

METRO PICTURES

King, Darryn. "The Other Side," *The Weekend Australian* (May 7-8, 2016).



THE OTHER SIDE

Photographer Cindy Sherman has built a long career around dressing as other people without ever revealing much of her true self, discovers **Darryn King**

In 1975, in her third year of college, Cindy Sherman created *Untitled #479*, the piece she still regards as her first serious work of art: 23 stills that, shot by shot, track one character's gradual transformation from androgynous mystery to glamorous, beauty-spotted, cigarette-wielding vamp.

In a single class assignment, Sherman announced and conveyed the themes that would preoccupy a lifetime behind and in front of the camera. In the four decades since, she has played starlets and harlots, centrefold models and housewives, fairytale characters and fashion victims. She has masqueraded as a Madonna, as Marilyn Monroe and a creature that author Karl Ove Knausgaard christened "the Pig-Human".

Toasting Sherman at a gala at the Hammer Museum in 2012, Steve Martin said: "On Halloween, Cindy Sherman goes as herself."

John Waters has called her a "female female impersonator".

It's shocking then, in its way, to see Sherman, 62, undisguised — looking purposefully non-descript in a sensible blouse and pants. Or maybe part of the point of Sherman's work, as has been suggested, is that a woman is always in disguise.

"I'm dressed up for this," Sherman says, smiling. "Normally I'd really be a slob."

Considering her motley creations, it's probably inevitable that the so-called real Cindy Sherman comes off, as Miranda July has put it,

as more like a "dignified documentarian than a crazy performance artist".

Sherman acknowledges the reality is often a

let-down for people. "They could also think that as a result I'm not so interesting and that my work is where I let loose," she has said. "That's probably true."

Today, Sherman has been working in her ninth-floor studio that occupies a gleaming Winka Dubbeldam building in West SoHo. (She lives in a penthouse apartment upstairs, with a parrot.) There'd be views of the Hudson River if you could see them: by the time I arrive, late in the afternoon, she has spent the whole day indoors, applying finishing touches to a new show.

"I hear it's very nice outside, right?" she asks. "Warm?"

One of Sherman's workstations is lined with bald Styrofoam heads. Curling plastic fingers sprout out from the edge of a tabletop. There's a rack of costumes and wigs, and cheap fake plastic moustaches and brows in packets probably plucked off a rack in Chinatown. Photographs of women — silent movie stars, fashion models, celebrities — adorn every wall. In the centre of the room is the well-lit, green

screen-backed space where Sherman's characters materialise and mutate.

Sherman is her own model, art director, costume designer and wardrobe stylist, make-up artist and hairstylist. She used to develop her own pictures, too — now she touches them up digitally. She has been a one-woman show for most of her career, having found it strange to be in character with an assistant in the room. Nothing came of attempts to enlist family and friends as models, and in her one foray as a movie director, in 1997's *Office Killer*, she found herself even less suited to the co-operative endeavour of filmmaking.

Often she finds herself shooting late into the night and sometimes entirely abandons a day's work if a character reminds her too much of something she has done in the past — or of herself. Where a single contact sheet of hers was once crowded by diverse characters, these days she takes about 100 images of a new character, taking the time to refine and get properly acquainted with each one.

"Sometimes it feels like pulling teeth. I keep trying different wigs, different costumes, changing make-up. Sometimes at 9.30 I'll be like, forget it, it's not going to happen, I'm over her!"

It's a busy time. After her coming New York exhibition at her gallery, Metro Pictures, where

she'll show her first body of work since 2012, she has a late-career retrospective at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane on May 28. Next month she will open the first special exhibition at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles.

Sherman feels depleted after months of intense activity such as these. "I get sick of it: sick of make-up, sick of costumes. I need to take some time off from being in front of a camera."

Her pictures are elaborate fictions rather than self-portraits. For someone who has made images of herself continuously for four decades, Sherman has cunningly avoided being the subject of her own work. She mostly hates having her photo taken by someone else — "I never know what to do with myself" — and dislikes the concept of selfies. "There's something wrong with a culture that's into that whole thing." When she was dating David Byrne she found his preoccupation with his fame and his

fans distasteful. "To be perfectly honest, he really is into his celebrity," she says.

