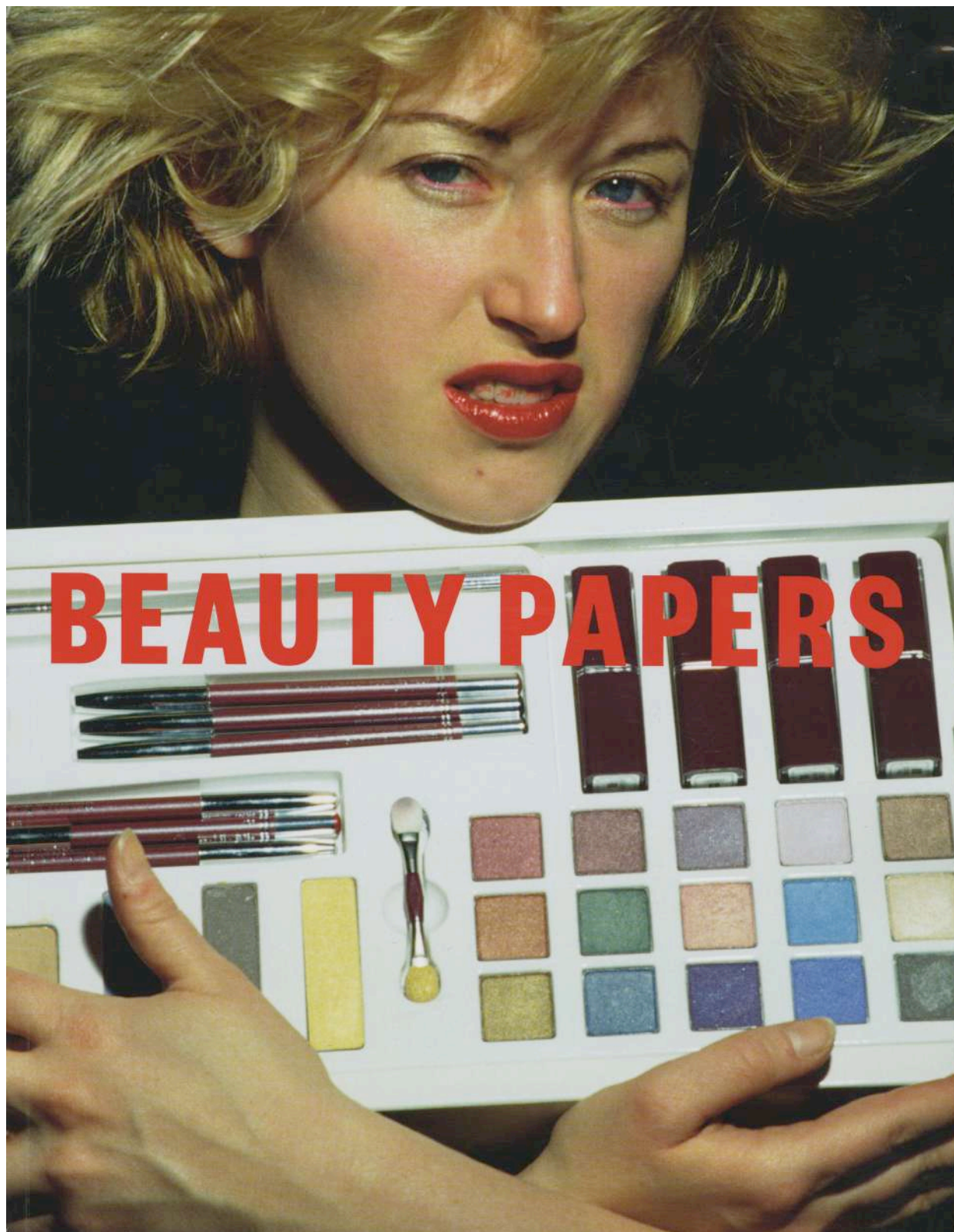


# METRO PICTURES

Gavin, Francesca. "Cindy Sherman," *Beauty Papers* (Summer 2019): Cover, Back Cover, 56-61.



