

METRO PICTURES

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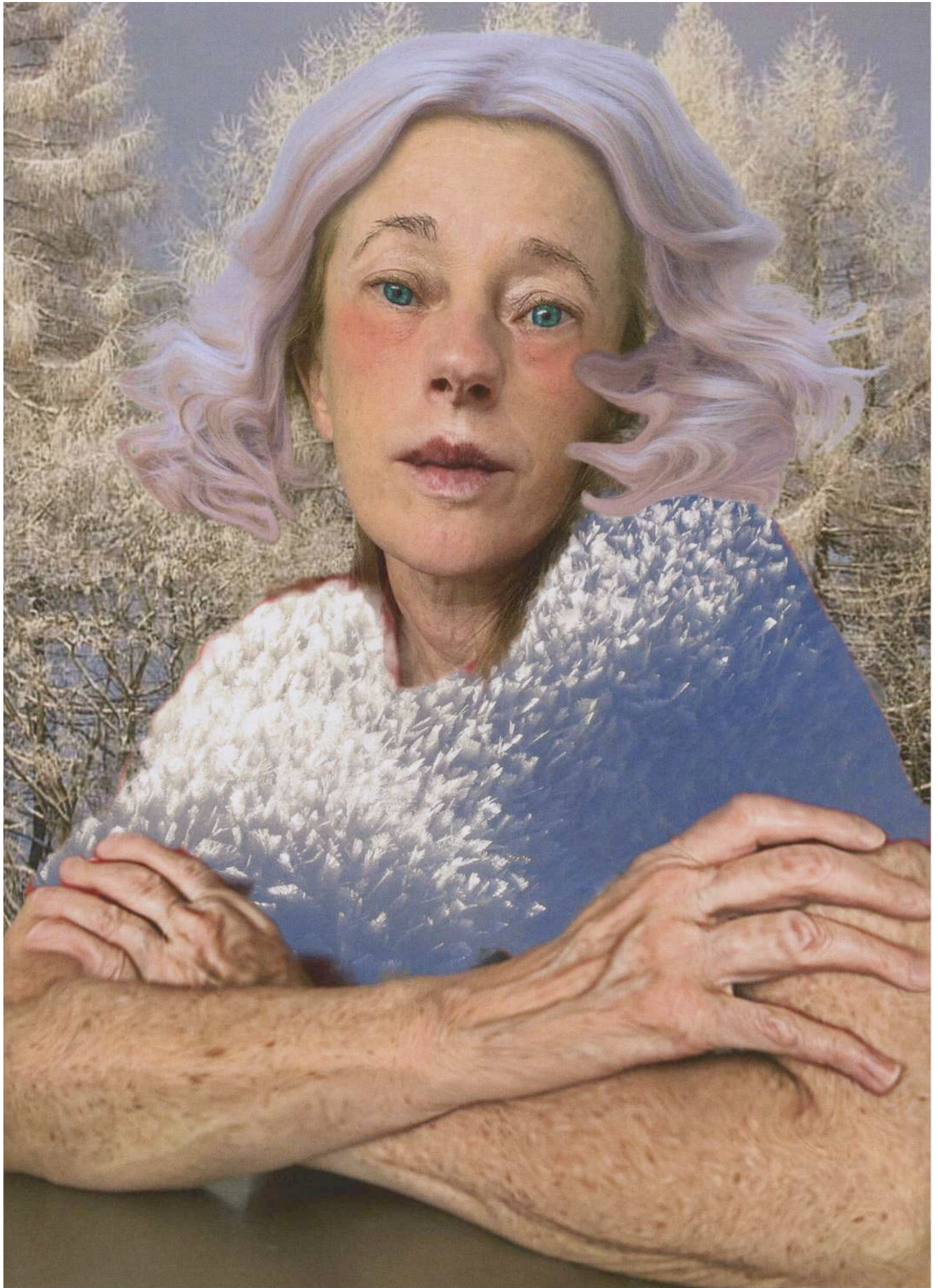
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For 40 years, Cindy Sherman has photographed herself disguised as grotesques and glamour pusses. Simon Willis goes in search of the woman behind the make up

A MULTITUDE OF CINDYS

Before and after Two portraits by Cindy Sherman, shot for 1843



In 1983 Cindy Sherman took a photograph of herself that she called "The Artist in Her Studio". Sitting in a chair surrounded by photographic equipment, she appears to be the embodiment of honest cheerfulness in a plain white shirt and scant make-up. But look again and you can see that she is wearing a blonde wig, chosen, presumably, in preference to another that has been discarded on the floor. By her feet sit two clichés of bohemian life, an ashtray full of cigarette butts and a glass of red wine. This is not portraiture but satire.

