

David Frankel, "Cindy Sherman: Metro Pictures," *Artforum*, February, 2009, pp. 186

NEW YORK

Cindy Sherman

METRO PICTURES

Looking at Cindy Sherman's recent photos, I thought, eventually, of what in the lit-crit practice of my college years used to be called "image clusters": groups of related metaphors and other verbal figures that run through the works of some writers—Shakespeare, Dickens—embedding a mood and character in the language of each text. Given how fast such authors worked, on the schedules of theaters and journals, I couldn't imagine they consciously planned these scattered but pervasive linguistic knots; they can't have had time. But apparently they were so immersed, their minds so fully engaged, that words came to them from . . . oh, somewhere, already meshed in lattices of evocative imagery.

That's the kind of mental access Sherman has. Instantly obvious in this terrific show was the sharpness of her conscious observation, both social and psychological. Her newest cast of characters—a stunningly disparate group, given not just that all, as usual, are played by Sherman but that all come from a narrow upper register of age and income brackets—are immediately recognizable, certainly to anyone on nodding terms with the trustee-and-collector layer of the art world. So horribly accurate do their portraits seem, in clothing, context, facial expression, body language, even physical build, that some may even be individuals, people Sherman has met or seen, though to understand them as types will do fine. Meanwhile, in parallel to the pictures' explicit aliveness to the semiology of costume and pose, there is another, wonderful level on which they work formally, and here I would guess Sherman's process is more subterranean and associative, at least in part. I'm sure, for example, that the rhyming silver grays in one stately photograph (all *Untitled*, all 2008) were thought through, since there are so many of them: the woman's hair, pearls, watch; the darkling seascape behind her, and its frame; the bluish carpet, the silkish cushions, the scrolled rim of the couch back; and last but not least, the coat of the slightly taxidermic schnauzer in her lap. But as for the Brooke Astor type on the grounds of, perhaps, some Newport mansion: Did Sherman plan the matching shapes of her earring—a squarish setting for an outsize round pearl—and the carved balustrade of the garden's enormous stone stair? And what about the frumpy dame, sagging of blouse, chest, and spine, and the ornate building behind her, with its hanging awnings and balconies? Many of these details reflect an artist's methods of expressing knowing commentary in visual terms, but as we pick them up, they also begin to suggest something else: the psychic completeness with which Sherman's fantasies have been imagined, the all-embracing quality of her fictional worlds.

Pulling against this immersiveness, meanwhile, is our own awareness that these *are* fictions—that every picture, no matter how totalizing and convincing, is ultimately Cindy. She has chosen whom to imitate, or, in a handful of photos

that tip toward the grotesque, to parody. Once again I think of Dickens, and of the nature of his characters, often, weirdly, precisely detailed, to the point of hallucination, and caricatural at the same time. I also think of how George Orwell spent most of a well-known essay figuring out the sectors of British society that Dickens hated. Does Sherman hate her subjects? Life-size and high-resolution, the pictures are crammed with unsparing information: makeup, fingernails, plastic surgery, what happens to aging hands. And the moods, from imperiousness through complacency to querulous anxiety: Few of these women look like they'd be fun to hang with. Sherman has a history of a kind of withdrawal, a market retreat—a production of images that dare the rich to buy them. But while that may be part of the story, it ascribes too simple a motivation to an artist who watches the people who interest her so intently, identifies with them so fully, that she temporarily becomes them.

—David Frankel

Cindy Sherman,
Untitled, 2008,
color photograph,
84 1/2 x 68".



