

# Cindy sherman artist biography



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No other artist has ever made as extended or complex career of presenting herself to the camera as has Cindy Sherman. Yet, while all of her photographs are taken of Cindy Sherman, it is impossible to class call her works self-portraits. She has transformed and staged herself into as unnamed actresses in undefined B movies, make-believe television characters, pretend porn stars, undifferentiated young women in ambivalent emotional states, fashion mannequins, monsters from fairy tales and those which she has created, bodies with deformities, and numbers of grotesqueries. Her work has been praised and embraced by both feminist political groups and apolitical mainstream art. Essentially, Sherman's photography is part of the culture and investigation of sexual and racial identity within the visual arts since the 1970's. It has been said that, "The bulk of her work...has been constructed as a theater of femininity as it is formed and informed by mass culture (her) pictures insist on the aporia of feminine identity tout court, represented in her pictures as a potentially limitless range of masquerades, roles, projections" (Sobieszek 229).

Born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, Cindy Sherman grew up in suburban Huntington Beach on Long Island, the youngest of five children and had a regular American childhood. She was very self-involved, fond of costumes, and given to spending hours at the mirror, playing with makeup (Schjeldahl 7). Cindy Sherman attended the State University College at Buffalo, New York, where she first started to create art in the medium of painting. During her college years, she painted self-portraits and realistic copies of images that she saw in photographs and magazines. Yet, she became less, and less interested in painting and became increasingly interested in conceptual,

minimal, performance, body art, and film alternatives (Sherman 5).

Sherman's very first introductory photography class in college was a complete failure for she had difficulties with the technological aspects of making a print. After her disastrous first attempt in photography, Sherman discovered Contemporary Art, which had a profound and lasting effect on the rest of her artistic career (Thames and Hudson 1). Sherman's first assignment in her photography class was to photograph something which gave her a problem, thus, Sherman chose to photograph her self naked. While this was difficult, she learned that having an idea was the most important factor in creating her art, not so much the technique that she used. While she was talented at copying with pencils and paints, this artistic method would not allow Sherman to express herself personally. But with a camera, Sherman could use her body as a tool (Sills 64). The young artist became fascinated by the way any image at all, simply being presented, activates a mysterious charge-neither subjective nor objective, but of both (Schjeldahl 7). In college, Sherman became active in the local avant-garde scene, the liveliest of two decades, and especially in Hallwalls, an artist-run alternative exhibition space (Heller 223). In 1975, while still attending college, Cindy Sherman created her first series of five photographs entitled, Untitled A-E. Within these first photographs, Sherman attempts to alter her face with makeup and hats, attempting to take on different personas, such as a little girl in Untitled D, and a clown in Untitled A (Thames and Hudson 2). This first series is Sherman's first attempt of documenting transformation. The Curator Linda Cathcart, saw the pictures at Hallwalls and put them at the Albright Knox Art Gallery (Heller 225). Because Sherman had such vivid imagination and became fascinated with self-transformation, Sherman often

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bought vintage clothes and accessories from thrift stores, which helped her to form and create different characters. “ So it just grew and grew until I was buying and collecting more and more of these things, and suddenly the characters came together just because I had so much of the detritus from them” (Thames and Hudson 2 ). Sherman went even as far as wearing the costumes and dressing as different characters to gallery openings and events in Buffalo. She wore these costumes because she wanted to see how far she how “ transformed she could look (Haller 225). Yet, Sherman never considered dressing up for performance purposes because she was “ not maintaining a character” but simply “ getting dressed up to go out” (Thames and Hudson 2).

Cindy Sherman began her famous series of “ Untitled Film Series” at the end of 1977. The small black and white photographs are of Sherman impersonating female character types from old B grade movies, which speak “ to a generation of baby boomer women who had grown up absorbing these glamorous images ay home on their televisions, taking such portrayals as cues for their future” (Thames and Hudson 1). Upon graduation of college in 1977, Cindy Sherman and her fellow student Robert Longo moved to Manhattan, New York together. She continued with her interest in role-playing and dressing up as different characters, and began to photograph herself in these different guises among different locations such as her apartment Untitled Film Still #10, in the Southwest in Untitled Film Still #43, and in Long Island in Untitled Film Still # 9. Sherman’s manipulation of lighting, makeup, and dress make it difficult to believe that all of the characters represented were indeed the same person (Heller 225). All of the

