IN AND AROUND THE HOUSE

BY LAURIE SIMMONS

11 Strathmore Road

My father worked at home. He left through a door in the kitchen. He came back in for lunch, dinner, an afternoon nap, and the occasional half-cup of Sanka. His wing of the house was the most interesting and mysterious, and entry was forbidden without the company of an adult. The suite of mint green rooms served as his studio, his laboratory, and sanctuary. He would exit through the door in the morning wearing a white lab coat and slacks, and go back again after supper in a plaid bathrobe, often until midnight. Scotch tape, pens, rubber bands, a typewriter, plastic charms, an aquarium, and a few months' worth of *Life* and *Look* magazines made breaking-and-entering irresistible to the children in our house.

The office exuded an important scientific aura. It smelled of oil of clove and wet plaster, and occasionally my father the dentist would give me a vile of mercury to poke at with a pencil. I remember childhood days where I

Parallax Panoramagram (3-D photograph from *Look* magazine), 1964

seemed to make my own schedule, and I often chose to sit in my father's waiting room, reading and rereading the oversized, mostly black-and-white picture magazines. I also loved to stare at the schools of neon fish swimming at eye level in the tank—a feeling I could vividly recall when I photographed through the glass of an aquarium twenty years later.

What I really waited for was a chance to follow my father down to our basement to a tiny darkroom off of a dank laundry area, where he developed dental X-rays. I would crouch on the floor under the counter and watch my father's huge white shoes turn pale orange when he switched on the safe light. Sometimes he would pick me up so I could see the ghostly forms of molars come to life on the black film.

I always knew myself to be an artist, and it turned out that all the tools I needed for my work could be found in my father's domain: papers, pens, paints, glue, and sets of plaster teeth with patients' names scrawled on them with a kind of two-toned pencil that seemed only to exist in my father's office—red on one end, blue on the other. My sisters and I would pour extra plaster into Dentyne-colored molds of birds and turtles so that the younger patients would have something to play with while they were waiting for appointments. I would sit at my father's desk and color the turtles with the green Venus Paradise pencils he kept in a cigar box. Sometimes I played with the toy head of a Clarabell puppet, which my father used to give to the children when he was drilling. If it hurt, they were supposed to make it squeak.

When I was ten my father became an orthodontist, and he began to take close-up pictures of everyone's smile. He was the first person I knew to own a Polaroid Land camera, and he always tried to stay current with the latest Kodak developments. Once he gave me a 3-D photo that had been published in *Look* magazine, which was considered a scientific breakthrough at the time. The picture was called a Parallax Panoramagram, and it showed

a bust of Thomas Edison surrounded by five of his inventions, including a home motion picture projector and a phonograph. When I was six, my father gave me a Brownie camera, which he continued to replace whenever an improved version came out. I never thought about being a photographer, though he would sometimes help me take close-ups of the faces of the ceramic nebbishes I collected. This was fun, but very different from the drawing I usually did.

Ceramic Nebbish

547 Broadway

In the spring of 1973 I rented a loft in Soho with my friend Jimmy DeSana. It was two hundred feet long and twenty feet wide, with large windows at each end and a few airshaft windows in the middle. A sweatshop that produced foundation garments had recently vacated, and for years the long creaky walk from one end to the other would cause sewing needles to rise magically from cracks in the floor. When Jimmy and I moved in, I claimed the self-service elevator and the morning light, and Jimmy took an extra airshaft window. Later, an artist friend-of-a-friend was paid to erect a sheetrock wall between the two spaces, and coincidentally, ten years later I married him—though I never met him at the time.

After our rooms were built, Jimmy immediately hung his hundred-odd hat collection on the wall and built a darkroom. He had studied photography in art school, which impressed me. I had dropped out of a photo class in art school because I didn't take photography seriously—until I arrived in New York and was introduced to

Self Portrait, 1976

conceptual art and video. I started hanging around Jimmy trying to learn, and eventually he helped me set up my own darkroom. Every day I would take the long walk through my loft to the door separating our apartments to have lunch with Jimmy. He would make tuna sandwiches each day for a month, then switch to hamburgers for a month, then back to tuna.

I wallpapered my room in a cherry-print paper from the '40s and photographed all of my friends there with my Yashica GT-35. That was my first organized photographic project. I had Jimmy and a few books to help me learn. David Vestal's *Craft of Photography* was always nearby, eventually becoming the floor in the photograph *Chair/Livingroom #1* (LS#17), 1976 (see p. 44). I would also call the Kodak Hotline daily. There was always a calm, friendly, technical voice on the other end that sounded like an astronaut's. Often, I would try to disguise my voice because I was embarrassed to call so often.

Shortly after I covered my room in the cherry patterned wallpaper, I realized I'd created my first set. The wallpaper was part of a collection of odds and ends that I'd organized and categorized with the idea of recycling them into some sort of artwork. The rolls of wallpaper came from a general store in upstate New York, where I'd lived for a while earning a bit of money by painting houses and putting up wall coverings. I also had a bunch of toys from the 1950s—most of which were still in their original packages—which I'd found in the attic of a toy store in Liberty, New York, in 1972.

