

arts

Cindy Sherman: The Price of Fantasy

Jonathan Goodman

Cindy Sherman, one of the major arbiters of post-war photography for my generation in New York City, is showing work of more than three decades at the Museum of Modern Art. Our generation, caught on the cusp between the very last moments of non-ironic modernism and the beginnings of a pop whimsicality that seemed jaded from the start, has had to establish a new, and not very stable, position. Facing down conceptualism, minimalism, and performance art, the three major avant-garde movements in the late 1960s and '70s, when our cohort was coming of age, photographers likely felt a little left out. They knew of the stunning formalism of past photographer-poets such as Walker Evans and Edward Steichen, as well as the ghastly absurdity of Diane Arbus's images, but were determined to construct a postmodern esthetic of their own, one that would speak to the particulars of a pleasure-oriented but also alienated peer group. Many, many photos of this kind have been taken by artists since the last third of the twentieth century, to the point where art critic Arthur C. Danto dubbed those who took them "photographists," namely, artists whose impulse was registered in *conceptual* fashion, as opposed to the searing truths of both documentary and dramatic art.

Sherman belonged to this group. The time during which Sherman first asserted herself as a photographer saw many female artists playing roles in response to the desiring eyes of a male audience. New York performance artist Hannah Wilke was a major force during this period, often posing nude and openly enjoying her erotic allure, partly a willed persona and partly a psychic truth. However, unlike Wilke's exhibitionism, which employed nakedness as a liberation, Sherman has been an artist of concealment, masking herself to fit pop fantasies since the mid-1970s: actual nudity was not part of the artist's armamentarium, although in the 1980s, after the achievements of the film still series, she adopted synthetic breasts and artificial vulvas in pictures that poked vicious fun at male fantasy. What is most important to know is that Sherman played a role in the feminist recasting of the body in the 1970s, a movement that would be originated and maintained by women. Our generation believed that "the personal is political," and the performance artists, mostly women, took the axiom and made it astonishingly real in light of their achievements, which were based upon the dysphoria existing between the sexes. Sherman herself, in the early shots especially, created one persona after another until one was bewildered by the numerous faces and physiques she was able to construct using her own body.

And this bewilderment is exactly the point. In her deliberate attempt to reveal the performative nature instilled in the female psyche, Sherman plays roles to the point of abandon. The selves that emerge from her brilliant transformations belong to the glamor of the black-and-white film industry of the 1930s and '40s, when female beauty was key to selling movie tickets. For some,

It might be easy to address the photographs as arbitrary, so that their staged effect would cling to their essentially artificial nature. Seen that way, the images lose their fanciful intensity and become a single-note critique of femininity as viewed by Hollywood. But while artifice is a major stratagem in Sherman's bag of tricks, it is also the *truth* of posturing she wants to express. This creates the dialectic present most strikingly in her earlier work (in her later art, as we shall see, the artist succumbs to rancor and a negatively charged vision of women): Sherman wants both artifice and truth in the same moment—at the point that arises when a woman no longer knows if she is playing a role or revealing an actual self.

The implication in Sherman's film-still collection is oriented in no small way toward an imaginative redress of the female in a society run by men. Strikingly, and most effectively, she maintains decorum in the small-dimensional film-still series for which she is likely best known. But the modesty has a price: the artist performs her gender in ways that recall the subordinate role of women. As Sherman develops as a "photographer," in the 1980s and later, this sense of subordination becomes the springboard for a series of photographs whose rage is nearly overwhelming, as if the winsome personae she took on in the early work sought revenge for the very mildness of their accusation that women perform their femininity for men. Because the differences are so great between the early body of work and the later efforts, it seems necessary to separate the two as best we can. Sherman's role-playing in the film-still collection has, despite the obvious guile with which she enacts her parts, the innocence of youth; she is young, and she is good-looking, so the pictures she takes of herself erotically attract as well as implicitly edify. The extent to which this balance is achieved is seen in the images themselves, which occur in black and white and in small dimensions at the beginning of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