I had this image in mind as I stood, one morning in April, outside Sherman's studio in Manhattan, where I had come to meet Sherman ahead of her first ever retrospective in Britain, which is currently on show at the National Portrait Gallery in London. "The Artist in Her Studio" offered a warning to anyone expecting to probe the person behind the personas.

Sherman has spent the last 40 years photographing herself dressed up as other people. She emerged in 1980 with "Untitled Film Stills", a series of 69 black-and-white photographs in which she impersonated a parade of female stereotypes – blonde bombshells and desperate housewives – inspired by Hollywood and European cinema. Since then, she has morphed into vamps and fashion victims, wannabe starlets and dejected models, sinister clowns and Renaissance Madonnas. Portraits by other artists usually try to represent their subjects faithfully or draw out a psychological trait that lies within them. Cindy Sherman's work is built on lies: the fake perfection that is sold to us on TV, in films and magazines, the falsehoods we tell ourselves, the disguises we put on to hide who we are. She makes no attempt to disguise her artifice – the make-up is often crude, the prostheses are protuberant. This note of caricature often creates an uncomfortable mood in her pictures, hovering somewhere between tragic, comic and cruel.

When Sherman answered the door, she greeted me with an excitable "Hi!" and an eager smile. She beckoned me into her studio, which forms the lower half of a vast, light-filled duplex (her apartment is upstairs). She currently lives alone, apart from her bright-green, 28-year-old pet macaw, Mister Frieda.

Sherman is 65 but looks younger, with delicate features and a slightly lop-sided smile that seems mischievous and faintly conspiratorial. When we met she was wearing a blue-and-white tie-dye T-shirt, baggy blue trousers and white trainers. Her long blonde hair was fastened in a ponytail with a pale pink band. The ensemble, along with her folksy charm, lent her an air of almost suburban ordinariness. "I can show you my chickens!" she said excitedly at one point. Sherman's pastimes are decidedly wholesome: she once said that if she wasn't a photographer she would like to be a gardener, and her current passion is raising poultry. She got out her phone to show me a live feed of her brood in their henhouse at her place in the Hamptons.

As we began to talk at a large wooden table, my eye was drawn to evidence of her darker arts. I spied a shelf of plastic and wax heads at the far end of the room. Among them was the head of a boy with orange hair whose face was hideously scratched and blistered. "Did he come like that?" I asked her. "No, I made him like that," she replied warmly.

Nearby were cupboards full of neatly categorised body parts: bums and breasts, teeth and hands, a tray full of fetuses. She speaks quietly and hesitantly, and makes no attempt to impose herself. She opened one of the cupboards and rootled around in a drawer near the bottom. "Those are butts and bellies and tits," she said, with all the dispassion of an estate agent listing the features of a property, "and these are just face parts." She pulled out a set of teeth with cancerous lesions on the gums.

Sherman once said that she divides herself up "into many different parts". Among them are "the professional self" – which is chirpy and accommodating, and leaves her feeling like a smile has been pasted on her face – and her "work self in the studio". For a time these personas interfered with each other: early in her career she employed a studio assistant, but found that she spent too much time making her coffee and asking about her boyfriend. Now she houses her assistants – she currently has two – in another building so that she can work unimpeded by her tendency to please other people. She does everything herself, from make-up to lighting. Hardly anyone has ever seen her in work mode. Susan Jennings, an artist, was employed as Sherman's assistant for six years. Not once did she see a picture being taken.

