

METRO PICTURES

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COVER STORY

02

CINDY
SHERMAN



CINDY SHERMAN

JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, THE AMERICAN ARTIST HAS STARTED AN INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT. BUT UNLIKE EVERYONE ELSE, SHE POSTS HIGHLY UNFLATTERING RETOUCHEE PORTRAITS – AND THE RESULTS ARE FRANKLY EXHILARATING.

In 2018, in *The New Yorker*, a drawing by Charles Lutz showed three characters sitting in front of artworks hanging on the wall of a room. "My perception of their conceptual rigour was based on a misreading of an Instagram post," says one of them. Launched in 2010, the Instagram app (bought by Facebook in 2012) started as an extra tool for the promotion (more than the expression) of various disciplines, including the visual arts. "In the art market as we know it today, the reading of an artist's work can also occur in light of the myth that we can associate with it," explained Judith Benhamou-Huet in her book *Art Business: Le marché de l'art ou l'art du marché* (Assouline, 2004). And many are the artists of whatever stature who use their Instagram accounts as a tool to feed this "myth."

Not so for Cindy Sherman, who started posting on Instagram in October 2016 during a trip to Japan with her friend, the blues-folk singer Jenni Muldaur, who was already using the app. "So I thought, 'I'll post from my trip, too. Why not?'" Her first post (146 likes to this day) shows a few pairs of

shoes on a wooden floor. The image is not geo-localized, but Sherman captioned it "Kill Bill restaurant." The Gonpachi, in Tokyo's Ginza neighbourhood, which is mostly frequented by tourists, became famous after Quentin Tarantino shot the sword and mace fight scene between Uma Thurman and Chiaki Kuriyama there (The Bride versus Gogo Yubari) in *Kill Bill: Volume 1*; today you have to take your shoes off to access the first-floor booths. Sherman chose the pseudonym *misterfriedas_mom* for this private Instagram account, presenting herself as the mother of Mister Frieda, her macaw, who has lived with her for almost 30 years (the bird was simply Frieda until Sherman found out he was male).

Like so many of us, Sherman used Instagram to share her "domestic" world, posting images of the sky from a plane, trees under the snow, plates in restaurants, a few childhood photos, others taken at a Diana Ross concert and, on 26 October 2016, Mister Frieda himself, in his glorious apple-green plumage (47 likes). She posted almost no contemporary art (apart from a couple of views of Daniel Buren's intervention at the Fondation Louis Vuitton on 4 March 2017), but laid-back moments with girlfriends instead: on 2 May 2017, she posted a picture she'd taken the day before at the Met Gala, where she poses alongside Isabelle Huppert (in Dior and Repossi jewels) and Catherine Deneuve (in Vuitton and Repossi). The caption reads "Isabelle, Catherine et moi." All pretty banal in other words, just like





her post a week later on 8 May featuring some videos at the City Winery, a restaurant/bar/music venue that opened in 2008 in SoHo, New York, where you can make your own wine or just drink chardonnay. Sherman watched Muldaur play there and on the first video wrote "Jenni & Teddi" (referring to the folk singer Teddy Thompson). Still pretty ordinary, and not in the least premonitory of the next post, on 12 May, which was far less banal.

Since then, Mister Frieda's account has become "Cindy Sherman's." "The account was private. But whenever someone requested to follow me, I felt it was my duty to see if they were really serious art-interested people. So, I'd look up their Instagram and see, 'Ah, okay, they look like they're creative enough.' Some people would be posting a bunch of selfies in the mirror, so those people I'd reject. But I just found it was taking up too much time to be researching who wants to follow me, so that's when I went public, about five months into it," Sherman explained to *The Gentlewoman* in 2019. A photo she posted the same day as the Met Gala hinted at what was to come. In it we see Sherman together with the ex-abstract painter and now "celebrity makeup artist" Bruce Dean. "What a real makeup artist can do! Thank you, Bruce Dean," Sherman wrote underneath. Both appear to have had major digital face-lifts, with that "post-Pierre et Gilles" skin quality characteristic of touch-up apps for smartphones – all that was missing were the dog ears and muzzle. The "embellishment" was done using Facetune, which Sherman had just discovered: she installed it on her phone and started "playing with it," on her terms.

