

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Cindy Sherman talks to Simon Schama

By Simon Schama. Portrait by Stefan Ruiz

The American photographer on capturing the masquerade of daily life



Simon Schama and Cindy Sherman in her New York studio

Sometimes you can overdo the prep. I realise this when Republican wives, mobilised to do their duty for the cameras in the primaries circus, all begin to look like Cindy Sherman in light disguise. The doll-like gestures; the inhumanly exquisite coiffure; the lip-glossed smiling; the desperation behind the adoration; all seem to leap shrieking from a Sherman show yet to be posed, shot and exhibited. No living artist I can think of has more exactly nailed the masquerade we perform when we go about our business, public and private, social and erotic. No one has caught the futile compulsion to self-brand, to lock down an identity, with quite Sherman's psychological acuteness. As an anatomist of self-consciousness, a collector of living masks, she has no peer. No one else catches those moments of sudden disarray, when the identity-performance begins to fall apart and delusions of grandeur tip into comedy.

This is why the retrospective about to open at New York's Museum of Modern Art will be a sure-fire smash. For although Cindy Sherman's work, over four decades, has been catnip for heavy-duty post-structuralist theorists who sometimes embalm her antic mischief in solemn lucubrations about the Lacanian "gaze" and the commodification of the body, her popular appeal is much simpler. In a culture

drunk on the vanity of images, Sherman's universe of characters appear with the skin of their appearance deeply and multiply punctured, so that all kinds of repressed humanity leak out: apprehension, fearfulness, garish over-confidence; lust, disgust and furtive terror. No one makes such brilliant art by pulling our insides out. Though not a portraitist, much less a self-portraitist, her subject is something that has always exercised the most perceptive of those picturers: the artifice of self-presentation. In the age of YouTube and *The X Factor*, the call to perform has gone epidemic. But she's no enemy of the image industry; just its clever jester. Her take on the unceasing cavalcade of personae works so well because she is unapologetically of the pop culture she ironises and occasionally torments. She manages, sometimes within the same image, total immersion and cool distance; the frontal challenge and the sidelong glance; the gasp and the giggle.



'Untitled', 2008

She does all this, by and with, herself. Not only has she been, over many decades, her own model, but she works without platoons of assistants. She takes justifiable pride in having no one but herself executing the work. Sherman is an old-fashioned art maker. There are no lens-shleppers, no lighting people; no dressers or make-up artists; there is just Cindy. The perennial tease of her shape-shifting is that she is everywhere and nowhere; peekaboo-recognisable and as often totally unrecognisable; her performances thematise the hunt for identity without herself having one. She simply disappears into the murderous ogress; the centrefold model done in by visual abrasion, the foundation-pancaked tennis queen of the Hamptons. Look for True Cindy and you will never find her.

So naturally I wonder, as I ride the elevator to her studio, which Sherman of the countless variations will be doing the interview? I half-imagine one of her personae – edgy, mournful, fierce, reticent, wearing a ghastly grin or a sociopathic scowl, heavily wigged, exotically made-up – to be lying in wait behind the door at the end of the concrete Chelsea corridor. But, surprise, the person who greets me is none of the above. Instead, a woman slighter than I had imagined; no make-up, softly attractive, wearing the kind of smile that kicks the Manhattan winter into the Hudson, shows me in. She talks a lot; she laughs a lot; she is generous with time, tea and funny, voluble conversation. There is not a trace of defensive taciturnity or jokey condescension. Good grief, can she actually be a contemporary artist? But then there's something invitational about much of Cindy Sherman's work, even when the party gets wickedly out of control and you're confronted with stuff designed to prod the gag reflex. Her pictures beckon the imagination into

mysteries, horrors, suggested conversations, vaguely intimated consummations. They will not leave you alone.

Her studio, as you'd expect, is as much a theatrical dressing room as art workspace – awash with costumes hanging from garment rails, sequins and satins, masks and hats, feathers and wool, props and wigs, bits of mannequin. The drapery of drama; everything she might need for a new character. It is her playground of personality and she has, she says, always been one for dressing up. “At school the teacher always seemed to wear a different outfit every day and I was so impressed. I had this little pegboard and I'd figure out my outfit for the whole week! I was so neurotic.” Her art began with making drawings of her own clothes; the beginnings of something that, as an art student at Buffalo State College, would become a booklet of Cindy-doll.



