

METRO PICTURES

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ART INNOVATOR

CINDY

For four decades, the artist has been reinventing the portrait, using her shape-shifting self as her photographic subject and, in the process, exploring our obsession with self-image and identity.

BY DEREK BLASBERG PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN JAMES GREEN

SHERMAN

For a woman whose career has been built on self-portraits, Cindy Sherman is barely recognizable. In the flesh, the MacArthur Fellowship-winning photographer looks too friendly, too nice to be the same face that stares out from harshly manipulated self-portraits (whatever you do, don't call them selfies) depicting scary clowns, aging flappers, royalty from old master paintings, society ladies and even creepy social media influencers.

When Nicolas Ghesquière, creative director of Louis Vuitton's women's collections, first met Sherman, he was shocked by the disparity. "You are inevitably struck by how pretty and sweet she is," he says. "No pretense, no weirdness, just a wonderful, emotionally available, direct and frank person. You have to remind yourself that you are in the presence of one of the most exciting and fascinating artists working today."

Helene Winer, co-founder of Metro Pictures, which became Sherman's gallery in 1980 and remains her sole representation today, always laughs when she's at an art fair with Sherman. "Someone will come up to me and say, 'Are you Cindy?' People jump to the conclusion it's me because Cindy Sherman couldn't be this sweet, small woman next to me, could she?"

Sherman's work is ferocious stuff, which is one reason she's not a fan of that word selfie. In fact, she thinks selfies are a call for help. "I have friends I follow [on Instagram] who I can sort of tell when they're feeling vulnerable or insecure because that's when suddenly they're posting all of these pretty photos of themselves," the real-world Sherman, 65, says at her country house in East Hampton, Long Island, which she shares with a colorful 29-year-old parrot called Mister Frieda. "The thing I hate most about selfies is the way most people are just trying to look a certain way; often they look almost exactly the same in every pose, and it's a pose that is aiming to be most flattering."

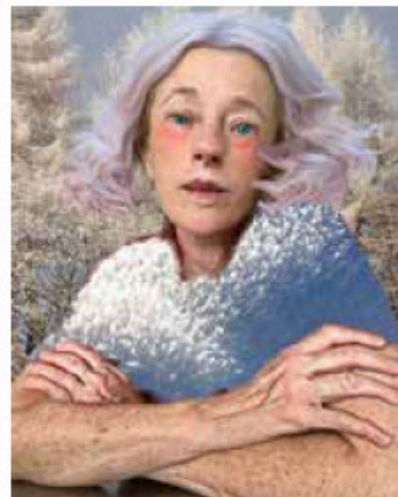
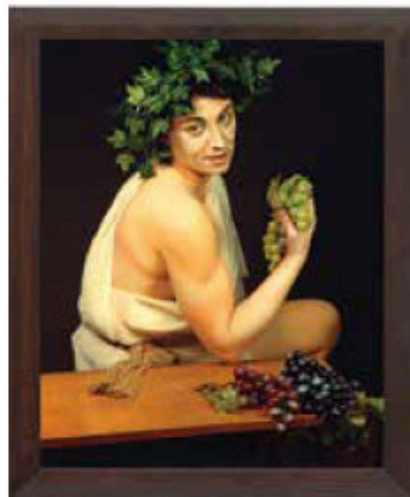
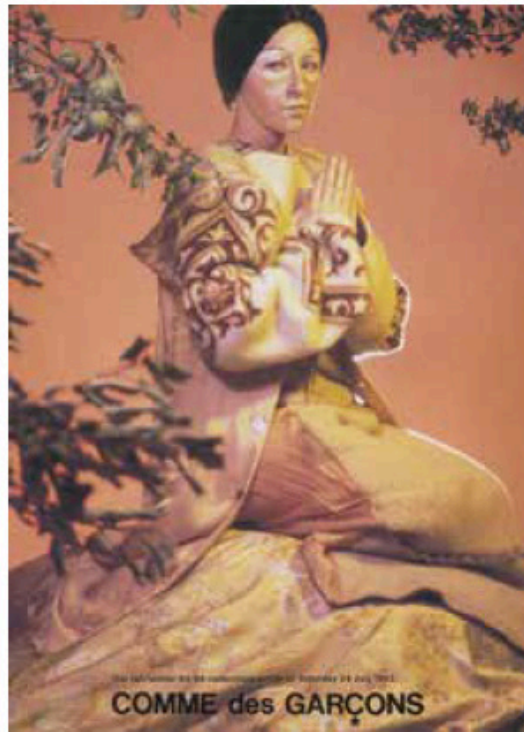
The word *selfie* officially entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2014, nearly four decades after Sherman began experimenting with black-and-white portraits she took of herself in costume. Starting most famously with her 1977–1980 series *Untitled Film Stills*—in which she appears as Hitchcockian ingénues and B movie-style molls—she has been her own subject. Today, she is second, after Richard Prince, on a list of photographers whose work has cumulatively brought the most money at auction over the past five years. (Sherman's sales total was \$54 million.) Next spring, her critically acclaimed retrospective that began this summer at London's National Portrait Gallery will debut in expanded form at Paris's Fondation Louis Vuitton, making her the first female artist to have a solo show in the museum's five-year history. Yet recent conversations about her work still tend to revolve around pop culture's obsession with pictures from front-facing camera phones.

