

# METRO PICTURES

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## The alter egotist

MoMA's Cindy Sherman retrospective affirms the  
photographer's brilliantly creepy vision



Untitled #425' (2004)

When, as a callow graduate student, I first waded into the muck of critical theory, Cindy Sherman was academia's darling. She reigned as the queen of deconstructionist, postmodernist, appropriationist, feminist critique. Her "Film Stills", black and white frames from non-existent movies starring Sherman herself, furnished graphic backup for every fashionable thesis. Scholars hitched a ride on her speeding career, using her stomach-churning close-ups of vomit, rotten food and body parts as vehicles for modish ideas of "abjection" and "the grotesque".

This erudite admiration did her a disservice, shrouding her work in jargon that obscured its brilliance. I had been told so often what it was about that I couldn't see what it actually was. That finally changed for me at the Museum of Modern Art's electrifying retrospective, which liberates Sherman from the superstructure of criticism and finally gives her ample space to choreograph her dance of seduction.

Sherman pulls off a number of near-impossible feats. She fathoms depths in a well of shallowness, combing

dress, hairstyle and gesture for hidden-in-plain-sight signals about social life. She has found unexpected fecundity in clichés, forcing us to face up to how comfortably we wallow in the stereotypes cooked up by movies, fashion spreads and TV.

She has done all this by taking pictures of herself, over and over, for 35 years. I once misunderstood this relentless obsession as narcissistic; now I see it as self-negating. When this uniquely gifted artist vanishes into one of her fabrications, she offers no glimmers of a sitter's soul, only an intricate surface. Sherman's dizzying variety of subjects is always her, a fact that reinforces the purity of the artifice. We can go no deeper than the deadness in her eyes.

A 1975 stop-motion animation that comes towards the end of the show distills the alluring horror of her worldview. In it, she acts the part of a paper doll that comes to life and flips anxiously through her cardboard closet in search of something to wear. Settling on a frock, she cavorts in front of a mirror until a monstrous hand descends from above, scoops her up, strips her and imprisons her in a plastic sleeve. At first glance, the film appears to reject the sentimental illusion that we make our own choices; we are all just puppets, defining ourselves at the pleasure of some unseen manipulator. But, in Sherman's world, the all-powerful hand is hers as well, turning her fatalism back on itself. Perhaps we are responsible for our own self-creation after all.

MoMa's retrospective, and Sherman's career itself, is bracketed by her best work. The film stills from the 1970s seize our attention on the way in; the recently made gathering of society matrons escorts us to a triumphant exit.

The early black-and-whites look back nostalgically to B-movie heroines, who supplied Sherman with a panoply of types: the femme fatale; the sophisticate; the ingénue as career girl, victim and coquette; the dishevelled seductress; the mental patient on the run. This parade of characters forces us to confront the difference between being a woman and looking like one. Femininity wears many costumes, each a variation on a confining cliché.



©Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures  
Untitled #359' (2000)

That political message would have gone unremarked if not for her astonishing cinematic dexterity. Each image is a mini-masterpiece of brilliant effects, startling contrasts and ardent power – a tour de force of total control. Sherman didn't simply dress up; she also designed the lighting, set the stage, wrote the script, manned the camera and directed the scene.

Later, she used this mastery to indulge her creepier side and appeal to our baser fantasies. In the aftermath of 9/11, she began a series of clowns decked out in acid-rainbow colours, their features congealed into lurid masks. They are intense, ugly, frightening, glazed with hysteria and bitterness. Most disturbing is #425, where three leering faces frame a fourth clown who cowers between them in striped long johns. It's a cheerful tableau of humiliation, straight out of a nightmare.

Much of Sherman's work treads a nasty path just this side of ghoulishness. She's turned on by what makes her upset. One series spotlights a cast of eccentrics, exaggerated just to the point of deformity. The freckled bohemian in purple satin and a sequined beret; the turbo-charged blonde Olympian in a Day-Glo tracksuit; the wilted earth-momma with too-tanned skin, inflated lips and bleached dentures – these women haunt the fringe of American femininity. These dark doppelgangers of Sherman's earlier ingénues may not possess the psychotic opacity of the clowns but they, too, mould their passions into brittle masks.

Sherman lapsed only once into gimmickry, with a series of photos modelled on old masters such as Ingres, Caravaggio and Raphael. She deployed prosthetic breasts and powdered wigs in lacklustre critiques of male-dominated art history. The film stills referred lovingly to their Hollywood origins, but these pastiches malign their sources, turning exquisite paintings into schlock. Technically indifferent and visually inert, they



©Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures

'Untitled Film Still #6' (1977)

seem to court the academic theorising that Sherman typically avoids. Fortunately, MoMA has shunted these into a single room, where they run riot in salon-style abundance.

Now in her mid-50s, Sherman has recently refreshed her art by dealing with decay. She has a new roster of alter egos: women of a certain age desperately attempting to look ageless. Real women go to such extremes of Botox and surgically aided artifice that here Sherman's penchant for parody gives way to melancholy realism. Fitted out with dagger-like earrings, buckets of face powder, rubber wrinkles and even the odd decorative terrier, she meets her cast of wizened belles halfway, antiquating herself prematurely in order to impersonate her youth-craving elders. The abiding irony of Sherman's career is that the deeper she plunges into invisibility as a subject, the more lustrous, poignant and indispensable she becomes as an artist.