

# METRO PICTURES

Campbell-Johnston, Rachel. "Cindy Sherman at the National Portrait Gallery — the original selfie queen," *TheTimes.co.uk* (June 15, 2019).

## THE TIMES



*Untitled #574*

Who is Cindy Sherman? You might be forgiven for presuming that you are about to find out. The National Portrait Gallery is staging a retrospective of the American artist's work this summer. You will find her face in each of the photographs that will be hung on its walls. But when you get to the end of them you will be none the wiser, because Sherman is famous for being a shapeshifter. She is contemporary art's answer to Proteus.

The 180-odd images on display will span Sherman's career from its beginnings in the mid-Seventies, with the series that defined her approach (it hasn't been shown in Britain before), to the present day. Over this period Sherman has consistently been her own model. She has masqueraded as all manner of characters: biker chick, bored housewife, black-and-white B-movie star, pouting centrefold, society beauty, Republican wife, circus clown. At the portrait gallery she will even appear in the guise of Ingres's famous sitter Madame Moitessier, with the National Gallery's original hung beside her for comparison.

Sherman's fictitious characters are illusions speaking of a society that presents many façades. What are we to make of such appearances? What meanings do we attach to them? That's what her work invites us to ponder. As surely as any great portrait betrays some truth about its sitter, Sherman's photographic impersonations examine the illusions we accept, the deceptions we adopt. The visitor is enticed to look beyond the surface; to discover, perhaps, a more profound level of truth.



*Untitled #96*

Over four decades Sherman's career has flourished into a one-woman industry. She has picked up pretty much every award on offer to an American artist — a MacArthur Fellowship “genius grant” among them. She has twice represented her country at the Venice Biennale. She has exhibited in the world's most important public spaces, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which staged a retrospective in 2012. Her photographs fetch immense sums at auction: one, in 2011, sold for almost \$4 million at Christie's, making it the world's most expensive photograph at the time. All this, Sherman has said, arose out of the games of make-believe that she liked to play as a child.

Sherman, who was baptised Cynthia, but likes to go by her childhood nickname (perhaps this, with its girlishly guileless feel, is yet another persona), was born in 1954 in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. She was brought up on Long Island, the youngest by far of five children (her parents were well into their forties when she arrived). She grew up feeling a bit like an intruder, she has explained, and started dressing up in what she, with hindsight, imagines was an attempt to impress her family, to persuade them that she was someone to be accounted for.

In their attic they had a trunk of old clothes — but don't think sparkly fairies or frilled ballerinas. Donning her grandmother's old dresses and pebble-lens glasses the young Sherman would wrinkle her stockings round her ankles, stuff socks in her waistband to make saggy breasts, and plaster on make-up to create crinkles and blemishes. “Maybe now you guys will remember me?” That was her message, she once said in an interview. Still, you can't help wondering if her compulsion to create alternative personas may also have arisen from more complicated roots; perhaps as a way of escaping a malicious father, or addressing her view of her mother as a martyr who desperately wanted her daughter to behave like “a good little girl.”

Sherman's family had no artistic background. The only art book in the house was *100 of the World's Most Beautiful Paintings*. It stopped at Salvador Dali, she remembers. But still, Sherman decided to study art and enrolled at the State University of New York in Buffalo. She began as a painter, she says, laboriously copying, but as soon as she discovered the camera things changed. “I didn't want to make high art... I wanted to find something that anyone could relate to,” she explained. “I wasn't thinking in terms of precious prints or archival quality. I didn't want the work to seem like a commodity.” Sherman became interested in people such as Eleanor Antin or Adrian Piper, who used role play in their work. She fell in with a group of artists, among them Robert Longo, who would find fame in the Eighties with his *Men in the Cities* series — pictures that showed sharply dressed people contorted with emotion. He became her boyfriend.



The photographer as herself this year

In 1977 she and Longo moved to New York. It was the Summer of Sam, when the serial killer David Berkowitz was active. To Sherman the city was terrifying for other reasons. “I was really shocked at how I was treated just walking down the street,” she recalled. For weeks, Longo remembered, she wouldn’t leave the apartment. But she eventually realised that she could adapt her persona to fit in. It was the era of punk — she had a boy’s haircut and, putting on men’s clothes, she would go out, trying to look as mean as any knife-wielding ruffian whose path she might cross.

