



LAURIE SIMMONS' ROLE PLAYS: LOVE, SEX, DESIRE

Since the 1970s, Laurie Simmons' photographic eye has focused on the manufactured bodies of dolls and ventriloquist dummies in a range of domestic settings from dollhouses to actual rooms in her home. She has recently completed The Love Doll, a series of photographs featuring a life-sized sex doll from Japan sitting, standing and even swimming at the Cornwall, Connecticut, home she shares with her husband, the painter Carroll Dunham.

Laurie Simmons
The Love Doll/Day 11 (Yellow), The Love Doll
2010, Fuji Matte print
70 x 47 inches. Edition of 5 with 2 APs
Courtesy of Laurie Simmons and Salon 94, New York

Nels P. Highberg: Where did *The Love Doll* originate?

Laurie Simmons: I've been dealing with photographing dolls, surrogates, mannequins and paper cutouts for my entire photographic career. In 2006, I had finished a movie called *The Music of Regret*, which left me very unsettled and wishing for a fresh start. After I shot the movie, I started downloading free porn from the internet because I wanted to start all over and the way to start over is with girls without clothes without evidence of a time frame, just absolutely like a re-birth with girls in their "birthday suits," nakedness in its purist form. In a sense, I was starting over. I found a place where I had been when I had started my work in the mid-70s, only now I had the Internet. I had these girls. I had newer dollhouses with empty rooms. It felt like a way to include something I hadn't included before. This was around 2007.

I see them now almost as premonitions, these drawings in preparation for going to Japan and finding this love doll. Maybe my antennae were up when I got to Japan in 2009. I was in a Manga bookstore with one of my daughters looking at comic books and she found a tiny little poster of a doll in a schoolgirl dress and said, "Look, look at this." We went back to the hotel room and did some research, some Googling and found a showroom in Tokyo that was actually selling these life-sized sex dolls. That's how I found them.

NPH: It definitely seems you like to deal with contradictions. You talk about starting with images in pornography but putting them in dollhouse rooms. And we're sitting here in what many would call a quintessential New England home, yet you take photos of Japanese sex dolls here. How conscious were you of these contradictions when you were putting it together? Or have they grown over time?

LS: It's such a great question because what you're calling the contradictions are the inherent limitations with the way I work. When I started to work, there was no digital world. There was only putting a doll in a dollhouse or pairing a figure with furniture. Things didn't necessarily match scale-wise. Things didn't necessarily match light-wise because I was dealing with studio light and natural light. In order to make myself have a strong belief in what I was doing, I had to ignore what you're calling the contradictions and decide that this was a reality I could convince others to believe. I think what you're calling the contradictions and what I'm referring to as the inherent limitations are actually, in the end, what make my work my own work. Maybe the fact that I had a blind eye to that is what gives my work its edge, its dark underside.

To catch up to the present: by the time the Asian love doll, which is basically a very, very beautifully-articulated masturbation tool, arrives at my new house – which I've waited my entire life to own or afford – I am completely oblivious to the contradictions and it all seems absolutely fine.

NPH: You call what you were doing with the internet after the film a “re-birth.” Do you think it was you starting to deal with the digital? Even though the digital has been around, was it you starting to work with this proliferation of images?

LS: Again it's a great question because I hadn't thought about that. Usually, I use as few tools as I can to help me because I am afraid of compromising what I intend to do. There was a point when I realized I could download any image I wanted from the Internet and also download any pair of woman's legs I wanted and combine anything I wanted. I realized I couldn't go there, that it would end up being some kind of collage that looked like it came out of the world of illustration or commercial art. Even though I am digitally savvy, digitally aware and have no resistance to what the internet has brought us, I knew I couldn't go there in my work.

In terms of this kind of re-birth, I think the most important thing to me was closing the door on thirty years of work. I felt that the movie had engaged every series I had ever done in a certain way. It almost was like a musical revue that said goodbye. Everybody came out and waved goodbye.

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below: Laurie Simmons
The Love Doll/Day 24 (Diving), *The Love Doll*
 2010, Fuji Matte print
 51 x 70 inches
 Edition of 5 with 2 APs
 Courtesy of Laurie Simmons and Salon 94, New York

NPH: Where are you with the love dolls now?

LS: We're publishing a book in the fall called *The Love Doll*. In a sense, the series is over, which is really exciting. I'm starting to work again this summer and I really have a strong desire to bring the male figure into the work with the love doll. One of the great things about being an artist is that you can make all these strict, rigid rules and turn them around and break them all. I'm telling you the series is over, but I'm also saying I could pull them out again.

NPH: As you're finishing the book and thinking about the next project, when did you feel the series was done, at least in its current state?

LS: I've always worked in series and because a series has a general idea or one group of figures, I've always relied on intuition to tell me when the beginning is and when I'm flying along in the middle and it seems like the end kind of comes and slaps me in the face. I knew I wanted to make a book. Even though I shot for days and days, I numbered each day I shot, so I knew I wanted to have around a month's worth of pictures. Maybe I shot ninety days and discarded sixty of them, but I wanted to make a book that shows the beginning, middle and end.

I sometimes have this nagging feeling that I've got these love dolls in the house and they may have to come out again. It's a funny feeling. But, generally, it's hard to describe how to know when a series is finished. Maybe it's characterized by restlessness? A little boredom? A sense that there's something else to explore? Or perhaps it's just prop fatigue. When I hung the show at the Gothenburg Museum, I looked at these pictures and thought, "Wow, I made those? They look so effortless."


