

Los Angeles Based Artist Laura London Talks Rock Stars, Teaching and Photography

By [Laurie Wheeler](#) on 12/9/2010 | Read more from [Laurie Wheeler](#)
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Laura London, world-renowned Los Angeles based female photographer has shown in N.Y.C. to Germany. She's made a home in Los Angeles, teaching at [Otis College of Art and Design and Art Center](#), and showing work at local venues like works on paper, Inc., and the [Peter Blake Gallery](#). Laura's work is right up our alley. With pieces in exhibits like *Illusions of Identity*, *Photo Femmes*, and *Head Games*, Laura explores the intricacies of the inner-self honestly and artfully. Needless to say, we are fans. During our recent kitchen-table conversation, I picked her brain on the tortured artist archetype, why teenagers emulate rock stars like Courtney Love, being an artist in L.A., and the psychology of post-modernist photography. Pull up a chair.

Things are about to get interesting...

Laurie Wheeler: Rockstar Moment was a series where you photographed an adolescent girl dressing up as rock icons. What did adolescence mean to you?

Laura London: I started studying photography at the age of fourteen. I ended up coming to photography after studying dance, painting and drawing. I was in a car accident, and that was the catalyst for switching from dance to the visual arts with a concentration in photography. When I was that age photography class was so fun. The classes were filled with interesting people and they were always going on field trips and shoots. The technical aspect also came very naturally. Through that, I found what I still do today. I really ended up in photography by chance. My love of it started as a teenager and is sustained by creating my artwork and teaching adolescents and young adults.

LW: Do you think that your experience as a girl in photography class at the age of 14 was different from the experiences of some of the boys in the class?

LL: I had more in common with the boys and girls who were creative. At my high school, people were pursuing the arts very seriously, and many of them are still in the field today. Photography class was not just the teacher and the art, it was about the people. My friendships were based on what I was passionate about.

LW: Are you working through anything emotionally while you are working on a project?

LL: Several of my pieces are reenactments of my own experiences. For instance, that picture of the girls in the bathroom was reconstructed from a memory I have. The bathroom at the place I was working had a similar look and feel to the bathroom I remembered from high school. The location was then recreated in the photograph. So even if it looks documentary, it's actually completely staged.

LW: So, memory plays a big part in your projects?

LL: It's memory, observation, and



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imagination. I still love documentary photography, but I really enjoy the process of constructing the image and then putting the model and location together to create a narrative.

LW: And with the bathroom picture for instance, is that visually strong for you? Emotionally?

LL: Oh yes, it's both visually and emotionally charged. It all works together, I try and have more than one level in my pieces, and the viewer can then bring their own experience to the work.

LW: Can we talk about the model in the Rockstar Moment Series?

LL: I wanted to work with a girl who was middle school aged, because I observed middle school kids being more influenced by the media. They are stuck inside. They can't drive yet and so they use their imagination, emulating rock stars and actors in their bedrooms. I guess I related to that, having grown up in a cold climate. We were indoors a lot.

Anyway, I had seen this girl. She was the daughter of a friend of mine so I had known her for a couple years. I thought she would be a good model. It was the way she looked, but there was also a kind of character coming through her, a sort of strength and confidence, so I really wanted to work with her on the Rockstar Moment Series.

We talked one time before we shot the series to decide on the rock stars to emulate. The most interesting characters are the ones who almost self-destruct, and then they recreate themselves. For instance, Courtney Love, who went through a few different phases. I was more interested in people who rise to the top, hit bottom, and then rise to the top again.

LW: Which Courtney Love keeps doing over and over again.

LL: The model was actually going to be Marilyn Manson for Halloween, so we incorporated him too. I tried to show some of the process of making the photographs. In a couple of the shots she still had hair dye on her hands. I like showing behind the scenes a little bit, even though I've moved away from straight documentary.

LW: Right. So with Courtney Love or Marilyn Manson, is there a parallel between their journey as icons and an adolescent girl's formation of self? Was there a parallel there for you, or not especially?

LL: I think for me it was more an investigation of role models. I think you get into trouble when you look towards that sort of persona as an idol. There is a lot of illusion that goes on. Teenagers have all this creative energy, and they want to do something with it, so they look to these celebrities to emulate. The view teenagers get of rock icons is superficial. A role model is someone you look up to for their positive actions. I think we need to move towards looking at these people in a more well-rounded way. What are they doing for others? How are they humanitarians? We need to start emphasizing that more.

LW: It's so interesting how we make these stars so big and iconic and idolize their lives while they are really self destructing. Like Kurt Cobain, same sort of thing.

LL: Yes, I think it is even more tragic when somebody goes through something like that now, because there are ways to get help. When I was growing up in the Midwest things existed but people were not doing them as much or talking about them.



Mark LeRoy (the interview photographer): Like cow tipping?

LL: (laughs) No, like yoga and meditation. Therapy was the only thing that people did, and even then, it was only after the person was arrested, or their parents weren't going to let them go to college. It wasn't like when I went to college, where it was a fairly common thing.

The idea of the tortured artist is something to move away from. I think you can be healthy and still make good art. I'm glad there are more resources out there now for people who are struggling. Hopefully it will mean less suicides.

LW: So, you feel like the idea of the tortured artist is obsolete?

