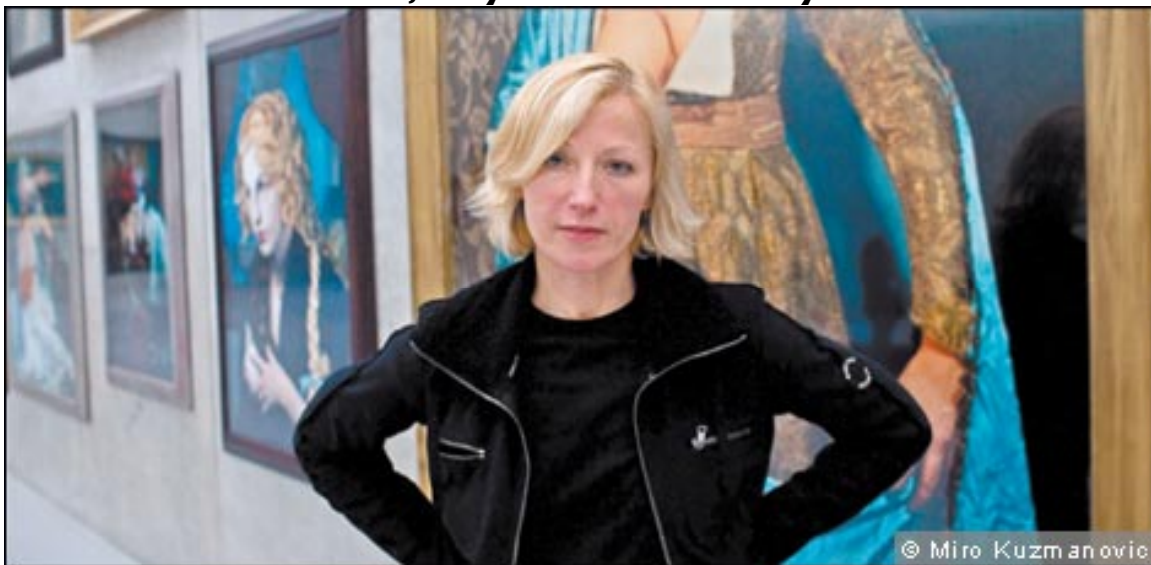


Emily Stokes, "Me, myself and why," **Financial Times**, January 7, 2011



## Me, myself and why



Cindy Sherman in front of some of her self-portraits

Asked to describe the first photograph that she ever took of herself, Cindy Sherman tucks her neat blond hair behind her ears and smiles, a little embarrassed. She was in her second year at Buffalo's State University College, she tells me, and her photography class was assigned a new project: to confront something that made them uncomfortable. A number of other students took photographs of passers-by on the street to overcome their fear of photographing strangers; Sherman's own thoughts turned to a photography field trip that was rumoured to happen the following semester, when "everyone would go into the woods and run around in the waterfalls and take off their clothes and take photos of each other ... Really," she tells me, wide-eyed, "it was my total nightmare." In response to the professor's brief, she took a photograph of herself in her bedroom, entirely naked except for the black lead that connected the camera to the remote shutter in her hand, with which she drew the outline of clothing on her body. The photograph, she remembers, earned her the first good grade in a class she had been failing.

The anecdote takes me by surprise because Sherman, now 56, is an artist famous not for revealing her body but for covering it up. She gently corrects me when I use the term "self-portraiture" to describe her work. "If anything," she tells me in her girlish voice, "I'm trying to expose as little of myself as possible, although people always think my work must be narcissistic." Over the past three decades, Sherman has taken hundreds of pictures in which she has transformed her face and body with painstaking detail, using clothing from thrift stores, wigs, makeup and prosthetics in order to become a range of fictional characters: clowns, grotesque part-humans, the subjects of Old Master paintings or wealthy women from New York's Upper East Side.

Her latest work, "Murals", features nine new personae, whom Sherman characterises as "mysterious and, well, just really hard to pin down". In one picture, an androgynous figure wears nude leggings, high yellow socks, a floral leotard, large trainers, and holds three bowling pins, standing with hands on hips and stomach pushed out, her expression grumpy and defiant. Another character, apparently a male, wears a large embroidered cape, which Sherman tells me is "from the Oddfellows; they're like the Masons, with really mystical costumes". I tell Sherman that the figures, which are cut-out against kitsch rural scenes in black and white, remind me of her early 1976 work, "Play of Selves", in which Sherman played out her relationship with her then boyfriend, artist Robert Longo, using paper dolls – but she corrects me once again, telling me that since "Play of Selves", none of her work has been autobiographical.

"I just happen to be the model," she explains, casually, "but it could be anybody as far as I'm concerned; it doesn't have anything to do with me at all."