This was the role play that she turned into an art form, at first taking pictures in her room of herself in the guise of her newly invented personas, then driving round the city in a van with Longo, jumping out to take pictures in which, in character, she posed on West Side piers, dusty pavements or city squares. These images became the basis of her *Untitled Film Stills* series — atmospheric black-and-white images from film noir that had never existed. They featured her dressed as women who looked menaced and frightened, and the series was to make her name.





Untitled #424

Others followed, each an investigation into a stereotype created by the history of art or advertising, cinema or media. Sherman works in a studio that is like a massively scaled-up version of her childhood dressing-up box. She has racks of secondhand clothes to rifle through; drawers of costume jewellery, and horror masks and furs; boxes of false nails and eyebrows; assortments of wigs and prosthetics. What pigment is to the painter these accoutrements are to Sherman. You can glimpse her at work in the 1994 documentary *Nobody's Here But Me* (made for the BBC's *Arena* series). It catches her trying on clothes in front of her mirror, lost in contemplation, swaying her hips as she dances. She sits on the floor to examine a male mannequin. "He's got a nice face," she declares; then, with a childlike enthusiasm: "And his teeth come out."

Over the decades Sherman has stepped into hundreds of roles. There was the 1981 *Centrefolds* series, for instance, in which she appears in close-up as a sultry self-confident seductress, or as a frightened victim who might possibly have been raped. At the end of that decade she made ornate Old Master portraits, posing as madonnas and clergymen, saints and aristocrats. In her 2008 society portraits she takes the role of Botoxed grandes dames and decaying film stars as she studies the inexorable process of ageing in an era obsessed with status and youth.



*Untitled Film Still #477*

What all these images share is a sense of narrative intrigue. “The still must tease with the promise of a story the viewer itches to be told,” Sherman has said.

Using her completely distinctive blend of performance and photography, she creates subtle visual essays that examine themes such as artifice, fairytale, gender and class. They probe social constructs and hint at darker realities. “I like making images that from a distance seem kind of seductive, colourful, luscious and engaging,” she explains in a documentary, “and then you realise you are looking at something totally opposite.”

Sherman does not want to pursue any typical idea of beauty. “That is the easiest and most obvious way to see the world,” she says. “It’s more challenging to look at the other side.” She reveals and dismantles the stereotype — as well as the mechanics of its creation — in series after series. Posing as the subject of *La Fornarina*, as painted first by Raphael and later by Ingres, she equips the famously beguiling beauty with plastic milk-swollen breasts and a pregnant stomach. She wants us to consider the posturing of the original sources, to question those traditionally masculine constructions of the world.





*Untitled #466*

Sherman is not an artist who seems concerned about fitting in, with following fashion or cultivating a public profile. In her private life, it would seem, she has become something of a loner. After the break-up of her 15-year marriage to the director Michel Auber she had a few relationships — including one with the musician David Byrne. But her parrot, Mr Frieda, appears now to be her most loyal companion. She is wary of finding herself commodified. In her *Disasters and Fairytales* series (1985-1989) she issued a direct challenge to an art market that she felt was trying to “consume” her. Works that appeared at first glance to be sumptuously lavish turned out on inspection to be rather harder to digest — observers stepped closer to discover grotesque prosthetics, piles of vomit and rotting foodstuffs.

This was enough to take anyone aback. But then it is the response of the viewer — rather than the finished image — that fascinates Sherman. In *Untitled Film Stills*, she explains, the people she depicts look vacant and expressionless, and that is deliberate. Her pictures only begin to work, to become affecting and estranging, she suggests, when there is something unfixed and ambivalent about them. Sherman sets out less to capture the sense of a character than to push us towards a response. It is we who must interpret them, who must make up our own stories and scenarios; and we do this by bringing to them our own histories and sets of inherited conventions, by responding to our inner worries and secret fears.

Sherman’s photographs resonate for and are brought alive by our individual responses. “I am trying to make other people recognise something of themselves rather than me,” she says. It’s not a portrait of the artist that you will discover on show in London this summer, it is a portrait of our society: its desires and anxieties, its dreams and its fears. And with that comes something even more discomfiting — what you will find is a reflection of your inner self.