Sherman in her New York studio

If in some of her early photographs characters look lost, or anxiously alert in the big city, it may be because she was kept from it by her parents, even though they were living close by in suburban Huntington, Long Island. “There was this family fear of Manhattan ... monsters in the manholes. We never came in, not to museums, not to the theatre. The only time I remember was at Christmas, to see the Rockettes.” I suggest that the fishnet-stockinged, high-kicking chorus line may have left its own imprint and she laughingly agrees that in retrospect it is a distinct possibility. Perhaps it was also telling that her first dabbling in art was to make copies: of news pictures, any images that took her fancy. Her enduringly haunting masterpiece album of black and white “Untitled Film Stills” has been described by Rosalind Krauss as “copies without originals”.

Parental Manhattanophobia dictated where she would go to study art: upstate at State College, Buffalo. The city was a gritty place in the 1970s, though with handsome Victorian buildings and, more important, the Albright-Knox Gallery, one of America's great modernist and contemporary collections. The college itself was a let-down: “no contemporary art and no interest in it”. But in Hallwalls, an artists' space co-founded by Sherman in an old ice-packing warehouse across town, she found sympathetic comrades who opened her up to the re-inventions of the 1970s: conceptual art, minimalism, body art, earth art; Vito Acconci and Robert Smithson. The college art department hated the upstart. “They felt threatened. My photography teacher gave us an assignment to go to Hallwalls, pick out something we were drawn to and copy it ... ‘because [he said] that's what they do, they just steal other people's ideas.’ Wow what a nasty

man.” With hindsight that condemnation of the playful copy only made Sherman more excited about experimental work that engaged with the immense carnival of American images. Something could be cut from this matrix, and made over into a fresh take: askance and off-kilter.



'Untitled Film Still', 1978

The first partly-made object she worked on was herself. “A Play of Selves” (1975) was at once a mini-theatrical performance of a murder mystery and a game about multiple identities and disguises. She dressed herself up as all the members of the cast; the preppy, the ingénue, and so on, photographed the characters, cut each one out and reassembled them in a single composition and then, as if making a film strip, did it all over again. The results are wittily playful but the laborious process of making them took the zing out of the invention.

When Sherman got to New York in the mid-1970s, “I wanted to work alone,” she says, partly because she was the only model she could afford but also to please her solitary streak. At Hallwalls she liked the creative companionship – up to a point. Now she wanted to do a solo act with the rest of the world just out of frame. “I wanted to tell a story that implied I’m not alone.” From that bud of an idea blossomed the 70 “Untitled Film Stills”, that remain some of the most stunning work done over the past 30 years, not least because so many of them are formally very beautiful while being noirishly atmospheric. Sherman claims to be “a little sick of them”, which is too bad because no one else is. The earliest pictures, which originally were meant to follow the career of a single blonde actress, were made romantically grainy by “being developed in hotter chemicals than you’re supposed to use. The film cracks so it looks like the crappy B movies I had in mind”. It’s called “reticulation”, a term so grand it draws another chuckle from her. In a justly famous image, from 1977, the blonde stands in a barren corridor against a shut door, face turned in profile, eyes closed, a late-1950s short coat slung over her shoulders, her right hand clenched in a fist, raised against the door, her weight on the back foot. Is she knocking? Is she just stopped in the moment of anticipation? We will never know but we sway with her on the tightrope of possibility.



Courtesy of Cindy Sherman and Metro Pictures, New York

'Untitled Film Still', 1977

All that happens is a slight tremble on the power lines of our imagination. Sometimes it's done with gesture. A swimsuited woman sitting on a folding beach chair turns her head – we are made to think, suddenly – to check out something we can't see. A big-eyed brunette (a favourite of mine) looks up from the kitchen floor, where her grocery bag has spilled its eggs and cans, to challenge anyone who's going to make something out of it. The Hitchcock and Antonioni inspirations are obvious. Real albums of stills, many of them from European cinema, triggered her inventions. You can have innocent fun spotting a Jeanne Moreau set of the lips, an Anna Magnani jut of the hip. But while most of the stills featured turning points in the plot – a scream, a fit of weeping – Sherman was hunting for the moments before, after and especially in between the turns of event. She wanted the blanks on which we can write the action. It's these freeze-frame actions that spill from the cinema screen into the inner projection of the little dramas we play in our own heads. The effect is as unsettling as a dream, and as enigmatically stirring.

