So Laurie, we should talk about how everything in your work got so Japanese. When did that start and do you know why?

Yes, I think I know. In the summer of 2009 I went to Japan for the first time in my life. I'd never really had a strong desire to go but that summer I had an exhibition in Tokyo and I felt like I should go. The second I got off the plane, almost the first minute I was there, I realized that the place was going to be very significant to me in some way. I just loved how strange I felt being there and so the entire time I was there I had my antennae up thinking that something might happen that would change the direction of my work.

So you were open to something.

I was open to something.

You know in our house we have that drawing that you did as a kid of a geisha, which I never thought too much about as anything other than a nice artifact of childhood until I saw the direction your work was going in. And then it's easy to make more of something than it maybe deserves, but do you think this idea of the geisha as a subject is something that was with you for a long time?

Well, I wish I could retrofit that drawing into my life but I think that when I was young it came more from a sensibility that there were girls like me all over the world, kind of representing their country, in the garb of their country and, you know, whether they were eating french fries or Moo Goo Gai Pan or Swiss cheese, that we were all doing something different but we were all part of the same girl universe.

So—it's a little counterintuitive—but in a way the specificity of national dress to you points out the shared girlness.

Yes, I felt this sense of shared girlness. Somehow on my birthday my sisters produced a framed watercolor of a geisha that I had done when I was 10. But I also have a framed drawing of a Scottish girl in a kilt that I did when I was 10. I think the fact that I found the love doll in Japan is kind of a coincidence. Well, you were the one that said that no matter where I found that doll I would have responded to her. So in this case it happened to be on this trip to Japan, which happened to have this kind of magical feeling to it. The way that Japan woke me up made me much more porous and open to finding something that would change my work, and I was determined to leave Japan with something.

Were you thinking about the issues of size and scale and trying to work with something that was more life-size before you found the love doll?

I had been thinking about that the entire time I'd been making my work because I never thought of myself as the doll artist. I needed something fake that I could shoot, that I could make become real, that I could turn into something and animate or anthropomorphize—

Well, what about the love part? I know I have said that to you, or I have said that to other people, that it was a little bit of a red herring effect that it was a sex doll. But then I was thinking about it before we sat down to talk and I realized that you've worked for a long time prior to finding the love doll on a series of pictures incorporating nudes, where the source of the nudes was internet porn and magazines and the girls in the photographs are posing the way girls pose in porn, and there's an interest in representing all kinds of girls: black girls, Asian girls, white girls. And both of those aspects seem to show a continuity of concerns with these recent things. Don't you think?

Yes, there is that connection between downloading free porn and then finding a life-size sex doll but I haven't really thought about it a lot and I'm usually the last one to make those kinds of connections, or I'll make them 10 years from now. But who knows, maybe downloading all that porn and putting all of those cut out pictures of girls in different rooms, made that tiny little ad that our daughter Grace and I found in a Manga book store jump out at me because of what I had already been doing. Maybe that was the case.

To me the most striking thing about the recent pictures is that now in the so-called life-size space, at the scale of the human world, a lot of the effects that were present in most of your early pictures are gone. By which I mean the rough edges of the micro world that become very vivid when they're brought up to macro scale. Whether it's cutting things out and you see the edges very clearly or whether it's back, even at the very beginning, when you were photographing dolls in dollhouses and all of the imperfections become elements in the formal structure of the picture. And then in the back of your mind there's this knowledge that you're looking at something that feels almost plausibly real but that is blown up from a tiny thing. All of that is not present in these pictures, and to me they look much cleaner as a result and the psychological jangle is not there. There's a different kind of jangle having to do with realizing that the person in the pictures is a doll.

Well, this is the first time I've ever made pictures or had pictures in an exhibition where people have walked in and really had to scratch their heads as to whether the model was a real person or a doll. That's never happened before. And it's almost like I've achieved a goal. I've achieved the goal that I had been reaching for all these years that I had been making photographs, which is to blur the line between human and non-human. So now I'm there and lots of times people don't know what they're looking at and I'm like, "Hmm, maybe I miss having people know." Maybe I miss having it be so blatantly obvious.

Are you saying that maybe now you're not so interested in that confusion story after all?