portraits are of her but none of the works are in any way a self-portrait of Sherman. They are portraits of an identity that Sherman shares with every female who thinks of her life in the way of a cheap movie. For this reason alone, is why her work has been looked at for special by feminist who hold the view that “ women do not hold theories, but tell stories.” In the stills it is important to get a deep and true understanding that her use of photography is more integral to the performance then a photographic record of what took place. (Danto 10-11). Each of the stills is about the girl in trouble, but in the aggregate they touch the myth we each carry out of childhood, of danger, love, and security that defines the human condition. “ Desire mixed with nostalgia fuels the allure of the Untitled Film Stills-desire for the woman depicted as well as desire to be that woman, during that time” (Thames and Hudson 4). Sherman said that the last thing she wanted her pictures to have was emotion. The still only provided a framework through which her deeper artistic impulses found expression (Danto 9). She was most interested in what a character was like when they were completely emotionless (Sherman 8). These black and white photographs were purposely grainy because Sherman wanted them to look like cheap publicity shots. While, Sherman takes most of her own photographs using a remote shutter-release, some of her pictures are also taken by her family and friends. This Untitled Film Series was first exhibited in 1995, in the Hirshborn Museum of Washington D. C. In each of the photographs, Sherman is depicted alone, “ As a familiar but unidentifiable film heroine in an appropriate setting” (Thames and Hudson 2). Some of the many characters depicted are of a perky B-movie librarian in Untitled Film Still #13; a voluptuous lower-class women from an Italian neo-realist film in Untitled Film still #35; and a young secretary in the city

Untitled Film Still # 21 (Thames and Hudson 2). In terms of the untitled film still #35 and Untitled Film still #15, both depict Sherman as a seductress, Sherman says “ To pick a character like that was about my own ambivalence about sexuality-growing up with the woman role models that I had, and a lot of them in films, that were like that character, and yet you were supposed to be a good girl” (Thames and Hudson 2). Sherman encourages the viewers participation in constructing their own narratives of her Untitled Film Still #10, Untitled Film Still # 14, and Untitled Film Still #65 (Thames and Hudson 3) Sherman created sixty-nine photographs in total, presenting her works in an array of types. According to Judith Williamson, “ force upon the viewers that elision of image and identity which women experience all the time...” (Thames and Hudson 3).

Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills are also seen as related to feminist performance work of the 1970’s by artists such as Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin. Sherman is also noted as being heavily influenced by these artists. The Untitled Film Series are not only photographic records of performance but performative accounts of filmic images (Thames and Hudson 4). Sherman ended her sixty-nine photograph scenes in 1980, when she began to realize that she was duplicating previously used characters, clichés, and stereotypes.

Cindy Sherman’s next series or collection of photographs was her first working color called the Rear Screen Projections, which exude the artifice of a television show. With her increasing desire to work at home, Sherman created her photographs in front of a projected screen, which she projected slides of outdoor and indoor scenes. Viewing the photographs one can

obviously tell that the background is fake. “ The very realistic and sometimes quite closely cropped images of Sherman contrast with the blurry and substantial settings, heightening the artifice of the entire scene” (Thames and Hudson 5). Her second series concentrates on the 1960’s and 1970’s rather than the 1950’s depicted in the Untitled Film Series. Rather than female victims, the Rear Screen Projections depict women who are confident and independent, usually youthful, middle-class women in the real world. The characters of the Rear Screen Projections are best identified as being counterparts of women in the media of the 1970’s such as Mary Richard’s character in The Mary Tyler Moore television series (Thames and Hudson 5).

In 1981, after creating a portfolio of images for an issue of Artforum, Sherman became inspired by the magazines horizontal format and produced a series of works that refer to the photo spreads in photographic magazines. This is said to be Sherman’s first mature work. These large photographs are in color, are cropped and close-up with each image depicting a young woman looking off to the side with a vacant and vulnerable look. She keeps background details to a minimum allowing the attention to be drawn to the figure. Sherman’s horizontals suggest a profound “ transgression against form.” Within these pictures there is no coherent point of view (Sobieszek, 25). When Sherman showed this series, she was criticized by some for having created women that reaffirm sexist stereotypes, therefore Artforum rejecting this series. Critics have found Untitled #93 as the most suggestive of all her works. This photograph shows a woman with messy hair and smudged makeup in bed covering her eyes, while looking toward the light that shines in her eyes. Although Sherman has stated that “ She was

imagining someone who had just come home in the early morning from being out partying all night, and the sun wakes her shortly after she has gone to bed” (Thames and Hudson 6). Critics on the other hand have read this photograph as a rape portrayal. Misreading of the centerfolds became very common because people tried to create stories from them, discovering hidden meanings where none were present (Schjeldahl 9). Much like her earlier works, the centerfolds mimic and repeat mass media modes.