The light in the cherry room was very flat. Slowly, I began to awaken to the fact that light and a sense of a place might be my subjects, but I didn't know how to think about that. I was both moved and intimidated by the art in the mid-'70s downtown New York scene, and I felt I needed to make pictures that spoke to that level of tough critical thinking. At the same time, I was doing my secret crash course in photography. I was terrified that as soon as I picked up a camera someone would quiz me on the short but packed history of photography beginning with Niepce and going right through to Eggleston. I focused on the Szarkowski model at the Museum of Modern Art, as well as the model I was tracking at the galleries, which included artists like Mel Bochner, Jan Groover, Jan Dibbets, Robert Smithson, and the fashion photographer Deborah Turbeville.

In my studio, I made a little set with rooms full of toy furniture and walls held together by tape and toothpicks or leaning on phone books and heavy cans of Crisco. I left it by the light of the front window and shot in and around it as the light changed throughout the day. I developed the negatives myself and sometimes printed all night. I would print images over and over in an attempt to learn, thinking I might eventually become skilled at a trade. Around this time I answered an ad seeking a freelance photographer to shoot toys for Shackman, a company that sold dollhouse miniatures on lower Fifth Avenue. I took a few objects home to shoot, and then agonized over the lighting and set-up. I discovered I had no feel at all for catalogue work, and later noticed in one of the contact sheets that a fly had settled on a doll and I hadn't even noticed. One shot of a staircase to nowhere intrigued me, however, as did a bathroom sink I had placed in front of some wallpaper. Amidst the social and financial chaos of my life and my studio, a calmer place began to emerge in my pictures. I loved looking at them, but I was much too embarrassed to share them with anyone else.

At that time, I had a couple of doll figures lying around, which I never intended to place in my pictures. I actually believed that the rooms I was shooting could be mistaken for real places. I was naively intrigued by the

way the camera lied. I figured that's what it was all about. I loved the scale dislocations of the scenes, and the ease with which I could play with light. I felt powerful, and at the same time I was awestruck by what I saw through the viewfinder. I was careening dangerously close to serious photography, which made me uncomfortable—but I didn't seem to have a choice.

11 Strathmore Road

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My mother always showed great concern about the décor of our home. Our house was not grand by the standards of the community, but both its modest representation of a Tudor castle and the fact that it sat atop a hill made it feel more important than it was. Two enormous maple trees, a magnolia, a Chinese cherry tree, crab apple trees, hydrangea, peonies, honeysuckle, lily of the valley and roses created the illusion of the English countryside. A sloping rock garden containing sweet alyssum, ageratum and candy tuft was carefully cultivated by my mother's gardener, Louie.

Although tastefully appointed for the time, a description of our home may sound almost like theater. My favorite rooms were of course the bathrooms, particularly the one in the master bedroom suite. This was a perfectly round room that fit neatly into the single stone turret. It had classic four-by-four matte black tiles and an exquisite maroon sink. Rooms had color themes and were gender coded. Pinks and reds for girls; powder blue for a baby boy, which could quickly be painted rose when another girl was born. The basement was finished to

look like an old-fashioned soda shop. My mother thought we could have parties there. There was a Formica bar with tall stools, and glass shelves behind the bar that held apothecary jars filled with gumdrops and peppermints. There were several small white tables for two, heart-shaped chairs, and red-and-white striped café curtains covering windows with no view. The walls were white painted chunks of wood made to look like brick, with a flock of copper ducks flying south. My mother decorated with painted plaster replicas of ice cream sundaes and banana splits, which she had bought at a local ice cream parlor that went out of business. All the plants were fake because there was no natural light.

Rooms were kept freshly carpeted and curtained. Hallways were hung with fuzzy, flocked wallpapers. Closet lights went on when doors opened, and went dark again when they closed. Colored lights got strung up for outdoor summer parties, and there was a clock with chimes from Switzerland, a dark leather settee from Morocco, and a Japanese bar in the living room. Small, tinted, mullioned windows turned up in surprising places throughout the house. There was always some odd ray of light to chase.

Pig Tree, 1976

547 Broadway

In 1976, my early fascination with magnification and a couple of screw-on macro filters invited me to take a closer look at things. In the spring of that year, I placed a group of tiny toy pigs in the leaves of a houseplant. This gave me the confidence to finally pick up a doll and shoot it. The first sequence was of a lone figure in a purple

Jane, 1976

Bedroom Door, 1977

dress. It was to be a birthday gift for my close friend and neighbor, the painter Jane Kaplowitz. The doll moved around a chipboard floor, from which furniture would vanish and reappear, until she finally sat down upon the name *Jane*, which I had scribbled in chalk on the floor. The pictures looked empty and desolate. I felt that their mood counteracted the cuteness of the doll, and I surprised myself by finding them acceptable—even though they broke my recently imposed rule not to shoot figures.