It was Sherman's fear of self-exposure that led her to turn the lens on herself in the first place. In college, it was a spring tradition for students to go on a naked romp through the trees and snap photographs of each other. "It was horrifying to me," Sherman says with a laugh. "But one of our early projects was to confront something. I thought, OK, maybe I have to confront that issue." Sherman took a series of photographs of herself in the nude, disfiguring her body with photographic effects.

"That was when I really started taking pictures of myself."

When she enrolled in the art course at the State University College in Buffalo, New York, her intention had been to pursue drawing and painting, with the vague idea she might be a courtroom illustrator. "Disjointed and all over the place," is how she now describes her efforts as a painter. "There was no theme, no passion or vision in what I was painting."

In her second year, Sherman failed her technically focused introductory photography class. It was her third-year photography professor, Barbara Jo Revelle, who encouraged her to work on the ideas instead.

Sherman had discovered the work of Chris Burden and Vito Acconci, who used their bodies as the raw material of their art. At the same time, Sherman had an intensifying obsession with experimenting with make-up, fashion and the malleability of her own appearance.

As a child, Sherman had kept a trunk beneath her bed overflowing with dresses and thrift store finds. Playing dress-ups and creating characters was an attention-seeking strategy, she says now. "I think it had to do with being the

youngest of five kids. There was a big gap between me and the next one, so they were a whole separate family by the time I came around. It was kind of like, maybe if you don't like me this way ... how about this way?"

Sherman guesses that she was about 11 when she dressed up as an old lady and strolled the neighbourhood with a friend in geriatric postures. She still remembers the thrill of apparently fooling a neighbour. "I'm sure he was humouring us. He was acting like he really

believed we were old ladies. I remember thinking, 'Oh my god, he's really fallen for it!'"

She never outgrew that desire to pretend. "It must have been this therapeutic thing to go into my bedroom and, just with make-up, turn into somebody else," Sherman says.

It was Sherman's college boyfriend, Robert Longo, who pointed out her private metamorphic mirror routines — which she did out of boredom or escapism but also mainly out of habit — were a kind of performance art. "[He] sort of turned me around to say, 'Look at yourself, look at what you're doing. Maybe you should record this. This is interesting.'"

Sherman started turning up to openings and parties in character and increasingly eccentric outfits. One time she went as a pregnant woman; another time she dressed as Lucille Ball.

When she moved to New York with Longo after college in 1977 and started working as a part-time gallery assistant, she occasionally dressed up in character for work, one time showing up as a nurse. "They loved that," she says. "They found it very comforting to have a nurse around."

It was a natural extension of her own self-amusement when, that same year, inspired by a friend's stash of Hollywood-inspired softcore stock photographs, Sherman started creating grainy, black-and-white, intentionally trashy re-creations of scenes from imagined movies, starring herself as a collection of cinematic archetypes.

Many of them were taken around Sherman's studio, with others taken, hit-and-run style, on the streets of New York. Sherman, Longo and Metro Pictures Gallery co-founder Helene Winer would drive around Manhattan with a case of costumes in the back. When they spotted a suitable location they would leap out of the car to take a few shots — usually no more than a half-dozen. Sherman would get changed in alleyways and behind dumpsters.

These were the humble, scrappy beginnings of *Untitled Film Stills*, the series of 69 images that would go down as Sherman's most important and influential work. Part of the instant appeal and enduring power of the series was that its banally numbered titles and Sherman's blank star-

es evoke in the viewer a multiplicity of interpretations, even conflicting ones. Sherman intended it to be a “jumble of ambiguity” and completely accessible.

“I want the viewer to tell their own story about a picture,” says Sherman, who describes her relationship with art theory at the time as nonexistent.

“And even if it’s not the story that I would want, even if it’s the opposite of what I intended, I’m OK with that. I don’t want to go forcing a message on to somebody. If they don’t get what I’m trying to say, that’s too bad.”

Sherman’s reluctance to explain her work also may have something to do with an early-career appearance at the School of Visual Arts, where she endured the animus of students a few years younger than her who perceived her work to be salacious and anti-feminist. It was one of her last public appearances, if not the last. “I think I’ve blocked it out.” For the most part, anyway, Sherman has been flattered by the critical praise and attention, if sometimes bemused by it: academic Laura Mulvey musing on the male gaze; Arthur Danto detecting “an allegory for something deeper and darker, in the mythic unconscious of everyone”. Sherman’s work was compared with that of the Countess of Castiglione, a 19th-century Italian aristocrat she had never heard of but who became a useful influence later on. “It was always informative to me,” Sherman says. “Though there were times when I thought, this is ridiculous, I can barely understand what they’re saying.”

