

METRO PICTURES

Cotter, Holland. "Cindy Sherman's Divas, Poised for a Final Close-Up," *NYTimes.com* (May 26, 2016).

The New York Times



Cindy Sherman's "Untitled" (2016).

In the transgender, avatar-populated present, personal identity feels increasingly like a pliable condition. It's one that Cindy Sherman has been playing with in her photographs for decades. While still in art school in the early 1970s, she was transforming herself, for the camera, into an epic cast of individual characters — sullen teen queens, nerdy guys, Hollywood vamps — through a use of makeup and costuming so virtuosic and expressive as to rival the brushwork of a master painter.

Now, some 40 years on, in a show of new work at Metro Pictures, the virtuosity is greater than ever, or at least subtler, and Ms. Sherman is still sole actor, director and costumer in a continuing drama. But the cast of characters has changed, simplified. Guys are long gone; the teen queens have grown; the vamps remain, all veteran divas poised for a final close-up.

With their elegiac tone, the new pictures, Ms. Sherman's first in five years, seem specifically designed to prompt reflection on the histories she has taken these divas through over time. She introduced them, in 1977, in a now-renowned series of black-and-white photographs called "Untitled Film Stills," as starlets on the rise. They played ingénues — young housewives, career girls — threatened, in noirish, B-movie solo scenes, by unnamed dangers lurking just out of camera range.

519 W 24TH ST NEW YORK, NY 10011 T 212 206 7100 F 212 337 0070
WWW.METROPICTURES.COM GALLERY@METROPICTURES.COM

When Ms. Sherman started using color photography, the sense of danger became more explicit and vivid. In the large-scale 1981 “Centerfolds/Horizontal” series, the ingénues appeared half-naked in disheveled beds, looking dazed as if in the aftermath of sexual attack. By the “Fairy Tales” series of 1985, they were relegated to taking passive, abject roles in the dead-end genre of horror films. At the beginning of the 1990s, a decade that would be scarred by AIDS and the culture wars, Ms. Sherman pushed images of physical violation to near-pornographic extremes. In the “Sex Pictures” series, she removed real bodies from the pictures and, in scenes of erotic abuse, substituted gender-scrambled figures composed from prosthetic parts. She finally reduced the figures to primal muck: puddles of blood, vomit and feces soaked into the earth.



Cindy Sherman's "Untitled" (2016).

After these near-abstract pictures, which are by far her most radical and least approachable, she brought real bodies — meaning her own — back in front of the camera. One often has a sense in Ms. Sherman's art that she is maintaining a kind of double remove from the characters she depicts. We aren't seeing just her in disguise; we're seeing her playing someone who is also playing a role. This was the effect in the 2008 series “Society Portraits.”

In those pictures, it was almost as if we were revisiting some of her 1970s ingénues 30 years later, retired and presenting themselves to the world as they wished to be seen, postcareer. Now upper-middle-class matrons, they've saved wisely or married well. Their lives are shaped by physical comfort, surgical enhancement, a continuing flair for glamour, but also perhaps by a vague sense of doubt and regret. Did they leave films too early and miss their great roles, the roles that would have earned them full admission to divadom?

The genuine and apparently still active older actresses played by Ms. Sherman in the photographs at Metro Pictures have no such regrets: divadom is theirs and they've earned it. One, wearing a silver turban and a silk caftan, is an incarnation of Gloria Swanson in her Norma Desmond phase. There's a "Grey Gardens" version of Mary Pickford, with cupid-bow lips, tumbling locks and clumpy pancake. A Susan Hayward type smolders in a royal-purple robe; and a Ruby Keeler clone, an imperious gamine of a certain age, poses before a digitally inserted cityscape.

As always with Ms. Sherman's pictures, the production values, for both photography and theater, are high, though there are some notable departures in these new images. Many of Ms. Sherman's past pictures of women have been caricatures, mockingly absurd or grotesque. Some of these new ones are too, but not all: A high percentage flatter their fictional sitters. And whereas in the past the artist has gone to great lengths to obscure her personal presence, she seems less intent on that here. Several of these characters clearly share her features; most display, very conspicuously, her 62-year-old hands.

Ms. Sherman recently suggested that, after a long career focused on molding herself into expressive versions of human statuary for her photographs, the time may have come to move on, try new things. Judging by the current work, that sounds right. As ingenious, polished and thoughtful as these pictures are, they are also somewhat ordinary, like exercises in dress-up, particularly when considered within the context of the increasingly radical forms of transpositive culture that her art has surely helped create.

At the same time, her work has rarely felt as straightforwardly personal and humane as these new pictures do, with their how-to (and how-not-to) lessons in artful aging. And that in itself is a valuable and provocative advance.



Cindy Sherman's "Untitled" (2016).