The parrot also helps keep the rest of the world at arm's length. "Frieda gives Cindy a buffer," Jennings told me. "He won't let you get too close. When I started working for Cindy, he would attack me." That morning the bird was sequestered in another room, which was just as well. Sherman hates doing interviews. She agrees to them before a big show only because "it's kind of expected. I feel it would be very uppity and snobby of me to say no." I suggested that doing this one must be an imposition. "It's ok, it's ok!" she reassured me perkily. Several days after my visit, she posted a short animation on her Instagram account which, judging from her clothes, was shot the day I was there. In the video she runs through a series of smiles and laughs and blinks, ingratiating but obviously insincere. It is captioned "When you've been too social".

Sherman's memories of dressing up stretch back to childhood. She recalls discovering a trunk full of old clothes in the basement of her parents' house, among them billowing Edwardian dresses and baggy white bloomers. "I don't know why my mother and father kept them," she said. "I was just intrigued by the fact that some woman wore this at some point, and in my mind I could only imagine it being an old woman. So I took socks and put the socks in parts of the blouse so it looked like the tits came down to the waist." Then, sitting in her chair, she did a killer impression of a pensioner, shrinking in her seat, stiffening her neck, reaching for an imaginary walking stick with a crabby hand, and speaking in a high and shaky voice rounded by old-fashioned elocution.

Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey in 1954, but the family soon moved to Huntington Beach on the poorer side of Long Island. Her mother was a teacher and her father worked as an engineer at Grumman Aircraft. In many ways Huntington Beach was an idyllic place to grow up. "I remember leaving the house in my bathing suit and just taking a towel and going down to the beach. I was barefoot all sum-



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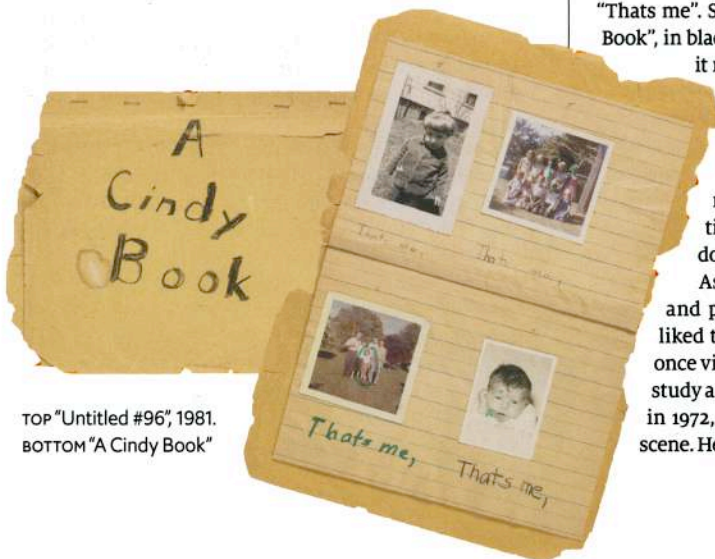
mer long,” Sherman says. Sometimes she and her friends would stage little plays at her house.

But the family home was “a weird place.” Sherman has described her father as a racist who resented his children. Her parents were looking forward to retirement when she was born. “I think they were kind of tired by the time I came around,” she told me. “They were probably ready to have a quiet life and suddenly they have another child.” She felt alienated from her four siblings, all of whom were much older. Her brother Robert, who was 19 when she was born, said later that “when Cindy was conceived I was very angry.”

When Sherman was about six years old, she began rooting through boxes of family photographs. She extracted images of herself and circled her figure in each picture – sitting on the beach as a chubby toddler or posing with the family on a summer afternoon. Then she stuck them in rows of two or three in a little exercise book and under each one she wrote, “That’s me.” She inscribed the cover with a title, “A Cindy Book”, in black. “Looking back on it,” she told me, “I guess

it must have been a reaction to me feeling kind of out of place.” “A Cindy Book” was a way of proving to herself that she mattered to her family. Dressing up was also a response to her sense of estrangement. Turning herself into a monster or a witch was her way to claim attention in a family that she felt excluded her. “If you don’t like me this way, how about this way?”

