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ART REVIEW

Photography's Angel Provocateur 'Cindy Sherman' at Museum of Modern Art



Cindy Sherman "Untitled #470" (2008) in a gallery of Ms. Sherman's society and clown portraits in the Museum of Modern

There are several conclusions to be drawn from the [Museum of Modern Art](#)'s magnificent if somewhat flawed survey of [Cindy Sherman](#)'s brilliant career. But one of them is surely that reports of the death of the author have been greatly exaggerated.

At many points throughout this dense, often exciting show, which opens on Sunday, we are confronted by an artist with an urgent, singularly personal vision, who for the past 35 years has consistently and provocatively turned photography against itself. She comes across here as an increasingly vehement avenging angel waging a kind of war with the camera, using it to expose what might be called both the tyranny and the inner lives of images, especially the images of women that bombard and shape all of us at every turn.

Aided by ever-shifting arrays of costumes, wigs, makeup techniques, accessories, props and at times masks and prosthetic body parts, Ms. Sherman has aggressively role-played and stage-directed her way through, and in many ways laid waste to, a lexicon of mostly female stereotypes. Her career started in the late 1970s with the small black-and-white "[Untitled Film Stills](#)," quietly reverberant scenes from nonexistent movies.

Inspiring almost reflexive story lines in viewers, their female protagonists identify variously as housewives, forlorn lovers, sex kittens, girl Fridays and tourists. From there she moved ever onward and outward, to color and to larger formats and a dizzying array of conventions — fashion, art history, centerfolds, pornography, portraiture, fairy tales and horror movies. We have followed, filling in the blanks, from one set of characters to the next.

Unfolding in discrete, chapterlike series, her work has proved to be as formally ambitious and inventive as it is psychically probing. Her photographs are inevitably skewed so that their seams show and their fictive, constructed nature is apparent; we are always in on the trick, alerted to their real-feigned nature. The rough, visible nonchalance with which they are assembled for the camera has expanded the boundaries of setup photography, incorporating aspects of painting, sculpture, film, installation, performance, collage and assemblage.



Ms. Sherman is often lauded for being a skilled, chameleonlike actress, and she is — an actress always teetering on the brink of being in a role, but never all the way in. She is also a consummate manipulator of space, scale, color and pattern textiles. And she is famous for working solo in her studio, without assistants. Part of the power of her images is their home-alone quality. We know that everything we see in a Sherman image she put there, deliberately, decisively.

This is a timely exhibition. At a moment when too much art is dependent for its effect on lengthy explanations offered by wordy museum labels or nattering art dealers, Ms. Sherman has pursued an adamantly visual art that allows for — coerces, really — rich, free rumination on the viewer's part. Similarly, when younger artists are increasingly encouraged to make work that tackles the problems of the world, she demonstrates that these things can't be easily calculated. It reminds us that art's political and moral effects are convincing only when driven by deep, in many ways selfish, psychological needs.



Ms. Sherman, who was born in New Jersey in 1954 and grew up on Long Island, is one of the most important artists of her era. The Modern's press statement rightly notes that her work remains "the unchallenged cornerstone of postmodern photography."

But she is also great, and arguably the first of her kind, in a more old-fashioned sense. She may be the first woman in modern art history whose career conforms in its broad outlines to those of figures like Pablo Picasso, Jasper Johns or Bruce Nauman: an innately precocious, innovative, prolific, influential artist who has enjoyed widespread acclaim — and market success — virtually since she first appeared, in the early 1980s, and who has never rested on her laurels, but has persisted, decade after decade, with interesting, surprising work.

So the Modern's Sherman retrospective is unquestionably a historic occasion, even if it is also something of a missed opportunity. It rides on the coattails of Ms. Sherman's achievement without quite doing it justice. The show will undoubtedly enthrall the general public, as it should. But a larger, riskier, more rigorous look at

what Ms. Sherman has wrought could have set everyone back on their heels and been a major inspiration to artists as well.

