

Mel Giedroyc
On Bingate and baking mischief with Mary Berry

Fit club
Are you doing the ape yet?

ES

Evening Standard Magazine 30/01/2015

Girls talk
Laurie Simmons on her daughter Lena Dunham

Time to pivot?
Change gear in your career without quitting your job

Gugu Mbatha-Raw photographed this month by Steve Schofield

LADY
GUGU

Hollywood here she comes

Portrait by HIBBI PEREY

Integrity, creativity, sex... Lena Dunham learned everything she knows from her artist mother Laurie Simmons. As a retrospective of Simmons' work is unveiled in London, Luke Crisell meets the inspiration behind the voice of a generation

ALL ABOUT HER MOTHER

On a clear day you can see most of New York City from the penthouse in Williamsburg that Lena Simmons shares with her husband Carroll Daurian (known as Tib). It's a multimillion-dollar glass crib, 12 floors up, which doubles as a studio for both these artists, and it's spectacular. The wrap-around balcony has a view all the way to the Statue of Liberty. I like to walk up in the middle of the night, just to look out at this, says Simmons.

The couple have two daughters: the elder, Lena, 26, is one of the most famous twenty-somethings in the world—an American Vogue and Vanity Fair cover girl who has given a voice to a generation of young women as the iconic author of the groundbreaking TV series *Girls*, which chronicles the lives of four rudderless friends trying to make it in New York City. Grace, 22, who graduated from Brown University last year, has a large bedroom here. She says we're the best room music anyone could ever hope for. In the Simmons, Lena owns a smaller and by all accounts humbler apartment in Brooklyn, where she went to school, where the family lived between 1996 and 2004. She lives with her boyfriend Jack Anonoff, the drummer from the band Fall, with whom she's been in a relationship since 2012.

The recent publication of Lena's best-selling book *Not That Kind of Girl*, in which she candidly shares her upbringing, has put the family under the spotlight. The book begins with a nine-year-old Lena asking her mother to sign a vow of celibacy to prevent an item having intercourse too early in life. Simmons refuses and Lena quotes her reason: "You just don't know what life will bring, and I don't want you feeling like you're missing out on something great. I'd Twitter to you and right

wing me later to level accusations of sibling abuse at Dunham that were so upsetting she cancelled her book tour date last year. This has only intensified the anger. In this uptick and unconventional family.

Lena has frequently tied her parents and the environment they fostered, as a foundation of her success. As she told *The New Yorker* in 2012: "I feel like nothing would be going on without now I didn't have the parents I do." In fact, the character of Hannah Horvath, a twenty-something struggling writer, often borrows from Simmons' life. The very first scene of the very first episode of *Girls*, showing Hannah at dinner with her parents when they announce they will no longer be supporting her financially, was Simmons' experience in the early 1970s. "When an artist was over and I moved to New York, it was like, 'No more money.' And there I was really hung out to dry—it was similar. But Simmons, like her daughter on screen, is a total believer in her art and set about doing whatever she could to support herself. "I think Lena's always been obsessed with that part of my life. She loves hearing stories about the precarious jobs I did because I wasn't qualified for a full-time job. She particularly loves the first period I had going out on dates with 'Sh. Corrects herself: 'I just had to sit and have a talk with Japanese businessmen. It didn't last very long because they didn't like the abstract I was—I was too much of a hippie. Lena has a real kind of an affinity with that part of my life. Lena has recently admitted her own dating experience is actually very limited: "Something I had come to realize about it was I never really did it. I didn't go on several, real dates."

Simmons, 65, grew up in Crest Neck, Long Island, a short distance from New York City—her mother would call it. She was one of three daughters born to a dentist father and



Laurie Simmons and Lena Dunham in photo, 2003. (Lena Dunham)

OPPOSITE PAGE: DASH; THIS PAGE: LARRY TRACY; LENA: STEVE WELLS; WALKING CAMERA: PHOTOFEST; TINY FURNITURE: PHOTOFEST; WALKING CAMERA: PHOTOFEST; TINY FURNITURE: PHOTOFEST



Laurie Simmons

an amateur photographer and a housewife mother, both her generation Jewish Americans. "I self-identified as an artist from the time I was a little girl," she says. "I always sort of lived in this limbo world that I was different from everyone anyway... I was a weird toady girl who liked to draw."

