Lars and the Real Girl Vs. Laurie Simmons:
Titillation, Sexuality and Provocation in the Utilization of Dolls
and Mannequins in Contemporary Photography

by Philip Krejcarek
October, 2014

“I wasn’t looking for this doll, it kind of found me.”

- Laurie Simmons on her purchase of a Japanese love doll.

Remember when the only sex dolls were inflatable? The industry certainly has evolved. Now, even established photographers such as Laurie Simmons are purchasing them. Life-size dolls are now poseable with skeletal infrastructures, silicone skin and realistic eyes (in a variety of shades). They are available with a detachable face of your choice. Of course, these amenities come with a cost. High-end sex dolls range in price from $4000 to $6000—by no means, a cheap thrill.

Cinema has used dolls in their storytelling since the time of the Surrealists. More recently, the 2007 film, Lars and the Real Girl, readdresses the sexual interest in and passion for dolls and mannequins. Nancy Oliver received an Academy Award nomination in the "Best Writing - Original Screenplay" category. The lead actor, Ryan Gosling, was nominated for the Golden Globe Award, "Best Actor in a Motion Picture Comedy.” In the film, Gosling plays a rather socially inept man living in his brother’s garage. He purchases the sex doll, “Bianca,” online, sits her in a wheel chair and introduces her as a missionary visitor with some health issues. At first shocked, the brother and his wife, as well as the
small community in which they live, embrace the notion of Lars’ “real” girlfriend. Eventually, Bianca becomes more ill and dies. Lars, along with those that have come to know her, attend the funeral.

At the service, character Reverend Bock eulogizes, “Lars asked us not to wear black today. He did so to remind us that this is no ordinary funeral. We are here to celebrate Bianca's extraordinary life. From her wheelchair, Bianca reached out and touched us all, in ways we could never have imagined. She was a teacher. She was a lesson in courage. And Bianca loved us all. Especially Lars. Especially him.”

(Fig. 1. *Lars and the Real Girl*, film, 2007.)

There have been other films about sex dolls. In the 2002 French film, *Monique*, the husband orders a sex doll after his wife leaves him. *Love Object*, from 2003, depicts the male lead making an Internet order for, “Nikki.” More recently, in the 2012 television episode of *House*, “We Need the Eggs,” a hospitalized patient has his sex doll accompany him to the hospital.

Where do these dolls come from? Many are manufactured by Abyss Creations in San Marcos, California. Sculptor, Matt McMullen, created the first mannequin and founded the company, Realdoll. He began production in 1996. Today, there are three females and one male doll available, which can be ordered with 10 different face options. To date, there have been 4000 dolls manufactured and sold. A number of photographers have gone there to photograph them. Erotic fashion photographer, Helmut Newton (1920-2004), asked Playboy magazine to photograph at the Realdoll factory. He was given the assignment in
2002, but they never ran the photographs in the magazine. There was some question about
the appropriateness. Eventually, some of the images were published in their 2005 book,
*Playboy Helmut Newton*. In 2002, UK Channel Five, produced, *Guys and Dolls*, a
documentary film about men who purchase and live with sex dolls. These individuals are
often called “iDollators” and network with each other online at the website, *The Doll Forum*
(http://www.dollforum.com/forum/).

(Fig. 2. Realdoll website, http://www.realgirl.com.)

Contemporary photographer, Laurie Simmons (b.1954), utilized dolls early on in her
work, where she often addressed feminist themes about women’s role in society. In 2009,
she visited Japan where she came upon an advertisement for “love dolls.” She ordered a
doll that she has photographed in a variety of outfits, poses and locations, including in a
image from each day of shooting. As the series progressed, she purchased and included a
second doll into the photographs. Towards the end of the series, the look of the doll
transformed from a more generic American woman to an Asian one. In the last photograph,
she posed her studio assistant, who has a Geisha tattoo on her back, with the doll.

“I really, in the end, had to turn a blind eye to it. I found what I wanted in terms of
prop. I both ignored and denied what the doll was created for. The box that arrived with the
genitals and lubricant were put into deep storage.” - Laurie Simmons

(Fig. 3. Laurie Simmons. *The Love Doll/Day 25 (The Jump)*, color photograph.
Koyama Gallery/Wilkinson Gallery, 2012.)
Another photographer, Amber Hawk Swanson (b.1980), had a life size doll made at Realdoll to resemble her own body and face. The cost of the doll rose to $12,000, due to the custom processes of scanning her face. She chose a body type that looked the closest to hers. She named it, “Amber Doll.” It took nine months from the first negotiations to the time of delivery. (Note: She ordered before the release of the film, Lars and the Real Girl.) Swanson picked up the doll in California and drove to Las Vegas where the two were married in a chapel. She has interacted with it in both video performances and still images.

In 2007, she documented the creation process at the Realdoll factory in the video, The Making-Of Amber Doll. In her still photographs there is a narcissistic uneasiness. Swanson wears the same clothes while interacting with, embracing and carrying the doll. They have matching tattoos on their wrists. The real Amber’s tattoo has the word “Bully,” while the doll has “Prey.” In 2008, she placed Amber in a funeral casket as part of the exhibition, “To Have, To Hold, And To Violate: Amber and Doll (Funerary Installation),” at Locust Projects, in Miami, Florida. Strangely, during the exhibition visitors damaged the doll while she lay in her casket. Swanson used the remains of Amber Doll in the making of “Tilikum,” a sculpture of a bull orca from SeaWorld Orlando.

“I commissioned the production of a life-like sex doll, a RealDoll, made of a poseable PVC skeleton and silicone flesh, in my exact likeness. My doll, Amber Doll, began as a Styrofoam print-out of a digital scan of my head. Her face was then custom-sculpted and later combined with the doll manufacturer's existing, ‘Body #8’ female doll mold.” - Amber Hawk Swanson
In 2013, shortly after graduating from Rhode Island School of Design, Martín Gutierrez (b.1989) exhibited photographs of himself at the Ryan Lee Gallery, in New York City. The images portrayed four female sex dolls that he named, Ebony, Luxx, Mimi, and Raquel.

“I think of my work as documentations of transformation and performance. While gender is undoubtedly always a question in my work, I don’t see it as a boundary.” - Martín Gutierrez

In 2014, Yale University Press published, *The Erotic Doll: A Modern Fetish*, by Marquard Smith, which examines the use of erotic dolls in fine art. Included are such artists as Oskar Kokoschka, Marcel Duchamp and Hans Bellmer. A photograph of Man Ray’s mannequin with a birdcage on her head was chosen for the cover.

were used as tables in a cocktail lounge. The naked mannequins were cast white forms except for their colored head and pubic hair. The male clients at the bar place glasses of drugged milk upon them. On the independent film side, Todd Hayne's bizarre film, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1983), depicts the Carpenter family as Barbie dolls. Karen doesn’t do so well. Her real-life anorexia equates easily to the Barbie ideal.

Following is a survey of still photographers who have utilized dolls and mannequins in their work and who provoke questions as to their intentions. Are their reasons different from those in cinema? In the case of *Lars and the Real Girl* and other recent films, the discussion is about finding a substitute for relationships. Clearly, in the case of Laurie Simmons, there is another motivation. But, in Amber Hawk Swanson’s work, the meaning is more ambiguous. Are the purposes as diverse as the photographers who have used them?

**Dolls in Photography**

From antique dolls to Barbie and beyond, contemporary photographers have utilized dolls as vehicles for investigating a variety of topics:

California “F64 Group” photographer, Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976), was known for her still life photography, as well as her human figure and portrait work. In 1910, when studying photography in Germany, she purchased 3 dolls intending to photograph them with children in commercial portraits. For one of the dolls, she made a wig from her own hair. In her later fine art photographs, there are a number of antique dolls. Her 1970
photograph, *Doll with Head Between Legs*, is the most provocative depicting a headless doll missing one arm, who braces a pupil-less head between its feet.

(Fig. 6. Imogen Cunningham, *Doll with Head Between Legs*, black and white photograph, ca. 1970.)