# CINDY SHERMAN

A KEY ARTIST IN THE PICTURES GENERATION MOVEMENT, CINDY SHERMAN EXPLORED AND SUBVERTED MOVIE GLAMOUR, COMBINING PSYCHIC INNER LIFE WITH POP CULTURE FANTASIES. Words FRANCESCA GAVIN

There are many Cindy Shermans. For the past 40 years, the artist's work has been defined by its mutability. She is everything and nothing. The epitome of the masked chameleon. She has been the gothic nightmare living in an abject messy hell; over-made-up middle-aged rich lady living in a day-glo Florida fantasy; the disturbing clown daring you to confront its painted grin. The Cindy I am focusing on here is the artist who looked at the stereotypes of film and fashion and turned them upside down.

Cindy Sherman's exploration of the art of dress-up began early on in her career. At home she would go to the basement and try on her dead relatives' frumpy old 1930s clothes, transforming herself into an old lady for fun. While studying at the state university in Buffalo, New York, she would transform herself for pleasure. "I hadn't thought of my dressing-up as art. I'd be in my room and turn into a character, just out of curiosity – a receptionist, a pregnant prom queen. And then, when I felt completely transformed, I'd go out," she noted in a rare interview.

While studying, her interests lay with conceptual and performance artists. "Minimal, performance, body art, film – alternatives. In the mid-'70s the art world didn't seem to me as macho as it began to feel later in the '70s and early '80s, but maybe that's because there were artist role models around like Lynda Benglis, Eleanor Antin, and Hannah Wilke." She was

living in a communal studio warehouse with her boyfriend artist Robert Longo and friend Charlie Clough, making paper dolls of herself dressed as different characters. But the doll references "seemed contrived and girly". Sherman explained, "I knew I wanted to go on making little narratives, but without using other people. I wanted to work alone I wanted a controlled situation in my studio."

She moved to New York City after graduating, living in the dark, desolate, eerie landscape of downtown. She began working as a gallery assistant/receptionist at the influential Artists Space, sometimes coming to work or going to openings in character. Her artwork, as with many of her contemporaries, was cinematic from the start. They became known as the Pictures Generation – artists who took the language of TV, cinema and advertising and turned it into a cut-and-paste, post-modern mix of narrative and the conceptual.

The then new gallery Metro Pictures – its name a cinematic reference in itself – was the first to show Sherman's work in 1977. They exhibited what became some of her best-known projects, the *Untitled Film Stills*. These intimate 8x10in black and white photographs looked like production films from imagery movies, each starring Sherman in a different outfit and scenario. She would largely take the images herself using a shutter or button control. The series reanimated a collective consciousness grown up on a heavy TV diet.