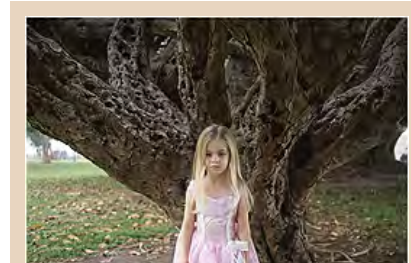
LL: In art history, there is so much of it. For example, people killing themselves, or going crazy from paint fumes, or becoming alcoholics. I mean, it makes for an interesting art history lecture, but it is sad. It is wonderful to look up to a person's creative spirit, just don't model your whole life after theirs.

LW: So you think, as an artist, it is OK to find an artistic role model and emulate them?

LL: Maybe as a mentor or teacher or to be inspired by an artist and their work. I teach my students to bring their unique interests, points of view and strengths to their work. I know a lot of teachers have their students copy other people's work as a learning technique. I don't teach that way, but I do expose my students to other people's work. You don't want them to be oblivious, copying an artist's style, unaware of where the influence came from. All art has some art history in it, so you might as well know what has influenced you and then make it your own. You have to put it together in your own way.

LW: Is that picture there based on a memory? (gestures to the picture of the little girl in the tutu in front of a tree)

LL: Well that was shown in New York. It was made five years ago. It is from the series Portraits On Location and is called "Born On Earth Day." The model is the daughter of a friend of mine. I placed her near that huge tree. It was the fastest photo shoot I've ever done because she couldn't stand still for longer than 20



minutes. Her birthday is actually on Earth Day, so it worked well with the piece, juxtaposing her with the big tree. She wouldn't let me pick her dress, so that was all her. She was very stubborn.



LW: I was just wondering if that was some memory from your childhood.

LL: No, I wasn't that girlie with everything being pink. I liked more classic style fashions.

LW: In terms of psychology, if you do address any psychological issues, how do you do that in your work? I know in the Rockstar Moment series I read that there was some complexity to the character, and that some of the shots were trying to depict a psychological state of mind. Is that present in a lot of your work?

LL: Sometimes I will see a certain quality emanating from a person and I'll ask them to model for me. I'll bring that quality out with my shots. I want things to be aesthetically pleasing, and have a concept and narrative. I direct the models I work with to bring out the quality I see in them and juxtapose it against the other elements of the shoot. The setting, styling and lighting is all designed to create a certain mood. It's about character and observation and putting all the elements together to create a story.

LW: Is there an ideal psychological state for taking pictures?

LL: Present, calm, balanced, happy, excited and enthusiastic. When I'm actually taking the picture I have the feeling I had when I danced. The feeling of everything coming together in one moment. The technical and emotional and idea all come together.

To be able to have that feeling again is really great! The things I learned about using space in my dancing contribute to my understanding of space as a photographer. It feels like magic when you get the right shot. When you move beyond the technical and everything comes together and elevates above all of it, it's a good feeling.

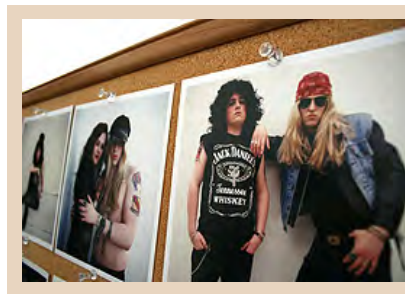
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Mark: Has the approach to art making changed since you were in school in terms of how students want to relate to the world? Does it seem like artists today are more focused on themselves?

LL: I think that good artists are always thinking about the quality of the work. If you think too much about how something is going to be received or critiqued then the work won't be as strong. Generally, I have found that it is best to make work from a strong place inside. Whenever I've had someone try and push me in a direction that didn't feel true, it's never felt right. I guess I still have a little of that punk rock spirit in me, I've just got to do what feels right. The Rockstar Moment series came from a really strong place inside of me, I feel really good about how it came out, and it was well-received.

LW: I know that a lot of people work through some of their personal issues with art. Do you think that art could substitute for therapy?

LL: No. I believe they function as two individual practices.



LW: Does it go back to what you were saying earlier about Courtney Love and how it's great to look up to the creative side of her, but maybe not the personal side?

LL: Well, she is really strong and creative and I admire that. I just don't see art as a substitute for therapy. I know some people really like to make art when they are feeling down and I think that can help some. I think the difference is that with therapy, you are working collaboratively with a person who is trained to help you. I

think that for me, art is a much bigger thing than my emotions. Making a photograph or a body of work is a bigger idea, and hopefully, it's personal and then becomes more universal.

LW: I think in the teenage mindset, there is a tendency for art to be more like a diary, more personal. And then as people get older there is a shift away from that towards a broader understanding.

Mark: I think that's really hard to do. That's a struggle that I sometimes have as I try to think about going back into being an artist, and as a producer. Like, "Is it about me, or is it about the world at large?"

LL: Yes, some people are more open and some people are more private about what they bring into their artwork. I see the world as positive and beautiful but I also see the more difficult things that exist in the world. I like to make work from a personal perspective which is conceptual and incorporates formal aesthetic concerns.

For more information on Laura London's artwork and teaching schedule go to www.lauralondon.com

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