

METRO PICTURES

Stephens, Andrew. "Who are you? Cindy Sherman retrospective goes in search of the real subject," *SydneyMorningHerald.com.au* (June 3, 2016).

The Sydney Morning Herald



Cindy Sherman explores the effects of ageing in her latest series.

They aren't her, all those people in the photos.

That's what Cindy Sherman has always said. "None of the characters are me," she told the *New York Times* in 2012. "They're everything *but* me."

Tradies at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art recently found themselves working amid the installation of Sherman's magnetic new self-titled exhibition, which presents all the work she's done since 2000. One of the men (unfamiliar with Sherman's art) looked more closely at the five-metre high photographic murals featuring strangely dressed characters, when suddenly it dawned on him: "Are these all the same woman?" he asked.

A curator told him yes, and so too were all the other dozens of portraits, head-shots, fashion photos and clowns in the connecting rooms. All of the characters are Cindy Sherman; and, at the same time, they are not.

For 30 years Sherman has been using herself as the model in her carefully choreographed photographs, magically transforming herself with wigs, make-up and fabulous outfits (and, more recently, digital tools) into an astonishing array of characters. Actors, socialites, party-girls, falling stars, corpses, clowns, secretaries, models, housewives, suburban tragics – Sherman has pretended to be all of them, using her body as the canvas for a fascinating range of masquerades about the feminine, the grotesque and the performed self.



Untitled #566, 2016.

She works alone on one floor of her two-level New York apartment and loves it: she is the model, make-up artist, fitter, stylist and photographer. She is her art.

These days, Sherman is so well-known she is almost beyond fame. In the art world she is universally adored, considered both a modern classic and a touchstone for younger artists, with legions of imitators, admirers and art theorists on her tail. Even so, she is still making work that causes a stir.

At last week's opening at GOMA, Sherman sat with one foot inelegantly trussed up in a hospital-grade sandal, having broken some bones in her foot while putting on a shoe and stumbling, not long before flying to Australia. Talk of the accident sets off a discussion about ageing – Sherman's new works feature Hollywood-style women of a certain age. They are *Sunset Boulevard* alumni in gorgeous outfits, hairdos and settings that hint at their glamorous pasts - histories of youthful stardom they might be clinging to a little too hopefully.



Untitled #569, 2016.

At 62, Sherman, too, is no longer a young artist and she says she can see herself in these women, whom she has photographed with a wistful compassion.

“I relate to these women, they are older and dealing with it and trying to put on a strong, tough face and trying to maintain some dignity as they’re ageing,” she says, “And I totally relate to that. I related to a lot of the other series too, but this has a much stronger impact for me... when you turn 60, everything just starts to fall apart.”

While she says she didn’t set out to deal with ageing, her decision in 2007 to start working digitally helped bring her to it – a new digital camera, with more pixels and resolution, meant “all the wrinkles are sharper and all the more highlighted”.

It had been five years since Sherman had been in front of the camera (she’d been busy with several big exhibitions, catalogues, the Venice Biennale and so on). When she finished the new series earlier this year, she sent through the first images to GOMA curator Ellie Buttrose, who was immediately entranced. The large works have been printed using a cutting-edge technique of bonding the image to aluminium plates, meaning the wrinkles – and every other luscious detail – are exquisitely rendered.

For the interview, Sherman is seated in one of GOMA’s cinemas – aptly chosen given both the cinematic scope and content of her work. After all, it was her 69 black-and-white *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977-80) that brought her to wide attention and they continue to get press, such is their enduring power. Those photos showed her posed in a variety of settings reminiscent of B-grade film noir cinema shots, and they are at once familiar, enigmatic and disturbing.

Her vast array of untitled work since then has ranged through topics commonly grouped together under informal titles such as *disasters*, *fairy tales*, *pink robes*, *centrefolds*, *history portraits* and the abject 1990s *sex pictures* (which featured mannequins and prostheses). The exhibition survey takes in her seven most recent major series – *head shots* (2000–02), *clowns* (2003–04), *Balenciaga* (2007–08), *society portraits* (2008), *murals* (2010), *Chanel* (2010–12) and the latest set of faded stars.

For the new series, Sherman wanted to explore these “silent movie types of actresses” and was interested to find the works have a sincerity she can see in the early *Film Stills*. “It was so different from previous work because they weren’t so much caricatures or cartoon-y versions of people that people say I’m making fun of... they were more sincere.”

While Sherman doesn’t think she makes fun of her subjects, in an essay for the exhibition catalogue, the National Gallery of Victoria’s senior curator of international exhibition projects, Miranda Wallace, wonders: “Is Sherman being cruel with her subjects? Is she poking fun at women by creating these caricatures? Or does she feel empathy towards them?”

Wallace notes that while Sherman says she empathises with and adores her characters, she also “takes delight in replicating some of the bizarre choices women make in presenting themselves to the world, through their use of fake tans, make-up, cosmetic surgery and fashion.”