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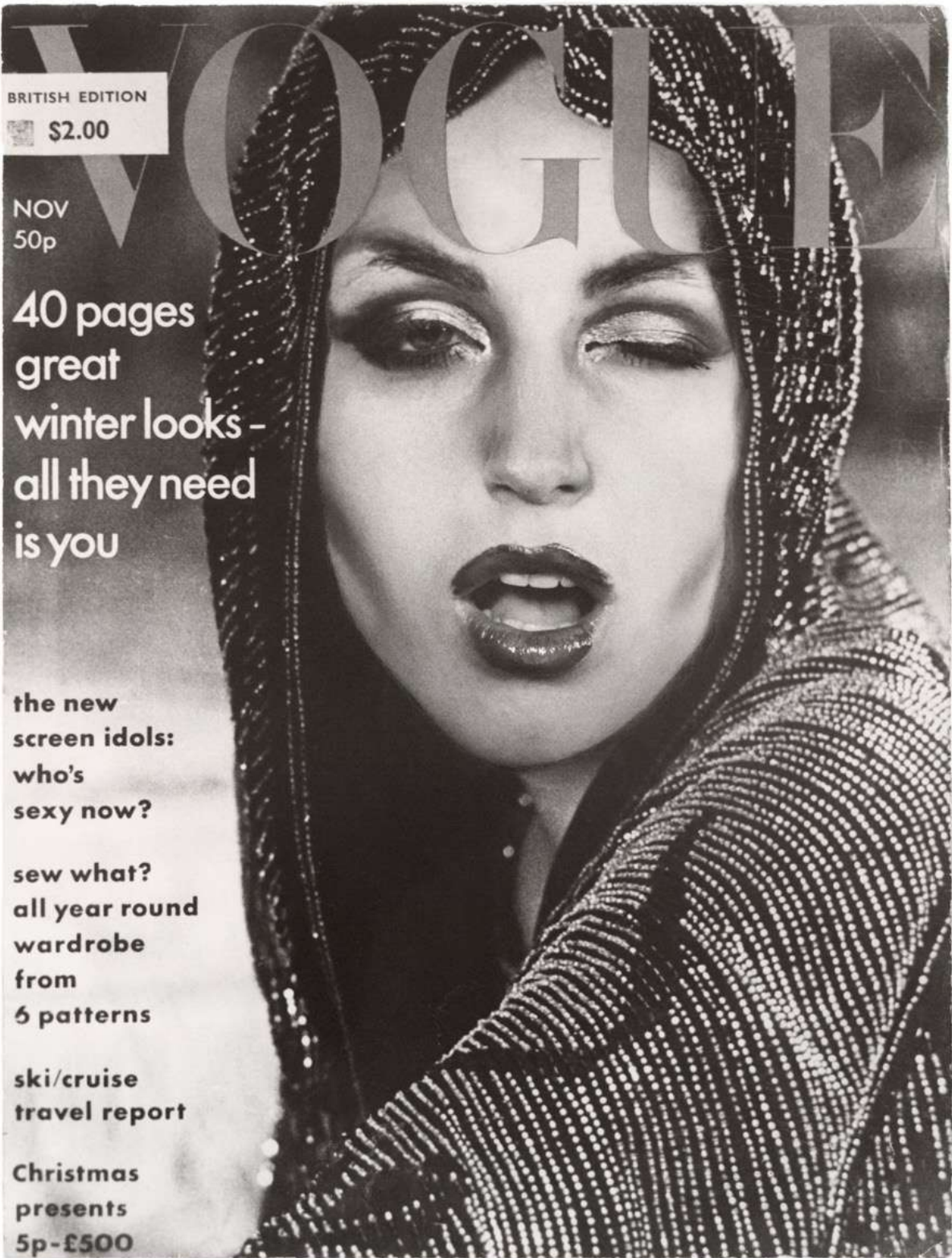
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"If the film stills look like film noir or neo-realism or B movies it comes from my having viewed a lot of those kind of films. I just soaked them in. The images then come from my unconscious." Sherman later explained. She would play with familiar genres, from the thriller to romance. Her work felt at times like pieces of Hitchcock or Antonioni.

A friend who worked at the bookshop Barnes and Noble would bring home cheap film books for her. "These books were my textbooks, my research. And of course I was only interested in the pictures." Sherman explained. Her faux-publicity photos were neutral and mysterious, in between action. "What I didn't want were pictures showing strong emotion... what I was interested in was when they were almost expressionless." The narrative in Sherman's photographs was unclear. There was always something going on off screen, outside the shot that we as viewers brought to the image.

For decades Sherman's images became the go-to examples to illustrate feminist art theory and the notion of the male gaze, pioneered so well by art historians like Laura Mulvey. The idea that the photographic or film camera is always occupying the male view, objectifying the female subject with stereotypes of composition, lighting and content. Sherman twisted these visual norms by becoming both author and subject of her work, making us aware of the structure of imagery in her innovative use of the camera. Sherman herself has always noted that feminist reinvention wasn't at the forefront of her mind when presenting these women battling with internal struggle. "I suppose unconsciously, or semi-consciously at best, I was wrestling with some sort of turmoil of my own about understanding women," she later conceded.

