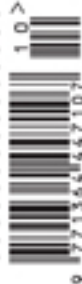


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GUEST EDITORS
Laurie Simmons
Conversations
with Myself

+

Elmgreen & Dragset's
Fictional Homes





Guest Editor Laurie Simmons Conversations with Myself, 2013



Sarah Charlesworth / Jimmy DeSana / Ligia Dias
Carroll Dunham / Wes Gordon / Rachel Howe
Jelly Belly / Peter Jensen / Erika Kobayashi
Takuro Kuwata / Marilyn Minter / Duro Olowu
Watermelon Oreos / Brie Ruais / Tamara Santibanez
Dorothy Simmons / Tabitha Simmons / Thakoon



It's remarkable what Laurie Simmons can do with a frozen expression. 'The specialty of the house,' says the artist, only half-joking. And telling the truth.

Since her first foray into conceptual art in 1976, Simmons has been photographing the poker faces of inanimate playthings and imbuing them with emotions that are palpably real. Melancholy, longing and regret loom large in her pictures, which can be as comic as they are poignant. Think of the archetypal suburban housewives alone in the doll's house kitchens and bathrooms that Simmons assembled for her early works, colour and black-and-white reveries that evoke the drama and drollery of a daytime soap opera. First exhibited in New York in 1979, these malcontent but stylish figures break from their domestic chores to dream, perhaps, of a more romantic life. Possibly they share Simmons' own adolescent longing to become the muse of a great artist, probably a man. At the time, she wasn't ready to believe that the person she ultimately inspired would turn out to be herself.

It wasn't until 1994 that Simmons acknowledged as much with *The Music of Regret*, a series that focused on a mannequin made in her own image – a woman surrounded by male suitors competing for her attention with come-hither looks that mask a profound inability to form any real bond. That they are all ventriloquist dummies with fixed smiles and glass eyes only adds to the human comedy that the images actually portray.

In 2006, Simmons brought those photographs to life in the central sequence of her first film, a musical, also titled *The Music of Regret*. Using both hand puppets and live actors, it gave speech, movement and a storyline to characters from several previous series. The film also had the star power of Meryl Streep, a neighbour in Cornwall, Connecticut, where Simmons owns a 14-room, Georgian country house with the painter Carroll ('Tip') Dunham, her husband of the last 30 years. 'We have no idea why it's worked this well,' Simmons says of the relationship. 'The longer we're married, the less of an answer we have.'



SELF-PORTRAIT, 2013,
LAURIE SIMMONS IN
HER STUDIO WEARING
PETER JENSEN

Simmons, who is 64, grew up in a white, middle-class, New York suburban home during the 1950s and 1960s, where television played a significant role in her life. Throughout her childhood, she watched variety shows and situation comedies, Disney cartoons, puppet shows and adventure series. 'You name it,' she says. 'I watched it. I have a TV brain.'

Some of those shows, broadcast live, featured commercial breaks in which singing dancers were costumed as cigarette boxes with only their legs showing. The influence of those adverts on the content, if not the import, of Simmons' work led to her now iconic series from 1987-1991, *Walking and Lying Objects*. The photographs put seemingly human legs under miniatures of some of our favourite things – a birthday cake, a revolver, a handbag, a toilet and, most tellingly, a view camera – catching them in mid-movement. Theatrically lit, and printed up to 7ft tall, the photographs personalised manufactured products as sensate touchstones of daily life, playing out little dramas of their own.

Only two pairs of legs in the series belong to actual people – one of Simmons' two sisters and the >>



LOVE DOLLS, LAURIE SIMMONS.
THE DOLLS PURCHASED IN 2009

photographer Jimmy DeSana, who has a camera for a head. The two artists shared a SoHo loft when Simmons first moved to New York from art school in Philadelphia, where she had studied painting. DeSana, she says, taught her everything she knows about photography. (In 1990, DeSana died from Aids-related illness; Simmons is the executor of his estate.)

Today, she is often identified with her contemporaries in the so-called Pictures Generation, artists like Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger and the late Sarah Charlesworth, whose artworks appropriated images from newspapers, movies and magazines to create acid commentaries on the manipulative power of mass media. Simmons always took a more subjective approach. The first doll pictures were so intimate that Simmons printed them about the size of postcards. The walking objects and dummy photos were life-size but, like the others, were laced with nostalgia for a past for which Simmons felt both affection and distaste.

Making her film, *The Music of Regret*, left her at a crossroads. 'I was creatively crushed,' she says, 'because it took all of my prior work and made it dance and sing.' She wanted to start over, do something new. That meant no nostalgia. It also meant getting naked. She downloaded porn images from the internet and cut out pictures of the women in them for collaged photographs that she exhibited in 2008 at Art Basel Miami Beach. 'I think they confused people,' she says now. She put them away, even more unsure of her future direction.

