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Cindy Sherman Unmasked

CINDY SHERMAN was looking for inspiration at the Spence Chapin Thrift Shop on the Upper East Side last month when she eyed a satin wedding dress. An elaborate confection, it had hand-sewn seed pearls forming flowers cascading down the front and dozens of tiny satin-covered buttons in the back from which the train gently hung like a Victorian bustle.



"It's Arnold Scaasi," the saleswoman said, as Ms. Sherman made a beeline for the dress. Unzipping the back the clerk showed off a row of labels, one with the year it was made — 1992 — and another with the name of the bride-to-be. "It has never been worn," she added. As the story goes, when the gown was finished, the bride decided she didn't like it.

Ms. Sherman appeared skeptical. Is this really what happened, or is the story just the cover for a jilted bride? One begged to know more.

That tantalizing sense of mystery and uneasiness are similar emotions viewers feel when they see one of Ms. Sherman's elliptical photographs. Over the course of her remarkable 35-year career she has transformed herself into hundreds of different personas: the movie star, the valley girl, the angry housewife, the frustrated socialite, the Renaissance courtesan, the menacing clown, even the Roman god Bacchus. Some are closely cropped images; in others she is set against a backdrop that, as Ms. Sherman describes it, "are clues that tell a story."

"None of the characters are me," she explained, sipping a soda at a cafe near the shop that afternoon. "They're everything but me. If it seems too close to me, it's rejected."

On this unseasonably warm afternoon Ms. Sherman, 58, had bicycled from her apartment in Lower Manhattan to discuss her landmark [retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art](#), which opens Feb. 26 and includes more than 170 photographs. Wearing no makeup, with leggings and sneakers and a tweed hat that carefully concealed her crash helmet, she looked totally inconspicuous, hardly the celebrated artist whose fans include Lady Gaga; Elton John, who collects her work; and Madonna, who sponsored a show of Ms. Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills," at the Museum of Modern Art in 1997.

Petite, with strawberry-blonde hair that falls to her shoulders, she is nothing like the larger-than-life characters she portrays in her self-portraits. Soft-spoken and friendly, she is very much a girl's girl who can as easily giggle about men, movies and makeup as she can discuss literature and art.

With its array of high-end used clothing stores, this neighborhood has proved a rich hunting ground for Ms. Sherman. It was here along Third Avenue that she found the perfect designer clothes for her "society portraits," a 2008 series of photographs depicting Botoxed, over-made-up, often unhappy women of a certain age.

Even as she prepares for her retrospective — her first in the United States in nearly 14 years — she is pushing herself to try something new. Lately she’s been thinking about creating a family portrait where she would play every member.

“She’s undoubtedly one of the most influential artists of our time,” said Eva Respini, associate curator of photography at MoMA, who has spent the last two years organizing Ms. Sherman’s retrospective. “She is always addressing issues at the heart of our visual culture. In this world of celebrity makeovers, reality TV and YouTube, here is an artist whose different modes of representation seem truer now than when they were made.”

Philippe Ségalot, a Manhattan dealer who bought his first work by Ms. Sherman for his own collection in the ’80s, said: “I’ve always been amazed how she could take what seems like such a simple idea and keep reinventing it. Cindy is one of the few artists who has been consistently great throughout her entire career.”



Raised in the 1950s, among the first artists to come of age in the era of television and mass media, Ms. Sherman is part of the “pictures generation,” making works that combine Pop and Conceptualism.

She was first noticed in the ’70s thanks to her “Untitled Film Stills,” fictional portraits inspired by movies and girlie magazines. She and artists like Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler and Laurie Simmons were examining female archetypes and gender issues in a way no one had before. But it wasn’t until 1981, when she made her “Centerfolds,” a series of portraits inspired by photographs in Playboy — but with the women clothed and conveying a complicated range of emotions — that her career really took off.

“That was when museums first began to acquire her work,” said Janelle Reiring, a co-founder of Metro Pictures, the Chelsea gallery. “It was a big turning point.”

Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic for The New Yorker, who calls Ms. Sherman “his favorite American artist of the last 40 years,” remembers the day he walked into Metro Pictures to see the “Centerfolds.” He was so bowled over, he ran out to the nearest pay phone.



“I immediately called the two publications I wrote for only to discover that they had already assigned reviews,” he recalled. “I had to write something that day, and it turned out to be a check.”

Mr. Schjeldahl bought a photograph for \$900, paying in monthly \$100 installments.

By 1982 Ms. Sherman was the subject of an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and included in Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany as well as the Venice Biennale. Five years later she had a traveling retrospective that was at the Whitney Museum of American Art. And in 1995 she received a MacArthur grant.

Her “Untitled Film Stills,” for which she purposely developed the film in hotter-than-normal chemicals to make them look cracked, cheap and grainy, like promotional giveaways, are now considered landmarks of late-20th-century art. (In 1995 MoMA purchased a set for a reported \$1 million, an enormous price at the time.) But scores of other images from her long career have endured too, despite the proliferation of digital photography and Photoshop.