I ask what life was like in the family home when Lena and Grace were growing up. "It's so hard to describe the kids' childhood and our life as a family," says Simmons tentatively. "We don't know yet if Grace an artist. But this idea that she's an artist because of what she all does." She shakes her head. "We are arguing, leading the dishwasher, figuring out who's going to pick up my bag, buying the goddamn cupcakes for the birthday party because I don't have time to bake them. When you're in the middle of it, it's just real life," she says. "And it's harsh. It's harsh. (Back then) it was a two-career family trying to figure out how to stay alive, putting your kid at a desk with textbooks and paper, because that's what you have."

Simmons has a mini retrospective opening at the Arts Club in Mayfair later this month, and so we'll show you a America later in the year. She is part of a group of female photographers who, in the mid-1970s, dared to challenge female stereotypes and explore photography as a conceptual medium. "I think that's the hindsight I could see myself having had courage, but at the time I was just doing my work. I think probably, I can't speak further, but I don't think I was a brave, courageous woman. I think she's driven to do her work and she's doing it the way she needs to do it."

Simmons moved to Manhattan in 1973, just a year and after the death of the Chelsea Hotel scene (she refers to the 1960s in New York as "a glamorous fairy tale"). Swims in the art world was rare. "I think it was always there, and I think it's still so tremendously in so said to say that—but it was an exciting time. Everything was exploding... Painting was dead in the water. Decadent. And the art world was so small that you could actually go to a bar and sit at a table and eavesdrop on the conversations of famous artists. It was exciting. She met Tip Dunham in 1972; they frequented the same events and parties. "The funny thing about it is that he really liked my work. I'm all thought, 'Oh my God, he's a painter.'" she says the last word without closing. She looks at Tip, who is making a cup of tea in the



Snapshot, above: Walking Camera (Linen), 1991-1994. Right: The Water Tank Project, NYC, 2004

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kitchen, while earshot. "Now I'm really talking about you," she says, smiling. "I think that he always thought that people were trying to find a way to make him not a painter so that he would kind of fit in." Tip walks over. "That really irritated you," she says to him. "Yes, I always thought it was odd." he says wryly. Simmons started making what she calls her first "grown up" work in 1976. She photographed scenes meticulously created with furniture from doll's houses. Tentatively, she began to add actual dolls to the scenes she photographed, and when she landed her first show, at a gallery called Artists Space, on Hudson Street in downtown New York, in 1979, the gallery director insisted she include the doll figures, something she was uncomfortable

with. "That work was really embarrassing for me. I was looking at this really rough, hard-ass conceptual work and here I was taking pictures of dolls and dollhouse interiors." Tiny Furniture, the 2000 independent film that Lena wrote, directed and starred in, was very much based on her own family (the title is a reference to her mother's prop). A festival-circuit favourite, the movie was the catalyst for Lena's career. It starred Simmons (as Lena's character Aura's mother) and Grace (playing Aura's sister), and many scenes were filmed in their apartment at the time. In Tribeca, in one scene, Aura finds some of her mother's old journals and reads them—an event based on real life. The lines Aura speaks aloud in the bath are those that Simmons actually wrote when she was 23. I remind her of one of them: "Having a body of work seems more like security to me than anything." "I mean that as an emotional security. I think I was wishing or longing to be an artist with work that I knew was mine," Simmons says after a pause. "Not second generation, not derivative, but that came from me. So when Lena found them, she was in the same place as I was, and when she read it, she probably thought, 'Oh, if only I had a couple of books that I knew were mine.'"

