

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces

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Courtesy the Artist / the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Untitled Film Still #21, 1978

For three years starting in 1977, when she was 23 and just out of Buffalo State College, Sherman photographed herself in costumes, wigs and settings that drew from the deep pool of movie images we're all immersed in from childhood. In her 70 "Untitled Film Stills," she took on the role of career girl, housewife, siren and woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

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Heroine with a Thousand Faces

By Richard Lacayo

Cindy Sherman takes pictures only of herself, but she always insists she doesn't make self-portraits. It would be truer to say that for the past 35 years, she's been producing a portrait of her times as they flow through the finely tuned instrument of her baroque psyche. Again and again in her spine-tingling retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City--it runs there from Feb. 26 to June 11, then travels to San Francisco, Minneapolis and Dallas--you also discover she's made a portrait of you.

Growing up in a New York suburb, Sherman loved to play dress-up. In 1977, when she was 23 and just out of Buffalo State College, she started playing it with a vengeance. For three years, she photographed herself in costumes, wigs and settings that drew from the deep pool of movie images we're all immersed in from childhood. In what eventually grew to a series of 70 "Untitled Film Stills," she took on the role of career girl, housewife, siren and woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Six years before Woody Allen got there, she became the Zelig of the collective unconscious, the heroine with a thousand faces.

Sherman wasn't interested in campy genre re-creation. Any number of drag performers had already nailed that act. It was a subtler kind of female impersonation she was after. That's why there are few distinct genres or stock characters in the "Untitled Film Stills"--no sci-fi, no cowgirls, no obvious gun molls. And though in some images she seems to channel Hitchcock blondes and in others moody beauties like Monica Vitti and Anouk Aime, none of the pictures reproduce scenes from actual films. Their power is in their ambiguity. What they re-create is not a specific movie memory but the primordial soup of images from which we cook up ourselves. And though obviously it's the sources of female identity she was attempting to unravel, in the process she deciphered a media code that constructs us all.

By 1995, when MOMA reportedly paid what was then the newsmaking sum of \$1 million for a full set of the stills, Sherman was well established as one of the pivotal artists of her generation. She had made the leap into museum collections long before, with a 1981 series inspired by the centerfolds in skin magazines. But the weirdly spotlit young women she becomes in those pictures are fully dressed and

acting out psychodramas of yearning and anxiety never dreamt of in the Playboy philosophy.

There are galleries in the Sherman show, which was organized by MOMA associate curator Eva Respini, that go off in your head like bombs. Sherman's universe of enigmatic faces and wiggly characters appears in prints that are big--6 ft. tall and more. The colors can be harsh and aggressive. Though she sometimes offers herself quietly to the camera, her face as round and innocuous as an aspirin, she can also look feral, sinister and unhinged. The unclassifiable specimen she becomes in Untitled #359 doesn't look human so much as like some mad approximation of humanity.

For a 10-year period that started around 1985, Sherman's work took a turn into realms of pure disgust. In those pictures, she often turns up only at the margins, if she appears at all. The figure in the frame might be built out of dismembered mannequins, prosthetic body parts and bondage gear. There are pools of fake vomit and beaches littered with skeezy cupcakes. Taken together, it all looks like the portrait of a meltdown, with the artist sometimes literally spilling her guts--or a reasonable store-bought facsimile. Sherman delved into this grotesque territory during the worst years of AIDS, when the body was a target of fear and loathing. In those same years, she also endured the breakup of a 15-year marriage. So even if the pictures aren't self-portraits in the ordinary sense, you get a feeling they report to the world from an undisclosed location inside her.

Writers who profile Sherman always mention how nice she is. It's her art that's ferocious, and over time it's gotten more that way. In 2003 she started to costume herself as a series of very unnerving clowns. Some are pure malevolence with a funny nose. Others, like the sad sack in Untitled #424, are trapped in a candy-colored world where it looks as if the laughs come hard. (If you don't see yourself in these pictures, you need to look again.) Then, four years ago, came the chilling suite of society women. Brittle older gals with money, Medusas of the 1%, these women have constructed an ironclad social mask for themselves.

A few of them, like the inward-looking stalwart in Untitled #470, also appear to have accomplished through surgery and Botox what Sherman has been doing for years with makeup and wigs--transforming themselves into grotesques. The multiple levels of artifice are quite something in these pictures, in which Sherman impersonates older women as they struggle to impersonate younger ones. Because she places them against backgrounds more detailed and realistic than what you find in most of her work, the series takes a turn from the ambiguous and unruly into the realm of pure social satire. But isn't that also just part of what she was doing all along? By devoting herself to the ancient mystery of metamorphosis, Cindy Sherman came early to the discovery that life is the ultimate makeover show.

