

METRO PICTURES

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FACES

A Cindy Sherman retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The first sentence of the first wall text in the Cindy Sherman retrospective now at the Museum of Modern Art reads, "Masquerading as a myriad of characters, Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954) invents personas and tableaux that examine the construction of identity, the nature of representation, and the artifice of photography." The images do no such thing, of course. They hang on walls. The pathetic fallacy of attributing conscious actions to art works is a standard dodge, which strategically deepens the pursuit of meaning. Such boilerplate language has trailed Sherman since her emergence, more than thirty years ago, in the "Pictures Generation" of media-savvy artists who tweaked conventions of high art and popular culture, sometimes in tandem with theory-bent, iconoclastic academics and critics. The association made for a rich episode in the history of ideas, and a spell of heady distraction in that of art. The intellectual vogue is long over, though the pedantry lingers, presuming that the mysteries of Sherman's art—photographs that are like one-frame movies, which she directs and acts in—demand special explanation. (She is remarkably tolerant of interviewers who keep asking her what she means, as if, like any true artist, she hadn't already answered in the only way possible for her: in the work.) But the mysteries are irreducible. Alive in the experience of viewers who reject being told what to think, they qualify Sherman, to my mind, as the strongest and finest American artist of her time.

The show is theatrical. A hundred and seventy-one pictures hang in exquisitely lit rooms, on differently colored walls. Visitors are greeted by an eighteen-foot-high photomural, from 2010, displaying five monumental, sweetly gauche visions of Sherman, variously bewigged but with minimal makeup, most in historical costumes, set against grainy black-and-white landscapes. There is some ju-

venilia, including a 1975 film, in which Sherman appears as an animated paper doll, but the selection favors recent work, from a series of faux portraits of aging society women in swank surroundings, and is chiefly a calculated sequence of visual knockouts. I'm disappointed as a critic, hankering for a denser, more chronological array—encompassing the more than five hundred works she has made since 1977—to enable a fully informed career analysis. Beyond sharing most artists' reluctance to be thus anatomized, however, Sherman clearly takes her duties as an entertainer seriously. The show is as good as the movies. Picture by picture, we are thrown back into discontinuous feelings that she quickens and manipulates as deftly as a Hitchcock or a Kubrick. To change mediums, we respond to the mastery of performance and presentation in her mature photographs as we might to Baroque paintings.

The seventy pictures from the "Untitled Film Stills" series in the show, though delightful and historically illustrious, are immature art. They were Sherman's first project in New York, when she arrived from Buffalo State College, in 1977. As an art student, she had switched from painting to photography and, encouraged by trends in conceptual art, had resumed a favorite pastime of her Long Island suburban childhood: dressing up. The Film Stills are the body of Sherman's work most congenial to cultural-studies cogitation, owing to their tacit commentary on women's roles in the popular imagination. She enacted actresses acting in films that are recognizable in kind—art-house European, noir, B melodrama—though invented in fact. The waifs, vamps, sex objects, career girls, and housewives add up to a living inventory of hand-me-down feminine enchantments and miseries. The Film Stills are brittle as art, though, limited by the same game-playing that makes them such fun. The generic settings are prosaic

in contrast to the poetry of the acting. Sherman remedied that, first with a series of would-be sophisticated young women posed against rear projections of urban locales, and then, in 1981, with a breakthrough show: a dozen two-by-four-foot “centerfold” images of socially assorted females lost in introspective anguish. No longer burlesquing film, these works mobilize a forthright range of cinematic potencies. The effects of acting are inseparable from those of framing, set, lighting, makeup, costume, and color. Scripts are implied—blatantly, in the case of a melancholy girl clutching a scrap of newspaper lonely-hearts ads. More ambiguous are young women vulnerably hunched or sprawled in the grip of nameless memories and fears: awakening the worse for wear in a bed with black sheets, or transfixed by the apparent light of a campfire, or embracing a blanket as a surrogate for someone or something. You can wrinkle out social comment, if you like—at the time, many viewers projected rape scenarios—but you will have stopped looking.

Starting in 1982, Sherman countered another distorting response to her work: a popular clamor to discover “the real Cindy,” as if she were the latest shtick-wielding show-biz celebrity. First came terrifying pictures of her huddled in a cheap bathrobe, looking out with defenseless, stricken despair. (Here’s real for you. Happy now?) Then she brought the grotesquerie latent in all make-believe to luxurious, noxious flower, effacing or eliminating her presence in scenes carefully contrived to shock. Id-drenched fairytale monsters revel in crepuscular depravity—at times with bottles at hand, to explain their intoxicated, hideous glee. Prosthetic body parts perform decidedly anti-erotic sex scenes. One creature delicately fingers her huge, bloody

tongue amid tiny toy human figures, likely her nutriment. Slasher-movie tropes of gore and dismemberment passed in review. (In 1997, Sherman made an actual, not very good horror film, “Office Killer,” about a mousy copy editor turned serial killer. An obvious discomfort with directing other actors confirmed her customary wisdom in working alone.) Poised between disgust

Metro Pictures, in 1990. Like the characters in the Film Stills, the period ladies and gents portrayed (with the notable exception of a Fouquet Madonna and a Caravaggio Bacchus) seem instantly familiar but are essentially dreamed up. The deluxe appearance of beauty and splendor, at first glance, disintegrates, upon a second, into the purely ersatz effect of tatty fabrics and obtrusive makeup. This desultory

fact casts the viewer as a collaborator in the works’ ultimate payoff as actually beautiful, superlative art.

Some people find cruelty in Sherman’s recent pictures of wealthy dames fighting losing battles with age. They’re right. But a particular cruelty pervades all her art—along with a wafting compassion that falls some degree short of reassuring. Sherman hammers ceaselessly at the delusion that personal identity is anything but a jury-rigged, rickety vessel, tossed on waves of hormones and neurotransmitters, and camouflaged with sociable habits and fashions. She does this by conveying inner states of feeling and surmise that are dramatically out of synch with outer, assumed attitudes. (Only her monsters are exactly what they think they are.) Hapless self-images are the ordinary stuff of comedy, but Sherman makes hard, scary truths sustainable as only great artists can. Her work’s significance naturally exercises

village explainers of every stripe. Still, let’s leave the future some brainwork to do. What she means will become clear in retrospect. A line from “Hamlet” comes to mind: “in thy orisons be all my sins rememb’red.” Sherman assures us that certain of our own dearest offenses and follies—and prayers, too—will outlast the present day. ♦



Carefully contrived to shock: “Untitled #415” (2004).

and hilarity, the works in these series are often consummate pictorial art, in which Sherman perfected her formal virtuosity. They don’t feel like photographs, passively recording slices of reality. They feel like paintings, infused with decision throughout.

It made sense that, once her audience had suffered enough, Sherman plumbed the history of painting with delectable, rousing pastiches of Old Masters in antique-looking frames, which were a major hit when they were shown at

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Slide show: Schjeldahl on Cindy Sherman.