Yes. I've been trying to get here for so many years—to the place where people really wouldn't know what was the truth and what was a lie, because I have always been playing around with that ever since the first photos I made in 1976 or 1977. And now I am at a place where I've seen people walk into an exhibition of "The Love Doll" photographs and be visibly confused and now I'm thinking that it's not as much fun or as satisfying as I'd thought it would be.

This geisha series is very specific where it seems like you embraced her culturally specific background almost to a perverse degree. And then there are other images where she's treated just like some kid in the house—which happens to be our house. Have you noticed that one or the other type of picture gets more or less of that reaction?

The photographs where the love doll is just engaging in almost mundane activities in and around our house have more of the sensibility of the secret life of *The Lonely Doll*. Somebody whose mother is out, and you get the sense that the character has no friends and is in a very private world. Once I turned the doll into a geisha, which involved inviting a team of Japanese people who specialize in dressing people as authentic geisha—once they came in and did their six hours of hair, makeup and kimono dressing, suddenly the doll looked like a regular small-scale doll that you would bring home from Japan to give your daughter. Suddenly, that kind of realism turned the love doll both into a doll-sized, doll-scale doll and into a real geisha, and that's where people seem to have the most trouble figuring it out.

Yeah, that makes sense. And then you have photographs of your assistant Rachel dressed like a geisha in the same room as the doll dressed up like a geisha. Your assistant Rachel has a tattoo of a geisha on her back, which you didn't know, right?

No. She was working with me for three years. I knew that she was densely tattooed and we had talked about where she had gone to get her tattoos and I could see colors and I could see certain new things she was getting on her arms, but I had never seen what was on her back. I knew she had tattoos from the base of her spine up to her neck but I didn't know what they were. At some point when I was doing the geisha pictures, she just decided to reveal that information to me. It's a maiko, a young apprentice geisha, and the geisha image on her back looks somewhere between a maiko and Wilma Flintstone. It's very beautifully drawn but it's really cartoony. And at the point where she revealed to me that she had this elaborate geisha on her back, I just thought, "When can I get her into the picture?"

Did you feel like it was a kind of weird message from the universe?

I felt like there was definitely some bizarre synchronism. But I find that I'm often photographing things or thinking about things before they happen in my life. Or they just seem to mimic what's happening in my life. Like most recently it seemed like you and I were working on the same kinds of issues or figures without even realizing it. We were working really close to each other and we weren't looking at each other's work and suddenly you were making paintings and I was making photographs that seemed like they could be paired together. You know, most specifically when I put the love doll underwater and her black hair started floating around like crazy, and you were making "Bathers" with their black hair flowing around, and I don't think there was an awareness that we were both doing that.

Well, that could be, you know, the proverbial roommates getting their periods at the same time, but I'm curious and I mean it's true that we talk a lot less about what we are each up to in the studio than one might assume. So I was somewhat surprised to realize that as well. I'm thinking back even further, you were photographing dolls and ventriloquist dummies and things like that all through the time when our children were small and our family was coming into being and developing.

I remember going to the ventriloquist museum and handling dummies. Dummies are probably the size of a toddler and moving them around, carrying them and putting them in chairs and dressing them—the next thing I knew I was carrying around a 1-year-old.

Yeah. That's what I was thinking about too—

I was sort of shocked that life and art could imitate each other so perfectly.

I was thinking a lot about the ventriloquist pictures because you made a sculpture, which, I think, is the only sculpture you ever made. It involved ventriloquist dummies, clothed, sitting on chairs. And it just felt like it had more to do with objects as opposed to photographing objects and I think it conveys something about what you were interested in back then that's very different from the photographs.

Yes. Well, the thing that I love about making the photographs is the fact that they can almost endlessly be reproduced. And there's a reason why I still have all of those dummies. I'm afraid that if I made paintings or sculptures I would have a really hard time parting with them. Making photographs is a good way for me to make art and save it and hold on to it, which is what I really want to do. I don't mean that in any kind of market-driven way, I just mean it in an emotional way. It's really hard for me to let go of things. By making all those dummies I made sure I would never be without one.

Yeah, I understand.

