

METRO PICTURES

Saltz, Jerry. "Cindy Sherman: Becoming," *New York Magazine* (February 20, 2012): 88 - 92.

NEW YORK



Cindy Sherman: Becoming

519 W 24TH ST NEW YORK, NY 10011 T 212 206 7100 F 212 337 0070
WWW.METROPICTURES.COM GALLERY@METROPICTURES.COM



Jerry Saltz on the artist who continues to transform herself—this time, for *New York*.

Photographs by Cindy Sherman

C

ECIL BEATON

once said that "making oneself a work of art" was "that most difficult of all causes." Cindy Sherman not only does that, she's given herself up entirely to the mission. For nearly four decades, she has been braiding together fashion, photography, and the strange internal magic of herself—dressing up, putting on makeup, doing her hair, donning wigs, and posing alone in her studio for the camera. She shows us fashion as costume, compulsion, camp, ritual, and necessity. We see the ways fabric and cosmetics touch our bodies in public and how these performances of self make us visible, invisible, awful, sublime. Fashion helps Cindy hide in plain sight; in turn, she plays havoc with fashion. She is our greatest female impersonator.

A lot of people still think caring about clothes is a dubious, unserious, frivolous, girlie thing. Waves of academic critics have insisted, and still insist, that Sherman's work is all about "the male gaze," "the objectification of women," and other such doctrinaire tropes. Sherman is most definitely an artist who thinks about gender roles, but she claims total ignorance of those rigid categorizations. "I was totally unaware of that," she says. "I was trying to come to terms with my own ambivalence about liking to put makeup on ... dressing up ... [It] was a guilty pleasure ... [that] allowed me to play around with makeup and the sexier, old-fashioned styles." She has talked about being "inspired by how things are made, by fashion as art form." She's shot for *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and now the fashion issue of this magazine. She's been commissioned by *Comme des Garçons* and Balenciaga.

Yet fashion alone doesn't explain this most complexly uncanny American artist. Sherman delights in the mortification of the self, reveling in it like an epicurean at dinner; I see her as a spawn of De Sade and Rabelais, Daumier and Hogarth. Her survivalist instinct and relentless inventiveness make her a modern-day Schehe-

razade. Sherman's art is that of someone saving her own life in a mostly male art world, working from deep instinct, ferocious imagination, assertion, self-defense, all while fashioning an elaborate tapestry of grand visors, demon clowns, Beau Brummels, and Valkyries; frazzled club girls, crinolined courtesans, dandies, macaronis, hippie chicks in Hiawatha fringe, Hollywood housewives, and other women fighting for their places in the world. Sherman is a warrior artist—one who has won her battles so decisively that I can't imagine anyone ever again embarking on a lifetime of self-portraiture without coming up against her.

THE DEFINITIVE retrospective of Sherman's work opens at the Museum of Modern Art on February 26. That makes this a good time for me to admit that I came late to a full appreciation of it. After being beguiled by her "Untitled Film Stills" in 1980—those are the photos that made her famous, in which she imagined herself as a series of anonymous mid-century actresses in mysterious frozen moments—I was baffled when Sherman became the princess of postmodernism, the artist who launched a thousand theories. For a decade I was cold on her art. The so-called "centerfolds" from 1981 and 1982—horizontal pictures of Sherman under sheets or waiting by the phone—and the lurid scenes that followed struck me as pictorially dull. It was obvious noir, New Wave negativity, overconstructed self-consciousness, I thought; it oozed sleepwalking eighties hipness.

Even then, though, I always liked one thing: She consistently asserted that her pictures weren't self-portraits. "I really don't think they're about me," she said. For a moment in 1985, in a series referred to as "fairy tales," I glimpsed the dazzling power of this distinction. In these pictures, Sherman's solitude mutated into riskier, more unnerving images of otherness and self-inflicted psychic wounds. We saw Sherman posed as a survivor crawling on a fake beach, a hobgoblin in a field, a banshee wearing a turban and artificial breasts ("I collect breasts," she says), gaping at us from the undergrowth, posed with her prosthetic ass facing the camera. Her work was in seizure. So was my judgment of it. But then she reverted to her melancholy doom, photographing postapocalyptic debris fields, vomit, and other abstract spinoffs. I was done with her. For good.

