ALMINE RECH

Carroll Dunham & Laurie Simmons

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Laurie Simmons is a photographer and filmmaker. Carroll Dunham is a painter. Born a few months apart in 1949, they are American. Established in the 1970s, their respective visual arts careers developed in the 1980s, each quickly attaining a significant place and stance in their discipline in the New York and international avant-garde scene.

Simmons chose photography at a time when the medium was considered less "noble" than painting or sculpture ("When I went to art school, photography wasn't considered art," she said [1]), and became associated with the Pictures Generation in 1977. [2] Dunham was among the artists in the 1980s who took a chance on a discipline that had become remarkably old-fashioned, if not reactionary, and envisioned a return to painting. They both challenge the historical canons and conventions of their discipline, and its evolution from consumer society to cancel culture.

Both began exhibiting their respective œuvres in the late 1970s in New York: in 1981, Simmons showed at Metro Pictures gallery, founded the preceding year, and Dunham at Artist Space. They met in 1977 and got married in 1983. Their bodies of work have been developing in tandem for forty years in their studios at their home in Connecticut. They had never before exhibited together. "[Laurie] has been making photographs and I've been making paintings, the ways in which our work can be talked about in relation to each other has been overlooked," says Carroll Dunham. [3]

Simmons's photographic work is essentially peopled with figures, but she does not make portraits, and her "characters," at a distance from reality, are mostly created from puppets, life-size dolls (*Love Dolls*), miniature toys, and more recently, entirely made with artificial intelligence.

Carroll Dunham's pictorial work is also populated with characters. Not more of a portraitist, he cares little about conveying the inner life of his creatures, but is quite concerned with the geometric situations arising from anthropomorphic forms. Dunham recently found an effective way of keeping his characters at a distance from reality: they are now green, a strategy borrowed of course from science fiction comics (Hulk), thereby discouraging the now univocal reading of his earlier black or white characters as "racialized."

The exhibition at the Consortium Museum offers an opportunity to see two significant bodies of work created by both artists over the past thirty years. Envisioned as a "marriage" of two monographic exhibitions, it brings together some twenty works by Laurie Simmons (she has not had a solo show in France for thirty years) and about twenty by Carroll Dunham (benefitting from exceptional loans: eight paintings comprising the entire 2020 *Winners and Losers* series and a monumental artwork held at the Astrup Fernley Museet in Oslo). The exhibition thus provides a chance to see their work together and discover possible connections. It is not a "Game of Seven Errors," nor is it about looking for examples of what the other had already done ("What I always like to say is he copies me much more than I copy him," says Simmons [4]). Instead, the show invites the viewer to discern—or not—common concerns or forms in both oeuvres which have "grown up together." "When you live this closely with another artist, for this long, some kind of dialogue is taking place. I've been aware almost since the beginning of our relationship that Laurie's work has an influence on the way I think about images." [5]

— Eric Troncy

[1] Sarah Cascone, "'He Copies Me Much More Than I Copy Him': Laurie Simmons and Carroll Dunham on 35 Years of Creative Cohabitation," *artnet*, May 16, 2018.

[2] "When I picked up a camera, with a group of other women, I'm not going to say it was a radical act, but we were certainly doing it in some sort of defiance of, or reaction to, a male-dominated world of painting," she told *Interview magazine* in 2014.

[3] Sarah Cascone, *op. cit.*

[4] Sarah Cascone, *ibid.*

[5] Carroll Dunham, in Sarah Cascone, *ibid*.