The idea of a female artist using herself as a material in photographs began to emerge in the decades before Sherman. In the 1930s, Claude Cahun mixed genders in her photography and self-image, which sat between masculine and feminine. Carolee Schneemann's early self-shot erotic film, inspired by Wilhelm Reich, twisted the idea of the pornographic woman on display in the '60s. Ana Mendieta had used her body in films and photos to display her feelings about politics and spirituality. Sherman, however, had her own far more accessible pop context.

Andy Warhol's legacy was also something that hovered around the work. Another artist obsessed with popular culture, he opened up ideas of film, the representation of the body, the idea of character and self-invention. His work also draws on the collective memory of Hollywood movies – the frame, the shot, the idea of the lens and portraiture. He too would dress up and create himself – wig askew, white make-up caked on, both a caricature and a disguise.

In 1980, Sherman began to use colour in her work almost exclusively. The results were less nostalgic, more archival. She played with back projection, echoing the techniques of old-fashioned film-making. Her characters in pink robes against these settings felt more contemporary, more about the real, more erotic. "By 1980 fashion style had begun to absorb a lot of the clothes I was using, nostalgia was in. So I started to think the work was looking a little too fashionable," she later wrote.

Between 1983 and 1984, Sherman made a number of series of works related to fashion photography. The first group

of images were commissioned by Diane Benson for a spread in *Interview* magazine, using high-end designer clothes including Jean-Paul Gaultier and Comme des Garçons. The French fashion label Dorothee Bis then commissioned Sherman to create a series for *French Vogue*. (She later made images for a *Harper's Bazaar* story in 1983 and adverts for Comme des Garçons in 1994). The artist's take on fashion was intentionally uncomfortable, almost to the level of appearing violent or mentally deranged.

At the time her working notes, which were later published in monographs, show a desire to highlight the contrived fantasy built into fashion and advertising. "Attack clothes. Ugly person/face/body vs fashionable clothes. Make-up dripping down face. Ugly girls (awkward-gawky-adolescents) playing dress up w/ 'mom's' clothing." She may have used designer clothes and aped the poses in *Vogue*, but Cindy Sherman's 'fashion' images were anything but gloss and glitter. Her 'models' were covered in badly applied cake make-up. Their smiles were violent, angry, disturbed. They looked smudged, abused and worn out. They sat slumped in chairs, weirdly lit by neon lighting.

The works coincided with the rise of the designer must-have – the hyper-conspicuous capitalism that emerged in the 1980s alongside yuppies and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*. Sherman refuses to give us glamour. Instead, she hints at the madness that echoes the instability of the self that advertising was having on women. This was about the underbelly of fashion, the failure intrinsic to purchased glamour. These images were about the conflict between the external world and internal reality.

Sherman's interest in make-up, in particular, became more experimental at this time. In the *Untitled Film Stills*, make-up was used to transform into different characters. By 1983, it had become something weirder, more painterly, more about disguise and disgust. The body and face became something close to a living, heavy-breathing canvas.

"I'd always secretly loved make-up. I remember once taking an early train into Manhattan with my girlfriends for a day of fake shopping (which was trying on clothes without buying anything). I must have been a pre-teen. I didn't have any make-up then so I used poster paint, which eventually caked off my eyes and face. I'll never forget hiding my face from my mother when I left the house that morning," Sherman would later recall.

Later on, she began to use dolls, masks and prosthetics. Her images became closer to horror, the abject and the uncanny. The wigs got crazier, the details more shocking. They also stepped into hyper-queerness and extreme transvestism, a complex amalgam of sex, violence, humour and illusion. She uniquely combined psychic inner life with pop culture fantasies. The work, which she has always been reticent to discuss in detail, continued to question female identity. With Sherman as actor, director, cinematographer, make-up and costume departments, she transformed the idea of how the camera functions and questioned how we see ourselves and others. As she once noted, "I want to play with what's real."

Cindy Sherman, 27 June–15 September 2019,  
at the National Portrait Gallery, London.