As a child Sherman filled her time by drawing and painting meticulous likenesses. Her father liked tinkering with cameras but the family never once visited a museum or gallery. When she went to study art at university in Buffalo in upstate New York in 1972, she knew nothing about the contemporary scene. Her college boyfriend Robert Longo, a confident,



TOP “Untitled #96”, 1981.
BOTTOM “A Cindy Book”



SHE GRADUALLY TRANSFORMED HERSELF FROM A QUIET, ANDROGYNOUS YOUNG WOMAN INTO A VAMP WITH A CIGARETTE HANGING FROM HER LIP

LEFT "Untitled Film Still #13", 1978.

RIGHT "Untitled #479", 1975

ambitious art student, gave her a crash course. Along with painting and sculpture, at which she excelled, she was required to take a class in photography, which she failed. "It was all about this technical stuff," she says, "and it was very boring." The following year, a new teacher arrived with a fresh approach. Barbara Jo Revelle, not long out of art college herself and a self-described hippy, dealt with photography techniques in about two weeks before handing out tasks that encouraged students to be creative. Longo and Sherman each competed to be more radical than the other.

The pair's work, Revelle says, "became the reason it was fun to go to class". When Revelle asked her students to make a short, silent film, Sherman brought in a composition showing a tight crop of her own face mouthing the words "I hate you" over and over again. "Her face was increasingly distorted with emotion," Revelle remembers. "Toward the end tears streamed down...It was shockingly moving." Another time, Revelle asked her students to confront a fear. Sherman came back with a series of distorted shots of her own naked body.

In her third year of university, Longo and another friend, Charlie Clough, founded a gallery-cum-hangout in an old ice factory in Buffalo. Longo and Sherman lived together in the building's cavernous loft, along with Sherman's pet dove, Birdie, who was blind and nested in a pot plant hanging from the ceiling. Sherman was a reticent figure, known to take her flute along to parties so that she wouldn't have to chat, and had a low tolerance for art talk. For all her quietness, she was determined. "She would go into her studio," Clough remembers, "and you just knew something was cooking."

Sherman would sometimes emerge dressed up in character, and Longo encouraged her to photograph these personas. That year she made a series of 23 pictures in which she gradually transformed herself from a quiet, androgynous young woman with short hair and big glasses into a vamp with red

lips and rouged cheeks, a cigarette hanging from her lip and what Revelle called a come-fuck-me look. Sherman had found her subject: "How people choose, unconsciously maybe, how they look in order to present themselves to the world." For the first time, she felt like she was making art.

Sherman's work was critically lauded from the beginning. It didn't take long for money to follow and her prices have been heading north ever since. In 1980 you could buy a shot from "Untitled Film Stills" for \$50. Earlier this year, one of them was auctioned for \$810,000 at Sotheby's. For Sherman this is modest. One of her pictures went for \$3.9m in 2011. At the time, it was the most expensive photograph ever sold.

Sherman has always been suspicious of her own popularity, so her career has played out in a sequence of swerves. She has followed moments of triumph – a pricey sale or a sell-out show – with an uncompromising body of work deliberately designed to frustrate or disgust viewers. She hates the idea of being seen as a digestible artist, one whose work slips down too easily. "Every time I have been successful," she says, "I have immediately felt I have to do something to counteract that." The first time Sherman undertook this kind of self-sabotage was in the early 1980s. She and Longo had moved to New York with no expectations of supporting themselves from their art. They both got jobs: Longo as a taxi driver and Sherman as a receptionist at a gallery in Tribeca. They made work in their off-hours: Sherman posed for Longo's drawings and Longo helped Sherman shoot "Untitled Film Stills", driving her around town in an old vw van filled with costumes. Sherman proved resourceful with her settings. "There's a picture", Longo says, "where she looks like this country girl sitting in all this foliage. But she was actually sitting in one of the planters by the World Trade Centre."



When the pictures went on show in 1980, the response was warm but not ecstatic. That changed the following year, when Sherman exhibited a series of photographs in which she took the horizontal format of magazine centrefolds and replaced the pin-ups with images of despondent and terrified women. The series had been commissioned by Ingrid Sischy, editor of *Artforum* magazine, to run in her pages, yet it never did. Sischy later explained that she found them “so fully blown, so unexpected, so raw, so shocking...I was scared of the pictures”. But when they went on show they attracted attention from patrons of Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock, and the photography department of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York acquired one of them.