“The contradictory and complex readings of her work reinforces its ongoing relevance to multiple audiences,” Ms. Respini

said. “More than ever, identity is malleable and fluid, and her photographs confirm this.”

For Ms. Reiring the key to Ms. Sherman’s success is that she “doesn’t tell you what to think,” she said. “Her work is so rich in meaning that everyone can develop their own ideas. Everyone sees something different.”

While she generally works in series, she has steadfastly refused to give titles to her photographs because she wants viewers to draw their own conclusions. Ms. Reiring said it was either the gallery or critics or the public who have named her series.

Commercially she is often credited with taking photography out of a ghetto and putting it on the same firm fine-art footing as painting and sculpture. In May 2011 Mr. Ségalot, bidding on behalf of a client, bought a 1981 image in which she posed as a teenage girl. For six months it was the most expensive photograph sold at auction, bringing \$3.9 million at Christie’s.

Growing up in Huntington Beach, on Long Island, where her father worked as an engineer for Grumman Aircraft, and her mother taught in public schools, she recalls liking to dress up “probably more than other kids.”

“There are pictures of me dressed up as an old lady,” Ms. Sherman said, sitting in her studio on the edge of SoHo one afternoon. “I was more interested in being different from other little girls who would dress up as princesses or fairies or a pretty witch. I would be the ugly old witch or the monster.”



She started painting in college at the State University of Buffalo. “I was good at copying things, but I didn’t really have ideas of what I wanted to do with painting,” she said. “That was when I thought, ‘Why am I wasting my time elaborately copying things when I could use a camera?’ ”

One of her first assignments in a photography class was to confront something that was hard for her. “I took a series of myself naked in front of the camera,” she said. “I did a couple of these series, and that was when I started using myself, but at the same time, not as an art practice, just for therapy or something. I would transform my face with makeup into various characters just to pass the time.”

She was dating the artist Robert Longo, and he suggested that she document herself in these costumes. And after the two moved to New York in 1977, Ms. Sherman would often show up places in costume.

On and off for more than a decade, starting in 1985, she removed herself from her pictures. One series depicts macabre still lifes of vomit, blood and moldy food; another captures anatomically correct medical body parts in bizarre poses. She has said she created many of these tougher images during difficult periods in her life, like when she was angry about several male artists whose careers seemed to take off more easily than hers, or when she was in the middle of a divorce from the French video artist Michel Auder, ending their 15-year marriage.

None of these images have been as commercially successful as her “Untitled Film Stills,” or the “history portraits.” The history series (1989-90) were shots of her dressed as characters from old masters like Titian, Holbein and Caravaggio.



She works alone in her commodious floor-through studio that houses her costumes, props and equipment. Women's wigs dot window sills, and there are shelves of wax doll's heads and body parts from medical mannequins. It is here that she becomes the subject, the photographer, the director, the makeup artist and the costume stylist.

"Whenever I tried to hire people or use friends or family, even if I paid them, I felt like I had to entertain them," she said. "When I'm working alone, I can push myself. And I don't complain."

In recent years technology has changed her work. Before digital cameras "I would do the character, set everything up, take a roll of film, get out of character, take the makeup off and go to the lab and wait a few hours for the film to be developed," she said. "Then I'd look at the film and realize something didn't work out. And I'd have to redo everything myself. Now I can continue working and tweak it as I'm going."

In the MoMA show there will be images that are new to American audiences in which she has digitally altered her face. "I didn't use any makeup," she said. "It was all slight subtle changes with Photoshop to make each character look different."

In some her eyes are bigger and spread apart; in others she has reshaped her chin or plumped her cheeks. "It's horrifying how easy it to make changes," she said.

Recently she has been thinking big, producing murals printed on a kind of contact paper. She got the idea, she said, after seeing how "a number of male artists would get invited to do a show somewhere, and they'd just fill up an entire wall of painting that is just this gigantic thing."

She added: "I was thinking how pretentious that is. It made me realize not too many women artists think that way."

As visitors get off the escalator at MoMA, they will be enveloped in eight-foot-tall images of Ms. Sherman standing amid a bucolic black-and-white setting that she shot in Central Park. "It's like walking into Cindyland," Ms. Respini said on a recent

afternoon as she was overseeing workers applying the contact paper to the museum's walls.

There Ms. Sherman emerges in yet another mind-boggling array of characters: a circus juggler; a woman clad in a body suit with pointy bosoms, nipples and pubic hair (discovered in a Tokyo department store); an aging woman in a long red dress.

"You think you may know them," Ms. Respini said. "But in fact the more you look at them, the more complex and darker they seem. The same could be said of Cindy. How can such a mild-mannered, nice woman have such a wicked imagination that keeps inventing these fantastical characters over and over again?"

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Images from pages:

Cindy Sherman

Self Portrait, 2012

Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Cindy Sherman

Untitled, 1981

Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Cindy Sherman

Untitled Film Still, 1978

Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Cindy Sherman

Untitled, 2008

Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Cindy Sherman

Untitled, 2010/2011

Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures