

# my mother, my self

Lena Dunham and her artist mother, Laurie Simons, both explore themes of femininity, sexuality and the role of women through their work. Here the mother and daughter reflect on their shared passion for politics and a love that knows no bounds.



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PHOTOGRAPHY STEF MITCHELL

Hair Blake Erik at Jed Root. Make-up Alice Lane at The Wall Group using Chanel. Photography assistance Victor Prieto. Production Georgina Koren.

LENA DUNHAM AND LAURIE SIMMONS WEAR ALL CLOTHING MODELS OWN.



## LENA DUNHAM AND LAURIE SIMMONS

TEXT EMILY MANNING

In the 80s, artist Laurie Simmons wasn't only engaging with feminist perspectives through her photographs and installations, she was fighting for equality on the street and in the studio. Once, she and other members of the Women's Action Coalition travelled to a Buffalo abortion clinic to protect women seeking services from the hateful protesters who awaited them. To her young daughter — writer and director Lena Dunham — the trip had a slightly different mission. "I said, 'you can go only if you bring back Buffalo wings,'" Lena recalls, still unsure if her mother had, "actually gotten them there, or just picked some up at the corner store before [she] came home." The wings might not have been authentic, but Lena does have a treasured souvenir from the WAC days: a "super 80s" t-shirt of a downtown suffragette. It's only one example of what she's inherited from her resilient, daring, and outspoken mother. Here Laurie and Lena discuss their shared passion for politics, women's issues and baby pink...

### **Lena, what was it like growing up with artist parents?**

**Lena:** I was always aware of it being specific, cool, and unique. The entirety of my childhood was seeing creative people not just be creative, but also interact with each other about each other's work. But having an artist mum whose work was just as important as my father's was, I think, especially formative.

**Laurie:** I just figured you thought it was cool to have a mum who was an artist because I had dolls and toys in the studio; I didn't know you had any awareness of it.

**Lena:** I was very aware that you were part of a community. People always ask, "did your parents do many crafts projects with you?" It's not like you were always sitting gluing macaroni.

**Laurie:** I was just gonna say, "We spent a lot of time gluing macaroni!" There was a lot of doing going on. My fear was, "The other kids are all out playing sports and we're sitting around making things — what is this going to do to our children?"

**Lena:** Well, I definitely am not interested in physical activity on any level.

**Laurie:** See, that's not good!

### **What were the challenges of a creative household?**

**Laurie:** There are peaks and valleys for artists, creatively and economically. We struggled, but we felt it was better to let the kids know. I think it was great for you to get a handle on the fact that a creative life isn't smooth sailing. There are obstacles in the way when you're trying to do what you want to do, live the life that you want to live.

**Lena:** It's helped me learn that whether you feel inspired or you don't, you have to write every day, act every day, and find a way to train your brain to think creatively. I saw you and dad go into your studios and work every day; you didn't have the option to not be inspired because you had to engage your skills, no matter what.

**Laurie:** To me, the value of having daughters that, whether things were going well or not, seeing a mother who's excited about her work and making new things has got to be a positive message.

**Lena:** We also felt very included in you making your work. We got to hang out in the studio; you'd let us play and watch shoots. You even let me keep my hamster in there.

**Laurie:** There were a lot of animals in that studio. That's not something I feel great about.

### **How does your work inform each other's?**

**Lena:** My aesthetic is totally formed by yours. Everything that you find appealing — colours, framing, subjects — it's all in my work. Your work explored femininity, domesticity, the role of women... You and I both love baby pink, angora, something that looks like it's from the 50s, a weird doll with a weird face.

**Laurie:** It's amazing for me to watch *Girls*. I almost feel like you're sending smoke signals; there are so many images I can think of that feel like they came out of my work.

**Lena:** Every time I put someone in a bathtub, every time I shoot somebody through a window. I've always loved looking at your work. People ask me how I feel confident to say what I think politically; I was raised by someone who was completely outspoken about her political beliefs, specifically as a feminist. It never occurred to me that there was another way to operate in the world.

**Laurie:** This was pre social media, though. Your ability to telegraph your beliefs and ideas exponentially wows me. We're alike in so many ways, but you're so nice! I was so fierce when I was younger and fighting all the time, out of necessity. You've made me feel good that the fight I took for granted was more of a fight that I give myself credit for.

**Lena:** There's so much of you that is a part of me — even just the way I throw a party. But I think the biggest thing is my ability to bounce back from painful experiences.

