



# LAURIE SIMMONS

a real doll

**Andrea Blanch:** I was wondering how much of you is in your work? There is a lack of intimacy, in a way, in your work, how much is it a sign of the times?

Laurie Simmons: Well I think the sign of the times aspect was arriving in New York when conceptual art and paying attention to theory, and 1st and foremost: a renunciation of painting. Painting was dead again, and it just seemed like if you wanted to be in the conversation of what I would have called at the time, “the avant garde”, you had to think in certain ways and read certain texts. I really didn’t want to be associated with: number one: the generation of feminist artists, who seemed marginalized (and just to update, I’m grateful to them for paving the way, but it’s part of the responsibility of the next generation to eat their elders), and two: I didn’t want to be a part of a painting or sculpture culture that was male dominated. I was so excited by the conceptual process, film, and video work that I was seeing in galleries. It seemed really obvious to pick up a camera, because it was fresh and open for inves-

tigation. It was the desire; I went to art school, but I didn’t learn anything about the contemporary. When I got to New York it was this huge shock of “the new.” Then, the first year you’re excited, then you’re depressed – it’s like, “What am I supposed to do, how can I be part of it?” Then you come up with a way to be part of it. It seems so old fashioned and naïve right now, but picking up a camera in that way was a more radical thing to do. It was a male dominated history. The museum of modern art prescribed male history.

**Do you have any regrets?**

So many. [laughs] Mostly small regrets, but they tend to irritate themselves out.

**Let’s talk about this new project and how you got interested in it.**

The Love Doll was a new beginning for me because I could

nally work in human scale. I've been waiting my whole  
fe to find a doll that I could move around in the existing  
nvironment. If I knew the love doll looked natural and  
omfortable in the space, I knew that the image would be  
uccessful. So it was like working with all the great things  
bout having a life sized doll and all these terrible things  
bout having an inanimate object that was difficult to ma-  
euver. After that series was finished I started searching for  
here to go, and the love dolls were shown at the Mauri  
fuseum in Japan, a show called 'Love.' All these different  
rtists had rooms, and in one of these rooms the creator of  
is Japanese character called Hatsune Miku set up Ipads  
with Hatsune Miku performing, a Japanese vocaloid whose  
ecome a pop star. She's a hologram, a lanky girl with long  
lue hair, and she's had actual sell-out concerts, but she  
oesn't really exist. I could spend the whole time talking to  
ou about her, it's hard to explain the way that this figure  
as captured the imagination of the Japanese public, I can't  
nagine it happening in the U.S., but I fell in love with this  
haracter. Anyone in the public can make a song for her, or  
n animation for her. My first idea was to make a vocaloid  
ho was my age, and I still want to do that, but in investi-  
ating Miku and going down the rabbit hole, I got really ex-  
ited about fusing the boundaries between the animate and  
animate, because for years I had been trying. When I was  
hotographing characters and doll figures, I was trying to  
ake humans look like dolls with a great failure rate. Now  
ere are people we have discovered, young women who  
re surgically enhancing themselves and changing them-  
elves to look like dolls. There are young women now who  
re virtually indistinguishable from a porcelain doll. For  
ie, it's creepy but it's more like another version of a dream  
ome true to figure out: how to (regarding my work). The  
hole idea of being able to mask your gender and identity  
ultural. The whole idea of social media is to hide identity  
nd invent identity. You don't know who your tweeting to.  
have 12,000 Instagram followers. Who am I to them? What  
it? The idea of masking, which has always been interest-  
ig to me, is really the focus here.

**What was the picture of the gun about? I was surprised to  
ee you use a gun.**

ne of the really cool things about being an artist, you make  
ork and then you have the possibility to have the meaning  
hange for you over the course of time. When I made that  
icture in the early 90s I wasn't really thinking about guns  
nd violence. I was thinking about a woman character in a  
lm noir world who put it in her purse, it was more about a  
aricature who was a gun toting strong woman, a Raymond  
andler kind of character, it was very romantic. Now my  
riend from New York, who is very active against gun vio-  
nce, wants to use it as an edition to sell to raise money and  
onsciousness about gun control and gun violence, some-  
ring I really care about and think about.  
hen there's this other funny story, Jay Z bought "The Gun"  
r Beyonce as a present, and she didn't want it. So she  
witched it for "perfume bottle on legs." I thought, that's in-  
teresting. What did she see all those years later. Because when

I made the gun it was a super popular image. It's like ciga-  
rettes, at a time they were considered sexy. Things change.

**What are you going to do after the dolls?**

I think that having being an artist for so long and living  
with an artist, I really see it as everyone is trying to keep  
themselves interested in what they are doing. If I don't keep  
myself turned on about doing this I'm not going to do it  
anymore, so where can I go? From someone else, it's ano-  
ther painting that's exactly the same with one color change,  
whatever it is: it cant be formulaic and it cant be redundant.  
I have to go somewhere I can be excited, and if that doesn't  
happen, I don't know what I would do.