Sherman joined Instagram in October 2016, when she was on holiday with a friend in Japan. "I thought, Well, I'll just share photos of my vacation," she recalls. "And then, slowly, I was fascinated." She discovered subcultures that explored transgender society and offered extreme makeup tutorials. "It was a whole new art form I wouldn't have known about," she says. In 2017, she made her account public, and the art world went wild. A headline from *Artnet News* read "Cindy Sherman Just Made Her Instagram Account Public and It's Amazing." She currently has close to 300,000 followers.

Her hair colorist introduced her to Facetune, an app that digital influencers use to smooth out their skin, reduce their waists and enlarge their eyes. Sherman, however, uses it to distort her face and body to grotesque proportions and change the backgrounds of her pictures. "It's OK to say *ugly*," she says.

The pop singer Katy Perry, a friend and fan of Sherman's work, explains the difference between Sherman's approach and everyone else's: "Selfie culture is about getting the angles and portraying an idealized version of yourself for the internet. Cindy's work goes in the opposite direction to be hyperreal and almost a parody of selfie culture."

ALL APPEARANCES
 Clockwise from near right: *A Cindy Book*, circa 1964–1975, which Sherman started working on as a child; a postcard for *Comme des Garçons*, 1993; Sherman with John Waters in 1999; the poster for the 1997 film she directed, *Office Killer*. Below, from left: Sherman with Madonna in 1998; *Untitled #462*, 2007–2008.



CHANGE COURSE
 Clockwise from center: *Untitled D*, 1975, a work made while Sherman was still a student; *Untitled Film Still #10*, 1978; *Chill*, one of Sherman's Instagram posts, from August 8, 2019; *Untitled #224*, 1990; *Untitled #397*, 2000; *Untitled #96*, 1981, which sold for nearly \$4 million in 2011.

Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, the youngest of five children of a teacher mother and engineer father. She moved to suburban Long Island when she was 3. Like most kids, she enjoyed playing dress up. “But where my friends would want to be brides or ballerinas or princesses for Halloween, I’d want to be a witch or a monster or an old lady.” Sherman’s first explanation of her childhood behavior is simple: “To me, that just seemed more fun.” She wonders if her ability to explain herself through costume was a coping mechanism. “I’ve been thinking in recent years, from being in therapy for a while, that it was also probably a way for me to forget about who I was and try to be somebody else. Or it was the idea of my family feeling like I didn’t fit in, so maybe if I was a different person they would accept me.”

“She didn’t have anyone interested in art in her family, so it really came out of her own genius,” observes Delphine Arnault, an art collector and the executive vice president of Louis Vuitton. Sherman has said her family was more likely to drive into New York to see the Rockettes than an art exhibit.

“Cindy and I literally grew up less than a half hour away from each other,” says Robert Longo, the New York-based artist who dated Sherman in the late 1970s. (He’s from Plainview, Long Island; she grew up in Huntington.) They first crossed paths as students at State University College of Buffalo, where Sherman started off as a painting major. She enrolled in a photography course but failed because it was centered on technique. “I was so sheltered in terms of my art experience growing up, I didn’t even know what it meant to be an artist,” she says. Like many art students at the time, she assumed she’d become a teacher. “I thought an artist was like somebody who did the drawings in court, or on a boardwalk, you know, the people that did caricatures?”

When she retook her photography class, she was encouraged to look beyond technical aspects. “It also coincided with when I was learning about conceptual art and performance art and minimalist art,” Sherman recalls. “Learning about conceptual art and thinking about using a camera made it seem like, well, yeah, I could just worry about the concept of the image and then reproduce it in a second. Whereas in the past the way I painted was very laborious.”

Winer met her a year after Sherman graduated from college, when the artist was still living in Buffalo. According to the gallerist, Sherman “was painfully shy and the exact reverse of self-promotional, whereas some of the others were hustling.” Winer saw a series of cut-out figures Sherman had done and thought the work was impressive. “It wouldn’t have made me think at the time it was a knockout punch. But it was definitely of interest. And it was of interest how the rest of the artists in this community described her or saw her.”

Sherman held off going to New York because, she says, “the city intimidated me, and it wasn’t until I was visiting once and I saw [artist] Vito Acconci walking down the street in SoHo that I thought, It’s such a small world here.” In 1977, Sherman was awarded a \$3,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and she and Longo moved to lower Manhattan. For a time, making art didn’t pay the rent. Longo drove a taxi and Sherman became the receptionist at Winer’s then-gallery, Artists Space, creating her *Untitled Film Stills* after hours. “I shot in my apartment, resetting different areas—this place looks like a library or that place looks like a hotel room—and shot as much as I could there for about year,” she says. Eventually she and Longo started driving around in his van, with Sherman stopping from time to time to put on a wig and makeup and then jumping out to take a picture. “I didn’t know if any of it was going to work out. But it didn’t matter,” she says. “Nobody really expected to sell their work. There was this freedom.”