**Laurie:** Is it resilience you're talking about?

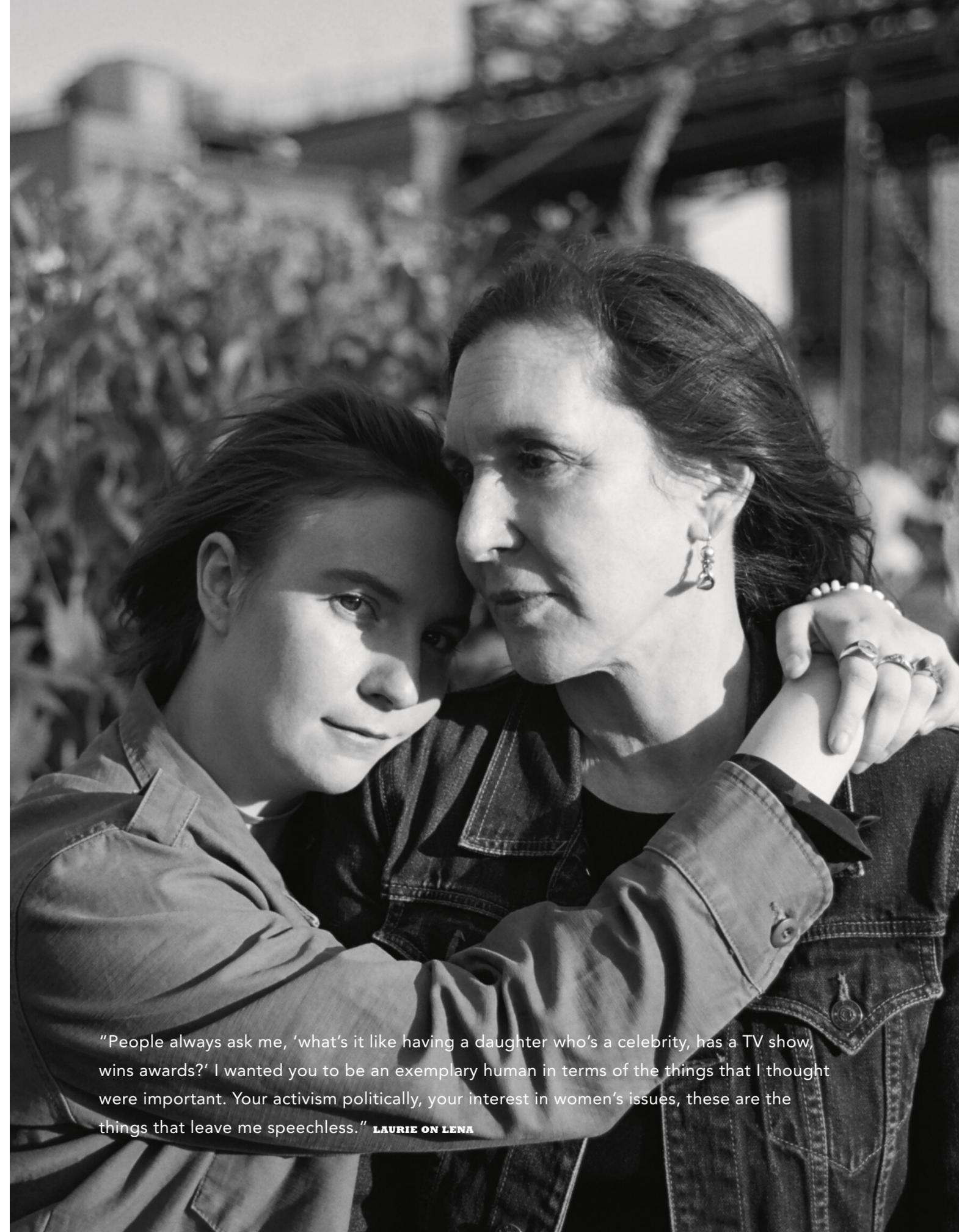
**Lena:** Yes. I've had a great career and I'm very lucky, but I've had a lot of experiences that were painful and challenging. Getting knocked around and being like, 'nope, I'm still here' is such a you quality.

**Laurie:** It's a lie to think that there are people who are still trying to push boundaries who aren't disappointed. I still grapple with resilience; my inspiration through it is you and Grace.

### **What do you admire about each other that you've never told each other?**

**Lena:** I've told you this inadvertently by stealing all of your clothes, but I think you are really a woman of style.

**Laurie:** Thank you! That makes me feel so good because I feel like no one ever notices. I say this to other people but I'm not sure I've ever told you and Grace is that I'm so proud of your activism. People always ask me, 'what's it like having a daughter who's a celebrity, has a TV show, wins awards?' I wanted you both to be exemplary humans in terms of the things that I thought were important. Your activism politically, your interest in women's issues, these are the things that leave me speechless.



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