

## Cindy Sherman

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Most photographers have turned their camera on themselves at some point, but few have made it their trademark. Cindy Sherman's images are, however, not self-portraits but are rather documents of her performances of a never-ending play of fictional yet distinctly familiar characters. This exhibition, Sherman's first European retrospective, catalogues her obsessions with mass culture and objectification which she has explored relentlessly over the past thirty years.

Sherman is not a photographer as such, but a conceptual artist who stumbled upon photography and uses it as a means to an end. One of the first pieces in the exhibition is the video work *Dolls Clothes* (1975), a black and white Super 8 film/animation of her as a cut-out toy with different clothes and outfits put upon her and taken in and out of her packaging by a giant (presumably her own) Monty Python-esque hand. This rarely seen piece made while she was still at college is a fitting introduction to her very playful style, but it also functions as a forecast for how Sherman will work for the rest of her career.

Sherman's fascination with mass culture, particularly cinema is performed literally in her seminal work, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977). Inspired visually by 1950s movies, the narrative situations she presents are open-ended yet also frustratingly impenetrable. Despite the importance of this work, not only for Sherman's own career, but also for contemporary photography and the ongoing discourse on the relationship between photography and film, the series is presented quite modestly.

Not all of Sherman's images are exclusively of herself. In *Disasters* (1986-89), *Sex Pictures* (1992) (which could have been studies that Otto Dix or George Grosz might have worked from), *Civil War* (1991) and *Horror and Surrealist Pictures* (1994-96), she uses mannequins and prosthetic limbs to create highly elaborate and deliberately falsified macabre scenes, appropriated from the film genres of crime, horror and pornography. This is extended with her black and white images of childishly mutilated toys in *Broken Dolls* (1999), a rather disappointing conclusion to Sherman's use of mannequins of one form or another.

The *History Paintings/Old Masters* (1988-90) series is an excellent conflation between costume and prosthetic extensions (such as noses and foreheads), where Sherman poses as imaginary characters from history. Like her film stills, they do not reference specific works, but general, instantly recognizable physical codes from a genre, in this case historical portraits. They are very witty, and also poke fun at the repetitiveness and banality of much portrait painting for hundreds of years.

With the exception of her most recent work *Clowns* (2004) where she is male, female and asexual, Sherman always plays female roles and portrays them as vulnerable, either by posing in a state of undress, or more often simply by her looks towards the edge of the frame, as if wary of an unseen character from her scenarios or simply the viewers of the works. Because of this, Sherman's work is inevitably placed within the sphere of feminist photography. She confronts themes of voyeurism and appropriation in the pastiche fashion spreads, *Centerfolds /Horizontals* (1981) and more directly in the *Pink Robes* (1982) and *Fashion* (1983-94) projects. Her appearance in nearly all of these images precursors the heroine chic aesthetic of the 1990s, and printed so large have an ominous and belittling presence over the viewer.

Due partly to her rejection of art theory Sherman's work has also become a counterpoint of post-feminist art. It could be argued that Sherman embraces and incorporates feminism as simply another cultural motif rather than attempts to make overtly feminist work. But in her own words, "the work is what it is and hopefully it's seen as feminist or feminist-advised work, but I'm not going to go around espousing theoretical bullshit about feminist stuff" [Cindy Sherman in interview with Betsy Berne, *Tate Magazine*, issue 5]. Other than giving projects titles, Sherman's individual images are always referred to as *untitled...*, which is a genuine effort to dislocate her work from commentary. Her work is often described as occupying the space where high culture and popular culture collide.

*Masks* (1994-96) is one of the most provocative series, in terms of its feminist agenda. This series of portraits, made in the style of a high street photographer's studio, show Sherman playing different stereotyped American women of a certain age (the ex-beauty queen, republican, personal trainer). These are the most cosmetically made-up characters Sherman has yet played, and hence are perhaps

the most sensitive, since she masquerades behind the same layers of make-up that ordinary women wear every day. There is quite a regretful and exhausted look in these characters who seem to be past their time. Clustered together on one wall, like an imaginary community in collective mourning, it is as if Sherman is saying farewell to some of these old friends for good.

Cindy Sherman's success as an artist and her decision to use herself as model/protagonist throughout her work has inevitably led to her almost celebrity status (few contemporary artists have made a cameo appearance in a Hollywood film, as she did in John Water's *Pecker* (1998)): When we think of an artist, we invariably think of their work rather than their physical image. This also personifies and probably surpasses Tracy Emin's model of artist and their work as one inextricably linked thing. That said, Sherman has in fact always subverted the traditional view of the artist as a singular author and personality, by presenting herself as an infinite possibility of individuals modeled on figures from popular culture. However, many people will not be able to help seeing Sherman as narcissistic, and certainly in a very self-conscious and egocentric era, her work will come across quite differently to when she first started photographing herself thirty years ago.

This exhibition is very comprehensive, and its chronological layout – although less ambitious than a themed layout – provides an excellent sense of the development of Sherman's methods which, given that she can be taciturn about her work, help contextualize each project. Because of this, it is an artist's retrospective in the truest sense; not simply the *greatest hits of Cindy Sherman*.