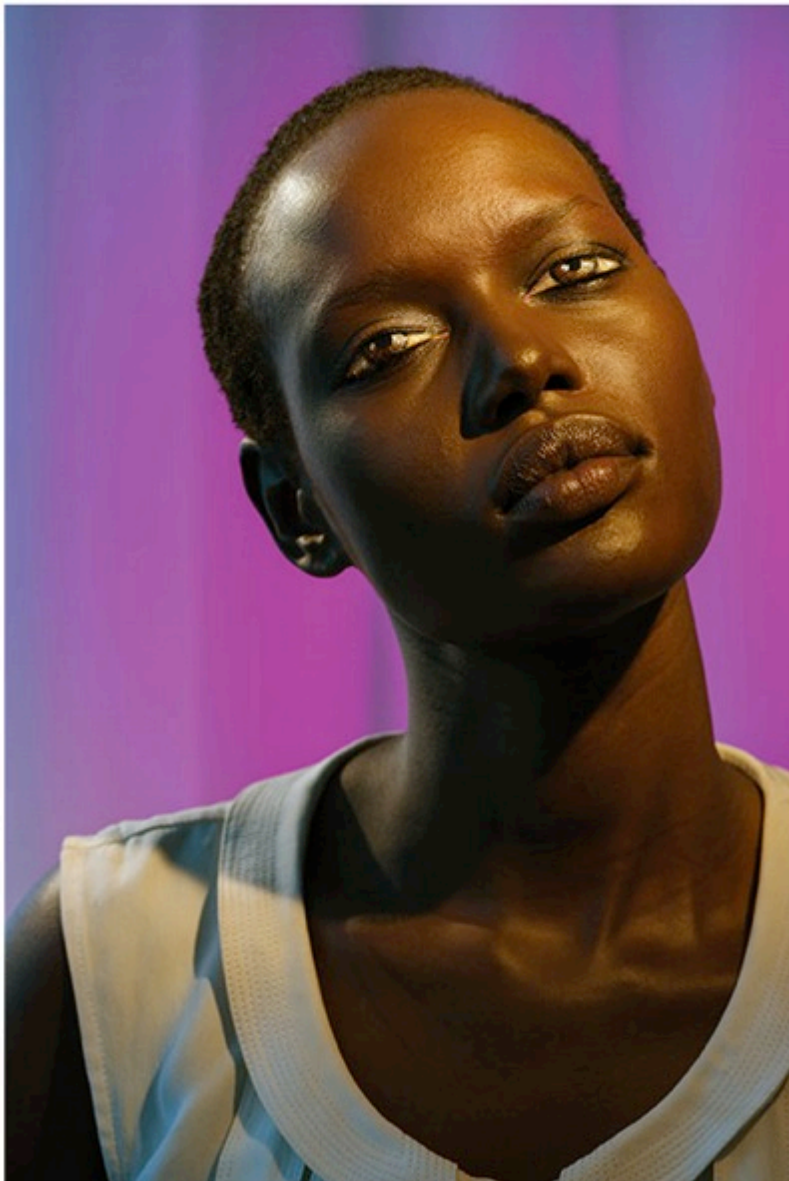
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AM:What part of your work process has most constantly brought you happiness?

LS: Editing pictures and hanging exhibitions. I love being with a show before anyone gets to see it.

AM:You mentioned that you are working on a movie. Can you tell us anything about it at this point?

LS: It's a narrative feature called MY ART about a woman artist around my age who is still trying to push boundaries and surprise herself. It kind of sprung from my interest in a summer farce like Bergman's Smiles of a Summer Night but it is more sad than funny. We start shooting next week.



LAURIE SIMMONS, HOW WE SEE / AJAK (VIOLET), 2015