German photographer, Ruth Bernhard (1905-2006), first immigrated to New York and then moved to California, where she also became associated with the “F64 Group.” Like Cunningham, she photographed the human figure, and also arranged studio still life compositions. These often included dolls and doll parts. She created a haunting image of a doll’s head being held in a mannequin’s hand, posed against a distant landscape of trees, water and mountains.

(Fig. 7. Ruth Bernhard, *Doll's Head*, black and white photograph, 1936.)

The German surrealist, Hans Bellmer (1902-1975), constructed bizarre dolls with wigs, glass eyes and exaggerated proportions, posed in various contortions. In 1934, his book, *The Doll (Die Puppe)*, was published anonymously. He later constructed a second doll with two sets of legs and pelvises joined at the waist. Bellmer photographed this doll both indoors and out. His prints were often hand colored, adding to their unnatural, yet erotic look.

(Fig. 8. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, black and white photograph, 1935.)
Lucien Clergue (b.1934), the French photographer known for his sensuous female nudes, also photographed manufactured dolls and those made by Martha Kuhn-Weber. It is curious to wonder why he decided to make this departure away from the human figure.


(Fig. 9. Ralph Eugene Meatyard. From: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater And Other Figurative Photographs, by James Rhem, D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2002.)

Laurie Simmons (b.1949) utilized small dolls of women in domestic dollhouse scenes that she photographed in the 1970’s. In these, she included miniature furniture and objects. They were photographed in both color and black and white. Oftentimes, Simmons used a bird’s eye view, looking down into the environment from above. This series culminated in the 1983 book, *In and Around the House: Laurie Simmons Photographs 1976-1979*, CEPA Gallery. Ellen Brooks (b.1946) also created dollhouse scenes that included miniature men and women. In her 1978–1985 series, “Tableaux,” couples interact,
often intimately (and nude), in domestic scenes. Similar to Simmons’ photographs from this time period, the point of view is often from above. However unlike hers, Brook’s couples are sexually charged.

(Fig. 10. Laurie Simmons, *Woman Opening Refrigerator Milk to the Right*, color photograph, 1979.)

Simmons recent series, “Kigurumi,” has real people wearing oversized doll heads and latex suits. The practice, originating in Japan, is known as *cosplay*, where performers take on the look of anime characters. Simmons’ models wear body suits with large mask heads. She posed them in an abandoned house. Large prints of these images were shown in a 2014 exhibition titled, *Kigurumi, Dollers and How We See*, at Salon 94 in New York City.

Cindy Sherman (b.1954) has mostly photographed herself over the last four decades. Her career jettisoned with the 1978-1980 series, “Untitled Film Stills,” where she posed as almost identifiable characters from black and white films. Yet, her most notable departure from “self portraits” was her photographs of medical mannequin parts, often arranged to make whole figures. Created in response to the NEA controversy over censorship of funded artists, these photographs are often disturbing. Assembled body parts become Frankenstein monsters. In 1999, Sherman again created images without her presence when she melted and deformed dolls for a series of low contrast black and white photographs.

(Fig. 11. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #261*, color photograph, 1992.)
Julianne Rose (born Australia, lives in Paris) selected and made-up children to closely resemble doll faces. She photographed both the child and its matching doll for the large-scale diptych prints that she created. Next to each other, the two images have an uncanny similarity. These photographs were published in the book, *Julianne Rose - The Flesh And Blood Toy Store*, Communic'Art, 2006.

(Fig. 12. Julianne Rose, From the series, *Flesh and Plastic*, color photograph, ca. 2006.)

**Barbie and Ken Dolls**

Laurie Simmons (b.1954) photographed constructions of “Barbie-type” legs with domestic objects. Her 1989 black and white photograph, *Walking House*, depicted a model house atop walking female legs. Other constructions combined legs with cakes, handbags, cameras and pistols. In 2006, she produced the film, *The Music Of Regret*, which included a segment where real people dance encased in the objects with just their legs showing. (*Act 3, The Audition*)

(Fig. 13. Laurie Simmons, *Walking House*, black and white photograph, 1989.)