NPH: And these are large images.

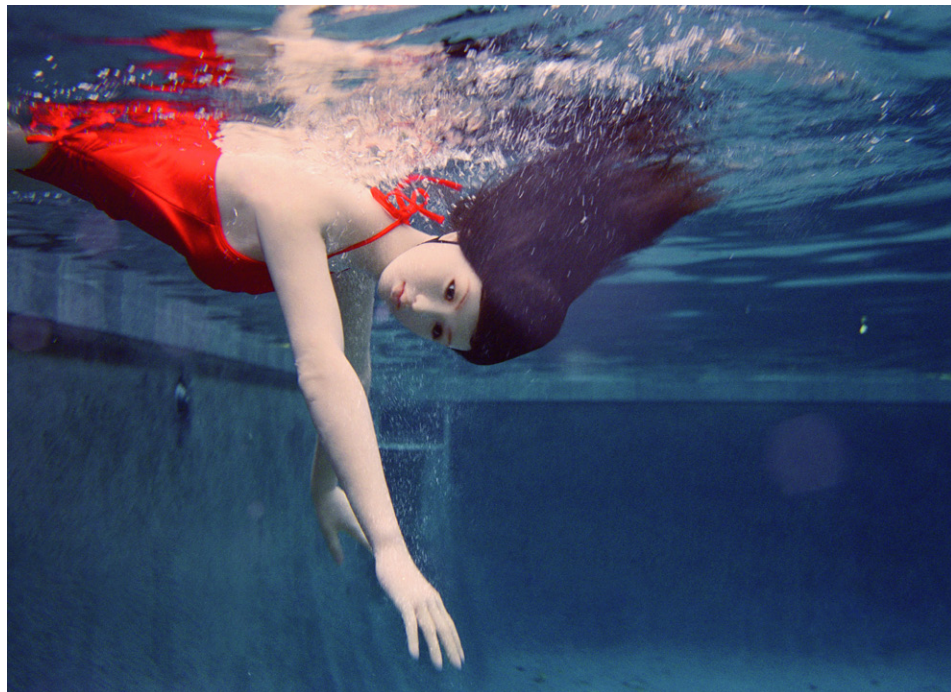
LS: They are seventy-two inches by fifty-something, life-size. They're big. Because of the way I use natural light, they have a relaxed, dreamy quality. And I have to say, making them was just miserable. Just moving that heavy thing around, getting it into position, having someone sit down so I could copy their position. I've said it before, but god knows how people have sex with these things. They are very, very awkward.

NPH: It's one of those contradictions we were talking about because the dolls do look delicate, but they are these life-sized things made out of plastic.

LS: And they're dead weight. It's one thing to pick up a forty-pound child who will kind of help you carry them, but this was like lugging two sacks of potatoes around.

NPH: You seem to be someone who works on projects and who focuses. You don't have five things going on at once. Is that pretty typical for you?

LS: Yes. If I have other things going on, it would be like a writing project and something I'm shooting for a magazine, but usually when I'm working it's one thing at a time. That question makes me wonder why, why I don't have three series going on at once? I'll have to think about that. 



opposite, top left: Laurie Simmons
The Love Doll / Day 27/Day 1 (New in Box), *The Love Doll*
 2010, Fuji Matte print
 70 x 52.5 inches
 Edition of 5 with 2 APs
 Courtesy of Laurie Simmons and Salon 94, New York

opposite, top right: Laurie Simmons
The Love Doll/Day 8 (Lying on Bed), *The Love Doll*
 2010, Fuji Matte print
 70 x 47 inches
 Edition of 5 with 2 APs
 Courtesy of Laurie Simmons and Salon 94, New York

opposite, bottom: Laurie Simmons
The Love Doll/Day 29 (Nude with Dog),
 The Love Doll
 2011, Fuji Matte print
 70 x 47 inches
 Edition of 5 with 2 APs
 Courtesy of Laurie Simmons and Salon 94, New York

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Since the mid-70s, Laurie Simmons has staged scenes for her camera with dolls, ventriloquist dummies, mannequins and occasionally people, to create images with intensely psychological subtexts. Her photographic based works are collected by many museums, including in New York: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Guggenheim, as well as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and the Hara Museum, Tokyo. In 2006, she produced and directed her first film titled *The Music of Regret*, starring Meryl Streep, Adam Guettel and the Alvin Ailey 2 Dancers with cinematography by Ed Lachman. Simmons was featured in Season 4 of the PBS series *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*. Her most recent exhibitions were at Salon 94 Bowery, NYC, with Wilkinson Gallery both at Art Basel and in London, at Baldwin Gallery, Aspen and at The Gothenburg Museum, Sweden. She has an upcoming solo show at Koyama Gallery, Tokyo and a forthcoming book titled *The Love Doll*. Simmons lives and works in New York City and Cornwall, Connecticut with her husband, the painter Carroll Dunham.

Nels Highberg is an associate professor and chair of Rhetoric and Professional Writing at the University of Hartford where he also serves as interim chair of Cinema. In the early 90s, he worked at HCP as the curatorial assistant while attending the University of Houston as an undergraduate.