The series was all the more remarkable for being so simply done, especially the lighting. "For interiors I'd just use a lamp or a screw-in bulb, just cheap aluminium parts." Exteriors, if anything, were even simpler, relying on serendipity. The famous "hitchhiker" ("Untitled", 1979) with its Tippi Hedren ash blonde in gingham check skirt, standing on a road under a low western sky, a dauntless little suitcase by her side, was taken by Sherman's father on a family road trip through Arizona. She packed her costumes, many of them scooped from discount vintage clothing stores in New York, and equipped herself with a new telephoto lens. When she spotted a suggestive location, she would stop the car, get kitted out, pose, wave at Dad and shout "OK, now!" The party line on these one-shot dramas is that they are not "photographs" in the sense of the fixing of an arbitrarily happened-upon event or place. But of course the entire history of the medium has been one in which happenstance yields to the framed, staged design, and there was a lot going on in New York art of the late 1970s – Warhol, above all – that was shamelessly stagey. "Untitled Film Stills" were shown first at the downtown Artists Space where Sherman was working as a receptionist. She got a nice review in ARTnews by a name she can never forget – (who would?) – Valentin Tatransky – and then the work came to her.



'Untitled', 1981

Even then, in her mid-twenties, Sherman was wary of losing her edge to fashion. One of her strongest instincts has always been to bite against the glamour. When Artforum approached her in the early 1980s to do one of their “centrefolds” playing with the girlie mag format, they were probably anticipating a feminist commentary on the female body as a grazing field for the voracious male eye. But what the magazine got when Sherman adopted the big horizontal format in colour was less a polemic than a baroque drama of fear, exhaustion, vulnerability and damaged reflection and, just occasionally, cool defiance.

The centrefolds are, in their way, a strike against the captivity of the ogled; but their poignant intensity comes from substituting for erotic intimacy, an altogether different kind of proximity; the body in distress. What she was after, Sherman says, was “someone expecting to open a centrefold and then ‘oops, sorry didn’t mean to disturb you’”. The Cindies, some blonde some not, are post-posed, hair matted, beads of sweat hanging on their face and body, psychologically stripped bare, even when clothed, emotionally disarrayed. Laid out on off-pastel towels and cheap blankets, the women register a palpable sense of suffering from some sort of violation, or dispossession. They are utterly still yet caught in a psychological shiver and the expressions are among Sherman’s most astonishing pieces of acting. “They make me want to ... cook them soup,” I say. She laughs again.



'Untitled', 1983

Sherman followed her woman's version of grandes horizontales with a visual coda; a small series of the same persona this time in upright format, an unmade-up Cindy clad in a red terry-towel robe, as though "beaten up by the photographer", that are among the most affecting pictures she has ever made. Alert to becoming flavour of the month, Sherman turned more confrontational. She began to experiment with uglification. This was the moment when the fashion house Comme des Garçons flew her to Paris to pick out outfits for the shoot. But instead of sending back the numbers she chose, "they picked really boring wool stuff." Off she went to the Halloween fright shops to stock up on scar tissue, raw-meat lips and cups of blood, and then posed in the wool jobs with a calculated vengeance. A black suit-dress is modelled with an unkempt peroxide wig covering all but one angry eye and clenched fists; a crimson wool number has her with greasy psychopath hairdo and bloody fingernails, and the most fabulously demented of all has her sitting in zebra stripes and floppy tie with an expression of deranged glee on her androgynous mug. "I dare you to print this in French Vogue," she thought. "And of course they didn't; they wound up hating everything. To get them off my back I did a few I knew they would like."



