

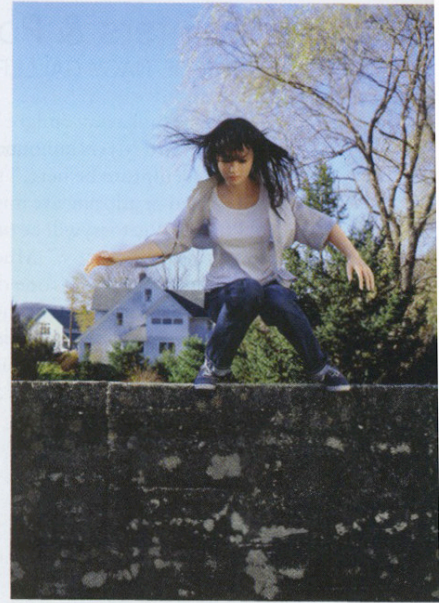
unexpected poignancy from an object that is, by definition, a caricature.

The body at the center of these new large-scale, color-saturated photographs is a beautifully crafted (and disturbingly expressive) custom-order Japanese “love doll.” The figure immediately stands out formally from the ones with which Simmons’s work is typically associated, simply by virtue of its scale; indeed, the gallery release makes a point of noting that this is the artist’s “first attempt to portray a life-sized non-human subject.” But the change is about much more than physical dimensions: By situating the doll plainly in the real world (in her own home, in fact), Simmons has significantly raised the emotional stakes, opening up herself and her project to far richer and less settled psychological terrain, and engineering a kind of “animation” frequently missing from her more physically and psychologically attenuated stagings. This personalization dramatically increases the susceptibility of the viewer—and, crucially, of the artist herself—to her subject’s disquieting charms.

Apparently, the doll arrived in a box with separately packaged female genitalia (naturally) and engagement ring (gulp), and Simmons manages to steer a path between these two operative poles, using the strange pathos inherent in her subject’s emotional function to temper the obvious salaciousness of its physical one. The artist, herself the mother of two daughters, positions the doll less within a frame of sexual desire than within one of maternal instinct, and the various settings within which she stages it privilege the emotional life of the “girl” over any accommodation she might offer a prospective “suitor.”

Although the intended chronology of the series is somewhat hampered by the show’s inclusion of only ten works from the ostensible thirty, seemingly chosen more for visual spectacle than narrative linearity, there are signs of a progression in the “relationship” between the artist and her subject from the day of its unboxing until the arrival of a second doll, which makes its appearance in the sequence’s final two images. In photos such as *The Love Doll/Day 6 (Winter)*, 2009, which features the girl dressed like an upscale horse-country teen waiting to join a Christmas-break sleigh ride, or *The Love Doll/Day 14 (Candy)* and *The Love Doll/Day 22 (20 Pounds of Jewelry)*, both 2010, which together frame an adolescent moment where one world of sweet shapes and colors begins to melt into another, the artist sidelines the sexuality of the doll with a kind of wistful, motherly affection. Even when the doll is shown in its natural state, as in *The Love Doll/Day 29 (Nude with Dog)*, 2010—the single such image from the suite chosen for the gallery—there is a kind of normative innocence in the setting, with its crisp white wainscoting and tasteful wallpaper, that inoculates the scene against even the slightest whiff of perversion. This, finally, may be the most intriguing aspect of the project: the way in which the domestic, for so long in Simmons’s work a locus of lurking unease and psycho-spatial artifice, here seems to be positioned as a kind of normalizing, stabilizing force. Only in one image, *The Love Doll/Day 25 (The Jump)*, 2010—the exhibition’s finest—can one detect signs of possible dissatisfaction. In it, the doll is shown at the top of a stone wall, her hair caught by the breeze as she prepares to leap, and yet the question of whether she’s leaving home or returning to it remains provocatively open.

—Jeffrey Kastner



Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll/Day 25 (The Jump)*, 2010, color photograph, 70 x 52 1/2". From the series, "The Love Dolls 1–30," 2009–.

Laurie Simmons

SALON 94 BOWERY

Perhaps, to paraphrase the old Freudian misquote, it’s possible for a doll to sometimes just be a doll—but certainly not in Laurie Simmons’s work. The photographer and filmmaker has built a thirty-year practice by drafting a town’s worth of figurines, mannequins, and puppets into formal and symbolic roles, typically deploying these human surrogates in miniaturized, dollhouse-like scenarios designed variously to dramatize the claustrophobia of the domestic, unearth the uncanny in the interpersonal, and tease out the myriad varieties of desire and disenchantment she detects hovering around the furniture of everyday life. These tableaux have usually read as persuasive—if often rather drily distanced—exercises in the evocative potential of the photographic still life, and have tended, in their Pictures generation way, to aim first for cerebral, rather than emotional, impact. All the more striking, then, is the turn suggested by the artist’s new series, “The Love Doll: Days 1–30,” 2009–(the opening of which marked the official bow of the Bowery outpost of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn’s rapidly multiplying Salon 94 franchise), which conjures remarkable depth of feeling and