





# Lens Life

Unmasking iconic photographer Cindy Sherman.

By Jason Edward Kaufman

Anyone with a passing interest in contemporary art has heard of Cindy Sherman, the New Jersey native whose photographic portraits have made her one of the most successful artists of her generation. The slim, 51-year-old blonde has made a phenomenal career of playing dress-up and casting herself in a thousand-and-one roles that she acts out in her works. From tomboy to ingénue, sex kitten to socialite, fashion plate to Renaissance courtesan and far more gruesome types, she takes on personae with a malleability more appropriate to an actor than a visual artist. Though it began as a childhood obsession, her playacting is more than girlish fun. Critics have hailed her as the very embodiment of our postmodern age, an artist whose sense of “self” is as mutable as the flickering images on a 500-channel TV. By photographing herself in myriad stereotypical roles familiar from pop

Untitled, 2004, color photograph, edition of 6.

culture, Sherman has found a way of surveying the psychological landscape of mass media. She invites us to explore how those images affect our psyches, and in so doing has carved out a niche in the history of art.

Even though she appears in most of her photographs it would be wrong to consider them self-portraits. Instead, they are a form of role-playing as social critique with a subversive and often feminist bite. The characters she portrays—some beautiful and appealing, others vulnerable and pathetic, and others monstrous and terrifying—are archetypes familiar from magazine pages, movie screens and museum walls. Her artificially constructed renditions of these characters beg the question: Why are women always presented in these kinds of roles? No wonder feminists have adopted her as a patron saint.

At art school in Buffalo she abandoned painting and flunked her first photography course. After graduation a National Endowment for the Arts grant allowed her to move to New York City where she made her breakthrough “Film

Stills” series, 1977–80. In these untitled, black-and-white 8 x 10 prints she cast herself as stereotypical characters in imaginary B movies of the 1950s and ’60s. “I feel I’ve always been more interested in movies, in some way, than in art,” she says, “but maybe that’s true for most people!” In one she appears as a young woman against the backdrop of skyscrapers, in another she’s an angry housewife scowling in a tenement, and in another she waits by the side of the road with her suitcase at her side waiting to hitch a ride. It wasn’t long before the art world picked her up.

The New York gallery Metro Pictures took her on, along with her old flames Robert Longo and Richard Prince. Then in 1982, when she was 28, Sherman found herself in two important international exhibitions: Documenta in West Germany and the Venice Biennale. Since then her résumé has ballooned to more than 80 solo shows in museums and commercial galleries around the world, including a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art when she was

just 33. She even won a MacArthur Fellowship “genius award” in 1995.

How does she do it? “I’m alone when I’m working,” she says, noting that she has never used a studio assistant and that no one is allowed to watch her work. Her method has barely changed over the years. She still works indoors in her SoHo loft in a room stuffed with props that she picks up at flea markets, secondhand stores and novelty shops. “I’m always collecting props,” she says, “whether I’m sure what I’ll do with them or not.” It’s an intuitive process. Once she settles on an idea, she mugs in a full-length mirror before stepping before the camera. “I might make lumpy sketches about how to structure a photo, and I take Polaroids while I’m setting up the shoot to check the lighting, positioning, costume, placement of the figure, etc.,” she says. “I keep a notebook mostly for problems that I encounter while working.”

Sherman says she can afford better equipment than when she began but has not adopted new technologies. “I use more lights and shoot more in color now,” she says. “Otherwise it’s pretty much the same as when I first began. I still use a Nikon 35mm.” She recently purchased a 4 x 5 camera but has yet to use it, and her digital camera is only for snapshots. She always shoots slide film—she used to develop it herself, but no more—then decides the scale for each piece and has it printed digitally by a lab. “In the very early years I used to print my own black-and-white [photos], and I kind of miss that. It was magical.” Her finished works are C-prints, generally in editions of five or six but sometimes 10 to 15 prints that she signs on the back.

Since the “Film Stills,” Sherman has made series of large-format color images based on fashion photography, fairy tales, Old Master paintings, horror flicks and pornography—always giving the selected genre an ironic twist. The fashion images were deliberately ugly, the horror images over-the-top gross, the sexual images un-erotic. “I’m not a fan of porn, but it is in our social fabric,” she says. “I hope to make viewers question their assumptions in life.” In the “Disasters/Fairy Tales” series 1984–89, she replaced herself with mannequins,



Untitled 1989 color photograph, edition of six.

medical prostheses and masks in ludicrously grotesque scenes of violence and mutilation. “I am invigorated by challenge and confrontation and find a curious pleasure in adrenaline-producing cheap thrills common in horror genres,” she says. She even made a horror film (“Office Killer,” 1997) that had a brief art-house run and says she still wants to make another film.

Meanwhile, major private collectors like Eli Broad and virtually every important museum of contemporary art have acquired her work, sending prices through the roof. “Film Stills” (edition of 10) that originally went for \$50 can now fetch more than \$300,000 apiece since the Museum of Modern Art purchased a complete set of 69 reportedly for \$1 million. The auction houses broke new ground by including her pictures not in the photography sales, but in contemporary art auctions alongside paintings where they often top \$100,000. One 24 x 48 print—Untitled #92 (edition of 10)—from her 1980–81 “Centerfold” series brought \$420,000 at Phillips, de Pury & Company in November 2004.

When not working, Sherman spends

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Untitled Film Still #3, 1977.

time in her home in Sag Harbor. She says she enjoys “boogie-boarding, music—loud, fast—shopping, cooking, old scrapbooks, birds’ nests, glass objects, Palissy ware ceramics, weird stuff, mannequin heads and body parts, and toys—Kid Robot!” But she always returns to the studio. Her latest series is a parade of colorful clowns inspired by Web site images. “I started to fantasize about the people under the makeup, what brought them to clowning, what they might be acting out psychologically,” she says.

Sherman leaves the interpretation of her images up to us, assigning the pictures numbers instead of titles that could influence our response. “I’m intrigued by issues that can inflame passions,” she says, “and raise debates on every side.” ❖

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