The following summer, Simmons had a show in Tokyo at the Tomio Koyama Gallery, and made the

Simmons tracked down a sex doll manufacturer and ordered one suited to the requirements of an artist

trip with the younger of her two daughters, Grace Dunham. Well-versed in the doll's house world of her mother's female surrogates, Grace, now 20, spotted a poster advertising a sex doll. Simmons tracked down the manufacturer and ordered a doll suited to the requirements of an artist, which were very different from the usual male customer's. But she got what she wanted. 'It's been a lifelong goal to use life-size dolls,' Simmons says, 'and wrest as much emotion from them as I can.'

The doll, which weighs 60lb and is not all that limber, got Simmons back into the studio, which was now her Connecticut house. Soon afterwards, she ordered a second doll. The pair proved to be not just a challenge but also a liberation. With the need to build sets for figures only a few inches tall eliminated, she could shoot in every room of the house as well as outside of it. The resulting series of large-format, colour photographs took her work to a whole new level. Titled *The Love Doll*, the series debuted in 2011 at her current Manhattan gallery, Salon 94, and was later exhibited in London, Paris, Tokyo and other cities. In each, the response was tremendous.

It's not immediately clear from the photographs that the pensive, dew-faced dolls aren't flesh and blood. Though made for sex, what they express most of all is a virginal innocence, itself a bit unreal. Last year, Salon 94 and Tomio Koyama co-published *Laurie Simmons: The Love Doll*, a book that documents the month-long learning curve that the doll imposed when Simmons had to dress, light and most of all get accustomed to working with the not-always-submissive creature. At first, Simmons didn't even want to touch it and was uncomfortable around it until it was dressed.

Moving on, Simmons shot male medical dummies for an exhibition at the Metropolitan Opera House that will accompany October's New York premiere of the contemporary Nico Muhly opera *Two Boys*. 'I'm craving male material,' she says. All the same, the new feature film she plans to make next summer, *My Art*, is about a female artist – to be played by Simmons. 'She isn't me,' Simmons insists.

This time, she won't be talking to herself. Her dog has a very big part. >>

Laurie Simmons on the visual riffing behind her pages

In 1963 Bill Evans recorded his provocative album *Conversations with Myself*. With the use of overdubbing, he literally played with and over himself on three different piano tracks using the technology of reel-to-reel recording. What may seem primitive and flat-footed in the digital age of music actually stirred some controversy in the early 1960s and created a complex new sound in jazz. While not everyone's cup of tea it earned Evans his first Grammy award and a five-star review in *DownBeat* magazine.

When, as a teenager, I discovered *Conversations with Myself*, it seemed I'd finally found a foreign language I could comprehend (as high school math, science, French and Spanish were Greek to me). To my ears, Evans devoured everything in his path – ripping through and chewing up tunes familiar to me from movie soundtracks and my parents' living-room stereo, with 'Hey There', 'Just You, Just Me', and 'Love Theme from Spartacus'. His music forced me to make order out of melodic chaos – the more complicated the layering, the more satisfying it was to find the strains of a song. And since everyone around me seemed to detest jazz, it was one more opportunity for me to set myself apart from the rest of my family.

I would say in hindsight that *Conversations with Myself* was my first conscious understanding that borrowing and recycling in art might be OK. It was clear that Evans wasn't doing covers of songs but blatantly stealing refrains and making them his own. (Of course, I'd been tracing pictures in fashion magazines for years and calling them 'my drawings'.)

Obviously, in current art discourse, the acts of borrowing, layering and stealing (subsumed under the term 'appropriation') are hardly new, and arguably have become academic. I've often felt that artists devour all kinds of material, including philosophy, literature, film, fashion, TV and, most often, other artists' work in a weird kind of jealous fit, wishing they could have invented it, composed it, designed it or written it themselves.

In my version of *Conversations with Myself*, I've reproduced some of my own photographs of the Love Doll I bought in Tokyo in 2009. They are paired with work I love by other artists (Sarah Charlesworth, Carroll Dunham, Jimmy DeSana and Marilyn Minter), starting with Sarah Charlesworth's mysterious

red geisha and ending with my picture of a tattoo of a geisha on a human back. I highlight the weird correspondence between the woman's hair in my husband Carroll Dunham's recent paintings and the hair of my Love Doll character swimming underwater. I borrow dresses from my favourite designers (Duro Olowu, Wes Gordon, Peter Jensen, Thakoon) and use my own Japanese Love Doll as the fashion model.

Thakoon's 'rose on legs' fabric (which we designed together in 2009) faces off against Duro's cabbage roses on a cape. I accessorise with shoes (Tabitha Simmons; Minter's painting of platform sandals in a puddle of silver paint; my own mother's shoes from the 1960s) and handbags (Jimmy's purse on his model's head and my purse on legs) and a cut-out photograph of a bracelet by Ligia Dias. Having recently commissioned a tattoo artist (Tamara Santibenez) to create a tattoo for my Love Doll's back, I juxtapose that with a portrait of my Love Doll by the Japanese manga artist Erika Kobayashi.

