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Artist Laurie Simmons' latest work is a blindingly brilliant critique of femininity



DAVID BERRY | November 14, 2014 2:17 PM ET

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Laurie Simmons has spent most of her career arranging dolls, painstakingly posing them to bring out whatever *je ne sais quoi* she's currently interested in. So you can imagine her excitement when she found dolls that would take care of the posing themselves. "It feels like I've gone through some strange dimension," she explains, with just enough awe to really mean it, "where I can speak to a doll or a character and they'll actually respond. There's this wonderful, surreal quality to shooting that."

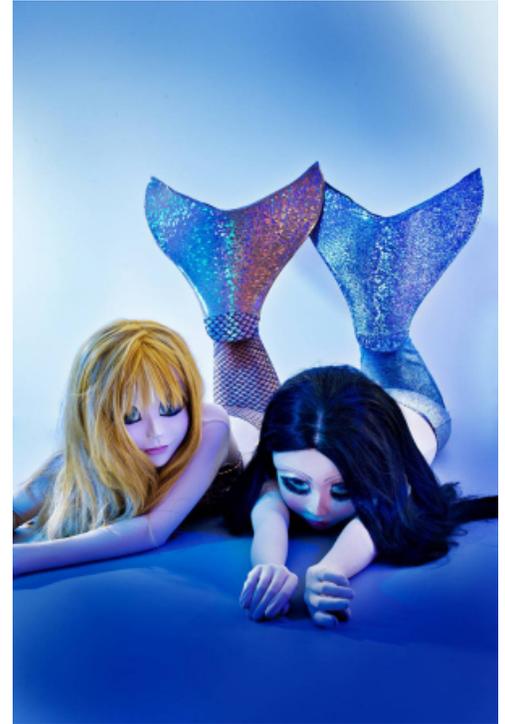
Surreal as it may seem, it's also more grounded than you might think: The renowned art photographer — coming to the Art Gallery of Ontario this weekend to judge the Aimia AGO Photography Prize and discuss her career with novelist Sheila Heti — has not discovered A.I., nor magic, but rather the primarily Japanese subculture of Kigurumi. An offshoot of cosplay, it features devoted practitioners who dress up, from vinyl-covered toes to plasticized wigs, like dolls.

Featured prominently in her most recent show at New York's Salon 94 gallery — *Kigurumi, Dollers and How We See* — the photographs of humans hidden under doll masks is as much a natural progression for Simmons as a complete reversal of her usual

concerns. Shows like her early Black Series (which features recreated works of art among doll furniture), *Walking and Lying Objects* (everything from toilets to guns teetering on doll legs), *The Instant Decorator* (domestic scenes composed of cut-out magazine photos) and even the recent *The Love Doll* (featuring highly realistic sex dolls in everyday scenes) are all about creating the illusion of life, playing with our tendency to project humanity, an inner life, onto everything we see. The notion that people would want to do the exact opposite, obliterate their reality and be something artificial, “was a dream come true — and almost too much to take,” Simmons says.

And it’s an idea that she admits is occupying more and more of her mind. Simmons started moving away from her usual work with miniatures right around the time her daughter, Lena Dunham, made a film, *Tiny Furniture*, that featured the practice prominently. From there it’s been a relatively quick leap from human scale, with *The Love Doll*, to actual humans.

‘When you’re in costume, you’re a little bit enslaved, dependent on being lead around a little bit’



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Her recent work — we talked just after she finished a shoot that will eventually be shown at the Jewish Museum in New York — has taken it a step further, doing away with the doll dress-up and instead focusing on women who have painted their eyelids to look like open eyes. Inspired by another chiefly Japanese trend — “They come from being a total tourist and visual scavenger of Japanese culture,” Simmons says — they are some of Simmons’ most haunting, potent works, drawing you in with a just-barely-perceptible uncanniness.

“In Kigurumi, you can’t really see through the eyeholes of the mask, so part of the situation is that you need to be lead around,” Simmons explains of the natural evolution from one to the other. “That would make you feel more vulnerable, and more helpless. When you’re in costume, you’re a little bit enslaved, dependent on being lead around a little bit.”

There’s also no small bit of irony in being blinded for the purposes of turning yourself into an almost purely visual spectacle, removing sight so you can be seen. Especially in the painted-eye pictures — the *How We See* part of her series — it also seems to be a fairly incisive critique of femininity in our society, a space where women are still strongly encouraged to be visual objects without strong viewpoints of their own.

“It turns back on how women are seen, how they see themselves: the way that women kind of need more and more armour to interact with the world,” Simmons says. “I also thought about it as a phenomenon of the age we live in. More and more of our life is lived online, and more and more we’re interacting with people whose identities are unclear to us. We don’t really know who or what we’re seeing. There’s a kind of blindness and a kind of lack of clarity with the way we live now that’s stunning. It’s stupefying.”

'I often tell my students, when I'm teaching, how much sympathy I have for them that they live in this world'

It's also an ultimately kind of odd dovetail with an artist whose work has often appropriated the retro and decidedly analogue — old housekeeping magazines, faded little plastic dolls, all that tiny furniture — though it may ultimately say something about the amount of induced artificiality we've allowed into our lives.

Still, if Simmons has found her own way of wading into the digital world, she is glad that the bulk figuring out how to live in that space will be left to another generation. She points out that one of the things that got her to pursue the *How We See* works was seeing how often they popped up on people's Instagram feeds (particularly after artist Richard Prince included one of them in a recent show of his that was all paintings of Instagram photos). Although Simmons admits to liking the photo-sharing service as an image-maker, she does occasionally feel paralyzed to live in a world that has a steadily expanding stream of made images available at its fingertips literally every moment of every day.

"I can't believe that it won't kill us," she says, letting out a soft laugh. "I often tell my students, when I'm teaching, how much sympathy I have for them that they live in this world. What do you do in a world with this many images when you want to be an image maker?"

"I trust that, like every generation before them, they'll find a way to do something new," she continues, giving it a little pause, "but I'm glad that's not the challenge I was born into."

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