Sherman felt ambivalent about this success. As the financial markets set off on a five-year bull run, money sluiced around the New York art world of the early 1980s. The new buyers – generally men who worked on Wall Street – wanted to splash their cash on bombastic paintings from artists like David Salle and Julian Schnabel. Not everyone was convinced of these painters’ merits. Robert Hughes, the most influential art critic of the day, thought that Schnabel’s work was the equivalent of Sylvester Stallone’s acting: “a lurching display of oily pectorals”.

Photography remained outside the bubble. It was considered a lesser medium, a view reflected in sales figures. “We paid \$1,000 for a ‘Centrefold,’” says Peter Galassi, former chief curator of photography at MOMA. Looking back on that time, Sherman once said she was disgusted by “the boy artists, the boy painters, the collectors, the crawl, and climb, and stabbing-each-other-to-the-top sort of competition”. She was mired in the sycophancy and vindictiveness of the art world without gleaning her fair share of the rewards.

Her reaction was to raise the middle finger. From 1983, around the time she married fellow artist Michel Auder,

she began to create pictures awash with rotten cupcakes and puddles of puke. She gradually disappeared from the frame, showing herself in one photograph as just a tiny, anguished figure reflected in a pair of sunglasses. Eventually she vanished altogether. In her place came glistening globules and mould-furred slices of what looks like cake in palettes of lurid green, yellow and purple. “I wanted to say to collectors, ‘Hey, if you’re gonna like me and want to buy my work, check out this vomit picture!’”

She returned to prominence in 1990 with a series of “history portraits”, in which she posed as Renaissance maidens, bearded burghers and lactating Madonnas, inspired by Old Masters and overlaid with a heavy dose of irony. She had fun with bulbous noses and fake breasts. The show sold out and her prices rocketed. “I knew I was successful before critically, but not so much financially. I just suddenly felt like I was making money, but I also felt really guilty about it too.”

Sherman reacted by pushing boundaries once again. For her sex pictures, she raided medical-supply catalogues for plastic body parts: breasts and butts, vaginas and penises, which she arranged in a physiologically impossible orgy of orifices and positions. Once again her artistic decisions were motivated partly by rivalry across the gender divide. Jeff Koons had recently produced a set of pictures that showed him having sex with his future wife, a former Italian porn star called Cicciolina. Sherman found their gauzily romantic atmosphere insufficiently hardcore. “This is so tame,” she remembers thinking. “It should have been way more graphic, like a movie of him fucking her or something.” She wanted to create a series that unequivocally portrayed the horror of rape and the tawdriness of the porn industry. The challenge, she told me, was to take a piece of medical equipment or a plastic doll, “and imbue it with something that is going to seem creepy”.

The year 1997 promised to be Sherman's *annus mirabilis*. She had directed "Office Killer", her first film, a horror picture about a mousy, diffident copy editor who acquires a taste for murdering her colleagues and befriending the corpses she stores in her basement. What's more, MOMA was mounting a major exhibition of her work in New York, with a headline-grabbing sponsor who had been a fan since the late 1970s: Madonna. Sherman seemed to be on the verge of entering the realm of celebrity.

But the film was panned – the *New York Times* called it "sadly inept" – and Sherman's private life unravelled in turmoil. Her marriage to Auder was collapsing. He had been addicted to heroin for much of their relationship, and she had finally given up hope that he would kick the habit. Her fame had exacerbated the rift between the couple. She tried to manage this by retreating from the spotlight, spending most of her time with Auder at their house in upstate New York, and avoiding openings and galas. But publicity from both the film and MOMA exhibition were making it ever more difficult to avoid life in the public eye.

Sherman's divorce was protracted, and she expressed her pain through her work. "I would go into the studio sometimes," Jennings says of her time as her assistant, "and she would be in there crying, with an electrical hot prod that you melt things with, and she would be stabbing these dolls in the face." The unfortunate toys eventually featured in a series of photographs exhibited in 1999 called "Broken Dolls", in which Sherman posed these mutilated and dismembered figures in freakish sexual positions.