'Untitled', 1985

As she became a Name in the late 1980s, Sherman tripped deeper into realms of horror and disgust, two of her favourite resorts. Her "Fairy Tales" series, not the kind you want your seven-year-old to see, are elaborately staged phantasmagoria, shot on beddings of gravel, dirt, moss and sand that she brought into the studio. A bloody-toothed hag in Norman Bates granny-wig, ancient fishnets half-rolled down, scrabbles obscenely in the pebbles. A naked giant ogress fingers her blood-soaked tongue against a background of tiny figures: her lunch. "Oh they were the little people model railway buffs buy for their sets," Cindy says cheerily. But all this was Bambi compared with what followed: still lifes of a tidal wash of puke and cupcakes; bluebottles crawling around in their favourite kind of yummy habitat.

"It was my little rebellion," she says with a cherubically artless smile. But it doesn't do to tangle with Cindy. Provoked by sanctimonious congressional condemnation of Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" and Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photography, as well as the way Jeff Koons modelled his porn star wife – "so lame" – Sherman responded with a "Sex Pictures" series (1992) that is definitely not lame but ferociously combative. For once she removed herself from the shots, but used anatomically correct medical

mannequins to make poses of savage absurdity: it was all ingeniously economical. By unplugging certain parts from their allotted position she could suggest massively gaping orifices; switching others around made a composition of separated heads, one male and one female lying on satin sheets beside a trunk equipped at one end with a penis and at the other a densely bushy vagina complete with tampon string; the whole thing circled by a silky bow tied around the midriff. When some unhinged minds actually found this a turn-on their creator was horrified: not what she had in mind at all, she says.



'Untitled', 1990

There would be other passages of mayhem: action figure toys melted, burned and mutilated. “There was an anatomically correct model of a gay man with a giant penis so I had to have that – think he was called Gay Bob. A year later they brought out his friend who naturally had to be Latino.” Cindy did terrible things to Bob and his friend but “I was going through a divorce. It wasn’t like ‘I hate you’; it was kinda fun, like a science project.” But there would also be more meditative engagements: with the old masters in her “History Portraits” (1988-90) – witty impersonations in which the canon gets stripped of its pretensions and pushed towards the circus. The exposed breast of a Fouquet Madonna; the emblem of intercession of sin, is straight out of the novelty shop; the head of Botticelli’s Holofernes is a Halloween decapitee.

Sherman is often mistakenly thought of as a one-note impresario of the grotesque, working in a range from neurosis to horror. For sure, the eloquent, impish person I’ve been talking to has always had a yen for the weird and the wondrous, but I tell her how struck I am by the sheer range of human types she manages to print on her face. Hers is the real Facebook (the one we all mistake for human connection, she avoids like the plague). The writing about her work, preoccupied as it is by the post-modernist mantras of quotation, allusion and ironic instability, seldom pays much attention to the astonishing versatility of her performance, the protean elasticity of face and body. Occasionally, with the mirror set beside the camera, this gift unsettles her. “Sometimes I’m awestruck by how little I look like myself and say ‘wow, that is so not me.’ But I do feel empowered by the spooky thing that is happening.” She’s right, but the capacity to take on the entire cast of the human comedy is actually not a symptom of post-modern distance from its cavortings, but its opposite: sympathetic total immersion.

The first thing visitors to MoMA will see is an enormous mural in which five monumental Cindies pose in the horticultural neo-classicist style against the background of a park and pond. But instead of Demeter

and Diana, she gives us a gently wry procession through the aeons: from nude body-suit Cindy through faux-medieval to Big-Bra-Jane-Russell Cindy of the 1950s. Has heroic megalomania struck? Quite the contrary. The statues are all nebbishy nobodies wearing expressions that range from prune to pudding and their costumes are, as ever, discount shop tat. The sweetly mocking parade is, like a lot of her work, a sly reproach to the besetting sin of contemporary art: its callow, orgiastic narcissism. Cindy Sherman looks at herself and sees everyone else. No other living artist manages so generously to exemplify the Roman playwright Terence's dictum: "I consider nothing human as alien to me." Well, OK, maybe the ogress.

Artworks courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Cindy Sherman's retrospective show is at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, from February 26 to June 11.