People often mistakenly confuse the characters in *Tiny Furniture* with real life, but Simmons—warm and articulate—is nothing like Siri, her brittle character in the movie. Her



work has often been described as a feminist critique of the state of the American bourgeoisie. She disagrees: "Sadness, melancholy, regret, memory... all of those things I can accept, but harsh critique is not in my work." I want to play with the big boys," Simmons says. "It's so interesting to think back on one's younger, arrogant self slithering there trying to figure out how to pay your [teenage] bill. I think, 'I want to hang in there.' There's a beauty in their kind of naivety and arrogance all mixed together. Maybe that's the part that I'm really proud of in me and my generation, and what I see my daughters doing: you're feeling out [uses] all the time, but you get yourself through it. Five of Simmons' photographs are now part of MOMA's permanent collection. This March, Simmons will direct her own film, *My Art*, about an aging female artist. She has made short films before, as well as a three-part musical called *The Music of Pigeons* in 2006 (which featured Meryl Streep, but this is her first feature film). The story has been in the air for a long time and it came out of a frustration with seeing the way women around my age are represented in film, coupled with the way artists are represented," she says. "I feel like many people get both of those subjects really wrong. So I thought, 'I guess we'll just start in get it right.' She will be playing the main role and says there is a small part for Lena in the film. "I would never call myself

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My mother the hero

Lena Dunham on Laurie Simmons

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"I always thought my mother and I had the best ability of anyone I know to see each other as a pair of competent adults."

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"My mother is the biggest regreter... [She] will talk about how she ordered the wrong thing at the restaurant for two days afterward, and

how she wore the wrong shoes to work. I understand so well. I thought five people were going to see *Tiny Furniture*... I guess we can thank Lena for creating a monster."

Conversation turns to Simmons' current work which, she has said, has made her feel like she did when she was a child. "There's this preadolescent awe period when girls feel powerful and then there's a lull immediately afterward when young women start to realize that in order to enter a society in an appropriate way they have to be a little passive," she says. "I think all the mothers in my generation are trying to work against our own adolescent experiences and trying to keep our girls as happy and strong and healthy as we possibly can. She looks out over the Williamsburg Bridge to Manhattan. "But there's something about having made work for this long, and having misad children, then feel a kind of freedom. It's just like, '**** it!' At this point, I can do what I want. I know that you can survive all the disappointments, you do disappoint them. Shutters back and looks me in the eye. "I'll know that not making your work, and not pushing yourself, is a usual worse fate than not making it." 65



Family matters Simmons with Lena Dunham in *Tiny Furniture* (2000); with husband Tip Dunham and Lena

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Portrait by Nigel Parry

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On a clear day you can see most of New York City from the penthouse in Williamsburg that Laurie Simmons shares with her husband Carroll Dunham (known as Tip). It's a multimillion-dollar glass eyrie, 12 floors up, which doubles as a studio for both these artists, and it's spectacular. The wraparound balcony has a view all the way to the Statue of Liberty. 'I like to wake up in the middle of the night, just to look out at this,' says Simmons.

The couple have two daughters: the elder, Lena, 28, is one of the most famous twenty-somethings in the world – an American *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* cover girl who has given a voice to a generation of young women as the creator and star of the ground-breaking TV series *Girls*, which chronicles the lives of four rudderless friends trying to make it in New York City. Grace, 22, who graduated from Brown University last year, has a large bedroom here. 'She says we're the best room-mates anyone could ever hope for!' laughs Simmons. Lena owns a smaller and by all accounts humbler apartment in Brooklyn Heights, where she went to school and where the family lived between 1998 and 2004. She lives with her boyfriend Jack Antonoff, the drummer from the band Fun, with whom she's been in a relationship since 2012.

The recent publication of Lena's bestselling book *Not That Kind of Girl*, in which she talks candidly about her upbringing, has put the family under the spotlight. The book begins with a nine-year-old Lena asking her mother to sign a vow of celibacy to 'prevent me from having intercourse too early in life'. Simmons refuses and Lena quotes her reason: 'You just don't know what life will bring, and I don't want you feeling guilty.' Another passage, involving Grace, led Twitter trolls and right-

ALL ABOUT HER MOTHER



Laurie Simmons and Lena Dunham at the 2013 Emmys

wing nutcases to level accusations of sibling abuse at Dunham that were so upsetting she cancelled her book tour late last year. This has only intensified the interest in this tight-knit and unconventional family.

