

Laurie Simmons

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/simmons>



Born

1949, Long Island, NY

Education

B.F.A., Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA

Lives and Works

New York, NY

Biography

Laurie Simmons stages photographs and films with paper dolls, finger puppets, ventriloquist dummies, and costumed dancers as “living objects,” animating a dollhouse world suffused with nostalgia and colored by an adult’s memories, longings, and regrets. Simmons’s work blends psychological, political, and conceptual approaches to art-making, transforming photography’s propensity to objectify people, especially women, into a sustained **critique** of the medium. Mining childhood memories and media constructions of gender roles, her photographs are charged with an eerie, dreamlike quality. On first glance her works often appear whimsical, but there is a disquieting aspect to Simmons’s child’s play: Her characters struggle over identity in an environment in which the value placed on consumption, designer objects, and domestic space is inflated to absurd proportions. Simmons’s first film, *The Music of Regret* (2006), extends her photographic practice to performance, incorporating musicians, professional puppeteers, Alvin Ailey dancers, Hollywood cinematographer Ed Lachman, and actress Meryl Streep.

Media and Materials

photography, film

Key Words and Ideas

animation, characters, domestic settings, narrative, **popular culture**, puppets

DISCUSSION

Before Viewing

■ Start a conversation about the similarities and differences between “high” art forms and “popular” art forms. Make a list of media and practices that fall into each category and consider what distinguishes one from the other. Why and by whom has the distinction been made? Do they ever overlap? If so, how?

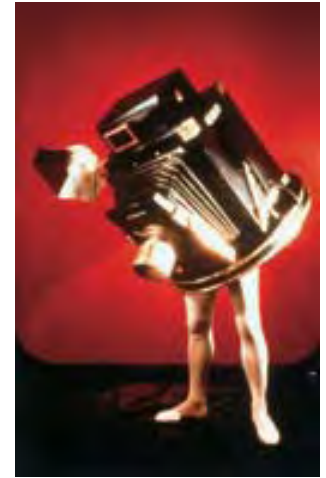
■ Compare and contrast characters from a variety of sources such as illustrations and cartoons, television, film, and theater. What are the key components of characterization? How do writers, actors, puppeteers, and animators develop a character through narrative? How do still images convey narrative differently than live action or film?

After Viewing

■ Why do you think Simmons makes a distinction between being a photographer and “using photography as a tool”? How can a tool or technique direct an artist’s ideas? How can ideas determine media choices?



The Music of Regret (Meryl), 2006. Flex print, 40 x 40 inches. © Laurie Simmons, courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York.



Walking Camera I, Jimmy the Camera (Color), 1987. Cibachrome print, 64 x 46 inches. © Laurie Simmons, courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York.

■ Simmons cites influences ranging from such painters as Manet and Matisse to fashion photography, *Life* magazine, and old TV commercials. Describe the influences and references you see in her photographs as well as the film, *The Music of Regret* (2006). What influences your work?

■ Describing the making of *The Music of Regret*, Simmons says, “I got a chance to revisit my work and figure out what would happen if the characters started to talk to me, to sing and dance.” Discuss how the transformation from still to moving images changes the impact of Simmons’ work. How does the film re-examine or reinvent her earlier subject matter?

ACTIVITIES

■ Simmons says that when she first began using photography as a tool, the fact that “you didn’t have to be super-skilled to pick up a camera and use it . . . it was so completely liberating.” Choose a medium or tool that you have never used before to reinterpret a piece you originally made in another more familiar one. Document your process and the results.

■ Create a character or self-portrait in the form of a puppet. Write a monologue that describes a specific emotional state and stage a performance with accompanying music.

■ Select a painting or photograph that suggests a specific narrative. Create a written story or drawing that reflects what happened five minutes before and five minutes after what you see in the image. Alternatively, follow one of the subjects back in time from the moment depicted and then forward.