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## Laurie Simmons: 'In Lena's world we're all fair game'


After a career photographing dolls, Laurie Simmons explains why she's ready to take pictures of people



Yellow and Green Teen Room 1983 Photo: Laurie Simmons courtesy Wilkinson Gallery

**By Alice Vincent, Arts Writer**

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 Comment

Since the Seventies, artist Laurie Simmons has been photographing dolls. She broke into New York's art scene at the time of Andy Warhol's Factory with a series of photographs of dolls in miniature rooms, each interacting with tiny furniture - it would later inspire the title of her daughter **Lena Dunham's first feature film**. Last year her series *Love Doll*, which pictured a life-size latex doll from Japan in situations designed to reveal the unnecessary excesses of Western culture, was nominated for the **Prix Pictet** photography prize.

But recently, for the first time in her career, Simmons has begun shooting real people. Our conversation takes place two hours before transgender model Edie Charles will come to her studio (based in her Tribeca apartment) on the final shoot for her forthcoming exhibition, *How We See*, at the city's Jewish Museum. Her new work continues to blur illusion and reality, as it always has done, through portraits of people with eyes painted on top of their eyelids.

"This is a real departure for me," Simmons says of making human portraits. "Whatever I do to disrupt the reality of a picture is usually pretty evident. But this interruption is so subtle people miss it at first. You know something's wrong - that's always the case with my pictures - but you can't figure out what."

In her own words, Simmons' work is about "the experience of being a woman". A small retrospective of her work opening at The Arts Club in London this week includes some of her well-known objects-with-legs images: a pair of shapely dolls' legs inside a single glove (1991) look lost and alone; another, propping up a microphone (1989), look coquettish. An earlier photograph (Yellow and Green Teen Room, 1983) places two ghostly women in a tiny, claustrophobic living room.

More recently she has become fascinated with how adults use dolls, notably, Kigurumi, those, mostly in Japan, who dress up as dolls to adopt another, dream-like personality. Painting dollish features on human faces came next, after Simmons "got caught up" in the hundreds of make-up tutorials available on YouTube.

The internet has taken her reflection on how we construct personalities, beauty and perception to the next stage. At 65, Simmons admits that she has "adapted [to the digital world] almost too well." Her Instagram account, which she was initially "very resistant" to acquire, has 67,000 followers and has become the source of the kind of anxiety that comes with being prominent online, as well as a topic of exploration in her work: "I feel like, with the explosion of the world wide web, initially everyone thought it would mean greater transparency; that we would be able to know more and see more and understand more. The big surprise is that it's about the possibility for deception and subterfuge and exclusion and so many interesting things come up."

It's a description which neatly reflects Simmons' work: while photography was initially a way for a more transparent image to be made, her photographs have always tried to obscure reality.

Photography, selfies and women's presenteeism online collided around Simmons' work in her daughter's 2014 memoir, *Not That Kind of Girl*. Dunham dedicated an entire chapter to a series of self-portraits Simmons took in her 20s. "I feel like when I first picked up a camera," she explains, "and this is true of so many women I know, and in those days it was a lot more complex, I turned the camera on myself as a way of knowing myself. Those pictures were super, super private. I would never have shared them. They weren't part of any exhibitions, they were just a kind of exploration."



Simmons is philosophical about such a flagrant invasion of her privacy: "What am I going to do?" she laughs. "We may resist it but the family is getting used to the fact that in Lena's world we're all fair game. In my mid- to late-20s I started taking lots of pictures of my parents. I was trying to mine my past to understand who I was in the present. So I have a lot of compassion and sympathy. I may not always love it, but I certainly accept it."

This supportive relationship is not one-sided. Dunham has been pushing Simmons to tackle her next project for nearly a decade. My Art is Simmons' second film, which, like Lena with her HBO show Girls, she has written and will direct and star in. Her first, 2006's The Music of Regret, starred Meryl Streep and received critical praise but never quite found its footing, to Simmons' great disappointment.

"It was Lena who said, 'you have to make another film, you have to put that behind you, stop thinking about it, that film won't find its way until you make another,'" she explains. "I feel like she's been encouraging me all along, to try to go forward again. She's really been an inspiration."

There's "a small but fun part" for Dunham in My Art, which is about a female artist (played by Simmons) in her sixties "who has never gotten the kind of respect for her work she has always wanted." The film aims to tackle the misconceiving way Simmons thinks Hollywood portrays artists ("like they're all waiting to cut their ear off") and older women ("either as someone who is infantile or on the brink of dementia").

"We'll see if it finds an audience," she says. "I can only imagine people from the art world watching it. But that makes me more comfortable about it. That's how I can get through it."

Laurie Simmons, 26 January – 25 April 2015, The Arts Club, 40 Dover Street, Mayfair, London, W1S 4NP. For more information visit [theartsclub.co.uk](http://theartsclub.co.uk).