

METRO PICTURES

Vankin, Deborah. "Cindy Sherman reveals her latest body of work — and it's personal," *LATimes.com* (June 11, 2016).

Los Angeles Times



Cindy Sherman before the opening of "Cindy Sherman: Imitation of Life" at the Broad museum in Los Angeles.

In a cavernous Broad museum gallery devoid of people, Cindy Sherman appears as if she has leaped from one of her large-scale, cinematic photographs — or one of the photographs has engulfed her.

Dwarfed beneath her new, ginormous wall mural depicting a dreamy face, a reimagining of one of her early '80s rear-screen projection images, Sherman could be passing through a noirish Hollywood soundstage. Like her untitled photographs — a choice meant to open the images to interpretation — Sherman, too, is a blank canvas of sorts this morning, in a plain gray jumpsuit and not a scrap of makeup, her blond hair pulled into a slender ponytail. But, like all of her storied images, there's a twist: She's balancing herself on crutches. Like her fidgety, in-transit bus riders in one series or the pensive suburban housewife twisting her hair in another, the petite woman with the broken foot bone suggests off-screen drama, a backstory.

For decades, Sherman insisted the characters she embodies in her photographs had nothing to do with her, that they were simply amplifications of female media tropes. Now 62, and with a major survey exhibition opening at the Broad on Saturday, the art star admits there's something of Sherman in all of her latest characters, and there's something of them in her.

"It's a big step," Sherman says of her newest work, fictional portraits of aging, former '20s-era silent film divas. "I still don't feel they're me, but I don't feel like I'm hiding in them and trying to disappear within the characters the way I've been in the past. I'm more present with these characters, I'm like one of them."

Sherman is leading a private walk-through of the Broad's "Cindy Sherman: Imitation of Life," a loosely chronological survey of more than 120 photographs created over 40-plus years. The exhibit, which practically fills the first floor of the Broad, is Sherman's first major museum show in L.A. in nearly 20 years, and the Broad's first special exhibition since opening in September. Eli and Edythe Broad are among the earliest collectors of Sherman's work, and the museum boasts the largest collection of the artist's work worldwide. All but 18 of the museum's Sherman pieces will be on view.

As a performative photographer, Sherman spends hours alone in her studio meticulously layering on wigs, prosthetics, false eyelashes, face makeup and vintage frocks to embody societal, pop cultural and cinematic tropes bestowed upon women — the young, vulnerable B-movie starlet, the sexy but confined '50s housewife, the disaffected and aging socialite, even archetypes from Renaissance and Baroque paintings. Her very private, behind-the-scenes practice of identity play is as much a part of the final work as the photographic image itself. As Sherman obliterates herself and re-surfaces in a chameleonic array of characters, she not only illuminates the fluidity of identity itself but probes our collective identity as it surfaces in mass media.

"She's one of the most significant contemporary artists working today," museum director Joanne Heyler says, adding that Sherman's images — which landed her in both the prestigious German art exhibition Documenta 7 and the Venice Biennale in 1982, when she was just 28 — resonate beyond the art world and the decade in which they were created because they speak to such universal, charged issues.

"Imitation of Life" incorporates all of Sherman's major bodies of work from 1975-2016, including her early Hitchcock-inspired black and white film stills and color rear-screen projection images; her centerfolds series, originally commissioned in the '80s by Artforum and later rejected by the magazine for being too disturbing; the history portraits; the comically grotesque vomit and sex pictures; the desperate-seeming Hollywood and Hamptons ladies and New York socialites; and the manic clowns, presented salon style against a lime green wall.

Her latest work in the show — Sherman's first new pictures in five years — embody what's been on her mind lately: filmmaking and aging. They depict richly colored, dolled up former silent film stars struggling to hang on to a vestige of their radiance and beauty. With their ornate hairstyles, severely drawn eyebrows and tightly wrapped turbans, they may or may not be the same fledging starlets of her film stills four decades ago. There's no direct relationship between the two bodies of work, Sherman says, but they're connected in that the new photographs, which debuted at New York's Metro Pictures gallery in May, are a return to her early film inspiration.