I mean I always wonder how, as a painter, you feel when a painting goes away. If you're lucky enough to sell it and it goes away and you never see it again, how does that feel?

Well, it's a mixed bag but it's better to have than the alternative.

Right.

So, to me, the ventriloquist pictures are kind of precursors of these recent images. The dummies triggered an enormous amount of work and it seems the same with the love doll.

It's interesting because the period in which I was dealing with ventriloquism was conceptually very rich for me just in terms of what I thought about and what I felt that I could say with those photographs, but ventriloquist dummies, like clowns, are not everybody's cup of tea. They're not always that pleasurable to look at.

Well, they're creepy.

Yeah, they can be creepy. They weren't creepy to me, but at the same time they weren't beautiful to me. Finding a love doll—I could not believe how perfectly rendered the hands, the feet and face and features and breasts and nipples were, and just the curve of a calf, of an ankle. It was really shocking. It's an idealized version of a woman and we all know that that's endlessly pleasurable for people to look at. So that made it so different from the ventriloquist dummies even if the use, even if the intention for their use is more sordid or way more perverse, depending on your interpretation. Still, in the end, the picture would be so much more pleasurable to look at.

You did a number of works involving photographs of ventriloquists and of dummies together. You were more positively disposed towards the culture of ventriloquism than you are towards the culture of Japanese guys and their sex dolls—which is a very elaborate subculture, from what I gather. It's almost as though with these pictures you've detached the doll from its cultural matrix completely. I mean, leaving aside the geisha thing, which does point to the history of women existing for the pleasure of men, but it's also sort of an iconic image that's detached from its specific set of social relationships at this point in time. It's a kind of motif almost.

Right. I am interested in the product. And again, I was interested in the culture of ventriloquism. Why someone would want to be a ventriloquist, why they made their dummy look like it looked, how many women ventriloquists have there been, are their dummies their twins, their parents, their children... And I tried to explore that in the photographs. But they are kind of a turnoff to people and it seemed like it took much less effort to make a picture that people would sit up and look at with the love doll, because it's a girl at a certain age and because it's so beautiful. The love dolls themselves did a lot of the work for me and I realized in the beginning that it would take very little to make interesting pictures, so that made me work even harder to try to push further to get to something that was separate from an image that could just look like an advertisement for a love doll.

You don't seem like you really wanted to advertise the love part, the sexual part of it.

No. I did everything I could do to bury that. You know, I went to the showroom with our daughter when she was 17 and with my friend who acted as an interpreter. So there were three women standing in a room of love dolls—high-end masturbation tools made in the image of women—and we were there, shopping for one. The whole experience was so strange and a little bit sordid and very odd and as soon as I got the love doll my intention was to get away from what she was created for. That seemed like the least interesting aspect to work with.

Did you feel the same way when you were making those pictures I mentioned earlier with naked girls in interiors?

Well, with the naked girls, the downloaded free porn, I needed figures of women. When I made my movie in 2006, *The Music of Regret*, it sort of mined the territory of my work for all of the years before. I felt that after the movie I had to start over. And it seemed logical that if I could get rid of clothing and all kinds of telltale symbols of time and place, that it was like a birth or a rebirth, because we are all born naked. And I just started thinking that naked girls in a room were a way to start all over again and eventually I'd put clothes on them and find a place for them, et cetera. So in my world, in my sense of what's logical, the naked girls seemed like a good place to start. And again, maybe that's why I was open to the idea of the love doll, you know.

But you saw those pictures as innocent and pure then, in a way that a newborn baby has no baggage.

Well, that would sound disingenuous on my part, but I didn't see them as sexy porn girls, and if they were sexy porn girls I started cutting out bras and panties from magazines and placing them on the figures when it seemed necessary. I wanted as many girls in a room as I possibly could get, so I just started cutting them out of paper, which I had never really done in that way before.

How many years is it now since you did the movie?

Six.

And, in hindsight, do you see it as a hinge in your development or in your story?