Czech photographer, Kristyna Milde, recreated scenes from classical painting using Barbies (and sometimes Ken). She has referenced such paintings as Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* and *Venus with a Mirror*, Manet’s *Olympia*, and Ingres’ *La baigneuse Valpinçon*. Milde titles this series, “ČUMENÍ,” where she compares the women from these paintings to modern versions in our culture.
“Using the historical painting as a stage, with a female icon represented by the modern Barbie, I want to show the similarities between stereotypical representation in the past and in the present time.” - Kristyna Milde

(Fig. 14. Kristyna Milde, *Valpincon Bather After Ingres*, color photograph, 2008.)

In a more twisted look at Barbie and Ken, Ontario artist, Mariel Clayton (b.1980, South Africa), included knives, guns, blood, bondage and beheadings in her domestic scenes of the couple. In some, Ken was often the victim lying on the floor where he is seen stabbed or beheaded. Even Barbie is found bleeding in the bathtub—maybe a suicide?

“Because I hate Barbie. I intensely dislike the stereotype that the ‘ideal’ female fits no current authentic female form. You can’t get to be Barbie without an ocean’s worth of peroxide, 27 plastic surgeries and a complete lack of intelligence, so it irritates me immensely that this is the toy of choice women give to their daughters to emulate.” - Mariel Clayton

(Fig. 15. Mariel Clayton, From the series, *Barbie Kills – A Unusual Unique Photo Project*, color photograph, 2013.)

Another Canadian artist, Dina Goldstein (b.1969, Vancouver), staged real people as Barbie and Ken for her photographs. Not only do the models look plastic, lines can be seen at their joints. In many of the photographs, the couple looks bored. Finally, Ken’s sexual preference is uncovered when Barbie catches him in bed with another man.
“We're looking at a dissatisfied marriage falling apart, a man that's finding his authenticity, a woman who's realizing that not everything is perfect in life.” - Dina Goldstein

(Fig. 16. Dina Goldstein, From the series, *In the Doll House*, color photograph, 2012.)

Or, why not become Barbie yourself? Ukrainian beauty contestant, Valeria Lukyanova (b.1985), enhanced her already Barbie-like features with breast implants to become the “living” Mattel doll. She posed in a number of exotic locations including hotels, beaches and yachts. She has also collaborated with, Justin Jedlica, who became Ken.

(Fig. 17. Valeria Lukyanova, Title unknown, color photograph, ca. 2012.)

**Mannequins in Photography**

Mannequins have also been a reoccurring theme in fine art photography. Approaches to this subject have ranged from department store displays to fantasy installations. Often, photographers known for other directions in their work have intriguingly included them.

French photographer, Eugene Atget (1857-1927), documented “place” in and around Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He also turned his camera to display mannequins in store windows. Often, he chose to photograph groups of mannequins that
were positioned together within the same window. He included the buildings in the edges of the prints, making them look as if they were picture frames.

(Fig. 18. Eugene Atget, *Avenue de Gobelins, Paris*, black and white photograph, 1925.)

Surrealist artist, Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky, 1890-1976), utilized mannequins in his assembled found-art sculptures that he then photographed. In one, a birdcage, with the door open, was placed over the head of the mannequin, revealing a plug placed into the mouth. These assemblages fit nicely into the Surrealists concepts of incongruity, fetishism and sexuality.

(Fig. 19. Man Ray, *Mannequin with a bird cage over her head*, found art sculpture, ca. 1938.)

Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), known for his documentary photographs that captured life, also photographed both dolls and mannequins. He posed them with surrealist painter, Leonor Fini. Not always shooting the “decisive moment,” he also photographed Fini nude in a swimming pool. Weegee (born Arthur Fellig 1899-1968), in his police-style documentary photographs, included a mannequin on the street where it appeared as a substitute in a crime scene. He also photographed groups of mannequins in displays as well as in storage facilities. Somehow, none of this seems strange in Weegee’s pulp photography world. On the opposite end of the documentation spectrum is Elliott Erwitt (b.1928), whose candid photographs of people are often humorous. He occasionally has included dolls and
mannequins in his photographs. People are shown in juxtaposition with these inanimate surrogates, adding to the playfulness of their relationship.

