

Jerry Saltz, "Sherman's March of Time: The Original Chameleon Shows Her Characters' Aging—And is Reborn," **New York**, December 1, pp. 76-77

ART

# SHERMAN'S MARCH OF TIME THE ORIGINAL CHAMELEON SHOWS HER CHARACTERS' AGING— AND IS REBORN.

BY JERRY SALTZ

**C**INDY SHERMAN'S is the face that launched a thousand theories. The best-known, most influential, least criticized, most lionized artist to emerge since Bruce Nauman, Sherman has a ruthless one-track mind whose powers of observation and parody have given us a rogue's gallery of archetypes, imaginary beings, demented dorks, ghouls, historical characters, and people she sees. Today, she's essentially doing what she's done since the mid-seventies: taking photographs of herself in female drag. Sherman is the siren-sorceress femme-fatale female-impersonator artist par excellence, a shape-shifting, attention-getting gremlin on the wing of photography. Over the decades we've seen her in almost 500 images, nearly always alone and center stage or lurking in gaudy disheveled backgrounds, staring blankly off into space or directly out at us.

It's some sort of Kabuki freak show. She's there but not there, a wanton but withdrawn shadow warrior who is in front of the camera and behind it, over your shoulder and in your face. Irony, mischief, and something like bloodlust pervade every cell of her. Sherman is preternaturally disposed to reprogram her appearance according to various sensory perceptions and sociopsychological signals, body language, and fashion clues. She jams her chakras, scrambles her molecules, and releases photographic goblins into the world. Even when I've spoken to her in person, she seems to repeatedly cloak and re-cloak, reconstituting herself before my eyes. It's unnerving.

This may be why I've never talked to Sherman much (even at her opening the other evening, this weirdness made me steer clear of her). Or maybe it's because until recently I was never a big fan. To me, she was an admirably consistent artist but someone whose work tended toward sensationalism, caricature, gags, and melodrama. Moreover, all the adulatory reviews and academic blather about how she critiques the male gaze are as annoying and blinkered as they are daunting. My theory about Sherman is that she likes to dress up, put on makeup, playact, and take pictures of herself crawling under the skins of stereotypes. We've seen her as vixen, saint, runaway, and hag. In some ways, all of Sherman's work can be thought of as one Ur-picture, a gigantic Dickens-Daumier library of types. That, or she's involved in a sort of metaphorical sacrifice: She dons these garbs to kill these characters. Either way, like a porn star, Sherman is obviously doing what she's doing in all her pictures—but you never know if she's faking it.

In these large-scale color photographs, Sherman has finally obliterated a psychological and personal fourth wall of photography that has dogged her art, on and off, for years. In many of the new pictures, her best in years, it's hard to distinguish between her art and our life. Her usual empress-strikes-back attitude is present, but gooniness and shtick have been ratcheted back in all but a couple of pictures. Her new figures show their years, and are more part of the real world, which gives them psychological weight and empathetic power. We see Sherman as a spouse of a financier or a powerful politician. In some pictures she looks like a southern belle, in others European nobility. In my favorite, an aging, roll-over-Vermeer *Girl With a Pearl Earring* lady scrutinizes us with patrician detachment. In the background is a magnificent staircase. Her hair and jewelry are perfect, but her makeup is caked and crinkled and stray hairs appear, all of it deliberately placed. Elsewhere, Sherman allows prosthetics and fake breasts to show. In one image, a seated Texas ingenue holds a rose in her lap. But her legs are spread slightly too far apart, and some arm fat spills from her dress. In another picture a contessa sits on a couch holding a dog. Look close, and you'll see the dog is fake, and that she's not really on

the couch. Sherman shot all these figures in front of a green screen, then digitally placed them in the settings (too bad she schmaltzes up some of the backgrounds). There's a weird Sears Portrait Studio quality to it all.

Inner lives radiate from these pictures. The image of what looks like an Upper East Side patroness shows us a chesty silver-haired lady with cultural interests, as can be seen in the portraits behind her desk; her interest in plastic surgery is also obvious. The same goes for what looks like a theater patron with puckered lips and long white gloves. The one of her as sisters in pastel gowns actually looks like a normal picture. (Unlike, say, the Carmela Soprano Mafia wife in garish jewelry.) Another, a white-haired Bea Arthur-ish world traveler, is white mischievous, New Age hippie, and cluelessness personified.

With the freakishness and parody toned down, Sherman finally seems vulnerable, someone going through some of what her characters are. Sherman no longer accuses or ridicules from the outside. Now she has joined her characters in this human comedy. After all these years, she's one of us.

THE ONLY ARTIST to twist women around as much as Cindy Sherman is Pablo Picasso. Moreover, Picasso never twisted any woman better than he did Marie-Thérèse Walter, the 17-year-old dishwater blonde he met outside a Paris department store at 6 P.M. on January 8, 1927, when he was 45. Picasso used (to my ear) the greatest pickup line of all time: "We will do great things together. I am Picasso." Never mind that she had no idea who he was; within three days they were lovers.

"Picasso's Marie-Thérèse," at Acquavella, could have been titled "The Year of Living Sexually." In 1932, Picasso's art became lush than ever, more florid, curving, sultry, and enamored. Walter is recognizable by a shock of blonde hair, her Spartan nose, and violet-and-lavender skin. Often we see her sleeping, her head thrown back in postcoital stupor, cheeks flushed, body supple. In *The Dream* her face turns into a phallus. In *Repose*, she is woman as alien: Limbs are splayed and twisted, hair becomes spiny needles, a tiny orifice sits at dead center. Establishment types say that Picasso was, at this point in his career, running out of gas. Judging by these pictures, I'd say he was just getting going. ■

## BACKSTORY

It's easy to forget what a **second-class citizen photography** was, back when Sherman was the "It" girl of the art world. As late as 1988, the MoMA curator John Szarkowski told the *Times* that "There aren't many people willing to hang a Garry Winogrand in their living rooms. **A Winogrand is not a wall ornament.**" That story went on to describe Sherman's work as almost unsellable as well: "Her last show included images so grotesque—dinner plates piled with rubber worms, pools of fake vomit—that people wouldn't dare, so she thought, hang them on their walls." Sherman's **photographs, at the time, were selling for as little as \$2,000**; last year, Christie's gaveled off a 1981 print for \$2.112 million.

CINDY SHERMAN  
METRO PICTURES.  
THROUGH  
DECEMBER 23.

PICASSO'S  
MARIE-THÉRÈSE  
ACQUAVELLA  
GALLERIES.  
THROUGH  
NOVEMBER 29.





*Untitled (2008),  
by Cindy Sherman,  
at Metro Pictures.*



DECEMBER 1, 2008

*"Sherman is there but not there, a wanton but withdrawn shadow warrior who is in front of the camera and behind it, over your shoulder and in your face." SHERMAN'S MARCH OF TIME, PAGE 76*



