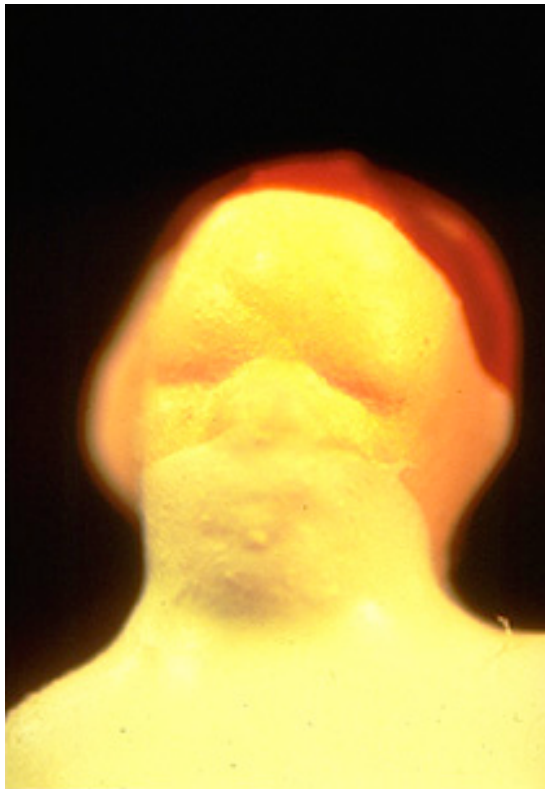


# Actual Photos

Allan McCollum and Laurie Simmons  
at Galerie Nature Morte

BY ROBERTA SMITH



Allan McCollum and Laurie Simmons, *Actual Photo*, 1985

Allan McCollum and Laurie Simmons have joined forces in an unusually productive meeting of minds and visions. Their "Actual Photos" series consists of portraits of non-actual people-head shots of the minuscule figures used in the smallest-scale model train sets. Made of cast plastic hand painted with a single-hair brush, the figures themselves stand about one-quarter inch high; with heads less than one sixteenth inch in circumference, their features are virtually invisible to the naked eye. McCollum once suggested to Simmons that she work with dolls so small that photographs of them would be illegible at any size. When Simmons responded

that the idea sounded more like McCollum's work than hers, they decided to collaborate. They found the figures and, with the help of a medical technician and a microscope at Sloan-Kettering, photographed them against red, yellow, blue, green and black monochromatic grounds.

The result is a rogue's gallery of 51 blurred, woolly faces which are nonetheless startlingly suggestive, at least when viewed as an ensemble. The series, which will travel to four commercial galleries across the country this season, shows that McCollum and Simmons have much in common. Both are drawn to artificiality and randomness. Both use found or appropriated objects and images in highly sophisticated ways, turning mass production against itself to point up the anomie it can engender - in art as well as life. Most of all, both use "surrogates," substitutes for the real thing. "Surrogates" is what McCollum has always called his flotillas of small generic paintings - plaster casts of canvases with frames, mats and black centers all carefully painted by hand - as well as the dark, illegible framed images he likes to bring forward, via re-photography, from the backgrounds of news photos and movie stills (as if to confirm the wider existence of his own work). Since the late '70s Simmons has photographed plastic dolls, ceramic figurines and stiffly posed models against dollhouse setups, pictures of interiors from magazines, and picture postcards; they too are surrogates, stand ins for women oppressed (and mass-produced) by their environment.

Several of these interests continue in "Actual Photos." The camera brings forward for our perusal a virtual genre of hand-painted yet mass-produced figurative sculpture - works of anonymous craft magnified (rather than elevated) to the level of surrogate art. Looking at these blobby plastic presences, a number of emotional, social and art-historical references trickle from eye to brain. Nadelman's plaster Kewpie dolls (intended for

mass production) come to mind, as do the dissolved-looking sculptures of Medardo Rosso and the tormented figures of Francis Bacon. "Actual Photos" is both a lightweight version of August Sander's grand project of photographing an entire society, and – since the photos often appear to be of the same person in different disguises – a play-do parody of Cindy Sherman. Ghostly, ghostly deformations alternate with surprisingly realistic poses and droll caricature. Some figures are cursorily filled in – abstracted or Orientalized globs which suggest glaze samples or the figure as smudged thumbprint. Others come across as stereotypes – schoolgirl, dowager, torch singer, businessman, college professor, boxer, gangster, etc. One gentleman with a particularly sloppy brushstroke across his head seems to be losing a hairpiece.



"Z-scale" figures, used for miniature train layouts, seen here sitting on a U.S. nickel, photographed for scale. 51 of These figures were photographed through a microscope, for Allan McCollum and Laurie Simmons' series, *Actual Photos*.



Allan McCollum and Laurie Simmons, *Actual Photo*, 1985

Brightly colored, alive with painterly flair and dripping (literally) with sculptural detail, these images exude an eerie, unfounded cheerfulness. But they also frustrate our desire for instant recognition; for the most part the images remain permanently blurred and out of reach. Ironically, this vagueness mimics the blurring effects of a camera in the wrong hands, undermining the technical precision that made these faces visible in the first place.

Like Richard Prince's 1981 "Sunset" series, which evokes the pasted-together fakeness of the Japanese monster film genre, McCollum and Simmons's images seem to refer to horror films; the artists have released on the world – or the set – an extended family of quasi-Quasimodo extras (prompting the question "What hath Wardrobe wrought?"). But there's more. McCollum and Simmons have done something together that neither has done alone before. Underlying and undercutting the deliberate blankness of both his surrogate paintings and her surrogate women is a kind of poignancy at times verging on cuteness. Here, that poignancy is brought out into the open, and cuteness is bypassed altogether. While McCollum and Simmons's "Actual Photos" doesn't give us actual people or deliberate expression, the series does convey an undeniable sense of human fragility, imperfection and decay – the way of all flesh.