

# "THE NAME OF THE PLACE"

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Laurie Simmons' photographic scenarios of dolls, dummies, and other miniatures can stand as a kind of iconic template for the moves of a whole generation of artists of the '80s, but I'm not sure I've thought of her work when visiting the shows of certain young artists of the '90s—Vanessa Beecroft, say, who makes a medium out of model-type women lounging around, or Lisa Yuskavage, who paints way-overinflated babes. Seeing them in "The Name of the Place," though, which Simmons curated, her work came irresistibly to mind. In fact the show pulled off a neat Freudian trick: if Jocasta rejuvenated herself by wedding her son, Simmons did something similar by linking herself with an extremely current and mostly quite junior group who in this context seemed largely to have sprung from her. Both progenitor (as artist and as curator) and coequal, or even, like a lot of parents, sly competitor (in that she subtly tossed her hat into the same marketplace with her kids), Simmons also gave the lie to the sexism often associated



with the Oedipal tale by slanting her show noticeably toward both female artists and female imagery.

Simmons' work has often been approached through fairly gender-neutral ideas about artifice, and artifice is certainly important to her: she tries for realism, she once confessed, "but once it's filtered through my personal system it comes out fake." Yet this is also an artist who could bluntly remark, of her 1984 "Tourism" series (unconvincingly showing Wilma Flintstone-like plastic figurines in glamorous tourist destinations), "The great sites of the world were built by men for the enjoyment of men." That kind of idea shouldn't be neglected in Simmons' art. Personal and quirky, "The Name of the Place" had no focused point that I could see (the title came from a lovely old pop song with the chorus "That's where it's at and I like it like that"—a slim concept, yet satisfying, for a curator), but a good part of its interest lay in its refreshingly wide range of takes on female subjectivity.

If Simmons' photos tend to make their strategy clearer than their emotional tone (their cerebral black humor, I think, obscuring their melancholia), Anna Gaskell's untitled 1996 C-print from her "Wonder Series" leans in the other direction. All shimmering blacks and blues, it shows a woman mostly under water, which distorts her body wildly, like a warped mirror. Gaskell apparently based this series on Lewis Carroll's Alice books, so that the *Wonderland/Through the Looking Glass* quality is calculated; the effect could easily be grotesque, but instead it's limpid, floating, quite beautiful. There's a sense of metamorphosis, and of both physical and interior self-discovery. *Dick Smith's House*, 1982–95, Keith Edmier's shot of a ghoulish special-effects head from *The Exorcist* sitting casually on what looks like a rec-room shelf, might have marked the show's other emotional pole. There was a squaring-the-circle subtext to these inclusions: if somewhat differently from Gaskell, Simmons too has used underwater effects, and you could also imagine her checking out the Linda Blair dummy if she hadn't struck on ventriloquism first.

Maybe Edmier's piece addressed the concept of the stereotype (at least when seen through the Simmons lens), but it mightn't have escaped you that both this and another demoniacal female, in Charles White's skillful sci-fi-movie ad



Above: Anna Gaskell, *Untitled (Wonder Series)*, 1996, color photograph, 16 x 20". Edition of three.  
Below: Dana Hoey, *Connecticut*, 1996, color photograph, 30 x 40". Edition of three.

## IF JOCASTA REJUVENATED HERSELF BY WEDDING HER SON, SIMMONS DID SOMETHING SIMILAR BY LINKING HERSELF WITH AN EXTREMELY CURRENT AND MOSTLY QUITE JUNIOR GROUP.

*Demonatrix Premiere Poster*, 1997, were conceived by men. The women's contributions tended to be more elliptical and enigmatic. Dana Hoey's posed photograph of women gardening outside a Connecticut mansion is a deceptively family-snapshot-like sociological study cum psychological puzzle; Jenny Gage's view of a woman outlined against a darkling sky on a rural hillside has a subtly forlorn searching-for-self kind of feeling. And Jennifer Bornstein's photo of herself in loose T-shirt and shorts beside a similarly clothed small child is purposefully provocative and ambiguous on issues of gender, physicality, and youth and maturity.

Photography was predictably strong in "The Name of the Place" (there was also Fox, Amy Adler's 1995 self-portrait as Jodie Foster, and the late Morton Bartlett's precociously early doll image), but Simmons obviously follows video (Sven Pahlsson and Gillian Wearing), painting, and sculpture with an inter-

ested eye. Among paintings and works on paper by Karen Yasinsky (the nicely George Grosz-like *Girdle Girl*, 1994), Keith Mayerson, Rita Ackerman, Nicole Eisenman, and Margaret Curtis, Patricia Cronin's truncated segment of a woman's body stood out; somewhat like Yuskavage, Cronin remakes erotic imagery from a woman's point of view, but without Yuskavage's elements of parody and consequently with a heat both more tense and more tender. With an installation of scores of tiny sculptures—tools, keys, household items, people—painstakingly carved out of soap (furniture for one of Simmons' doll scenes?), Sarah Sze was the attention-getter among the object-makers, though I have to confess a weakness for Jarvis Rockwell's little courtyards of toy action figures, so peculiarly different are they from the work of his father, Norman.

Simmons once described herself as an artist who tries "to show that the world is big, that you can disappear . . . and exist only as some kind of stereotype." Several of the artists here could profitably be approached from that Cassandra-like viewpoint, but as a curator, Simmons seems more interested in variousness than in limitation. If anything, in fact, "The Name of the Place" was a proof of power: Simmons may have chosen an arena of conspicuous petrification for her own work, but she recognizes the life stirring in the space she cleared, the love among the ruins. □

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