Lena has frequently cited her parents, and the environment they fostered, as a foundation of her success. As she told *The New Yorker* in 2012: 'I feel like nothing would be going on with me now if I didn't have the parents I have.' In fact, the character of Hannah Horvath, a twenty-something struggling writer, often borrows from Simmons' life. The very first scene of the very first episode of *Girls*, showing Hannah at dinner with her parents when they announce they will no longer be supporting her financially, was Simmons' experience in the early 1970s. 'When art school was over and I moved to New York, it was like, "No more money." And there I was, really hung out to dry – it was insane.' But Simmons, like her daughter's on-screen persona, believed in her art and set about doing whatever she could to support herself. 'I think Lena's always been obsessed with that part of my life. She loves hearing stories about the preposterous jobs I did because I wasn't qualified for a full-time job. She particularly loves the brief period I had going out on dates with...' She corrects herself: 'I just had to sit and have a drink with Japanese businessmen. It didn't last very long because they didn't like the dresses I wore – I was too much of a hippie. Lena has a real kind of love affair with that part of my life.' Lena has recently admitted her own dating experience is actually very limited: 'Something I feel embarrassed about in my twenties is that I didn't go on enough real dates.'

Simmons, 65, grew up in Great Neck, Long Island, a short distance from New York City, but another world culturally. She was one of three daughters born to a dentist father (and

PHOTOGRAPH BY STELLA WINKELMANN FOR PAS DE DEUX NYC. HAIR BY SUE ALLATT CREATIVE. MAKE-UP BY KAVITA KAUL. CLINTON H WALLACE/ANP.COM



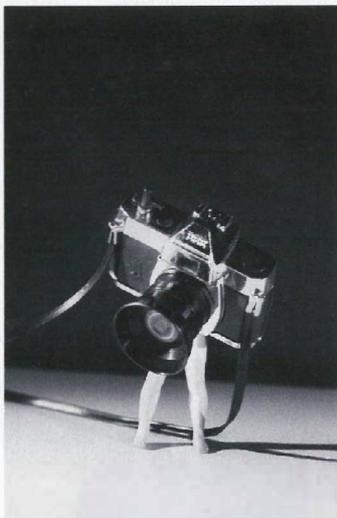
Laurie Simmons

amateur photographer) and a housewife mother, both first-generation Jewish Americans. 'I self-identified as an artist from the time I was a little girl,' she says. 'I always sort of lived in this fantasy world that I was different from everyone anyway... I was a weird tough girl who liked to draw.'

I ask what life was like in the family home when Lena and Grace were growing up. 'It's so hard to describe the kids' childhood and our life as a family,' says Simmons tentatively. 'We don't know yet if Grace is an artist. But this idea that the air is rarefied because of what we all do...' She shakes her head. 'We are arguing, loading the dishwasher, figuring out who's going to pick who up, buying the goddamn cupcakes for the birthday party because I don't have time to bake them. When you're in the middle of it, it's just real life,' she says. 'And it's harsh. It's harsh. [Back then] it was a two-artist family trying to figure out how to stay alive, putting your kid at a desk with pencils and paper, because that's what you have.'

Simmons has a mini-retrospective opening at The Arts Club in Mayfair later this month, and two major shows in America later in the year. She is part of a group of female photographers who, in the mid-1970s, dared to challenge female stereotypes and explore photography as a conceptual medium. 'I think that in hindsight I could see myself as having had courage, but at the time I was just doing my work. I think probably, I can't speak for her, but I don't think Lena walks around the world feeling like a brave, courageous woman. I think she's driven to do her work and she's doing it the way she needs to do it.'

