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Ready for Her Close-Up

In her first new photos in five years, Cindy Sherman confronts what aging means to women, including herself.

By BLAKE GOPNIK

"Tell me what to do," Cindy Sherman said, asking the photographer for guidance as she sat for her portrait. Her words seem almost comic, since she is posing in her own New York studio, staring out at her camera and the mirror she keeps perched beside it, and the one thing she has proved, across a career that turned 40 this year, is that she has known what to "do" in this setting.

She has used that camera and mirror to capture herself playing a vamp and a secretary, a starlet and a matron, a corpse and a clown and other iconic roles our culture has cast women in. Now, after a sabbatical from

the studio "coming to terms with health issues and getting older," Ms. Sherman, 62, has produced her first new photos in five years. They are more explicitly about herself than ever before — images that confront what aging means to a woman. In the series, which starts May 5 at Metro Pictures gallery in New York, she plays the veteran leading ladies of cinema's Golden Age, turning herself into avatars of Gloria Swanson, Greta Garbo and others in their twilight years. "I relate so much to these women," she said. "They look like they've been through a lot, and they're survivors. And you can see some of the pain in there, but

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Cindy Sherman, above in her studio, has produced a set of photos more explicitly about herself than ever before. Ms. Sherman, whose photos have strong roots in Hollywood, talks about moving to filmmaking.

Art



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Ms. Sherman's virtuosic acts of self-presentation have won her nearly every reward an artist could want, from a MacArthur Fellowship to shows at MoMA, Documenta and the Venice Biennale, and her work has sold at auction for more than \$6 million. In addition to the show in May that inaugurates a remodeled Metro Pictures, in June the new Broad museum in Los Angeles will feature her lifetime's work as its first special exhibition. Eli Broad, its founder, speaking from Los Angeles, said he is especially excited to present his deep Sherman holdings to the local audience, because of they're looking forward and moving on."

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Those roots are especially clear in her latest images, where she's dolled up in Jazz Age furs and pearls. And now, as Ms. Sherman revealed, her love affair with Hollywood looks set to deepen.

"I want to start playing with moving images, and we'll see where I go," she said, jauntily dressed in plaid Prada trousers and a blue short-sleeve sweater, with her hair in a ponytail. So far, she has no idea if that means directing feature films or coming up with video versions of her still photos.

She simply knows that she's grown tired of the stills she's been making for so long: "When I first started this series, I thought 'God, this is the last time I do this.' I'm so sick of using myself, how much more can I try to change myself?" The big surprise in her recent work is that she has made less of an effort to do so.

Seventeen years ago, when Ms. Sherman first explained her images to me, she was adamant that they were not about her: "I use myself the way I would use a mannequin. They're not autobiographical. They're not fantasies of mine. I like to work completely alone, so instead of using models I use myself."

On top of handling her own lights and cameras, Ms. Sherman has always done her own costumes and makeup and hair. The interview in mid-April took place at a studio table rimmed with 15 wig stands, surrounding piles of false nails. Back in 1999, Ms. Sherman insisted that "I'm under so many layers of makeup that I'm trying to obliterate myself in the images. I'm not revealing anything." Now she admits to a more "personal aspect" in her images of aging stars: "I, as an older woman, am struggling with the idea of being an older woman."

Ms. Sherman said that when she began this series she was afraid that "people would say, 'Oh, she's just gone back to the whole idea of the 'Film Stills' again, only these women are older, and in color.'" Those



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Ms. Sherman said that when she began this series she was afraid that "people would say, 'Oh, she's just gone back to the whole idea of the 'Film Stills' again, only these women are older, and in color.'" Those "Untitled Film Stills" were the 69 black-and-white photos, seemingly of actresses in B movies, that shot Ms. Sherman to fame in the early 1980s — and that started out selling for all of \$200. A risk of repetition has obviously been there with each series of images in which she has posed as other women. With the latest photos, however, she's closer to representing something fresh: Other women standing in for her.

Ms. Sherman described a typical movie star from the photos as a woman "who is now maybe in 1960, but she is still stuck in the 1920s, so she's still dressed or coiffed that way." The work obviously tips its hat to "Sunset Boulevard," but without that movie's condescension toward its mature star. Ms. Sherman said she was especially taken with the incongruity she's put into her images: "When you look at the real publicity shots or the images of the actresses from those days — her studio walls are papered with them — they're all young, of course, and yet these women clearly aren't."