For the *Chanel* and *Balenciaga* series, Sherman collaborated with the fashion houses – an interesting move for someone whose work has widely been interpreted as being deeply critical of the relationship between women, image-making and the way femininity is “performed” for the male gaze, with fashion houses deeply embedded in all that.

Little wonder, then, that Wallace also writes in the catalogue that, despite fashion’s “endless capacity to absorb opposition”, Sherman’s collaborations with that world “sit on a knife’s edge between admiration and parody, complicity and derision”. She says Sherman, in early interviews, claimed to be making fun of fashion but has since been increasingly identified as a front-row supporter of haute couture.

“Although you might think she is ‘subverting from within’, there is also the possibility that Sherman’s relationship with fashion resembles a case of Stockholm syndrome; like a true fashion ‘victim’, Sherman has begun to identify with and admire that which holds her captive.”

The artist, though, seems wary of fashion: with the *Balenciaga* shots, which were commissioned by *Vogue*, she says she was trying to imitate pap party photos we might see in the social pages. The final art works clearly critique the gleeful, vapid camera-magnets. Likewise, she used Chanel as a vehicle for her own ends. The fashion house gave her open access to their archives dating back to the 1920s, even pieces Coco Chanel had in her first collection – but she wasn’t enamoured with the garments.

“That was a different experience [to *Balenciaga*] because I was so in awe of what they were sending me and the value of it that I was so afraid to get anything dirty,” she says. “So I didn’t use any makeup for that series, I just changed myself digitally. I had chosen outfits that I thought would be loose enough to accommodate me because I don’t have a tiny model’s body or a tall skinny model’s body.”

But they were not loose-fitting and often had corsets and other constraints inside. “So in some of the poses I look really pissed off and angry because I’m trying to wear this thing but it keeps falling off me, or I couldn’t zip it up. Some of them I couldn’t even reach behind me, because it was so tight, to pull the zipper up. So it kind of affected a lot of the characters in a funny way.

“But I was really shocked at how ugly some [of the clothing] was, too.”

The discomfort of female attire “totally informed” her childhood, she says. She remembers playing dress-ups with her grandmother’s outfits – no surprise there – but as she turned into a young woman, she wore constraining clothing because it was the done thing.

“That is kind of what the *Film Stills* came out of,” she says. “When I was in college going to strip stores and finding a lot of those old pointy bras or girdles and thinking: I remember I wore a girdle when I was like 12 years old just because it held up the stockings. This was before pantyhose. Why would a 12-year-old girl need to wear a girdle? But it was just what, as a girl growing up into a woman, you were supposed to do. It was so bizarre.

“So looking at it as an older young woman, thinking back to my childhood, was really what inspired that vision with all those characters from films of that period.”

Sherman began therapy about 12 years ago and says it has been a huge help to her. The youngest of five (her oldest sibling was 19 years her senior), she grew up in a family where “it was a bad thing to go to therapy because you were not supposed to admit there were problems”.

She didn’t think she had anything she needed to fix. “I thought I was strong, I can get through this – through any problems I had, like in a relationship, I could get through on my own. It was when I was in this super-bad relationship and just realising I couldn’t get out of it and I didn’t know how to do that. [Therapy] helped me and opened my eyes to so many things.”

She talks with her therapist about dreams and during a patch when she wasn’t making any work, she had a “shocking and fantastic” dream in which she had a tube-shaped protuberance above her forehead. “We were talking about all the other aspects of the dream and he said: ‘That tube – is there anything that it reminds you of?’ And I started crying because I realised I had been really frustrated about wanting to get back to work and I suddenly thought oh my God that tube’s a camera.”

After using mannequins for the *sex pictures* series in the 1990s, she returned to photographing herself in 2000. The socialites, in particular, led beautifully into the new series of glamorous has-beens, despite the seven-year gap between them. For the new work, Sherman began by renting genuine vintage outfits.

“I just wasn’t satisfied with the results because they looked too much like I was doing *Downton Abbey*, like I was just imitating something that you see on television,” she says. “I started to realise that I needed to invent a costume so I got a piece of fabric and wrapped it around me, so it was never a real dress. It was just this thing I cobbled together.”

One of the new images has a semi-transparent double within it, another version of the character fading away beside herself. She so liked the ghost-like figure that began as an experiment, she kept it.

That spectral echo somehow goes to the heart of much of her work – as we look at all these many faces of Sherman in various poses, outfits and personas, we are bound to catch glimpses or suggestions of ourselves, our personal traits and foibles, and those of other people we know. “She picks up on those gaps in ourselves, where we would like to be something or someone else,” says Buttrose, who worked closely on the show with Sherman. “It is about aspiration. For me, the reason her work continues to be so strong is because she is not didactic. It is completely open. She puts these characters together but she is not saying how we should see them. She is aware of their follies but she is also deeply empathetic – and because those two elements come together, it means the viewer is implicated in the fiction, but not told how to read it.

“That is the joy in the work and her ongoing success. Her art asks you to rethink your preconceptions.”

And there we pause and look again at all these masquerading, captivating and sometimes vulnerable, sometimes frightening Cindy Shermans on the walls. No, they’re not really her. They’re us.



Untitled #568, 2016.