In the Pink Robe series, Sherman uses herself once again to imitate the stance of porno models, choosing to pose only in a pink chenille bathrobe. This series conveys a state of loveless intimacy, intimacy without understanding or personal tenderness (Schjeldahl 10). In this series, Sherman responds to the criticism of the centerfold series, and switches to a vertical format in order to do away with the vulnerability of the characters. Yet, the Pink Robe Series is just a continuation of the Centerfold series because Sherman thinks of these images as “ depiction of the porno model during breaks between posing for nude shots” (Thames and Hudson 7). Sherman sits in front of the camera deciding to appear as un-sexy and without makeup or wigs, staring directly toward the viewer. Many critics interpret this series as “ the real Cindy” and most revealing of all of her photographs (Thames and Hudson 7).

Sherman has produced four groups of works that quote from fashion photography. In Sherman’s fashion series, she reminds the viewer that that fashion allows us to create and display a wide range of appearances as if “ we each possessed a wide range of identities” (Sobieszek, 253). Her first fashion series was commissioned in 1983 for a spread in Interview magazine.



Provided with designer clothes such as Jean-Paul Gaultier, Sherman undoubtedly provided an antithesis of a glamour ads. The models look silly but utterly delighted in their high fashion frocks. Her second commissioned fashion photographs are even more bizarre from the previous works, with the models looking dejected in Untitled #137, exaggeratedly wrinkled in Untitled #132, and even homicidal in Untitled #138. It appears inevitable that Sherman would be drawn to fashion spreads because fashion is yet another means of masquerade for women, and ads for clothing “ promise to convert the buyer into a more perfect version of herself (Thames and Hudson 8). Like all advertisements, fashion photographs manufacture a desire in a woman that could never be filled. Sherman uses her fashion photographs to undermine the desirability of such images by emphasizing their manipulating nature (Thames and Hudson 8).

In the fairy tales and monster series, Sherman reminds us of the monsters from childhood memories and may be suggesting through these photographs that everyone harbors a secret, repressed self that can shift form and shape at will (Sobieszek, 253). The undercurrent turned, rather startling in the 1980's into a torrent of gore and rage when she switched to using a larger format and often lurid colors, and to concocting increasingly horrific and surreal images (Kimmelman 142). These images represent a time in her career when her images truly become strange and surreal. These photographs are unusual not only because of their horrific images, but also because a viewer is unaccustomed to seeing such stories represented in photographs. The strangest scene appears in Untitled #150, “ In which an androgyn with a huge, extended tongue fills the foreground, and tiny figures

stand in the landscape behind it, making it seem like a giant among Lilliputians” (Thames and Hudson 9). Sherman’s Fairy Tales do not depict a specific example, but evoke a narrative form.

By the early 1990’s Sherman had tired of creating these shocking images turning to art history for inspiration. The result was a series of photographic portraits of her returning as the model, transformed by her usual false noses, bosoms, into both male and female figures as painted by various old masters of Western painting (Heller 225). Even when Sherman was creating history portraits she worked out of books, with reproduction, she says that “ It’s the aspect of photography that I appreciate, conceptually: the idea that images can be reproduced and seen anytime, anywhere, by anyone” ( Kimmelman 145). Just like all the rest of her works, the history paintings do not depict a particular painting but depicts types for the history genre. Sherman creates the most memorable and humorous pictures of women. Often spoofing the awkward depictions of the female anatomy of the Old Masters paintings. Understanding how ridiculous these history paintings are helps the viewer understand that Sherman is mocking the Western canon and its depiction of royalty and religious figures (Thames and Hudson 12).

Sherman’s next career move was to a raunchy pornographic depiction of individuals called the Sex Pictures. Using mannequins and body parts from medical catalogues, she constructs hybrid dolls. Rather than showing the dolls having sex, Sherman proudly shows the sex. Sherman created these works in response to the controversy over the National Endowment for the arts and the debates over the constitute obscenity in the arts. Typically,

pornography portrays sex as anonymous, but in Sherman's series she depicts sex as ridiculous (Thames and Hudson 14).

In Sherman's work, the notion of self is completely abandoned, replaced by the concept of multiplicity, dissociation, and fluidity. Yet, her portraits do not appear as performances only "unstable representations in ambiguous non-narratives making brief appearances, caught in a moment of ambivalent emotional expression" (Sobieszek, 253). Much of her work is clearly meant to be ambiguous. Her pictures have been interpreted as feminist indictments of gender stereotyping, but Sherman insists that she is not "political" (Heller 226).

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