Another street photographer, Lee Friedlander (b.1934), has photographed mannequins in store windows with reflections superimposed over them, creating a double exposure effect. In 2013, the Fraenkel Gallery exhibited Friedlander’s photographs from this series and published the 112-page catalog, *Lee Friedlander: Mannequin*. Southern photographer, John Clarence Laughlin, also has included store window mannequins in his multilayered work. As with his other photographs, these create a veiled mystery where the viewer is only given a glimpse of the subject behind.

(Fig. 20. Lee Friedlander, *Mannequin, New York City*, black and white photograph, 2011.)

French photographer, Bernard Faucon (b.1950) combined vintage mannequins of boys with real boys in his 1976-1981 series, “Summer Camp.” Staged both indoors and out, his tableaux were often homoerotic in nature. What happens to boys during summer camp? Some of the images are quite explicit. In one image, it appears as if the campers are shooting a porno movie, as the real boy is naked on the floor embracing one of the mannequins, the others are adjusting the lights.

“The idea of fabricating fictions, the idea of a possible equation between photography and the dummies, struck me quite out of the blue. Childhoods made of flesh and plaster, the many lights of the Luberon, the nostalgia and actuality of desires, crystallized together through the magical operation of the photographic record.” - Bernard Faucon
Helmut Newton (1920-2004) also utilized dolls and mannequins with his “real-life” models. In these, mannequin look-alikes were created to pose with their fashion model counterparts. These photographs have a narcissistic, self-erotic feel and raise questions about their intent. Similar to the Newton photographs are those of actress, Megan Fox, who posed with her duplicate mannequin for a 2010 photo spread and interview with *Interview Magazine*. Photographed by British photographer, Craig McDean, these images of Fox and her double depict a sexual relationship between the two. Oftentimes they are embracing, but on some Fox is on top of the mannequin in a provocative exchange—again quite narcissistic.

After being pressured by her mother to find a man and get married, Suzanne Heintz (b.1965) obtained a mannequin family, consisting of a husband and a girl child. In her series, “Life Once Removed,” she created Christmas and other holiday greeting cards. Heintz is generally smiling, affirming that she is in fact the happy wife and mother. However, as with all families, there are times where she is at her wits end and her expressions change. She also traveled with the family to ski resorts and even France. In Paris, the family visited the Eiffel Tower, parks, fountains and restaurants. Heintz explained
that traveling with the mannequins was an ordeal that required assistance from willing friends and acquaintances to help get the family around. At least, her mother could see the importance that her daughter’s family placed on travel.

“‘Suzy, there's nobody perfect out there. You just need to PICK somebody, if you're going to settle down.’ I snapped back, ‘Mom! It's not like I can go out and BUY a family! I can't just MAKE it happen!’ ” - Suzanne Heintz

(Fig. 24. Suzanne Heintz, From the series Life Once Removed, color photograph, ca. 2014.)

Lastly, Montreal artist, Jerome Abramovitch, photographed mannequins and digitally added human faces, hands and legs. His 2009, “Mannequin Series,” depict figures that are part human, part not. Often, they have the sense of becoming or showing a metamorphosis as they transform from one into the other.

“Blending traditional photograph montage techniques with the assistance of digital compositing, the Mannequin Series is an investigation of perverse curiosities entwined with a dark sense of humor, each piece intended to be a scene from a long-lost movie with no beginning and no end.” - Jerome Abramovitch

My Dolls and Mannequins

Over the past 3 decades I have been photographing dolls and mannequins. It began when I discovered old discarded baby dolls for sale at a flea market. I don’t remember if I
went there specifically looking for dolls, but I came upon a vendor who had about 35 of them. I purchased his entire collection for $50. Many of the dolls had “haircuts” that were probably given to them by their younger owners. I painted these dolls, including their cut hair, with brightly colored flat house paint. Photographing them in my studio and on location, the dolls were arranged in groups for the camera. I wanted them to depict narratives and raise questions about their relationships with each other and their surroundings. As a child, I was always fascinated by the museum diorama displays where figures illustrated exotic cultures.

(Fig. 25. Philip Krejcarek, *If I Had Only Made the High School Basketball Team*, color photograph, 1988.)

(Fig. 26. Philip Krejcarek, *We Were Drawn to the Television as if it Were a Magnet*, color photograph, 1989.)