Simmons moved to Manhattan in 1973, post Warhol and after the zenith of the Chelsea Hotel scene (she refers to the 1960s in New York as 'like a glamorous fairy tale'). Sexism in the art world was rife – 'I think it was always there, and I think it still is. Tremendously. I'm so sad to say that' – but it was an exciting time. 'Everything was exploding,' she says. 'Painting was dead in the water. Uncool. And the art world was so small that you could actually go to a bar and sit at a table and eavesdrop on the conversations of famous artists. It was exciting.' She met Tip Dunham in 1977; they frequented the same events and parties. 'The funny thing was that he really liked my work. And I thought, "Oh my God, he's a painter,"' she says the last word with mock disgust. She looks at Tip, who is making a cup of tea in the



Snapshot, above: *Walking Camera (Little)*, 1991-2014. Right: *The Water Tank Project*, NYC, 2014

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kitchen, within earshot. 'Now I'm really talking about you,' she says, smiling. 'I think that he always thought that people were trying to find a way to make him not a painter so that he would kind of fit in.' Tip walks over. 'That really irritated you,' she says to him. 'Yes, I always thought it was odd,' he says wryly.

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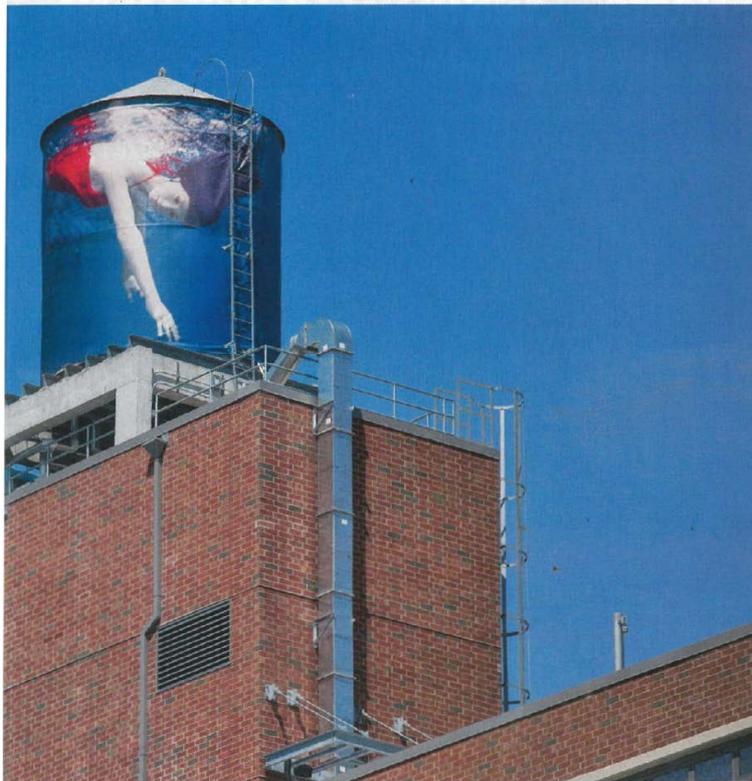
Tiny Furniture, the 2010 independent film that Lena wrote, directed and starred in, was very much based on her own family (the title is a reference to her mother's props). A festival-circuit favourite, the movie was the catalyst for Lena's career. It starred Simmons (as Lena's character Aura's mother) and Grace (playing Aura's sister), and many scenes were filmed in their apartment at the time, in Tribeca. In one scene, Aura finds some of her mother's old journals and reads them – an event based on real life. The lines Aura speaks aloud in the bath are those that Simmons actually wrote when she was 23. I remind her of one of them: 'Having a body of work seems more like security to me than anything.' 'I meant that as emotional security: I think I was wishing or longing to be an artist with work that I knew was mine,' Simmons says after a pause. 'Not second generation, not derivative, but that came from me... So when Lena found them, she was in the same place I was, and when she read it, she probably thought, "Oh, if only I had a couple of books that I knew were mine."'

