

METRO PICTURES

Baker, Kenneth. "Cindy Sherman: Interview with a Chameleon," *SFChronicle.com* (July 8, 2012).

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For six months in 2011, Cindy Sherman held the distinction of having made the priciest photograph ever sold at auction. It fetched \$3,890,500. Two years before that, an exhibition titled *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art certified Sherman as the preeminent artist in a cohort that includes David Salle, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, and Sherrie Levine. This year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York installed Sherman's electrifying career retrospective, making hers the most recognized female name—and least recognized face, because disguise is her métier—in the contemporary art world. Sherman, 58, was born in New Jersey and, barely out of Buffalo State University, first got noticed in New York for her late-'70s black-and-white "Untitled Film Stills." In them, she posed, bewigged and costumed, assuming the roles of actresses in hypothetical B movies. Today, those modest pictures look like classics, though they faintly foreshadow the extremes to which Sherman would take the invention of characters in full color for her camera.

Drawing from many sources and expertly handling makeup, costume, and lighting without assistants, Sherman has produced series of works—consistently untitled—known by nicknames such as "head shots," "clowns," "centerfolds," and "society pictures." In the process, she has taken the artifice of photography to new levels of scale, complexity, and intensity. Sherman and I spoke in her West Soho studio shortly before her show closed in New York.

Kenneth Baker: Are you an only child?

Cindy Sherman: No, I'm the youngest of five.

Baker: Did that give you some impulse toward disguise and impersonation?

Sherman: Sure.



Baker: From imitating or resisting the examples of your siblings?

Sherman: No. It was more like, “Hey, you guys, remember me? I’m here. I can be like this, I can be like that ...” There were so many years between me and my siblings. The closest to me is nine years older, the oldest is 19 years older, so that’s why I was always running after them.

Baker: At what point did you start scanning the Internet for promptings instead of scanning the street?

Sherman: I guess when I did the clowns. When I first started shooting the clowns, I tried to use my imagination and made some not very successful pieces.... So I was curious what active clowns really look like, beyond circus clowns. And there are just so many people who call themselves clowns. Some of them look very professional and a little too sleek.... But then there are some whose websites show them performing outside on a hot, sweaty day with their makeup running, and they look like they’re wearing just any old overalls and a polka-dot T-shirt they found in a thrift store. When I found those sorts of pictures, it seemed like the variety of things I could do was sort of endless.

Baker: How does one series end and another begin?

Sherman: There is usually a moment where I say, “I’ve had enough of this, I’m sick of it,” or I feel like I’ve started to repeat myself within a series. Then I go into production for the series—there’s usually a deadline involved, so I’m focusing on that and doing whatever needs to be done for a show. Then I’m sort of drained or distanced from working, so I clean up my studio and put things away. Even though I might have other ideas on a back burner, a couple of years might go by before I get back into the studio again.



Baker: What kind of working hours do you keep?

Sherman: What used to happen is that I'd take a roll of film and shoot it, and maybe do two just in case.... All I'd work with was Polaroids, but contact-sheet-size Polaroids, so even using a magnifying glass it wasn't like looking at a negative or a slide.... So then I'd take the makeup off, take the film to the lab, wait two or three hours until it was done, which was always a good time to do errands. Now I feel like I don't have time for errands, and I have to order things online.

Then I'd go pick up the film and find that it was all overexposed, or out of focus, or the lighting was no good. So usually the next day, I'd reshoot the whole thing. But now that I'm working digitally, I have everything hooked up to my computer, so I can just take 10 shots, and go see how the focus is. And what it means is that once I start working, I figure, "OK, I'm all made up, I might as well just keep working." I don't usually work past 10 at night, but sometimes I feel I have to.

Baker: Do you think of the photographic object as your work, or do you think of the insides of the images as your work?

Sherman: I guess the inside of the image. I don't think of it as real photography because I don't think people who like real photography think of it that way. People who are real photo fans like the early film stills, the black and whites that seem like real vintage photography, or there are people who complain about how big they are, like, "Who does she think she is?" It's just the medium I chose to work with.... And I was thinking there aren't many women who do really big macho-y kinds of things.... Usually with the figures I want them to be just a little bit larger than life-size.



Baker: Why do you work alone? Is it about privacy?

Sherman: It's about whatever freedom I feel privacy gives me....Briefly in the '80s I tried using friends and family and even hired an assistant to pose, and I felt like I just had to entertain them, be conscious of "Do you need coffee now? Are you tired? Do you want a break?" And they'd be kind of giggly because they were being made up to look funny. I push myself but I don't push other people, or if I do, I'm apologizing because we're going too late or whatever. Even having an assistant around, I'd feel self-conscious at times, like I'd better look busy now, rather than just spacing out, looking at images online or in magazines, or whatever I might do.

Baker: At what level do you consider how people are going to take what you've done?

Sherman: I really don't consider that. My attitude is they're just going to have to take it. There have been times when I made work in response to what was going on, when I began to feel like I was the flavor of the month for a new group of collectors in the early '80s. That's what inspired the pictures with vomit and all that. Because I thought to myself, "Well, they think it's all cute with the costumes and makeup, let's see if they put this above their couch." And it worked, they didn't. It took a long time for that stuff to be accepted, much less sought after.

Baker: Is there social critique implied?

Sherman: Sometimes.... When I did the head shots, people felt that I was making fun of these characters, but I really felt they kind of endeared themselves to me.

There was this idea of having a show in L.A., right around the time of the Oscars. And L.A. did fill up with all these people who went there to try and make it in Hollywood, and they wind up being realtors or working in a garage or whatever. Then that one director comes along and says, "I need some character actors for this one scene," and I imagined what they'd try to do as head shots to present themselves.



Baker: Has anyone told you that they recognize themselves in your work?

Sherman: Yes, in that show and in the society pictures. They didn't point out which ones they meant.

Baker: In some pictures it looks as if the character is singing or crying. Do you ever vocalize when shooting?

Sherman: No, I don't. It's all just done in that split second for the camera.

Baker: What about humor? It seems like there's more license to laugh in some images than others.

Sherman: I see humor in almost everything, in even the grotesque things, because I don't want people to believe in them as if they were documentary that really does show true horror. I want them to be artificial, so you can laugh or giggle at them, as I do when I watch horror movies.

Baker: And the most difficult work technically?

Sherman: The clowns were hard because it was really difficult to feel that I was finding a character beneath the makeup that would be different in each one, so it wouldn't seem like they were all just me with clown makeup on. That took some work.

Baker: Do you feel that you've been working out somekind of reconciliation with the world you find yourself in, the body you find yourself in?

Sherman: For the longest time, up until a couple of years ago, I was trying to lose myself in the work, literally and figuratively, so that I would never be recognized. Not just that it wouldn't look like me but that it wouldn't look like any of the other characters I'd done before. Just a few years ago, relaxing about that and not feeling this pressure to hide kind of freed me up. I didn't want the challenge of constantly trying to reinvent myself or invent new characters; that shouldn't be the reason why I'm doing what I'm doing.