"And possibly because it's the most sincere work I've done since then, where I wasn't doing caricatures of people," she adds. "I'm so much a part of these characters at this point of my life."

It's only through the process of masquerading herself, Sherman says, that new work takes shape and themes arise. Inspired by images in a book about German Expressionism as well as by Norma Desmond from "Sunset Boulevard," she began playing with false eyelashes, outlandish hairdos and extreme makeup. When it came time to shoot, she says, using a high resolution camera that showed "a lot of imperfections," and because it had been five years since she'd last shot herself, "it was a little shocking to me," Sherman says. "I realized my range had narrowed. Five years when you're in your 60s makes a huge difference, when you're suddenly looking at your face up close. I suddenly thought, 'Oh my God, now there are certain things I can't erase.'"

Sherman did lightly tweak her images in Photoshop, but she also didn't want to dilute the struggle of the women in the pictures.

"I could have really made the hands look young and my neck toned, but I realized there had to be something there of these women and the lives they led," she says.

Like all woman, aging is something Sherman struggles with personally, as well.

“It’s really hard,” she says. “I’m definitely torn between the possibility of doing something surgical and feeling like, ‘Come on, somebody’s gotta age in a normal way that other young people can look up to and appreciate.’”

Guest curator Philipp Kaiser has given the show a pointed, filmic framework. Sherman created two site specific murals that adorn the exhibition entrance, blown up to movie screen size. And the 1997 comedic horror movie Sherman directed, “Office Killer,” plays on a loop in a black box theater. The exhibition title, Sherman’s choosing, is a reference to a 1959 Douglas Sirk melodrama, “Imitation of Life,” itself a remake, or imitation, of a 1934 film — so the title also nods to the process-driven art appropriation movement that Sherman was part of.

“Her work is a meta-critique of our image saturated reality,” Kaiser says. “Her photographs are extremely theatrical. L.A. is the perfect place to show them — a city defined by the media and film industry.”

The Broads first encountered Sherman’s work in 1982 at Metro Pictures, then in SoHo, during a showing of her rear-screen projection series. “The gallery invited us downstairs to look at some works from Cindy’s film still series,” Eli Broad recalled in an email. “We weren’t photography collectors, but there was something in her work that went beyond photography. I was mesmerized. It was all Cindy. We bought 20 of her works on the spot.”

That “Imitation of Life” is ticketed — \$12 for visitors older than 17 — after much hype about the Broad’s free admission, has generated some controversy, especially given that about 90% of the works on display in the exhibition is from the museum’s permanent collection.

“We invited a guest curator to bring a new point of view to bear on the achievements of Cindy Sherman — there’s a catalogue, the site specific murals, loans,” Heyler says, the latter referring to 11 photographs on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Menil Collection, Metro Pictures. “There are costs to putting together a show where you’re supporting a curatorial presence.”

Looking forward, Sherman says that nearly every time she thinks about work, she returns to the idea of filmmaking; she’d like to write and direct another feature and is mulling possibilities.

“Part of the problem,” she says, “is I’m not used to working with a crew or a narrative. But I’m telling myself I can still work alone in my studio, the way I do with a still camera, just use it as a movie camera and experiment. I’d consider it a great success if it were between John Waters and David Lynch.”

She’s still friendly with the actresses in “Office Killer,” which starred starring Carol Kane, Molly Ringwald and Jeanne Tripplehorn, “so maybe we’d do a reunion,” she says, laughing.

Passing through the final gallery in the Broad exhibition, Sherman pauses at her latest pictures.

“I was thinking about how [hard] aging was for some of them,” she says softly, noting how Joan Crawford overdid her makeup to appear young and Greta Garbo hid from the public as she got older.

“And how sad that was. I just had a lot of empathy for them.”



Eli Broad speaks during a press preview of the Cindy Sherman exhibition at the Broad Museum on Wednesday.