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Artifacts | Laurie Simmons's Love Doll

By [LINDA YABLONSKY](#)

Laurie Simmons, courtesy of Salon 94 Bowery Gallery “Day 30” from Laurie Simmons’s photo exhibit “The Love Doll: Days 1-30.”

Loneliness is like a disease that infects every waking moment of a person’s life with melancholy. Some cope by heading for the nearest bar or by creating imaginary friends. Others have pets. The more adventurous, perhaps, opt for a love doll — a life-size latex sex partner who never cheats, has just the right look and is always ready to play.

Now Laurie Simmons has cast a couple of love dolls in a delicious new role — as the nubile subjects of the photographs that make up her first exhibition with the [Salon 94 Bowery Gallery](#), where they do not appear to be dolls at all. Pictured outdoors in the snow, diving into a backyard pool, lounging at home in their underclothes, napping in the afternoon sun and toying with the family dog, they seem to be young girls amusing themselves in the privacy of their own home.

It’s impossible to tell their age or that they are not actually made of flesh and blood. If sex is the air, what comes across most clearly is their undisturbed innocence, which is the most unreal thing about them. Otherwise they seem utterly lifelike, with full breasts and dewy complexions, and seem sensitive to very human moods.

Photographed in Simmons’s 14-room, Cornwall, Conn., country home and in gorgeous natural light, they look like models posing for the pages of a fashion magazine. A doll in one picture is nude, save for her makeup and the 20 pounds of costume jewelry draped over her body. In another, she reclines on a window seat in a wedding dress. But the most telltale picture in the series, titled “The Love Doll: Days 1-30,” shows one doll in the cardboard box that brought her to Simmons’s studio from a factory in Japan.

“It was both stunning and anti-climactic to open the box,” Simmons said of its arrival. “I didn’t know what I was going to do with it — the doll is the size of a person. All I knew is that I had to animate it in some way, and document the process from Day 1, until I got comfortable with it. And I’m still not.”

Simmons has made a career of photographing dolls of all sorts, from tiny figurines to ventriloquist dummies, setting them in the color-coordinated interiors of a dollhouse (or a brothel) or outdoors in backyard swimming pools. Her dolls, both male and female, function as human surrogates dreaming their way out of situations they would rather not

be in — cleaning the toilet or looking for love in all the wrong places. But after she made “The Music of Regret,” a 2006 film that brought to her life her iconic “Objects on Legs” pictures and featured Meryl Streep as a speed dater whose suitors are Simmons’s ventriloquist dummies, she wasn’t sure what direction to go in next.

She discovered the love dolls a couple of years ago during a visit to Tokyo with her daughter Grace (then a teenager), the younger of her two children with the painter Carroll Dunham. The showroom, she said, was an unsavory place to take her daughter, who took it in stride. “If you grew up with a mother who took pictures of dolls since you were a child, you don’t ask too many tough questions,” Simmons noted. The factory customizes each doll to suit individual tastes. “You can choose everything from the face to skin color to breast size and hairstyle,” Simmons said, “even the genitalia,” which came separately wrapped.

Her first doll had a face that appealed to her most. But working with it wasn’t all that simple. The dolls weigh nearly 60 pounds, and though they have joints and limbs that move, proved to be not all that pliable. “This is the most excruciating work I’ve ever done,” Simmons said. “It really wasn’t fun. All of these years of making setups that are smaller in scale, I had much more mobility. It was easy to change things around. But the love doll is so heavy that it’s difficult to dress. I had my assistant, who’s the same size, lie on the floor and then I tried to duplicate the position. A slight move of a foot or hand could change the whole picture.”

After working with the first doll for several months, Simmons ordered a second, one with a face she felt was less specifically Asian. Each required a great deal of preparation. It took time to shop for the right bathing suit, the right swimming pool. She completed the series only last week, when she made the short video now playing in the gallery’s street window. It provides dreamy front and back views of a doll made up and dressed as a geisha. Its soundtrack, a version of the Marlene Dietrich classic “Falling in Love Again,” is sung in nasal, accented English by a Japanese vocalist.

Like the rest of the show, it’s entrancing. But Simmons is definitely on a roll. Earlier this year, she made her feature film debut as an actor in “Tiny Furniture,” a critically acclaimed, semi-autobiographical movie by her elder daughter, Lena, in which Simmons plays the obsessive artist-mother of a recent college graduate longing for love and direction — kind of like one of her mother’s dolls. Simmons also has a cameo on an episode of “Gossip Girl” that will be broadcast in April. But it is the love dolls that consume her now, and the project is far from over.

“I wanted to do something in every room of the house,” she said, “and I’m not nearly done with that. That’s why the first photo is called ‘Day One.’ And these pictures feel so much like a continuation of what I’ve always done that I haven’t caught up to what they

mean yet.”

“Laurie Simmons – The Love Doll: Days 1-30” continues through March 26 at Salon 94 Bowery, 243 Bowery.