Several years ago, in a great moment of synchronicity, I discovered (after dressing my Love Dolls as geishas for some time) that my studio assistant Rachel Howe had an intricate multicoloured tattoo of a maiko (an apprentice geisha) on her back. Rachel makes beautiful ceramic vessels, influenced by Japanese indigo and boro textiles among other things, and I layer those along with the work of ceramic artists Takuro Kuwata and Brie Ruais. My mother Dorothy Simmons' delicate shoes from the 1960s feel as much like sculpture as fashion and the colours perfectly match the pinks and greens of last summer's limited-edition designer cookie: watermelon Oreos. Double T-strap, ankle-strap Tabitha Simmons shoes from her new collection look as exciting to me as aerodynamic table-top sculpture. And finally, the outfit the Danish designer Peter Jensen lent for this shoot was borrowed – at the last minute – by me to wear in my self-portrait. (Peter and I also collaborated in 2009 when I, or rather my work, was the inspiration for his Laurie collection, and one of our paper dolls is reproduced here.)

The graphic designer Tom Watt helped me layer the pictures using over 50 shades of miniature jelly beans as punctuation marks.

I'd like to thank everyone who allowed me to play over them. ★ Laurie Simmons, August 2013





Sarah Charlesworth
Red Mask, 1983



Erika Kobayashi
Laurie's Love Doll, 2013



Carroll Dunham
Bathers Nine (Here and There), 2011



Laurie Simmons
The Love Doll / Day 24 (Underwater), 2010



Laurie Simmons
Walking Purse, 1989



Jimmy DeSana
Purse, 1979



Tamara Santibanez
Cowgirl Drawing for Love Doll Tattoo, 2012

Takuro Kuwata
Blue-slipped Gold-drop bowl, 2013
Porcelain, 22.5 x 18.5 x 18cm

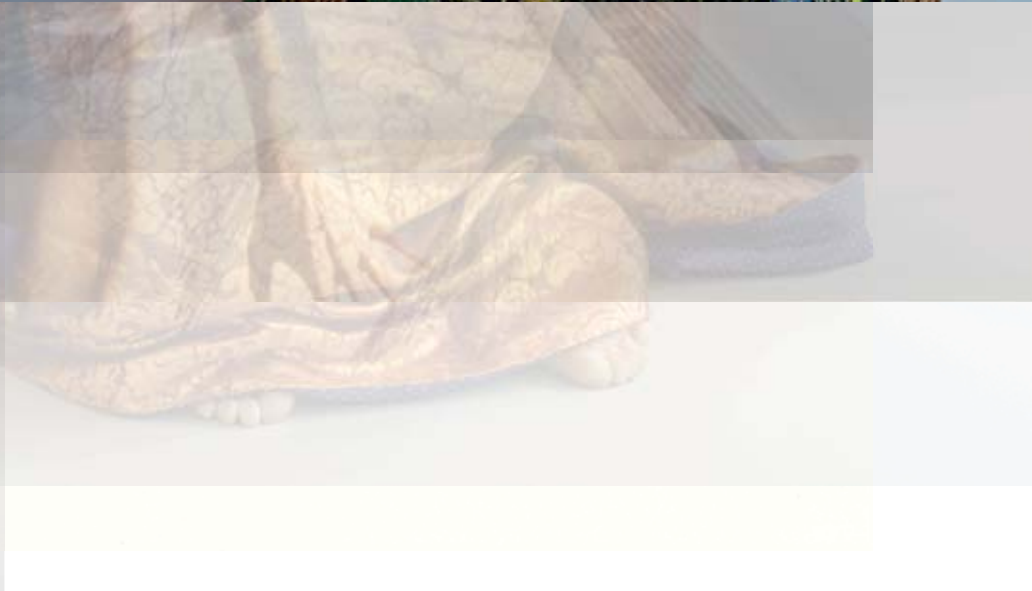


Laurie Simmons
Wes Gordon Reversible Clutch Coat, Fall 2013,
on Love Doll with Brie Ruais Sculpture, 2013



Laurie Simmons
Peter Jensen 'Laurie' Collaboration, 2009

Laurie Simmons
*Peter Jensen Rabbit Stamp Digital Print Blouse
and Capri Pants on Love Doll, 2013*



Laurie Simmons
Thakoon Walking Organza Bondage Dress on Love Doll, 2013, from Rose Fabric collaboration, Laurie Simmons and Thakoon, Spring 2009

Laurie Simmons
Duro Olowu Cape, Fall 2013, and Ligia Dias Bracelet on Love Doll, 2013



Laurie Simmons
*Dorothy Simmons' Shoes, 1962 (My Mother), with
 Limited Edition Watermelon Oreos, 2013*



Laurie Simmons
Tabitha Simmons Shoes, Autumn/Winter 2013 Collection, 2013

Marilyn Minter
Not In These Shoes, 2013
 Enamel on metal, 108 x 162in,
 Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