The 12 May image was a sharp twist in the rules of self-portraiture in the time of Instagram. Using the touch-up app with radically opposing goals to what it was supposed to do, Sherman appears with smaller eyes than in real life, while the image's blurriness suggests she was experimenting with the app's possibilities. Sherman captioned the post with an astonishing, "Selfie! No filter, hahaha," leaving little doubt as to her intention to do battle with the self-portrait in the age of digital enhancement and self-promotion. The twist is typical of her oeuvre, in that far from appearing "embellished" she's actually rather grotesque. She got 527 likes and a comment from Bruce Dean: "I'm dying!!! Lol don't you just love this app! It's very fun to tinker with." The next day, Sherman posted two self-portraits, one with a narrowed nose and huge eyes and mouth, captioned "New app Facetune. #notyourusualselfie," and a second with deformed eyes, nose and mouth and a chrome filter. At this point it became clear that, just as Sherman's photographs











are not self-portraits but portraits, her Insta images are not selfies but portraits "at the time of the selfie." A fall from a horse later that year, which hospitalized her, gave Sherman time to perfect her mastery of Facetune and to improve it with Perfect365 and YouCam Makeup. "I was kind of just lying around with nothing to do and playing with my phone," she told *W* magazine in November 2017.

Sherman's making public these first "selfies" on Insta was heralded by *The New York Times* as an "act of generosity from an artist who is less outgoing than most Instagram hounds" (August 2017). What it essentially acknowledged was the perfect harmony between the natural development of a far-from-disparate body of work and the domination of social media. People often talk about "post-Internet art," which generally doesn't mean much beyond an obvious statement of today's condition, but like Richard Prince – probably one of the only artists really doing something with Instagram that is a natural extension of his work – Sherman uses the app and its possibilities to extend her work within the very contours previously defined for it. Remarkably, neither artist was born yesterday and neither is from the post-Internet generation. The images they post are not a commentary on Instagram – even if they can be read as such – but a materialization of what their approach to things becomes via their oeuvre within the context of social media. For Sherman, Instagram plays the same role in the

development of her work as the movies in her *Untitled Film Stills*: an acknowledgement of the way a medium (cinema, Instagram) can inform a discipline (the history of portraiture).

Over the last two years, Sherman has posted dozens of portraits that sit at the crossroads of the selfie and her "classic" work: "Patience" (the post's comment is used as a title), of 24 April 2020 (22,224 likes), is a double portrait, like a Rorschach test styled as a Flemish old master, demonstrating the elaborate layering she uses to bring remarkable complexity and richness to these images. Sherman is less maniacal here about perfection, allowing herself more freedom for all-out experimentation. Too bad if the background is botched or a touch-up fluffed. But nor is her Instagram account a mediocre promotional tool for her "real" work, as is the case with almost all the other artists using the app. Moreover she happily mixes these images with videos of wild turkeys (27 May and 3 June 2017), photos of roosters (3 June 2017, 206 likes), of a child building a den out of sofa cushions ("When a child is bored at a dinner party," 10 June 2017, 275 likes) and travel shots (the Philharmonie de Paris, 11 June 2017, 587 likes).

But a not entirely innocent question remains: are these Instagram portraits works of art? Sherman responded categorically to *W* magazine in 2017: "All these Instagram images are, for me, just playing around, I don't think it at all competes with my serious work. They're just fun, like a little distraction." The temptation to turn them into actual works that could be sold on the market comes up against a technical reality: their definition doesn't allow them to be printed in large format, according to her New York gallery Metro Pictures (a technical detail that hasn't stopped David Hockney where his extraordinary iPad drawings are concerned). But Sherman has found outlets for her Instagram productions: unveiled in May 2019 at Harry's Dolci on Giudecca, during the Venice Biennale, two rings, a pendant and a pair of earrings in cameo and gold, made by hand in Italy (more than E20,000 for the earrings), were produced from her images by Lizworks, a company founded by Liz Swig in 2014 to make artist's products. "It seemed like a good project for using my Instagram images since the files aren't large enough to blow up into photographs," Sherman explained to *Whitewall* in May 2019. Since then she has discovered further ways of transforming her Instagram experiments into something more suited to the market: they recently became large-scale tapestries, produced in editions of ten in Belgium, of which two were shown on the Metro Pictures stand at Art Basel Miami Beach late last year, yours for E115,000 each.