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Laurie Simmons: *Walking Camera (Little)*, 1991-2014. Pigment print. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Wilkinson Gallery, London. Andrew Burton/Getty Images. Allstar/IPC Films. Broteme.co.uk



ADDITIONAL RESEARCH BY LAURA STRATFORD

IT'S JUST REAL LIFE. WE ARE ARGUING, LOADING THE DISHWASHER, BUYING THE CUPCAKES BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE TIME TO BAKE THEM'

work has often been described as a feminist critique of the state of the American housewife. She disagrees: 'Sadness, melancholy, regret, memory... all of these things I can accept, but harsh critique is not in my work.' Much of her work deals with artifice and façade, extending to costumes; in the past she has spoken about how women need armour to interact with the world. I point out that this is also a theme in her daughter's work. 'Well, we live in a youth culture,' she says. 'No one could have predicted the effect that social media would have on the world in terms of vanity and the possibility to put one's image out there... My work is very much about the experience of being a woman in the 20th and 21st centuries. And I think my daughter's work is about being a woman in the 21st century. So, in a broad sense,' she concludes, 'we share that subject.'

Simmons is often categorised as part of the Pictures Generation, along with her

contemporaries Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler. Rather than work, albeit fiercely, in the margins of the art world as their predecessors did, these artists wanted a bigger role. 'I thought, "If I'm going to do this, I want to play with the big boys,"' Simmons says. 'It's so interesting to think back on one's younger, arrogant self sitting there trying to figure out how to pay your [electricity] bill thinking, "I want to hang in MoMA." There's a beauty to that kind of naivety and arrogance all mixed together. Maybe that's the part that I'm really proud of for me and my generation, and what I see my daughters doing: you're feeling confused all the time, but you get yourself through it.' Five of Simmons' photographs are now part of MoMA's permanent collection.

This March, Simmons will direct her own film, *My Art*, about an ageing female artist. She has made short films before, as well as a three-part musical called *The Music of Regret* in 2006 (which featured Meryl Streep), but this is her first narrative feature. 'The story has been in me for a long time and it came out of a frustration with seeing the way women around my age are represented in film, coupled with the way artists are represented,' she says. 'I feel like many people get both of those subjects really wrong. So I thought, "Let me see if I can start to get it right."' She will be playing the main role and says there is a 'small part' for Lena in the film. 'I would never call myself an

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Lena Dunham on Laurie Simmons

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'My mother is the Biggest Regretter... [She] will talk about how she ordered the wrong thing at the restaurant for two days afterward, and

how she wore the wrong shoes to top it off. So I went defiantly in the other direction.'

'I remember asking my mom, like, four times one day, "Do you think that I will ever have enough money to live outside of your house?" And she would say, "I just don't know."'

'My mother is six inches taller than me and ten pounds lighter, but somehow I can wear her stuff. Now sometimes she borrows my clothes, which is very flattering.'

'The best New Year's Eve of my life was watching a Sex and the City marathon with my mother.'

actor, but I really feel like this character I wrote I understand so well. I thought five people were going to see *Tiny Furniture*... I guess we can thank Lena for creating a monster.'

Conversation turns to Simmons' current work which, she has said, has made her feel like she did when she was a child. 'There's this pre-adolescent period when girls feel powerful, and then there's a time immediately afterward when young women start to realise that in order to exist in society in an appropriate way they have to be a little passive,' she says. 'I think all the mothers in my generation are trying to work against our own adolescent experiences and trying to keep our girls as happy and strong and healthy as we possibly can.' She looks out over the Williamsburg Bridge to Manhattan. 'But there's something about having made work for this long, and having raised children, that I feel a kind of freedom. It's just like, "F*** it!" At this point, I can do what I want. I know that you can survive all the disappointments, you don't die from them.' She turns back and looks me in the eye: 'And I know that not making your work, and not pushing yourself, is a much worse fate than not trying.' **ES**

Laurie Simmons' show is at The Arts Club until 25 April, Wednesdays and Saturdays, 10am to 12pm, by appointment only (theartsclub.co.uk)