I see it as the end of the story, or as the end of one story—the end of one story that I really wanted to end. But you know, as long as you're an artist and you're alive and you're making your work you really can't end your story until you die. I don't think it's possible to really end your story, but I was desperate to start new with something else. Because, you know, the story of my art began when I was so young, when I first made a picture that I decided was my art in 1976. So in 2006 I thought, "Something has to start again." You know, I have made everything I have wanted to make come alive. I've written songs, made it dance, and it just seemed like, well, where do you go from there? So that's when I started to work with naked girls.

How did you feel about the process of doing the movie, other than as a tool to sort of catalog your previous concerns up to that point? What about the actual experience of making it and the kind of artifact you're left with?

It was the most engaging artwork I ever made, hands down. No question. I have never known an artwork as well, meaning I could breathe along with the movie and know every line. It's like my *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, I know every word, every breath that every puppet or actor took, every frame. The kind of focus that you have to have when you are making a film—first you write it, then you have to organize your crew, then you shoot it, then you do a color mix, then you do a sound mix, then you edit it—it's possible to know it in a way that I had never felt that I could know my photographs. I make them, I edit them, I print them, they're big, I see them for a few minutes in an exhibition and then they exist for me as either digital images or slides in a notebook, so I don't really get to spend a lot of time with my work. And I certainly don't spend as much time in front of a photograph as you might spend working on a painting. So the kind of engagement that happens making a film, you know, it's really intense and I wish it were that way with all my artwork. When I am making pictures there's always a moment when I see something, and the something doesn't exist unless I'm looking through the viewfinder. So, there's just one moment where I see it and it's happening and I shoot it. And there aren't really any other moments that are as exciting or interesting as finding that moment.

Did making the movie change the way you are making photographs?

Everybody says that making a film is really excruciating no matter how positive the experience. So being forced to collaborate, being forced to have that focus and attention to every detail when you make something, kind of makes everything else feel lesser, or everything else that I've done prior to that feels like a little bit of a letdown. On the other hand, there's something so amazing about being able to work by yourself, working quietly and making something that way—and that's sort of what I've been doing my whole life. So the movie was an aberration, an aberration that tempted me to leave the way I was working, for sure. I felt it was like a siren call: that's where I'm going to go, that's what I'm going to do and I can't go back. My understanding is that most people that have made movies, particularly artists, have that experience because it is so stimulating.

Yeah, it takes a lot to shake it off.

It's taken me six years.

But maybe there is a way that that also clarifies what's awesome about art-making.

Yes. I've had this experience whenever I've tried to shoot real people and I've had to deal with a person who gets tired or who's hungry or who moves. It's very exciting but it's always a relief to finish with them and to have a set up scenario in my studio that just stays there, and I can come and go as I wish and let the light change and not have to worry about, you know, if it needs to sleep or eat.

Or belongs to a union.

Or belongs to a union, right.

Well, along those lines, working with a love doll certainly isn't as demanding as running a movie set, but it is very different than moving around little dolls on a tabletop. I was sort of surprised when that love doll arrived, that it's massively heavy.

Yes, it is. It looks like a person and it doesn't weigh that much compared to a real person, but it's absolutely dead weight.

So when you are working with it, there's a team involved in a way that's very different from the way your work used to come about.

Well, there's a team involved because I won't dress the doll, I won't comb the doll's hair, I won't see the doll naked, unless I'm purposefully shooting the doll nude. I choose and lay out the doll's clothes and then I leave. I split because I don't really want to see the process.

What's the issue there?

I need to get the situation to feel real. I need magic. And the magic is for this doll to turn up fully clothed, bathed, attired, in position with the light just right, and then I start to shoot. Otherwise it would ruin it for me. I just don't think that I could get to the place that I need to get to for the fantasy to be real if I had to do the grunt work of setting it up.

And it would feel like you were doing something that wasn't positive for your art.

I used to say that I had a kind "whistle-while-you-work" mentality. I just was always having such a good time making my work and I thought that enjoying shooting pictures had a real connection to the outcome of the shoot, meaning that if I loved the act of shooting the pictures, I would get really good pictures. Shooting the love doll was hellish. I felt really flat and I felt really uncomfortable. It took me a long time to see something that I liked, and when I did it was often very fleeting. It was an unpleasant experience, but I still got the shots I wanted. So, after all these years of shooting, that was really a new lesson. That you could be absolutely miserable while you work and still the results can be what you want.