Basically, the Modern blinked. Ms. Sherman's body of work could have easily handled the entire sixth floor, like the recent De Kooning retrospective or Richard Serra's in 2007, instead of just two-thirds. Or it should have been given additional space elsewhere in the museum, like the recent surveys of work by Martin Kippenberger, Gabriel Orozco and Martin Puryear. Failing that, better use should have been made of the allotted space.



It is easy to grasp the challenge that the quality, quantity and variety of Ms. Sherman's art presented the show's able organizers, Eva Respini, associate curator, and Lucy Gallun, curatorial assistant in the department of photography. The notion of laying out her career series by series might have seemed, on paper, too predictable. But the treatment here pulls its punches.

The show consists of a combination of five galleries devoted to individual series — starting with the “Untitled Film Stills” and ending with her recent stark, monumental society portraits of heavily made up, quietly desperate matrons of a certain age — and six often nebulous thematic galleries that mix different series together. The combination muffles the rage in her work, obscures the clarity of her evolution and dilutes or skirts her less popular and less critically chewed-over series.

Except for one admittedly harrowing gallery, the show gives short shrift to her works from the late 1980s and especially the '90s, when, partly out of fatigue, partly to make her work less predictable and collectible, she all but vanished from her photographs. In her place she offered an often fabulously repulsive assortment of masks, prosthetic body parts and dummies, as well as expanses of gelatinous ooze that added a visceral, excremental if also painterly force. There are only three examples of Ms. Sherman's jarring sex pictures from 1992, which use medical dummies and masks to create dark, savagely unerotic plays on pornography and the very idea of sexual union; to their credit, they are apparently not ready for Modern prime time.

Less familiar groups of Sherman-free works, all from the '90s, are skipped altogether: her mask series, horror and Surrealism series, Civil War series and the gnarly, broken-doll series in which she suddenly reverted to working small and in black and white while going through a rough divorce. In an interview in the catalog she notes that collectors prefer works in which she appears; it is unfortunate that the Modern reinforces this view.

Her big corrosive clown images from 2002-04, with their bright, digitally manipulated abstract backgrounds, should have blazed forth from their own space rather than been divided among three thematic galleries. I could have used many more examples of the fashion photographs, which despite being commercial work, are among some of Ms. Sherman's most aggressive, opulently sardonic efforts. Here nearly 30 years of projects are represented by a mere 11 images, and none of them shows her incorporating masks or prostheses, one of many examples of cross-fertilization between series that might have been stressed. And the show lingers too long over her popular but uneven history portraits, in which she cobbled together riotously false approximations of old master paintings by Raphael, Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Ingres.



Finally, the show plays down Ms. Sherman's astounding artistic precociousness by including too few of her earliest works and then sprinkling them among other efforts in the first and last galleries. Her penchant for

role-playing gained momentum from seeing photo-based Conceptual works by female artists like [Hannah Wilke](#), [Eleanor Antin](#) and Adrian Piper in the mid-1970s while she was attending college in Buffalo. But an uncommonly intense attraction to dress-up and masquerade dates to her childhood: It was in her blood. The catalog includes a photograph of Ms. Sherman and a friend around age 11, dressed and made up as old women; her stooped creaky posture already signals the ability to crawl into other people's skins.

The most recent works at the Modern are murals of immense images that break out of the photographic frame and portray the artist without makeup in often ill-fitting costumes. Here Ms. Sherman unabashedly plays on her own aging — as she does in a more lacquered way in the society portraits — but she also evokes the play-acting little girl that she once was while making it feel like new territory.

If this show does not go all out for Ms. Sherman, it is still a gift, one that reminds us, when we especially need reminding, what it takes to be a great artist. Although not one of her images qualifies, exactly, as a self-portrait, the Modern's show is above all an inspiring portrait of the artist ceaselessly at work, striving never to repeat herself, always trying to go deeper and further in one direction or another. Her self — remorseless, generous, imaginative and shrewd — is everywhere.