Scale Models

Michael Lobel on Laurie Simmons and Anne Collier

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Opposite page: **Laurie Simmons, *Woman/Kitchen/Sitting on Sink*, 1976**, black-and-white photograph, 5 ¼ x 8". This page: **Laurie Simmons, *Chair/Living Room I*, 1976**, black-and-white photograph, 5 ¼ x 8".

WHAT'S IN A GENERATION? From Pepsi to yuppies, the notion of a generational style or sensibility is often dismissed as a mere marketing tool, a way of breaking up the population into discrete consumer subgroups (that crucial "men 18–34" demographic, for instance). Nevertheless, these types of categories have a strong hold on us: on our cultural experience, our sense of history, our thinking about art. I've dealt with plenty of generations in my own art-historical work—the '60s generation and the Pictures generation, mainly—yet I don't feel I belong to any clearly legible one. I guess I'm part of what has been called Generation X (I was born in 1968), but even that name seems categorically unspecific, the *X* denoting some kind of phantom zone between the history-making baby boomers and the so-called Millennials, those paradigm-shifting "digital natives" who came of age around 2000. Indeed, a spate of recent exhibitions has plunged into this territory—witness the confluence in New York last year of "The Pictures Generation" uptown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and "Younger than Jesus" downtown at the New Museum, the latter endeavoring to take the artistic pulse of the Millennials and serving as the first in a series of triennials called—what else?—"The Generational."

These reflections were prompted by a symposium at the Washington, DC–based Contemporary Art Think Tank this spring. But they were crystallized by a show of early photographs by Laurie Simmons I saw at about the same time. The exhibited body of work demonstrated Simmons's connections to her contemporaries even as it emphasized the limits of generational categories. The atypical venue of the show—not a gallery or a museum but rather the main branch of the New York Public Library—was fitting in this regard. Although Simmons has been placed squarely within the Pictures generation (her photos were featured in the Met's survey), there's something about her pictures that sets them apart from the rest. Her photographs tend to explore more personal and intimate (even autobiographical) terrain, with less of the overtly public, slick, commercial address that distinguishes the work of so many of her contemporaries. The suite of fifty-six gelatin silver prints from the 1970s that was on view at the library is probably best known from its (partial) appearance in the form of an artist's book titled *In and Around the House*, first published in

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1983. Their presentation en masse gave the photographs a renewed freshness, emphasizing their experimental quality and suggesting a young artist putting things through their paces—which is exactly what Simmons was doing as she explored the artistic potential of dollhouse settings: What if I pose this doll standing at the table? Sitting on the counter? Hiding behind a refrigerator door? Standing on her head? Or even attaching a chair to a tow-truck winch? (That last example speaks especially well to Simmons's idiosyncratic approach.) The resulting pictures constitute a feminist exploration of women's traditional domestic roles, played out, tellingly, using girlhood toys. The references to conspicuous consumerism in the home furnishings and miniature versions of brand-name goods, and the dreamlike evocations of the domestic suburban ideals of postwar America, constitute a specifically introspective take on Pictures work as the "baby-boomer art" par excellence.

It was precisely because of the concentration on these strategic and critical uses of photography, rather than on an investigation of the ostensibly formal properties of the medium, that Simmons and her peers were criticized by some (and championed by others) when their work appeared on the scene in the late '70s and early '80s. One of the clearest explications of this dynamic occurs in a seminal 1984 essay by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photography After Art Photography." In a memorable passage, she quotes the photography scholar Peter Bunnell discussing Cindy Sherman the year before—he finds Sherman "interesting as an artist but uninteresting as a photographer." When pressed to elaborate, Bunnell explains:

> I don't see her raising significant questions with regard to this medium. I find her imagery fascinating, but as I interpret her work, I have no notion that I could engage her in a discourse about the nature of the medium through which she derives her expression. . . . I've had discussions with artists who have utilized our medium in very interesting ways as independent expression, but I have never perceived them as participants with the structure or the tradition I have referred to here.

Bunnell's words may ring odd to us now (considering that Sherman herself has become one of our most successful and sought-after photographers), but they quite effectively illuminate the modernist position at the time in relation to this new approach to photography. Simmons's contemporaries just didn't seem to be concerned with the issues of medium that Bunnell saw as essential to the formal (read: modernist) investigation of photography. And this was also the hook that allowed Solomon-Godeau and her circle of critics (largely housed within the journal *October*) to champion this new work as something different, as emblematic of artistic postmodernism as they saw it.

This view still largely guides our understanding of this generation of artists. We tend to look to their work for the ways in which they use photography to investigate and take apart the mass-media image, or narrative, or social identity, or the construction of authorship and originality, rather than for their formal and technical uses of the medium. Nevertheless, one of the things that most struck me on seeing this body of Simmons's work all in one place was that it *did* seem to be exploring the medium of photography—but perhaps in ways that a modernist like Bunnell wasn't open to noticing. Take, for instance, *Chair/Living Room I* of 1976. This looks at first blush like a relatively simple, even dashed-off image, until one realizes that everything in it save the dollhouse chair at left is a flat, printed surface: The black "floor" below is a horizontal plane that's actually at a ninety-degree angle to the reproduction of a domestic interior (complete with end table and patterned wallpaper) above (or, more accurately, behind). Simmons clearly knew what she was doing: By placing the back left leg of the chair and the "nearest" leg of the end table so that they both just touch the dividing line between black floor and interior backdrop, she confuses our sense of horizontal and vertical, forward and back, real space and depictive space. (The reflections in the glossy black surface only add to this confusion.) Note, too, how the shadow cast by the chair resembles those cast by the table legs, even though the former is an "actual" shadow cast in the scene, while the latter are depicted, i.e., part of the photographic image at back. (Frankly, the more I look at the image, the less sure I am of how it works.) And to understand just how overtly and self-consciously Simmons was investigating the medium, consider this: In a text she wrote to accompany the 2003 republication of the *In and Around the House* photos, she revealed that the glossy black horizontal plane is actually the cover of a book she had consulted on photographic technique, titled *The Craft of Photography*. (Those repeated circular forms at lower left are part of the book's cover, which presents the opening of a camera-lens aperture in stylized form.)

Just this one photograph, then, shows the extent to which Simmons was probing the formal parameters of photography, no matter how unconcerned with such issues these pictures may have appeared at the time (and even since). What's more, the works specifically zero in on the medium's primary physical properties. Because photographs, for much of their history, took the form of objects of modest size (whether prints or photographic reproductions in books and the like) that were meant be held and handled, we tend to associate them with both physical diminution and tactility. The dolls and dollhouse settings of *In and Around the House* embody both of these properties, since they are not only miniaturized representations of the human body and its physical environs but also objects that are meant to be played with, to be touched. Simmons intensifies the play of self-referentiality in pictures in which doll-size items are arrayed before a backdrop that is clearly meant to be read as a photograph within a photograph. The photo in *Chair/Horse/Study*, 1977, for instance, with its white border and curled and frayed edges, is as much an object of physical use as the crude wooden horse in front of it. (The use of the term *study* may

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Opposite page: **Laurie Simmons, *Chair/Horse/Study*, 1977**, black-and-white photograph, 5 ¼ x 8".
This page, from left: **Laurie Simmons, *Big Camera/Little Camera*, 1977**, black-and-white photograph, 5 ¼ x 8". **Laurie Simmons, *Worgelt Study*, 1977**, black-and-white photograph, 5 ¼ x 8".

also be a knowing play on words—and on images, referencing both the traditional term for a preliminary artistic assay and that for a room in the home like the one that appears here in photographed form.)

The attention to size and scale also offers a vehicle for narrative in Simmons's work, often with psychological or emotional resonance. Perhaps the most explicit—and cheeky—example is *Big Camera/Little Camera*, 1977. At the same time that the image plays with the visual effects of miniaturization and enlargement, it suggests a parent/child dyad, with the towering Bolsey camera keeping watch over its diminutive partner, whose curling straps give the impression of a child's unruly, flapping arms (in this respect, it's not insignificant that Simmons's father was himself an amateur photographer). Simmons's photographs, in their mixing and matching of dollhouse settings with reproductions of full-size architectural interiors, often convey the relationship (or contrast) between the realm of the adult and that of the child. She touched on the affective experience of scale in her work when she discussed, in her 2003 text, an early picture where she shot a friend from above "in an attempt to make her look like a doll, but she just ended up looking like a person who was trying to look like a doll." She continued: "I've tried many times since then to make human scale feel diminutive in pictures."

This is another reason why the presentation of Simmons's pictures at the library was so illuminating: The institution's profound connection to the culture of the book emphasized the photographs' status as small, material objects (just 5 ¼ by 8 inches each). So it's ironic that, at the very moment that Simmons (as well as her contemporaries David Levinthal and James Casebere) was engaged with photography and miniaturization, the long-standing experience of photography's intimate scale was about to be overturned. Here, perhaps, another generational category presents itself: those photographers—Simmons's cohort—who witnessed photography's shift from the small scale of print culture to its contemporary status as a wall-bound rival to painting. This transformation has been taken up by many critics, perhaps most notably by Michael Fried in his 2008 book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. Building on the writing of the French critic Jean-François Chevrier, Fried sees the introduction of large-scale photographs meant for the wall (which Chevrier identified as the "tableau form") in the late '70s and '80s as marking "an epochal development within the history of art photography." This is the scale and viewing situation with which viewers of art today are utterly familiar, that of the Jeff Walls, the Andreas Gurskys, the Edward Burtynskys, and so on and so on. Fried, for his part, welcomes the photographic tableau form for its engagement with modernist issues of beholding—what he has memorably framed as the relation between absorption and theatricality. But one should also consider the market forces at work: It's hard to imagine that photographs would be commanding the dizzying prices and general attention they're getting these days if they weren't able to fill some significant wall space.

Simmons's early photographs offer a different way of looking at the recent turn to the tableau format. In particular, they seem to have sketched out a path for certain contemporary works that manifest ambivalence about the ascendancy of the large tableau and that often do so in the guise of historical return. This tendency is particularly evident in the work of Anne Collier. For one thing, Collier's practice, at least for the past several years, has comprised a veritable catalogue of '70s art and culture (that is to say, the same period to which Simmons's early practice dates): the deadpan use of found photographs, a reiteration of Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince's strategic move to rephotography in that period; the echo of Cindy Sherman in her use of stills of Faye Dunaway from the 1978 thriller *Eyes of Laura Mars* (not to mention the magazine-cover portraits of Sherman that appear in another work); and a bevy of the decade's pop references, from the new age blandishments of its self-help books to such period celebrities as Dunaway, Cheryl Tiegs, Jack Nicholson, and Candice Bergen. There's even what appears to be a direct reference to Simmons in Collier's *Zoom 1978*, 2009, in which Simmons's *Walking Camera 1 (Jimmy the Camera)*, 1987, finds its complement in twinned magazine covers featuring a soft-core shot of a model whose head has been replaced by an oversize camera.

Collier's oeuvre may offer up yet another potential generational grouping, since a return to the '70s is evident in a good swath of contemporary artistic practice, particularly that which represents a second- or third-generation spin on photographic appropriation—whether Collier's work, or the appropriation-*cum*-superimposition of Idris Khan's *Homage to Bernd Becher*, 2007, or Josephine Meckseper's borrowings from period German mail-order clothing catalogues. No doubt this is, in part, a function of artists looking back to the

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Collier's work responds to the challenge of maintaining a connection to the contingent, intimate scale of the photographic image in the age of the oversize tableau.

Anne Collier, *Woman with a Camera* (detail), 2004, diptych, color photographs, each 41 x 50".

Anne Collier, *Zoom 1978*, 2009, color photograph, 39¼ x 48⅛".

period of their childhoods, just as the baby-boomer underpinnings of Pictures art are often evident in its recurrent use of imagery from the postwar era.

What keeps Collier's work, in particular, from becoming a mere exercise in nostalgia? It is that—as with most of her subjects (feeling, expression, self-identity)—the past and memory are themselves always understood as subject to the contingencies of representation. So while there's plenty to be said about *Zoom 1978* (particularly its postfeminist take on the dated sexism of the soft-core image, as well as its connection to Collier's broader interest in pictures of women with cameras), we would do well to note the juxtaposition of the two versions of the same magazine cover, a motif to which Collier has returned several times. This doubling calls attention to the slight differences between the two covers, differences produced in part by the vicissitudes of handling (akin to the weathered surfaces of the album covers she often depicts in her work), and in part by the bleaching effects of light or sunlight—a version, that is, of photographic exposure. At stake here is individual versus collective memory—a key issue in generational thinking—as understood through photography. If photographic reproduction, like memory, makes the past available to us, that retrieval has generally been experienced through individual instances (whether printed photographs, magazine covers, or album covers) that are subject to all sorts of contingency (fading, weathering, physical wear).

In this context, I wonder whether Collier's interest in history (and in our inevitable distance from it) is also the reason for her distinctive approach to scale. Her work suggests a provisional response to the challenge of maintaining a connection to the intimate scale of the photographic image in the age of the oversize tableau—an age made possible by the advent of digital imaging and printing techniques. One way to do that would be simply to continue to make small photographs. Another would be to focus on miniature objects and worlds, as Simmons does (and Casebere, and Levinthal). (Collier's contemporary Moyra Davey has done both; her signature close-ups of pennies, the "Copperheads," 1990, are also printed in a fairly small size, generally 20 by 24 inches.) Yet another way is evident in Collier's pictures: They are usually printed in the large dimensions of much contemporary photography (50 by 60 inches or thereabouts) but tend to place the photographed object or objects within a significant expanse of space, as if an extremely wide mat in a frame. This border acts as a distancing device, an equating of historical distance with physical remove. Some of Collier's pictures, like her 2008 *Sylvia Plath*, even literalize that distance by interposing a large expanse of studio floor between viewer and object. Yet this strategy has another, concomitant effect: It reasserts a sense of scale within the picture that's more in keeping with that of our own bodily experience, rather than the often overwhelming scale of so much recent art. Just as Collier's pictures evoke a constant play between past and present, they set up a tension between depicted object(s) and frame, a contraction within an expanded field.

Simmons and Collier are linked inasmuch as they both make use of the simultaneous proximity and distance that photography affords: proximity in terms of its conventional scale and mode of physical address, and distance in terms of the inevitable effect of mediation (by the camera, by reproduction) it entails. In different ways, each proffers a world of objects that speak of human feeling and intimacy, of temporal specificity, at the same time that they reveal those objects to be paltry, fugitive substitutes for those very experiences. It may be one of those inevitable ironies of generational change that what is out of reach for Collier is the very period that gave rise to Simmons's profound artistic meditations on photography's workings. Or perhaps it's all just part of the broader process of artists figuring things out by taking stock of what has come before, trying to connect to a time that is always just beyond their grasp. □

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