

Cindy Sherman, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver

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Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is best known for her important series of black-and-white photographs, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), which has only been shown in its entirety once before, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2012. This series of seventy images is still taught and discussed as a foundational set of works in the context of feminist art in the 1970s and 1980s that was moving away from the core imagery and essentialism of early feminist art. In the *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman photographs herself in a range of performative guises that recall cinematic female tropes and stereotypes, but with the often ambiguous facial expressions and fragmented narratives, these images are more unsettling than familiar.

The retrospective of Sherman's work at the Vancouver Art Gallery, which ended not long before the Gallery closed temporarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was a blockbuster exhibition that emphatically demonstrated that Sherman's satiric eye has only grown sharper since the 1970s. As someone who teaches Sherman's work, it was a genuine pleasure to see all of the *Untitled Film Stills* in one gallery setting; each room gave the viewer ample proof of Sherman's place in the contemporary canon.

Following her early work in which she performed various feminine identities, primarily through costume and pose, Sherman proceeded to experiment more and more with composition, lighting, make up, and even prosthetics, almost always using her own face and body to enact a range of personas. Her works interrogate gender stereotypes, but they also satirize (sometimes gently, sometimes just this side of cruelly) the posturing of wealthy, aging women, as in Sherman's untitled photographs from the *Society Portraits* series of 2008. The well-heeled female subjects in these photographs are depicted in their sumptuous homes, their fingers suffocated by rings, and their eyes speaking of hauteur or quiet desperation, depending on the photograph. All of these

rich women, of course, are Sherman herself, heavily made up and using her body to communicate a myriad of interior states. There is satire here, yes, but also empathy.

Looking at series after series of Sherman's work is a master class in using one's strengths as an artist to create a body of work that is both cohesive and expansive. The roughly chronological structure of the exhibition guides the viewer from Sherman's early black-and-white works to her colour series of the early 1980s that show Sherman in unidentifiable settings; with the artist's gaze directed at something or someone beyond the frame, there is an unnerving sense of possible threat.

Sherman began to work more explicitly with the grotesque and abject in her *Fairy Tale* series of 1985. Using herself to embody strange figures in exterior settings, the artist is at times monstrous and at other times vulnerable, but always uncanny, now through the use of prosthetic noses and teeth. This interest in the abject continues in the *Sex Pictures* and *Surrealist Pictures* series from the 1990s. In these works Sherman has deconstructed dolls and put them back together again, badly and often erotically. These photographs recall Hans Bellmer's modernist experiments with female dolls, which were intended to critique the Nazis' obsession with the classical body, but which, from a feminist perspective, signify the violent fragmentation and dismemberment of the female form.

The final works in the exhibition are Sherman's photographs that were commissioned by fashion houses (1980s–2000s); they can be read as gentle critiques of individuals who consume high fashion. In these photographs, Sherman is glamorously dressed, but she has adopted strange, even absurd poses, for example with her shoulders hunched forward, her hands clenched, and her blonde hair obscuring her face, with one red-tinged eye peeping through (*Untitled #122*, 1983).



Cindy Sherman

← *Untitled Film Still #17*, 1978.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Metro Pictures, New York

† *Untitled #546*, 2010–2012.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Metro Pictures, New York

→ Image taken from Instagram, published on May 6, 2020.

Photo : courtesy of the artist

→ *Untitled #588*, 2016–2018.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Metro Pictures, New York



The whole exhibition is breathtakingly impressive, both in terms of quality and quantity. The most exciting works, to my mind at least, are Sherman's most recent photographs, for example *Untitled #588* (2016/2018). In this monumental, square photograph, Sherman poses as a middle-aged woman with long brown hair. She is clearly wealthy, but she doesn't have the pinched facial expression or judgmental glance of the women in the *Social Portraits* series. She is opulently dressed in a glorious turquoise suit of matching embroidered blazer and pants, and is standing in front of what appears to be another photograph of a sports car. The background is blurry, but Sherman herself is crystal clear and vibrantly coloured. This series seems to be a more nuanced and self-reflexive engagement with Sherman's own status as a successful artist of wealth and means. These photographs are formally stunning, and like her earlier works, they leave space for a range of interpretations about narrative, lived experience, and, perhaps most importantly, the viewer's own affective response to the female subject.

The Cindy Sherman retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery was a rigorous journey through the mind of one of the most important artists working today. The photographs, and the exhibition as a whole, provide ample evidence of the power of art to make the viewer think about issues pertaining to gender and class, and to make the viewer feel a range of emotions (anxiety, excitement, resentment, and disgust, to name only a few) while moving through the gallery space.

Sherman continues to be a huge draw in galleries and publications. She was interviewed, for instance, for the Spring and Summer 2019 issue of *the gentlewoman*. The artist has also reached a whole new audience of young viewers with her mind- and gender-bending self-portraits that she regularly posts to Instagram. These are not the selfies of Insta-influencers, but rather images that glory in under-eye

circles and laughter lines etched around Sherman's mouth. Sherman currently has 314,000 followers, and in addition to posting strange, warped self-portraits that have been digitally altered, she uses her platform to bring attention to artists, such as Polish artist Zofia Kulik (b. 1947), and galleries, such as the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, which she likely visited while she was in Vancouver for her retrospective.

Julia Skelly

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