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CINDY SHERMAN
Museum of
Modern Art, New
York City, Feb. 26
to June 11

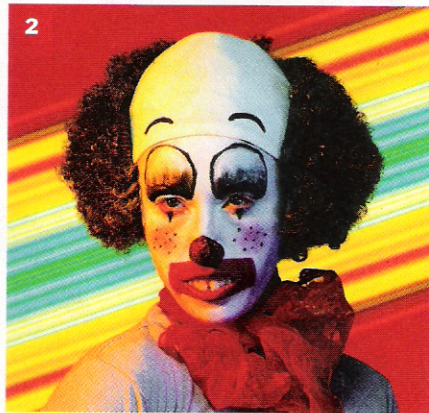


**Variations on a theme
of unruly identity**

1. *Untitled #359* (2000)

2. *Untitled #424* (2004)

3. *Untitled #470* (2008)



Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Untitled Film Still #7, 1978

In the film stills Sherman wasn't interested in campy genre re-creation. That's why there are few distinct genres or stock characters in the series — no sci-fi, no cowgirls, no obvious gun molls. And though in some images she seems to channel Hitchcock blondes and in others, like this one, moody beauties of '60s foreign film like Monica Vitti and Anouk Aimée, none of the pictures re-produce scenes from actual films. Their power is in their ambiguity. What they re-create is not a specific movie memory but the primordial soup of images that we cook up ourselves.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / Eric Fischl and April Gornik

Untitled #86, 1981

Sherman made the leap into museum collections with a 1981 series inspired by the centerfolds in skin magazines. But the weirdly spotlighted young women she becomes in these pictures are fully dressed and acting out psychodramas of yearning and anxiety never dreamt of in the Playboy philosophy. To keep their meanings in play as much as possible, Sherman never titles her photos.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Untitled #122, 1983

Courtesy the Artist / Metro Pictures, New York

Sherman has done commissioned shoots for clothing designers, boutiques and magazines, without ever producing anything like standard fashion images. It was in some of these pictures — like this one produced for a Manhattan clothing store that ran as an advertisement in *Interview* magazine — that Sherman first explored what would turn out to be an enduring interest in the grotesque.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Untitled #299, 1994

Courtesy the Artist / Sibley Family

And as her work matured, Sherman showed ever more interest in transforming herself into figures that were ever more out there. The unclassifiable specimen she becomes in this picture, also produced as a commissioned image for the Japanese fashion house Commes des Garçons, doesn't look human so much as like some mad approximation of humanity.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Untitled #175, 1987

For a 10-year period that started around 1985, Sherman's work took a turn into realms of pure disgust. In those pictures she often turns up only at the margins, if she appears at all. The figure in the frame might be built out of dis-membered mannequins, prosthetic body parts or bondage gear. In this example, with its pools of fake vomit on a beach littered with skeevey cupcakes, you can just spot her reflection in the sunglasses at upper right. Taken together, much of her work from those years can look like the portrait of a meltdown, with the artist sometimes literally spilling her guts—or a reasonable store-bought facsimile. Sherman delved into this grotesque territory during the worst years of AIDS, when the body was a target of fear and loathing. In those same years, however, she also endured the breakup of a 15-year marriage. So even if the pictures aren't self-portraits in the ordinary sense, you get a feeling they report to the world from an undisclosed location within the artist herself.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / Linda and Jarry Janger, Los Angeles

Untitled #224, 1990

In 1990 Sherman first exhibited pictures from the series that came to be called the "history portraits," photographs resembling Old Master paintings that sometimes reproduce actual canvases, but more often try to recall more broadly the style of an artist or era. Here she recreates Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus* from 1593, a painting presumed to be a self-portrait of Caravaggio representing himself as the god — meaning that Sherman is impersonating a male artist who is already impersonating a deity.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / Philippe Segalot, New York

Untitled #411, 2003

Nine years ago, Sherman started to costume herself as a series of very unnerving clowns. Some, like this one, are pure malevolence with a funny nose. If you don't see yourself in these pictures, you need to look again.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / Jennifer and David Stockman

Untitled #425, 2004

Though she still does all of her studio preparation herself — make-up, costuming and props — over the past decade Sherman has begun working with digital manipulation of her images, which permits her to appear multiple times in a single picture.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Untitled #474, 2008

Four years ago Sherman began to produce a chilling suite of brittle older women with money. Medusas of the 1%, they've done their best, or their worst, to construct an ironclad social mask for themselves. A few of them, like the cool customer here, who possesses all the warmth of a chrome hood ornament, also appear to have accomplished through surgery and Botox what Sherman has been doing for years with makeup and wigs—transforming themselves into grotesques. The multiple levels of artifice are quite something in these pictures, in which Sherman impersonates older women who are struggling to impersonate younger ones.

Cindy Sherman: The Heroine with a Thousand Faces



Courtesy the Artist / Metro Pictures, New York

Untitled, 2010

In her most recent work Sherman has made pictures that break out of the frame, wall sized images, 18 feet tall, that create whole environments.

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