Of course, this isn't strictly true. It is part of the power of Sherman's work that she is herself a mythical figure, having both lived in the public eye for the past 30 years and been literally hidden from it. Looking at any of her work, it is impossible not to try to spot the real Sherman beneath it all – which is fitting, because the characters she chooses to portray often seem to be covering up something of their true selves. As Sherman says of her portraits of rich society women, each decked out in pearls and clearly nipped and tucked along the way, "These people are really about showing off the life they've created for themselves, and in some ways to sad effect, because you can sort of sense what they gave up to have this life."

The Sherman I meet is quite the opposite kind of person – almost breathtakingly understated and at ease, with a slender frame, a girl-next-door's pretty face, and a model's perfect skin. Dressed in a knee-length navy dress, with Doc Marten boots and patterned tights that suggest a hint of punk, she shows me round the space where she works, pointing out the green photography screen, the shelves of prosthetic limbs, the pages from fashion magazines that line the walls.

She is shy but immensely likable, with a tendency to laugh at the merest suggestion of a joke. "I tried to have an assistant or to use a model," she says, "but I found that, even when I was paying someone I didn't know, I was trying to entertain them." She shifts in her seat as if to imitate her eager-to-please self. "It was, 'Are you having a good time? Can I get you a cup of tea?'" She laughs. "I'm not a good task-maker in that sense. I can't really be tough on other people in the way I can be tough on myself..."

Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, the youngest of five siblings. Her father, an engineer, and her mother, a reading teacher, instilled in her "the belief that if you're going to be successful it's not going to be easy – it's got to be really hard work". She first earned success with her "Untitled Film Stills" (1977-1980), in which she constructed images that looked as if they had been taken from 1950s noir films. Their popularity was, she says, at first worrying to her – "I didn't want to become 'flavour of the month,'" she explains – and so, for her next series of work, she tried to make something that would defy collectors. The "vomit pictures", as she calls them, are some of the few photos in which she herself does not appear (and, she tells me, quite deadpan, they didn't sell very well at all).

Today, Sherman is arguably the most critically acclaimed female artist of her generation; she is often cited as being solely responsible for changing the status of photography in contemporary art (Charles Saatchi was among the first to pay the kind of sums for her work that most collectors had previously reserved for paintings). In 1995, she received the MacArthur "Genius" Grant of \$500,000 and, in 2012, she will have her largest retrospective to date at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Despite the claim that her works are impersonal, it seems clear enough when speaking to Sherman that there is a relationship between her struggle with fame and recognition – her desire to "blend in" – and the work she makes. She likes the idea of female pop stars who reinvent their identities but hates being recognised in the street, a problem that has been presumably exacerbated by several of her boyfriends, who have included the actor Steve Martin, the filmmaker Paul H-O – who made a film called *Guest of Cindy Sherman* (2008) – and, currently, the musician David Byrne, formerly of Talking Heads. She has only recently started to enjoy going to art openings, which she used to dread because she has "a lot of friends from the old days that never really got successful and I felt bad for them – and so it would be really uncomfortable sometimes because I felt like I just wanted to blend in with the crowd; I didn't want anyone to notice me, or say, 'Ooh, you're Cindy Sherman'..."

Sherman has always been more interested in vulnerability than exhibitionism – which she calls "nakedness" as opposed to "nudity". Despite working with various fashion designers including Chanel and Marc Jacobs, she has no interest in the current trend of artistic fashion photography embodied by artists such as Ryan McGinley, who portray "attractive young people with

perfect bodies, and they're just showing that off and what's the shock there, you know?"

The "Murals" take this a step further: as she explains, she was wearing no makeup or prosthetics in the pictures (although she has, she says, altered her face in several images with Photoshop) – something that made her worried that she was "showing too much of myself" and so would seem "narcissistic".

In fact, Sherman's fear of narcissism is particularly difficult to understand in relation to these images. Whereas she looked rather gorgeous in her early "Untitled Film Stills", the "Mural" pictures make her look geeky and abject – older and more awkward than she does in real life. Perhaps this is the point: these figures are so "sincere in their weirdness", as Sherman puts it, that they seem to capture what it is to wilfully expose one's vulnerabilities, to face up to your fear with hands on hips.

Before I leave, Sherman shows me a small architectural model of the MoMA gallery spaces, which she is using to plan the layout of her 2012 retrospective. The "Murals", she explains, will constitute the last room of the show; she wants them to recall the shrines she saw by the roadside when she and Byrne were looking to buy a house in Mexico. Peering inside her MoMA doll-house, she giggles at one of the tiny figures printed on the wall – an androgynous character wearing the padded costume of a naked female body, complete with black felt triangle for pubic hair, and brandishing a plastic sword. Gently, with the slightest shift of her head and gesture of her arm, Sherman takes on a different aspect, as if to become her creation once again. "Here I am," she says in a gruff, benevolent voice. "I will protect you."