



# A CARNAL MEDIUM BY WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

Roland Barthes could be describing Laurie Simmons' work when he said in 1981, 'A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.' Though Simmons has been associated with a more conceptual critique of identity politics, her recent work is, in fact, a deeply corporeal commentary that is real enough to caress with our fingertips. There is a characteristic self-awareness in Simmons's recent work that sets her apart from her colleagues that are associated with conceptual photography also known as 'The Pictures Generation'. Her understanding of identity and its relationship to the photographic medium has always been evolving, and each new series is a simultaneous extension of and departure from the last.

For the series *Kigurumi*, *Dollers*, and *How We See* (2014), Simmons photographs real people in fantasy/fetish cosplay gear, expanding her focus on the living human body, tracing back to her *Water Ballet/Family Collision* (1980-1981) series, which dazzles with painterly swaths of naked bodies swimming in glorious maritime paradise and whose only competition might be Alfred Steiglitz's beautiful bell peppers and sexy sand dunes. Similarly, *Fake Fashion* (1984-1985) combines statuesque female models

with colour film projections. *Color Pictures* (2007-2009), while containing no living models, features lifelike found images of women from pornographic magazines. Finally, in her most recent series exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York, Simmons photographs a diverse group of individuals with painted-on eyes over their closed eyelids. The body, in all its physicality, has always been important territory to Simmons, and to consider her a photographer of the inanimate is a misnomer.

Keeping this relationship to the body and physicality in mind, we might understand Simmons' new works depicting cosplay as occupying a space between photography, painting, and performance. All of the figures occupy multiple registers of space. In *Brunette/Red Dress/Standing Corner* (2014) the model places her hands on adjacent sections of the wall, delineating a space with her body, just as the photograph delineates a space with its viewfinder. We might assume this room originally belonged to a little boy, now all grown up. Adorned with tiny race cars, the tattered room is at odds with the latex perfection of the female 'body.' Similarly, *Brunette, Black Dress, Orange Room* (2014) finds its *punctum* in the subject's gloved hand that grasps the wall. She tells us that this is her photograph as much as it is Simmons'. Moreover, her shadow is doubled and thereby deepens the

















photographic space with an index of her solitary performance. The model is the subject of the photograph, but she is also the architecture. She is the house in all its glamorous disrepair, but she is also a mechanically flawless manifestation of desire.

Even though these people seem post-human, as many of Simmons' subjects do, the body is thus at the forefront of these photographs, certainly, but so is the peeling, bubbling paint of Simmons' scenery, which, in a strange way, mirrors the flamboyant pigments of her subjects' costumes. Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* (1960) – in which he covered female models in his trademark 'Klein blue' and directed them to press their bodies against paper as 'living brushes' – is a perfect parallel to Simmons' bodies/pigments/humanoids. Klein's project was a more literal and distinctly French *Nouveaux Réalistes* adaptation of Robert Rauschenberg's and Susan Weil's earlier *Female Figure* (c. 1950). In both cases, a parallel arises to Simmons' *Yellow Hair/Brunette/Mermaids* (2014). Klein, Rauschenberg, and Simmons all suggest that an intellectual or 'postmodern' approach need not neglect the specificities of the body, or more importantly, the corporeality of the medium itself.

While the gender politics of Klein's performances have been debated elsewhere, what is more relevant in this context is that, although the *Anthropométries* survive as 'paintings,' they live on more forcefully in the cultural imaginary as photographs, especially pictures of Klein with paint-

drenched women. More iconic than the performance or the paintings are the photographs, because the photographs record the spectacle and the cult of personality. The physical body becomes inseparable from the photographic documentation of the body, which might complicate the way we discuss photography deemed 'postmodern'. This is especially important with regard to Simmons's work, recognizing her multifaceted dedication to performance, photography, fantasy, reality, and intellectual rigor.

Simmons requires the formalist reading more often associated with painting, even as she engenders a sociopolitical critique more often associated with photography. She requires that the 'postmodern' relationship between photography and identity politics be renegotiated. Her work is not merely an illustration of a sexual subculture but rather a historically replete and formally rigorous discussion of how the body and the photographic document might productively relate in a nuanced fashion. This is a pressing thought experiment because no identity is as simple as normative art histories would have us believe. Race, gender, sexuality, ability have come to the forefront of national and art world attention, but the real world events surrounding these lived experiences always confound easy explanation. Simmons's photographs ask us, perhaps, to look to the multiplicity of the human body, as well as the multiplicity of possibilities available to photography as the privileged medium of post-modernity.



## LAURIE SIMMONS

(b. 1949, US) has had solo exhibitions at galleries including MoMA PS1, Long Island City; Gothenburg Museum of Art, Sweden; Neues Museum, Nuremberg, Germany; The Jewish Museum, New York. Her work was featured in *The Pictures Generation*, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1974) and various other group exhibitions worldwide. In 2018, Simmons will have a traveling retrospective originating at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. In 2006 she wrote and directed a short film, *The Music of Regret*, and her first feature film, *My Art*, recently premiered at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival.

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