Ms. Sherman said she feels solidarity with Mary Beard, a classics scholar, who has recently felt obliged to leave behind the battles of ancient Rome to begin a campaign for a woman's right to age today: "You are looking at a 59-year-old woman," is Ms. Beard's message to men. "That is what 59-year-old women who have not had work done look like. Get it?"

Ms. Sherman, who described herself as "single, except for my bird" (a 25-year-old macaw), says that on the romantic front, at least, aging can have benefits. After years of bouncing from relationship to relationship, growing older has also left her more mature — "in a really good place, in being happy with being single."

With her pictures of women her own age, Ms. Sherman seems to have returned to a tenderness that hasn't been seen in her work for the last several decades. She describes the images as "the most sincere things that I've done — that aren't full of irony, or caricature, or cartoonishness — since the 'Film Stills.'" It could even be that her



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mature leading ladies should be thought of as the aspiring starlets of those "Film Stills" 40 years on, after they've achieved success and come out the other side.

Thanks to years of therapy, said Ms. Sherman, she is now willing to see aspects of herself even in her early photos. Their ever-changing self-presentation has roots in her childhood, when she was growing up in a family with four much older siblings and found herself desperate to please. "I felt like this straggler that was running after them, saying 'Hey, remember me? Don't forget about me!' It was easy to erase myself and put on somebody else's face, and say, 'Maybe now you guys will remember me,' or 'How about this face, or that character?'"

Taken one by one, the "Film Stills" confirm the reading that has made them famous: that a woman's identity is formed, and limited, by the images she's seen of other women. That is, a woman learned how to be a secretary from movies as much as from business school. Not many images could teach her about being a C.E.O.

In the words of the scholar Douglas Crimp, who gave the 25-year-old artist her first coverage in the elite journal *October*, the "Film Stills" are "a hybrid of photography and performance art that reveals femininity to be an effect of representation."

That's what attracted Eli and Edythe

Cindy Sherman, left, in her New York studio and above in images from her portraits about aging. Below, dresses used as props for her work.



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er to insert the landscapes behind her, many of which show off their digital origins. In one image, the branches of a tree reach out from the center in perfect symmetry, as though tweaked with some Photoshop mirror function; in another, clouds look like they've been carved into relief with a chisel — or an Instagram filter.

If Ms. Sherman's works have returned to the cinematic themes of "Film Stills," maybe it shouldn't surprise us that she is considering a turn to film itself. Although she and her first peers, the Pictures Generation, mostly produced still photos and paintings, film was the "coin of the realm," the painter David Salle said in a recent phone interview. "The grammar of the filmic shot, and its ability to encapsulate so much information, was a pervasive influence."

Ms. Sherman named her Broad survey "The Imitation of Life," after a 1959 melodrama by the director Douglas Sirk. In the show's catalog, Ms. Sherman includes a conversation with the director Sofia Coppola in which she admits that she might even star in whatever movie she goes on to make next.

A catalog essay by the curator Philipp Kaiser mentions six tiny films that Ms. Sherman made in college as well as a much bigger effort that came halfway into her career, in 1996, when she was invited to direct a horror feature called "Office Killer." When it came out, the *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith described it as "a fascinating if lumpy bit of Shermaniana," while Ms. Smith's movie-critic colleague Stephen Holden panned it as "sadly inept."

Streamed today, individual scenes come off as promisingly Shermanesque, but the whole gets bogged down in wooden acting and camp that feels dated. Ms. Sherman isn't ashamed of the effort — she still gets a kick out of its gore — but she recognizes that 20 years of working alone in the studio may not have been the best preparation for a movie's team effort.

Ms. Winer blames the movie's failure, if it was that, on who Ms. Sherman was at the time: "As a director, she wasn't comfortable telling people what to do." Two decades further on, the artist said she can't guarantee that she'll turn out to have more skills as a director, but she's pretty sure she'll be better at filling the role: "In some ways I am better equipped to understand what I want, and to make other people understand what I want as well."