Around that time, Sherman met Paul Hasegawa-Overacker, usually known as Paul H-O, the presenter of a television show called "Gallery Beat". The programme took an anarchic, behind-the-scenes look at the New York art world, lampooning its vanity and pretensions. H-O asked Sherman if she would let him make a profile of her. Much to the surprise of her friends, she agreed. "She really hated doing that kind of thing and she really hated to be interviewed," Jennings says. "But I think she liked the ironicalness of 'Gallery Beat'." When the episode about her aired, it became clear that she also liked H-O: the pair flirted on screen like teenagers.

For the first time in years, Sherman appeared in her own photographs. According to Jennings, "she decided to do portraiture again to kind of reclaim herself after the experience of her marriage." The pictures, which were due to be shown in Los Angeles during Oscar season in 2000, were conceived as headshots of wannabes who had come to Hollywood looking for fame. "They are really trying to sell themselves and be the best version of themselves they can be," Sherman told me. "There was something kind of hopeful about that and sad about it too." But these figures, with their expectant smiles, sunburnt skin, tacky jewellery and ridiculous make-up, predominately radiate a sensation of missed opportunity and self-delusion. It is hard not to see them, in part, as Sherman's response to the corrosive effects of celebrity.

By the time the pictures were shown, Sherman and H-O were a couple. They went surfing together, visited his parents and cycled around the deserted streets of the Hamptons, where Sherman had just bought a house. But, as H-O

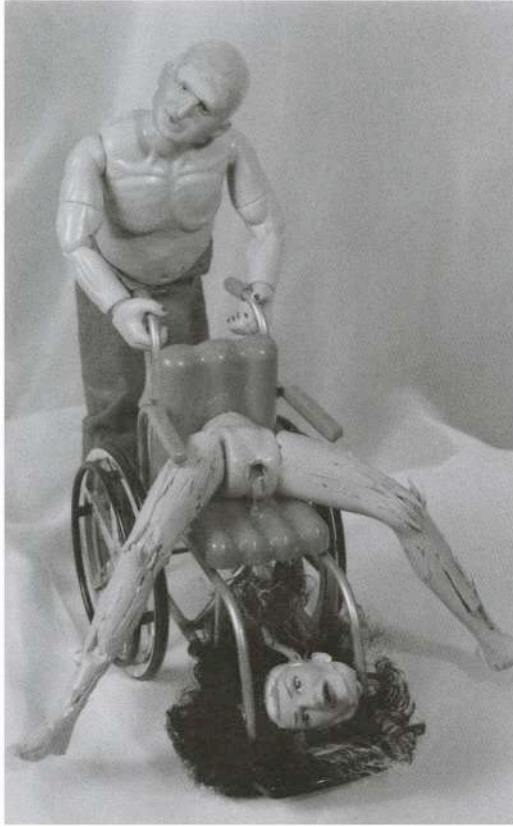
shows in "Guest of Cindy Sherman", a documentary he made about their relationship, her stature in the art world quickly became intolerable to him. As his own career began to tank, he found the experience of accompanying her to galas and benefits "excruciating". The film dissolves into an essay in male vanity and betrayed intimacy. Sherman, who initially supported the film in an attempt to help H-O's floundering career, eventually tried to have it stopped. She now regrets the whole enterprise. "Really it was about him trying to get more attention for himself."

One afternoon in May this year Cindy Sherman was waiting in the lobby of the Hotel Cipriani in Venice, her base for a week's visit to the city's biennale. The weather was blustery and Sherman was wearing a dark leather jacket and black scarf to guard against the cold, and a pair of pink-and-white Prada boots that appeared to be giving her some trouble (over the course of the afternoon she developed a limp). As we tried to find a quiet spot to talk, we rounded a corner and ran into a small group of people standing next to a vitrine of jewellery. "Why look who it is!" Sherman exclaimed, like a ring master announcing a new act. "It's Miss Swig!" It felt like an encounter orchestrated to please her friend.