I continued to shoot my empty rooms again and again, waiting for and observing the light. Meanwhile, my environment was beginning to resemble my photographs. The door to my bedroom had a slatted window that let stripes of light fall across the bed. The bed itself was set with a vintage cherry-printed coverlet and almost-matching new sheets from Macy's. I had covered the floors in an old patterned linoleum that had to be carefully unrolled to avoid cracking, and I had found a couch and been given two chairs that looked just like the simple furnishings in my photographs. A friend sewed me white filmy curtains, a surprise gift to make things homier. And I took some of my grandmother's tables and chairs and painted them flat black.

At one point, I invited a friend over, dressed her in a red dress and red rubber shower shoes and asked her to sit on the couch. I climbed a

Woman/Chair/Rug

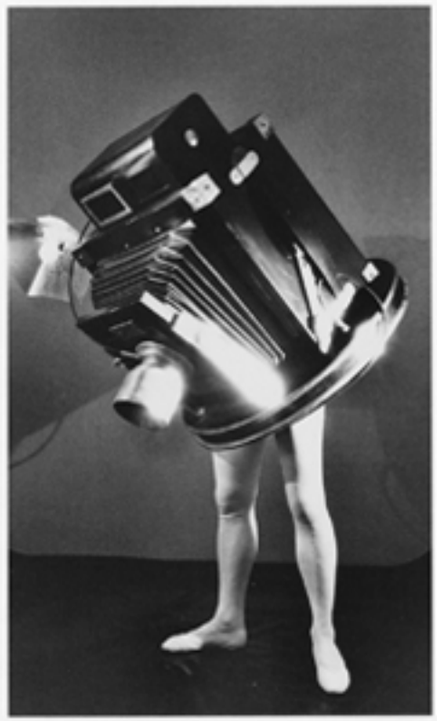
ladder to shoot her from above, in an attempt to make her look like a doll, but she just ended up looking like a person who was trying to look like a doll. I've tried many times since then to make human scale feel diminutive in pictures.

After this experience, I started to think that shooting dolls might be more interesting than I'd originally imagined. One reckless day I popped the doll in the purple dress into the kitchen scene and had her do all kinds of nutty things. She stood on her head, gazed into the abyss of the refrigerator, and generally made a mess. I never showed anyone those pictures—until 1983, when I published a little pamphlet with a mint green cover, which included a few images of the doll in the kitchen. This pamphlet was titled *In and Around the House*.

I remember waking up one day at the end of 1977 and realizing that everything I had been shooting in black-and-white really existed in living color in my mind's eye. I thought I'd made a mistake, and so I bought my first roll of color film, shot some bathroom scenes, and took the prints to the drugstore to be developed. Even given the low-tech quality of the prints, I could see there was a whole other world to explore in the set-ups. I'd always loved the part of the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy wakes up in a Technicolor world. Kansas looks pretty good in black-and-white, but suddenly the Yellow Brick Road, the red poppies, the ruby slippers make the world on the screen glow. It's as though the lights in a dark room have been switched on.

The color prints caused me to completely abandon black-and-white film until 1981, when I tossed a bunch of dolls into a swimming pool and shot them as they floated to the bottom. In 1987, I turned again to black-and-white when I shot Jimmy DeSana wearing a giant replica of a photojournalist's camera, which was a costume prop from the movie, *The Wiz*. Only Jimmy's white slippers and white stockinged legs emerged from the body of the camera. He had AIDS, and we both knew he didn't have long to live. That picture was my gift to him to say

thanks for what he'd taught me. He loved the photograph and hung it in his bedroom until he died in July of 1990. From that point, I photographed almost exclusively in black-and-white until 1991. I came to understand when to shoot in black-and-white and when to shoot in color.



Walking Camera I (Jimmy the Camera), 1987

22 College Place

I love the photographic image, the way scale can become meaningless and everything is unified within the surface. I now see that that kind of ambiguity is what drew me to working with the camera in the first place.

When I recently re-examined the black-and-white photographs shot between 1976 and 1978, I became aware of a potential narrative and structure that hadn't been obvious to me during the years that I was shooting. I actually began to see a house with many rooms, as well as indoor and outdoor space. I also began to think about a female presence, both real and implied, and to formally locate a space that didn't exist in my mind when I was originally exploring this territory with the camera. The project that you see here took shape when hundreds of long-forgotten images were revisited with the notion of creating a home within *In and Around the House*.

The concerns of being a young artist in New York and the economic pressures of maintaining that life now dominate my memory. Where was the space in the day to play and shoot? How many hours, minutes, days a week did I spend behind a camera? How many hours did I spend on my sets, in my darkroom, staring at prints, at contact sheets, or daydreaming? The memories of actually making *In and Around the House* elude me still. The pictures, I hope, will tell the story.