(Fig. 27. Philip Krejcarek, *Petrified Children*, color photograph, 1989.)

Two-and-a-half years ago, I purchased a female child and adult mannequin that I dressed in a First Communion dress and bridal gown respectively. The 12-year-old girl came from Amazon and cost $100. The manufacturer called her, “Holly,” and the name stuck. The adult mannequin is Rosalind (the manufacturer named her “Roz.”). When the box arrived, the word, “Mannequin” was printed in large letters upon it. My wife accepted the package from the UPS man who just smiled.

I decided to take Holly on a road trip where I camped out of my modified van. I felt that Rosalind was too cumbersome to travel with me. Holly was small enough to fit in the passenger seat. We drove to 9 southwestern national parks where I photographed her. I was
leery about bringing her out with all the tourists around. So, I confined our shoots to more remote locations where I didn’t have to explain my companion to onlookers. When we returned from our trip, I posed with Holly. I wore a black trench coat and wide brimmed hat. The resulting images have a bit of a Humbert Humbert and Lolita look to them. Ironically, “Lolita” was the manufacturer’s name for the blond wig that I had purchased for her. In these photographs, I hoped to create a mixed message. Was the man trying to help the little girl, or was he just a creepy old man? My youngest daughter, now 28, said he was just the later.

(Fig. 28. Philip Krejcarek, Holly, color photograph, 2012.)

(Fig. 29. Philip Krejcarek, Holly, Grand Tetons National park, color photograph, 2012.)

I have a small collection of about 11 wedding dresses purchased from resale shops. I dressed the adult mannequin, Rosalind, in a couple of them and photographed her on my country property. In some of the photos she interacted with Holly. I later took her to my studio where she posed in a few of the other wedding dresses. There, she also posed with me, and a few actual women. Eventually, she wore other dresses and attire than the bridal gowns. Sometimes, I created diptychs with a human female model wearing the same dress as Rosalind. I have also taken nude photographs of Rosalind. At first glance, I want them to look like a real woman. I removed the mannequin seams to make her appear more so. Most recently, I have posed female nude models with the two mannequins: Rosalind again in her wedding gown, and Holly in her First Communion dress. My hope is that the
interaction between the nude female and the mannequin will raise questions about their relationship. I like the enigma that it creates.

(Fig. 30. Philip Krejcarek, *Rosalind*, color photograph, 2012.)

(Fig. 31. Philip Krejcarek, *Rosalind and Holly*, color photograph, 2012.)

(Fig. 32. Philip Krejcarek, *Rosalind and the Real Girl*, color photograph, 2014.)

(Fig. 33. Philip Krejcarek, *Saving Holly*, color photograph, 2014.)

(Fig. 34. Philip Krejcarek, *Figure With Rosalind*, color photograph, 2014.)

I don’t often think about why I have been drawn to dolls and mannequins in my photography. Maybe I should. Here I am with a collection of painted baby dolls, two mannequins and an array of women’s clothing. How would this look to someone coming into my studio for the first time? If I were in therapy, would the therapist ask, “Is this work in response to the shortcomings you feel in your relationships with women?”

Why do artists photograph dolls and mannequins? It is difficult to know for certain and there appears to be numerous reasons. They seem to range from a simple interest in the forms as a still life objects, to more complex narratives and social issues. For some, it might be about Pygmalion sculpting Galatea. Perhaps these artists are looking for the relationship that is so difficult to obtain in real life. In 1918, when his model and muse, Alma Mahler, left him for another man, Oskar Kokoschka commissioned a life-size doll replica be made of her. Not only did the doll appear in Kokoschka’s subsequent sketches and paintings, but also accompanied him at social events.
Despite the varying intentions, it is reassuring to know that I am not alone. Like the “iDollators,” maybe those of us photographing dolls and mannequins should form an online support group, reassuring each other that we are not unlike other photographers. For now, I am going with, “It may look a little creepy and deviant, but we’re OK.”

So, thank you Lars and Bianca, for the inspiration and permission to do so.

After having given Bianca flowers, Lars says to her, “Those are nice, huh? And they're not real, so they'll last forever.”

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