Liz Swig, with whom Sherman had travelled to Venice, is an entrepreneur from New York and daughter of one of America's biggest property tycoons. Her company, Liz Works, produces decorative objects designed by artists. This year she had turned photographs from Sherman's Instagram account into cameos, set into brooches, rings and earrings. Swig, who speaks in superlatives, thought that taking the newest form of portraiture, the selfie, and applying it to one that was produced in the ancient world would be "insanely cool". Sherman was in town to help her sell.

"I KNOW WHAT CINDY'S UP TO BECAUSE I READ ABOUT HER IN THE SOCIETY PAGES"

The question that now hangs over Sherman's work – so much of which has been about movies and magazines, fashion and celebrity – is whether it has become soft. She once examined the rich and famous as an outsider with a critical and often vicious eye. Now she is one of them. Every Christmas, Sherman holds a lavish party at her apartment with mountains of lobsters, flowing champagne and crowds of bold-faced names. Clough, her college friend, remembers being there one year. "Monica Lewinsky was there, Lady Gaga was there. If I was 30 years younger I would be hustling, but now that I'm old and the die has been cast, I can just sit back and go, 'Oh look, there's Debbie Harry.'" Douglas Crimp, an art critic who knew Sherman in the 1970s and 1980s but



ABOVE "Untitled #333", 1999.
BELOW "Am I cured doctor?", 2017



has since lost touch, told me that "I know what Cindy's up to because I read about her in the society pages of the *New York Times*." On her Instagram, you can see pictures of her hanging out with Catherine Deneuve and Julianne Moore.

It sometimes seems that Sherman's immersion in this milieu has tempered her work. In 2016 she produced a series of portraits of ageing actresses from the golden age of Hollywood. These figures recline elegantly in flapper dresses and fur stoles, in the mould of Gloria Swanson and Carole Lombard. Their expressions mix nostalgia, melancholy and defiance. Gone are the fake teeth and false noses that helped to give Sherman's work its edge. In their place was a new mood – a kind of sympathy and open-heartedness. For the first time, Sherman later said, she was attempting to make "pretty pictures" of women trying to look their best. Sherman had always felt that an image was working when she couldn't recognise herself in it. With these she "worried that I wasn't doing enough to transform them, that I was maybe revealing too much of myself".

More recently her Instagram work has developed bite. In 2017 she fell off her horse, breaking her ribs and puncturing a lung. Holed up in bed, she began posting pictures of herself. A friend had put her on to an app that most people use to make photos of themselves look younger and prettier: "I thought, right away, I am going to play with this." Lying in her hospital bed with tubes up her nose, she gave herself a make-over: perfectly smooth skin, eyelashes thick with mascara, a healthy blush on her cheeks. She captioned it "Am I cured doctor?" Then she did the opposite, turning herself into a cartoon crone with no teeth, calling it, dryly, "On the mend!" Over time her posts became little jokes that play words off against images, and mock selfie-culture's obsession with youth and self-promotion. Among the cameos is one in which Sherman's face, distorted beyond recognition, has been photoshopped onto a baby's body. It is titled "Rejuvenation time".

Sherman and Swig were joined in Venice the following day by about 100 invited guests for a lunch at a restaurant called Harry's Dolci. Sherman wore an outrageous pink-and-white pyjama suit. (Several weeks later, at the opening party for her show at the National Portrait Gallery, she looked like a walking glitter ball in a dress covered in reflective silver scales.) Sherman mingled with the largely female crowd. Ignoring the tempting buffet – artichokes, asparagus risotto, octopus salad – these women stood, freshly coiffed and deeply tanned, next to a table laden with Prosecco. From their arms hung Christie's totes and Chanel handbags. They wore Balenciaga trainers and leather pumps adorned with pearls. There was evidence of facial augmentation. Some of them reminded me of the women in Sherman's society portraits from 2008, which depict the doyennes of New York society – middle-aged Park Avenue matrons, expensively clothed and heavily made-up. But their adornments cannot hide their red-rimmed eyes, their tremulous expressions or the way their botoxed mouths can't quite manage a smile. As I looked around, the experience became increasingly uncanny. Here was Cindy Sherman and she was surrounded by a throng of Cindy Shermans. ●

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