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Laurie Simmons/Courtesy the artist and Salon 94

▼ Art

How We See Laurie Simmons

The *Voice* catches up with the Pictures Generation photographer as she debuts new work at the Jewish Museum **BY LILLY LAMPE**

A year ago Laurie Simmons opened an exhibition of photographs at Salon 94 that featured men and women engaged in costume play, a/k/a cosplay, a role-playing genre that ranges from comic-fandom to sexual fetish or an avenue for cross-dressing. Simmons focused on kigurumi, a Japanese version of cosplay in which participants dress as dolls. Her costumes were complete: Latex bodysuits cover the epidermis; masks and wigs obscure natural features and even the gender of her subjects. Tucked amid these uncanny images of dolls come to life were two portraits of bright-eyed, un concealed women, freckles and all, smiling as if for a high school portrait. Though a seemingly benign addition against the false flesh of the kigurumi, the portraits revealed a trompe l'oeil with puns to make the head spin. The models' eyes are closed; their gazes, the gleaming irises, those metaphoric windows into the soul, were mini-paintings applied to the eyelid.

The two portraits were a prelude to the series "How We See," on view in Simmons's solo exhibition — "more of a project," she says — at the Jewish Museum. "I often do that," she tells the *Voice* the morning after the opening party. "I make a body of work and exhibit it and at the last minute make a work or two that speaks to where I'm going next." If the six photographs at the Jewish Museum defy this statement, it's because Simmons is still very much mid-series. In fact, the night prior Simmons had left her own party to go back to the studio. She shared a preview from that shoot, a cellphone shot of a redhead with

an Anna Karina-esque bob wearing a shirt embroidered with a pattern that mirrored her haircut. The coincidence delighted Simmons. "Not all shoots are pleasant, some are really tough and tedious," Simmons says. "But we — the very small team I work with — love making these pictures."

The pictures on view depict six diverse fashion models, all clothed in white apparel by New York designer Rachel Antonoff, against color-saturated backgrounds in varying hues, "gazing" out into the room with masklike painted eyes. The references are myriad — the art-theory concept of the gendered gaze; the vivid backgrounds of Andy Warhol's screen prints; the photography techniques she learned from her late friend Jimmy DeSana; YouTube makeup tutorials; and Bruce Weber's 2014 ad campaign for Barneys, "Brothers, Sisters, Sons & Daughters," which starred transgender models posing among family and friends. Two of Simmons's models are trans women — though good luck figuring out which. The models are only visible from the chest up, leaving the focus on the fine bone structure, soft hair, and meticulous makeup of these women, a testament to expanding notions of female beauty. Subtle shifts in chin tilt become a vital element, lending the images the gravitas of Renaissance painting. In the ornate former dining room of the Warburg Mansion, home to the Jewish Museum since the late 1940s, the photographs, nearly six feet high, read like portraits of saints.

At the opening, Simmons was surprised at how many people found "How We See" confusing. "A number of people assumed I had painted on top of photographs — and

"I'm not that good of a painter," she says. In fact, the eyes are the work of the two makeup artists she worked with, James Kaliardos and Landy Dean. You can tell who did which by the eyelashes: Dean painted lashes directly onto the models, while Kaliardos applied false lashes. "I thought it was a really obvious statement and a really obvious method of working, but it turns out to be more obscure," Simmons elaborates. "This convention of eye painting is all over YouTube, all over fashion. People think of Cocteau, people think about so many things that have already existed. Sometimes as an artist you can take four or three elements and combine them

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in your own way and somehow you've come up with something that's your own. It never fails to amaze me." A facility with readymade elements has been a defining aspect of Simmons's impressive career. She came of age with artists of the Pictures Generation, a group that includes Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, who refined the visual borrowing of Pop Art into powerful social critique. Simmons made her debut with a solo exhibition at Artists Space in the late 1970s with carefully lit photographs of 1950s dolls in miniature interiors; the images cast an eerie lens on idealizations of midcentury housewifery. In the ensuing decades her subjects became more minimal, the themes increasingly dis-

turbed. Simmons began creating and photographing humanoid monstrosities, inanimate objects turned bipeds — like a handgun sprouting pale legs or a dollhouse teetering on lovely gams. "How We See" continues this experimental mixing of human and inanimate materials, with the visual switch reduced to the barest element.

Viewers would do well to consider it an update to reflect the digital age. Simmons cites Instagram and Photoshop as influences, for their ubiquity but also for their discord with reality. And she speaks from personal experience. "I've been photographed for magazines and not recognized myself," she says. "Now I ask the photographer not to Photoshop me."

Though she has long been a prominent figure in the rarefied world of New York artists, it has been the ascent of her eldest daughter — Lena Dunham, who writes, directs, and stars in the HBO series *Girls* — that has made her a celebrity. (Simmons is married to the painter Carroll Dunham.) Though Lena's stardom has shifted the rhetoric around Simmons, the photographer prefers to orient the lens the other way around. "When we had our first child 28 years ago, I refused to speak about being a mother and being an artist, because male artists weren't asked about being fathers," she notes. "As time passed I realized other women felt they had to make a choice" between being a mother and being an artist. "My generation was one of the first to do both. I'd rather be an example of an artist who has been able to make work and have a family and come out about being a mother, than not discuss it."

Despite her visibility, "How We See" is Simmons's first solo show at a major Manhattan museum. The subject brings her no remorse. "I'm 65 years old and I feel like all of the stuff that hasn't happened to me means like it's all out in front of me," she says. "I expect to be doing this a really long time and am just really gearing up. I have a lot to look forward to. Why look back and focus on all the things that haven't happened yet?"

Laurie Simmons: *How We See*
1109 Fifth Avenue (at 92nd Street)
212-423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org
Through August 9

Eyes wide: Lindsay (Gold), Tatiana (Pink), Ajak (Violet), and Edie (Green)