“She has 100 percent focus,” says Winer. “She went from knowing nothing about art, because she wasn’t exposed to it as a child, so even though she was talented she just drew pictures. She learned very quickly what was going on, and she was competitive and intense enough to catch up.”

“She had the chops,” Longo agrees. “She could draw. That’s the most important thing: Drawing gives you the chance to look at something, process it through your body molecularly and render it. The detail in her work is extraordinary. I remember arguing with people who said, ‘Oh, she makes photographs.’ No, she doesn’t make photographs. She’s an artist that uses photography.”

About a decade into her career, Sherman felt she had hit a glass ceiling. “There was a moment when she couldn’t give away those movie stills. They were being sold for like 50 bucks,” Longo recalls. “At the same time, there was this whole rebirth of this neo-expression shit, which was basically about what art was and not what art could be. And it mostly was put on by guys. It was men. At that time, the women who were making art were making art like razor blades. [Barbara] Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Cindy. They were just making work so much tougher than the guys were. I remember at one point Cindy being so frustrated with the whole art world that she made these vomit pictures,” he says, referring to a series Sherman did featuring lifelike human sick. “She was like, ‘This is ridiculous and a boys’ club.’” Today, the *Untitled Film Stills* are considered her earliest masterworks. The Museum of Modern Art purchased a complete set of them for what was believed to have been \$1 million in 1996, and in recent years work from the series has sold for seven figures.

Unsurprisingly, the artist whose practice revolves around dressing up has often been drawn to the fashion world. Sherman created self-portraits for ad campaigns for Comme des Garçons in 1993 and invented her own alter-egos for shots Juergen Teller took of her for Marc Jacobs in 2005. In 2010, she did a special series with *Pop* magazine wearing archival Chanel pieces in front of pastoral landscapes, and in 2016 she put together a portfolio for *Harper’s Bazaar* in which she morphed into fashion-world social-media influencers. Ghesquière remembers when Sherman collaborated with Balenciaga in 2006, when he was the creative director of the house, on a project for French *Vogue* where she used the clothes to dress up as a series of fashion-editor types. “She said a very simple yes after a couple weeks and then we didn’t hear back until she was done,” he says, acknowledging Sherman’s process takes time. “If one of the most important artists in the world agrees to take your work as a basis for a project, you just thank the Lord and wait.”

Arnault, who says she first became aware of Sherman’s work in the 1990s, has a 2008 Sherman photograph featuring the artist as a society queen. “Once, I had a friend come over and ask, ‘Is that your mom?’” Arnault says with a laugh. “You can’t pass by her work and not have an emotional reaction, and that’s why I admire her so much.” (Louis Vuitton also commissioned a special Sherman-designed trunk—“a portable Cindy studio”—as part of an artist collaboration series in 2014. Its drawers were labeled by Sherman as spaces for “fake eyeballs,” “false teeth,” “facial hair” and “scar tissue/skin.”)

Katy Perry’s first experience with Sherman happened at a museum in Los Angeles, when the pop star was a pre-famous teenager. “I saw this wacky self-portrait and I thought to myself, Who is this amazing weirdo? I was drawn to it because I related to the idea of being self-deprecating and being willing to show and even highlight the flaws. I love it because she is strong enough and brave enough to be silly and strange and awkward.”

Apart from updating to digital photography, Sherman works in much the same way she did when she and Longo moved to New York more than four decades ago. She does her own makeup, and she works the camera herself. “I’ve tried to work with assistants in the studio once or twice, but I found that I was kind of just keeping busy for them. I felt like I had to look like I was really working all the time,” Sherman says. “I realized part of my process is about spacing out sometimes, and that’s good. It clears your brain for a little bit.”



Sherman gets fake breasts, noses and buttocks on her travels or from oddity shops, and she takes inspiration from clothes and props she finds at flea markets and yard sales. For her socialite series, she says, “I really didn’t do that much research other than going to great thrift stores on the Upper East Side, where I got a lot of those outfits.” The series based on flappers was sparked by 1920s photographs of German women and a young Joan Crawford. “I just loved the whole extremeness,” she says. “The eyebrows being so penciled in and the lips being little bow shapes.”

Alone in her studio in SoHo, Sherman is uninhibited. “It feels magical,” she says of getting in character and placing herself in front of the lens. “I don’t know what it is I’m looking for until I put the makeup on, and then somehow it’s revealed.” A small handheld mirror sits nearby to correct her makeup between clicks, and she poses a large mirror in front of the lens until everything is in place.

“I’m disappearing in the world, rather than trying to reveal anything,” she says. “It’s about obliterating, erasing myself and becoming something else.” How does she know when it’s working? She gives an example from the time when she was making her history series. “I started to feel like, when I looked in the mirror, I didn’t see myself at all. And that was kind of freaky but also euphoric.”