

## **LAURIE SIMMONS**

### ***Kigurumi and Dollers***

21 May – 29 June 2014

Opening: Tuesday 20 May, 6 – 8pm

Laurie Simmons is famous for her photographs of dolls—miniatures, mannequins, sex dolls, kigurumi mask dolls, puppets, doll houses, friends posing as dolls, dollers, etc.—the list goes on. Dolls, the artist has found, provide a telling lens through which we can objectively ponder the human condition. Simmons, who has been active in New York since the 1970s, bears an exhibition history as exhaustive as her inquiry into the human surrogate. The artist has used the doll as a vehicle to contemplate issues surrounding gender, normativity, and agency throughout the last four decades, with prescient updates as time marches on.

Much of Simmons' early work placed female dolls in miniature household interiors, creating charged tableaux reiterating the quiet frustrations of historically female domestic workers in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America. We see a miniature woman awkwardly bending over next to a bathtub in 'New Bathroom/Woman Standing' (1978/87), or in a jarring of scale, a small doll apparently shoving a giant tube of lipstick against the backdrop of life-sized wallpaper in 'Interiors: Pushing Lipstick #1' (1978). Subsequent series in the late 80s and 90s featured comparably 'male' ventriloquist dummies either activated by a man, full of vim (see the 1986 series 'Ventriloquism'), or in moments of eerie lifelessness, captured with a garish flash, such as 'Clothes Make the Man (You Better Believe It)' (1990/91). Simmons has photographed friends donning gargantuan costumes of cakes and guns, miniaturising their legs (such as 'Walking Cake' or 'Walking Gun,' both 1989). She has made her own dollhouse, such as 2000's 'Kaleidoscope House,' and has even produced her own feature film, 'The Music of Regret,' which featured Meryl Streep and premiered in 2005.

Simmons came of age in the generation after the heyday of second-wave feminism, and took an approach counter to the directness endemic to the early 1960s. In a recent interview with me, Simmons suggested that it's the responsibility of the younger generations to 'eat' it's elders, which is effectively what she and her cohorts—who are generally lumped into the clumsy 'Pictures Generation' moniker—have done. Rather than utilise the rhetoric of feminist critique, Simmons creates tableaux that evoke an emotive understanding of issues both female and

universal. We see loneliness, alienation, and awkwardness in her photographs. Although aesthetically very disparate, Simmons' work brings to mind the paintings of American artist Maureen Gallace. Similarly, Gallace's work depicts scenery that could appear innocuous at first glance. She paints seaside cottages and farmhouses with verdant backgrounds—yet, importantly, all but few of these

buildings have no windows or doors, confining its residents inside. Simmons, like Gallace, casts the home as a site in which female agency is caught, potentially with no escape.

Simmons' most recent work trades in inquiries of 20<sup>th</sup> century culture with that of an age dictated by advanced technology and the World Wide Web. The internet emancipated sexuality insofar as it effectively detached gender from the corpus, specifically amidst social interaction and sexual play: online, you can be a 60-year-old man posing as a 13-year-old girl, or a 13-year-old girl posing as a 60-year-old man, or a 13-year-old girl posing as a 60-year-old man posing as a blue squirrel with a huge dick. While the possibilities are endless, Simmons focused on 'doller' cosplay subculture. That Simmons' recent portraits have extended to people donning complex doll costumes, which are equally complicated to produce as they are to put on and take off, evinces the passive comportment of the female human body. While the woman tends to diminish her body through compartmentalising gestures in public space (see the Tumblr 'Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train' should you need any evidence); in private, sexual space, the passive woman is a gift to be ceremoniously unwrapped.

Here's where things get a little hairy if you're unfamiliar with the rabbit hole of cosplay, itself a portmanteau of 'costume play.' The Japanese term 'kigurumi' describes a person dressed in a full-body costume of a cartoon character or animal. Simmons, naturally, was drawn to 'dollers,' who wear latex kigurumi masks emulating female anime characters. To be a proper doller, you must wear a kigurumi doll mask with a full-body latex suit in order to adequately mirror the matte quality of a cartoon character's skin. Simmons purchased several Kigurumi masks intricately painted by an artist in Russia and cast models to wear them, latex suit and all, in variably sexualised poses. 'Redhead/Pink & Black Outfit/Orange Room' (2014) captures a doller wearing heels, pink thigh-high socks and a miniskirt while tugging down a pink shirt and gazing into the camera. The photograph 'Blonde/Acqua Sweater/Dog' (2014) depicts a blonde doller holding, in a bathtub, a skeptical-looking dog, while another, 'Purple Hair/Purple Coat/Snow' (2014) shows a darker-skinned kigurumi taking a selfie.

While domestic frustrations largely remain a female issue, Simmons' interest in such online subculture seems a prescient front. Those at odds with culturally determined ideas about normativity once sought to alleviate their frustrations in physical safe spaces: in the 60s and 70s, for example, we had women-only groups and gay cruising zones located in specific sites. With the advent of the internet, much of this counter-cultural activity has transitioned to online space—take for example cosplay and doller subculture, to name only two. Simmons' photographs reiterate the weirdly beautiful agency in such subcultures and the tragedy of the repressive cultural conditions that precipitate them.

*Karen Archey*