That changed the night of January 6, 1990. That evening, at the opening of her "history portraits" at her longtime gallery Metro Pictures, I saw Sherman explode her own formula. She not only aped the



Salt on Four Never-Before-Seen Shermans:

- ← **The Sherman-esque:** The rarest of the rare: Sherman as Sherman in limbo, in a picture made for this magazine this month. The artist pulling back the curtains, allowing a glimpse of her in transit to the further shores of self. Hair in Baggie, no makeup. Blank slate; bare stare; ulterior motives; a snake-in-the-grass assassin.
- ← **The Hefner-esque:** Also created for *New York*, a foppish macho pageant-master Hefner in maroon brocade smoking jacket; lounge-lizard gigolo lowlife; shrunken-self pretty boy without sexual scent. Any heterosexual man who looks at this image should squirm a little.
- **The Gaga-esque*:** Towering frame-filling blonde Kabuki Venus in pink-bonnet babushka, helmeted in lemon hair, upturned angelic eyes blinded by starstruck self-image stupor. The girl next door dreaming of divadom of a half-thought dimension. Gladiator-masked Madonna.
- ↑ **The Snookie-esque*:** Yearbook Gorgon chicken-skin Jersey-girl drag queen on human-growth hormone; barbarous menace of antics and flamboyance; filler-injected war-painted hellcat cupcake.

*Sherman describes these two images as "sketches," preliminary ideas rather than final products.





aura, ambience, and look of old-master paintings, lauding and marauding at the same time—she turned the so-called gaze of male painters and art history into an onslaught of undoing. Wearing brocade gowns, silken cravats, and frills of old, she was in front of and behind the camera, as director, model, artist, inquisitor, subject, costume designer, and disenfranchised human doll. A new female male old master, she posed as a bearded scholar, a dandy, a hag with pendulous fake breasts, a blonde squirting milk from a prosthetic nipple. Backgrounds, clothing, makeup, and props got richer; picture sizes, lighting, textures, pattern, and palette intensified. It was riveting.

shield, or bearing flowers. These neorealist pictures are as strange and strong as anything she has ever made. Since around 2005, she's become a great colorist and manipulator of internal scale. Her colors aren't just red or yellow but bloody and ashen, dramatic, vivid, flowering. Faces fill frames; the photographs feel ready to burst or collapse from internal pressure. No part of Sherman's graphic field is now left unconsidered.

Still, I can imagine newcomers (are there Sherman "newcomers"?) getting bogged down in "Where's Waldo" games of "There's Cindy" or being turned off by the formal similarity and narrowness in the basic structures of her art. As a one-time skeptic,

cellent catalogue she speaks to John Waters about being "disgusted ... with the art world ... the boy artists, the boy painters." She talks about "female solidarity" and says her pictures are about "provoking men into reassessing their assumptions when they look at pictures of women ... in a way that would make a male viewer feel uncomfortable." It worked on me. She and her female contemporaries (Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Laurie Simmons, and a few others) "weren't accepted in the guys' world, so we found this whole other way to create." Some of them took up the camera partly because no one cared about photography at the time—it had no market—and they reinvented the medium forever.



From the "Untitled Film Stills" series, 1977...



...the "fairy tales," 1985...



...the "history portraits," 1989...



...and an untitled series from 2010.

Two years later, I went the full Sherman, when she made darkness visible in her horrific-beautiful "sex pictures"—images I've always called, after Goya's paintings of war, "The Disasters of Sex." Fashioned from dismembered and recombined mannequins, some adorned with pubic hair, one posed with a tampon in vagina, another with sausages being excreted from vulva, this was anti-porn porn, the unsexiest sex pictures ever made, visions of feigning, fighting, perversion. A studio note to herself from this time reads "should be more toward terror." I'll say.

Today, I think of Cindy Sherman as an artist who only gets better. Right up to the most recent works at MoMA—giant implacable wall murals featuring Sherman as unknowable beings, sometimes more than one of her, wearing nude full bodysuits or early-twentieth-century frocks, carrying a

I offer four pointers to the unconvinced:

1. You can never say exactly who the people are in her pictures or what they're doing. Sherman is the master of the "esque"—of creating beings in the manner, likeness, and style of a thing. Frustrated viewers often want her to supply explanations, story lines, even titles (which she hasn't used since the film stills). Sherman, however, adamantly says she strives for "ambiguity" and that viewers are the ones who should "come up with the narrative." Do this. But don't think in traditional terms of plot, continuity, character development, whatever. Her people are actors and inventions, each a tabula rasa and an open program for unformed archaic phantasmagorias.

2. Sherman has talked about her own father unflatteringly: "He was a horrible self-centered person ... really racist ... a bigot." Coming into the art world of the seventies, she found more bad fathers: In MoMA's ex-

3. Her characters have wrongly been compared to those of Diane Arbus, whose subjects look out at us from similarly stark interiors and invite us into a world they're comfortable in. Sherman's characters, on the other hand, are conjured and parodic, removed, uncomfortable. They never want us to step in. They exude fictive will, detachment. They are effigies.

4. Sherman's pictures are like Zen koans. Rather than being about understanding, they're about coming to grips with the state of mind that produces them. She has a luminous way of breathing life into things that cannot be described. Giving herself over to her own processes, Sherman opens up thought and makes pictures that subtly withdraw from definition, dislodging meaning, undermining ideology, becoming what I'd call radically passive. She sings the song of her selves. ■