**Did you shoot Sam and Dotti before you became an artist?**

No. It was another period where I tried to make real people  
look artificial. And somehow make my characters look like a  
Douglas Cher movie, I just wanted something from humans  
I couldn't get and that's a place I always return to. Why can't  
I arrest the kind of emotion that I can from a doll? It's almost  
like I get too much emotion, too much response, whatever I'm  
looking for I can't get it from shooting real people. I've tried.

**What do you think you're missing?**

I'm looking for artificiality. A kind of repose, a kind of per-  
manence, or else I just like taking pictures of surrogate, re-  
creations of people - it's more interesting. Just to put a finer  
point on it, I think that the satisfaction comes from light and a  
character and trying to find emotion. You can have a doll and  
light on the doll and turn the doll a fraction and suddenly the  
expression changes, and the personality changes and there's  
something different on their face, just because the light and  
dark spaces change. That's what I know how to do, that's  
what I can do today. That's only what I've been doing for thirty  
years! The love doll would look young, old, happy, sad, fat,  
thin - the picture that I got where the love doll had heavy legs,  
I was so excited, I just thought, "Wow! I made that happen."

**Define "mother."**

It's so funny. When you asked me that the first thing that  
popped into my head was a picture I made in 1976 called  
Mother Nursery, and the second was another picture I made  
in 1976 of another doll called Untitled Doll's Head. That's it.

**Even though you work alone, and a lot of the things you  
work with are inanimate, there seems to be a lot of collabo-  
ration in your work.**

I often say I think I'm a natural collaborator. I really try in-  
tuitively to figure out what I can share with the people I'm  
working with and what they have to offer. I like to be really  
open. Someone can be working for you and you realize they  
are an amazing cook, or they can draw beautifully, or they  
have a talent that is going to contribute so much literally and  
figuratively to the table. And I think if you're open to the peo-





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-Laurie Simmons**



ple around you, you can really enhance your work. Over the course of making pictures, people that work for me influence my pictures a lot. I don't have to be the big boss all the time. In the end, I'll do what I want to do, because that's the thing about being a visual artist, you are ultimately the decider.

**Kaleidoscope House, Tourism, and Talking Objects: What's the thread going through it?**

When the toy company approached me to make a toy, I thought, "I have no interest in making a toy." And then I thought, "Ah ha! If I make this house, I can use it as a prop," which I did. It was dreamy because the doors were lucid and colorful, so when I positioned them the light cast on the furnishing, which is exactly what I like to do. So that was just another artificial place for me to go. Tourism was again, re-

ally focused on color, and it was when I decided I wanted take the female character and move her around the world. So I gathered photographs of world monuments, photographs that had faded to blue, faded to pink, faded to green, and color coordinated these female figures against these backgrounds. I feel like my work has always been about the female in an interior space, even when the female is in exterior space, it has a kind of interiority because I'm working with rear screen or some sort of enclosure. Talking Objects is where I got a little bit off track because I went to the ventriloquist museum, and I was shooting ventriloquist dummies in the rooms and suddenly I saw these objects that ventriloquists use: talking gloves and talking walking sticks. They're extra tricks and I put them in rooms with rear screen projected backdrop. That was like a little journey away from the main topic for while, but still inanimate objects that speak, inanimate objects that are anthropomorphized and bringing things to life that are not meant to be alive. I think that that's the thread.

**For your new show you worked with real people what was that experience like & did you enjoy it?**

Of course the maskers looked like dolls but the fact that I was responsible for posing every inch of the model's body was an amazing relief and also led me to surprising places. As the Kigurumi maskers became more comfortable in their costumes they revealed more of the persona they were taking on in other words they grew into their roles and would come up with more and more exotic poses. There was obviously a liveliness and a REALIVENESS I could never find working with a doll. For me having a character that looks like a doll but moves on its own is hugely surreal...kind of like entering a dream space.

**Do you see working with real people again?**

Oddly, they don't seem real when I'm working with them. I feel like I've discovered a race of people who inhabit an interstitial place between human and non-human, human and doll. But whatever this is, yes, I'd like to continue working this way.

**Do you feel the collaboration enhanced the creative process & if yes how so?**

Again the element of surprise in the sense that I grew to expect the unexpected really made me see new things. My former subject (the love doll) was a 70 pound dead weight that was responsible for animating. Some days I just couldn't get there. With my human subjects there was always a revelation even if it was just a character stretching to reach a wall or sticking a hip out. Remember there is a lack of self-consciousness that goes along with masking because your true identity is not disclosed. My characters definitely performed outside of their usual comfort zone the Laurie Simmons Studio.

**What's your personal fantasy?**

I think most of the time when I'm fantasizing I'm thinking about a movie I want to make, and the character; what she looks like and what she thinks about the art that she makes.





