FULLY WANT A PORTRAIT?

Cindy Sherman, photographed with her muse, Mister Frieda, in her studio in Lower Manhattan.
Cindy Sherman

Once Cindy Sherman started working as her own model, in the 1970s, she became one of the era's signature artists. As MoMA launches a retrospective of Sherman's work, INGRID SISCHY looks past the wigs, noses, and hats to the oddball innocence of the photographer’s power.

When I began, in the mid-1970s, I was just fooling around,” remembers Cindy Sherman. “I had no idea I would really become an artist. I never would have thought I'd be doing this for 35 years. It happened organically—one series turned into another.”

And here we are. With her never-ending parade of performance photos—in which Sherman has been a one-woman band, almost always using herself as the guinea pig, doing her own hair, makeup, styling, directing, posing, and prop hunting—she has arguably become the most popular woman artist of all time (beating out Georgia O’Keeffe!). And the most successful: an image from her 1981 “centerfold” series sold at auction last May for nearly $3.9 million, at the time the most ever paid for a single photograph from the lens of either gender. Sherman is also roundly respected by critics and curators, and is about to have a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York (February 26 through June 11, 2012), which will then travel the country through the middle of 2013.

Sherman, who has probably put on more wigs, noses, lips, eyebrows, and hats than anyone alive—but never airs—says, “I totally lucked out.” So did we, her audience. Because all along she has kept herself, and us, entertained. Often spellbound. Sometimes horrified, even squeamish. But never bored.

Sherman seems amused that when people meet her—the real Cindy Sherman—they’re surprised. “They have a quizzical look on their faces, as if I’ve let them down,” she says, laughing, kind of. “I’m supposed to be weirder. I’m sort of mild-mannered, and they can’t believe I’m the same person who creates these crazy characters.” Actually, though, Sherman has always been a character herself. We cut our teeth together in the New York contemporary-art world of the late 1970s, which was the opposite of today’s art world. Money and power were not the aphrodisiacs they seem to be now; they were suspect. So were institutions and commercial galleries. Business was paltry; ideas were plentiful. It was the perfect petri dish for Sherman, who made ends meet by working at the front desk at Artists Space, a classic “alternative” exhibition venue of the time. The fact that she would sometimes show up for work dressed as, say, a nurse, or in a pinkish suit à la Jackie Kennedy, but trumpier, with cat-eye glasses on, is now part of art-world lore.

The backstory is pure Sherman. “I'd be home, fooling

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ
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Continued from page 347 around with makeup and a costume, maybe picked up at a thrift store, and suddenly I’d look at my watch and go, Oh, wow, I have to get to work. Well, O.K., I’ll just go like this.” Not only did the bosses not mind; one of them became a founder of her first gallery, Metro Pictures, where she shows to this day. Such mutual loyalty is rare these days, to say the least. Also unusual is the breathtaking range that Sherman has managed to bring to her work over the decades—from the “film stills” of the late 1970s to the “centerfolds” of the early 1980s, to the historical appropriations of the late 1980s, and on to “Hollywood Hamptons,” the “clowns,” and “society portraits” of this century. (Her photos and shows are all untitled but have developed informal names.) Along the way, she has created a body of work that also serves as a meditation on aging, and on the ages—all of it maintaining her particular vision, her acute powers of observation, no matter the variety of images or the technology she uses. As a person, Sherman can seem casual—but never her pictures. Her art is in the details, and often in the humor too. When she first began exhibiting her photographs, critics correctly contextualized the work as belonging to the feminist discourse of the time, but the pleasure and more personal emotions she got from playing with her characters was always important to Sherman, too.

Eva Respini, the associate curator at MoMA who has organized the Sherman show, says, “Every brush of makeup, every earring, every hair tells us something about the persona and character she has drawn. Sherman at her very best always has her finger on the pulse. She was contemporary in the 80s; she was contemporary in the 90s; and, boy, in the 2000s is she on point again. Her 2008 ‘society portraits’ were disparaging, tragic, vulgar, and quite empathetic. These were women of a certain age, from the top echelons of polite society—they could be politicians’ wives, art patrons, reality-show housewives. The works are monumental portraits of women who are struggling with a culture that has these ridiculous standards for youth, for beauty, and for wealth and status.”

Another shocker: unlike so many of her fellow superstar artists, Sherman works alone, often in her understated studio—where years of props and costumes are neatly organized—usually with a mirror next to the camera so she can see how the shoot is going. She explains the process: “Suddenly the reflection I’m looking at is not at all me. Suddenly it’s like a phantom that’s just popped out of the mirror, and that’s when I know the character is right on. There have been moments where I remember this thing suddenly appearing and I can’t believe that’s me!”

Sherman is also disbelieving that she is having an exhibition at MoMA organized under the auspices of the Department of Photography. “When I was starting my stuff I felt completely isolated from traditional photography,” she confesses. “I felt like an outcast, not just from the photography world but even from the art world, which was all about painting and sculpture back then—mostly male painting and sculpture. That’s why a lot of women from my generation tried to find new directions to go in.” Just goes to show what a misfit can do.