A few years after *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman retaliated against the notion that she was “the flavour of the month”. Through the years, her menagerie of characters became steadily more grotesque and outrageous, when they weren’t outright nightmare fuel (clowns, corpses). After her 2000-02 series of desperate looking Hollywood/Hamptons housewives, Sherman was accused of mean-spiritedness.

The new pictures she shows me — evoking the aesthetics of the silent movie era, with black

kohl around eyes, bow lips and sharp fingernails — suggest a return to more humane characterisations. They’re a clear spiritual sequel to the film stills. “They’re totally not cartoony. They’re not caricatures. They’re like real women.”

And, for the first time, Sherman admits that something of herself has crept into the frame.

“I think that my recent body of work is kind of closest to where I am right now, emotionally, mentally, age-wise. The characters are older women who are trying not to look so old and trying to hold on to something of their youth and beauty. There’s something kind of tragic in their eyes but they’re proud of what they’ve accomplished.”

Among the curios on display in Sherman’s studio are a few photos by another Cindy Sherman, from Boise, Idaho. That Cindy Sherman specialises in sentimental portrait photography of couples, children, babies and baby bellies and pets. It’s not surprising that the existence of a name-twin amuses the Cindy Sherman who has spent most of her life conjuring alter-egos and warped realities.

Sherman’s pictures will never brighten a living room wall in quite the same way as the sunny work of Sherman from Idaho. But Sherman cherishes her cast of over-the-top creations like her own loved ones. She dismisses the idea that she feels anything but warmth and affection for the whole crazy lot of them.

“I know that some of them are really funny-looking. They’re flawed in different ways. But to me they’re adorable. I’m really fond of them all.”

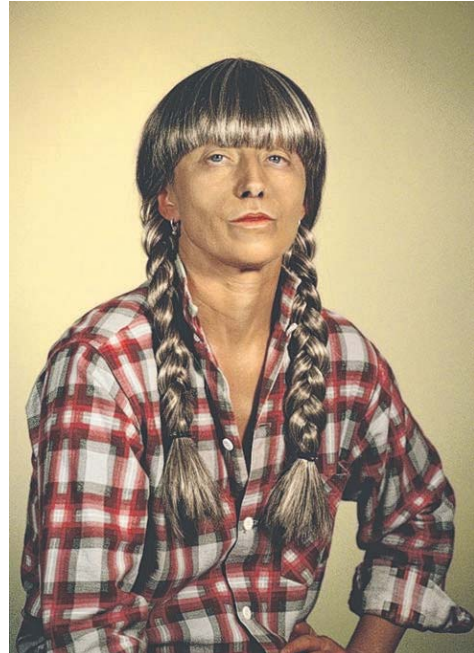
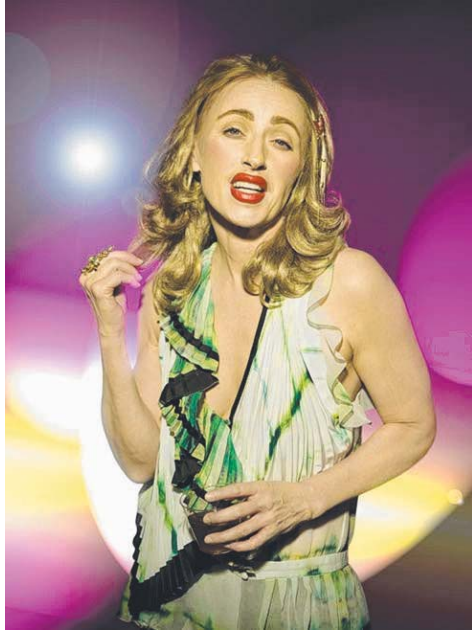
Cindy Sherman opens at Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art on May 27.



COURTESY CINDY SHERMAN AND METEOR DIGITALS



Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #462* (2007-08) at the Queensland Art Gallery, left; the artist at work in New York, below



Clockwise from top left,
Untitled (2007-08); *Untitled*
(2007-08); *Untitled* (2000);
Untitled #414 (2003)

ALL: WALTER LEMMONO/ONYX