

A Day in the Life of a Life-Size Doll

After a Film That Blurred the Line Between Family and Art, Artist Blurs Line Between Reality and Art With New Show

BY KIMBERLY CHOU

Since the success last fall of the film "Tiny Furniture," artist Laurie Simmons, whose work has appeared at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among other institutions, has found herself recognized in new ways.

"I went to see some films at MoMA and I sat down next to a young man the other night, and he said, 'Excuse me, are you Lena Dunham's mother?'" said Ms. Simmons, who is best known for her photographs of dolls and dollhouse interiors. "So that's been happening more and more."

In the film, which was written by and stars Ms. Simmons's 24-year-old daughter, Lena Dunham, protagonist Aura (Ms. Dunham) moves back home to her family's TriBeCa loft after college. Ms. Simmons plays Siri, Aura's artist mother. Aura's sister Nadine is played by Ms. Dunham's actual sister, Grace Dunham. (Their real-life father is the painter Carroll Dunham, who isn't in the film.)

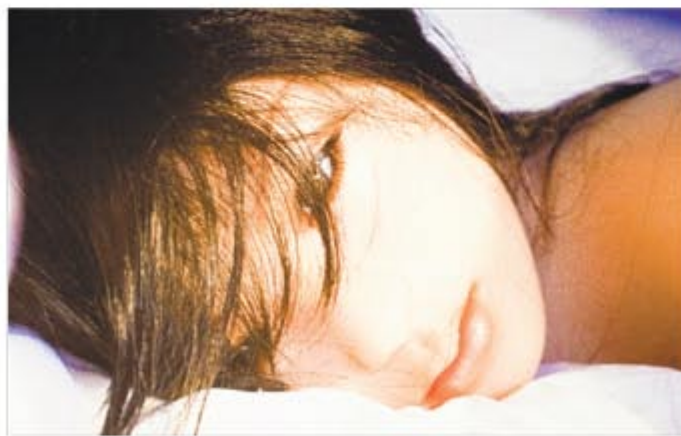
Much of "Tiny Furniture" was shot at the actual Simmons-Dunham apartment downtown, with fake art made for the film on the walls of Ms. Simmons's studio downstairs. "Since the character of Siri wasn't really me, I didn't think it was appropriate for the art to be mine," Ms. Simmons said.

Photographs on the wall included empty rooms with dollhouse furniture—"sort of facsimiles, very simplified versions of things that I do," Ms. Simmons said. In the opening scene, her character photographs Nadine in a pair of shoes made of cake icing, standing in a miniature living room.

Now, with her daughter's first artistic breakthrough in the rearview, Ms. Simmons is having another one of her own with a new photography series. "The Love Doll: Days 1-30," which opens Tuesday at Salon 94 Bowery, features images of a high-end Japanese sex doll photo-



Above, Laurie Simmons with photos from her current show, 'The Love Doll: Days: 1-30' at her TriBeCa studio; below left, 'Day 8 (Lying On Bed)'; right, Ms. Simmons arranging a mockup of the show.



graphed in day-to-day scenarios—looking out at the snow in a parka and boots, lounging with a book, taking a bubble bath—all shot at Ms. Simmons's house in Connecticut.

A video shows the doll in full geisha makeup, set to a woman's voice singing Marlene Dietrich's

"Falling in Love Again" in Japanese-accented English. This is Ms. Simmons's first show of new work in the city since 2006.

"I felt that it was incredibly fresh even though she was using a language and a practice that she has owned and scavenged for some time. doing it in an en-



tirely new way and [with] a new intensity," said Salon 94 owner Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, who previously co-produced Ms. Simmons's film "The Music of Regret."

Though the Salon 94 show chronicles the doll on specific days—"Dav 6 (Winter)." "Dav 8

(Lying On Bed)"—creating the pictures sometimes took multiple days and often was unexpectedly challenging. Ms. Simmons spent one late fall day in a wet suit in the pool, trying to keep the doll underwater.

"It's kind of like my dream come true to have a life-size

doll," the 61-year-old Long Island native said. "But really my dream come true would be to have a life-size doll that I could move around the same way I could move a six-inch doll—the same mobility and plasticity."

Ms. Greenberg Rohatyn noted that the doll's size and uncanny looks can elicit a greater sense of empathy for the viewer than Ms. Simmons's miniatures might.

"You know that her earlier work, that those are dolls are supposed to be conceptual surrogates. [Here] there's a confusion," she said. "Is it a real girl or is it a doll? And its purpose is for that confusion. The moment of suspended disbelief plays into all these kinds of tricks."

Ms. Simmons began the series in the fall of 2009 while filming "Tiny Furniture," parts of which were shot in the Connecticut house. She joked that her family tends to be private by nature, but that Lena has gradually worn down the others' inhibitions.

"I think she acts more resistant to it than she actually was," Ms. Dunham said of making the film. "I just assumed it was going to happen."

Plus, having grown up with parents who are established artists, Ms. Dunham noted, being in "Tiny Furniture," "it's almost to me that it's a cool side project that she did."

In fact, "Tiny Furniture" has been a self-reflective experience for Ms. Simmons. In the film, the character of Aura discovers and reads her mothers post-college diaries—which happen to be Ms. Simmons's actual diaries.

"Seeing what Lena's going through and having Lena conjure up memories for me of what I went through makes me understand how important tenaciousness is," Ms. Simmons said. "Sometimes when you're young, the journey from one place to another, it almost feels prescribed. But from the point I am now, the only thing I can see is somehow I never gave up."