

Laurie Simmons – Gothenburg Art Museum March 3, 2012

What always intrigued me with Simmons' images is the persistent focus on domestic space, from the distant, almost coolness, of the early unpopulated black and white doll house interiors and experimental still lifes, to the lush and rich hues of the first interiors in color, to the life-size and life-like domestic sets in the most recent series. The home is an arena where fantasies and desires, fears and anxieties play out. Home can be a symbol of coziness and comfort just as much as a symbol of repression and regimes of power. In much of Simmons' early work, her use of interiors and props evoke post world war II America – a rich and productive country, the champion of the war, at a time of optimism and opportunities that promised the possibility of a good life. This is a time when family values were reaffirmed and the ideal home was the suburban house with a white picket fence. In an uncanny way, Simmons captures the idea of the perfect house, the perfect home where everything is always in order, in much the same way that this period was portrayed in advertising, in magazines, and on television in the 1950s and early 60s. Using traditional girlhood toys – dolls and dollhouses with their props – Simmons' work alludes to what may be hidden beneath the surface of these interiors. Her images speak about consumer culture and especially the traditional roles of women within this culture.

In the early 1980s, Simmons made a series of color-coordinated interiors that are especially unsettling. Simmons placed dolls posing on a small stage and projected slides of monochromatic interiors on a small rear screen behind the dolls. The colors of the dolls and their clothes perfectly match the colors of the interiors in a disturbing way. Simmons has talked about, in a different context, the idea of "being subsumed by a place, a location, a role and about fading into and finally vanishing into the background." This notion of the home as a place that almost erases, removes, personality rather than expressing it, resonates, especially today, and not least in Sweden, with the wide spread obsession with home improvement and the idea of the beautiful house where the pressure to possess a picture perfect home becomes a prison, a cage of status and of high level conformity – the anxiety of not fitting in.

Simmons belongs to what is generally called the Pictures Generation, a generation of artists emerging in the mid-70s. It is often said that this generation was the first to grow up in a televised world, a world permeated with mass-media images. These artists chose to appropriate commercial images – advertisement, fashion photography, images on TV and in film – in order to reveal underlying power structures and to expose how these images shape the way we see ourselves and how we perceive the world. Cindy Sherman challenged gender stereotypes; Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger undermined ideological catchphrases and advertising slogans; and Sarah Charlesworth deconstructed the imagery of newspapers.

In this particular story, the use of color photography has an important place. Art photography had just been accepted into high culture and art photography at this time was to a very great extent in a serious black and white, while color represented both glossy commercialism and the amateurism of Kodak. But it was exactly these commercial associations that suited artists of this generation. Photography was not required to be precious and color photography's commercial and fictional connotations were helpful in the work of reinforcing the idea that any image always lies or at least

never tells the whole truth. As we see in the exhibition, Simmons used color photography from an early stage. It helped her expand her interest in light and patterns – patterns and colors were important in her interiors from the very beginning – and it helped her develop her intimate and sometimes dreamlike scenarios with an emotional impact that truly distinguishes her work among the artists of this generation.

When I was the curator of photography at the Brooklyn Museum I always enjoyed juxtaposing Simmons' work in the collection with 19th and early 20th century American painting, mainly women's portraits and domestic scenes in our galleries called American Identities. Simmons' images often have an element of exaggeration and fantasy, which together with the underlying social critique made these juxtapositions both jarring and meaningful. At the same time, her images are also often understated and very real. Sometimes the sets almost look like real places, and Simmons' attention to light and her ability to create and control spatial qualities – to imbue the images with a feeling of timelessness – made these combinations seem almost natural.

Today, seeing the earlier work together with her latest series, shot with a life-size doll in her own house, it feels as if Simmons has come full circle, pushing the boundaries of her previous work. As we follow the doll over 30 days, from being unwrapped and taken out of her box – woman as pure commodity – to wrapping herself joylessly in jewelry or to interacting – naked and disinterested – with her dog, we see Simmons mastering, on full scale, light and the art of charging domestic space with a psychological energy that has been her hallmark since the very beginning.

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