In general, the pictures function as alternatives to the ordinary, pedestrian self most of us rely on to get through the day. There is an extraordinarily sexy picture, *Untitled Film Still #13* (1978), that shows a blond, voluptuous Sherman reaching for an art book on a library shelf. She holds the book yet looks away from the shelf, gazing at something in the distance that we cannot see. Her hair strays over her forehead, while a headband attempts to keep it neat. While not a photograph for *Playboy*, it possesses a genuine attraction as it shows off the (dressed) outline of Sherman's body. The lack of spontaneity—the sense that the picture has been posed—introduces the notion of artifice, which, oddly, gives it a feeling of authenticity as well. One of the major differences between Nan Goldin, the other well-known American female photographer of my generation, and Sherman is that Goldin's so-called authenticity results in a truth developed by her own interests in sex, whereas Sherman is an artist whose playfulness results in something that is far more believable. Sherman's aura of make-believe somehow leads us into accepting its opposite, namely, that what we are seeing is true. This may happen because we have been so accustomed to seeing film stills we take them as more real than the actual reality surrounding us.

Even in *Untitled Film Still #32* (1979), where Sherman has shoulder-length brown hair and wears earrings and a black dress, which merges with the absolute black of the

picture's background, the sense of drama and the feeling of a Italian neorealism balance each other's emotional implications. In the picture Sherman is lighting a cigarette; her face is partially in shadow, and here, too, there is a mysterious sensuality at work. But along with the eroticism, there is just as much emphasis on vulnerability; one of Sherman's most touching images, *Untitled Film Still #48*, is that of her waiting on the side of a road as dusk approaches. Standing with a suitcase beside her, Sherman has her back to us—we see only her blonde hair, white shirt, checkered dress, and shoes and socks. The road opens up to a cloudy sky and mountain above a glimpse of a river on the right, while on the left are rocks and, issuing from them, a stand of evergreens. It is a desolate picture, its melancholy much like that we find in the paintings of Edward Hopper. One doesn't usually think of Sherman's work as pictorial or painterly, but here she transcends the genre to make a work that is truly picturesque, infused with the blues rather than her later fury.

The notion that a long deferral of self, in response to the voyeuristic needs Sherman addresses, will inevitably result in outrage has a certain persuasiveness to it. The grotesque, which is not really a part of the film-still series, rears its head in work that is determined to offend the sensibilities of the very group to which Sherman belongs: the coterie of hip, downtown artists and intellectuals who saw Sherman's originality pretty much from the start. There is a marvelous shot, *Untitled Film Still #65* (1980), in which an aproned Sherman, wearing black, looks back up the stairs she is standing toward a half-open door from which one barely sees a figure, if it is in fact there. The image is worthy of a Roberto Rossellini film; its neorealist properties are charged with drama and even depression, as so many of the film stills are. Despite the fact that the images are replete with make-believe allusions to actual films, the reality they portray turns on the amazing ability of Sherman to register different appearances and emotions, playing the role of the vamp in a way that does homage to and deconstructs the character she takes up in the individual photos of her art.

The vamp is central to Sherman's artistic personality, changing its psychological clothing from the supposedly innocent ingénue to images that display, in increasingly angry terms, a woman whose performance has transformed into a nearly mythological ferocity. But the early work witnesses an easier eroticism. *Untitled Film Still #14* (1978) presents Sherman in a black dress and a choker of pearls, in a room with a low dresser and a table. We can see the Sherman's back and a reflection of the table, with a glass of wine and a chair, in the mirror directly behind her. Her countenance, intensified by her hand supporting her cheek, looks alert, even slightly apprehensive; again, she gazes at someone or something beyond our sight. But her physical allure defines the picture, in ways that do justice to the romance of movies made one or two generations before her stills. The romantic poses make up a good number of the early photos, but do not overwhelm the viewer; they are part of a range of emotional possibilities captured in the moment that express femininity without necessarily putting forth feminism. Because they lack ideology in a traditional sense, they are more about feeling, about psychology. Thus, they do not belong to the more politicized art of the time, although clearly the issues that they attract belong to the personification of gender, as seen by a woman performing for the pleasure of men.

The imagery itself is isolated in that Sherman is almost entirely alone in these pictures, which intensify and accentuate the morbid circumstances of lacking friends or even acquaintances one might interact with. But the accompaniment of another person would spoil the mythic isolation of most of the pictures, which after all exist as a demonstration of the postmodern, alienated artist. We find an endurance in these images that move beyond the stylized accouterments of the coquette to a place where something deeper happens—as much as these photos are about emotion, in many of them the affect is disingenuous, trading on the essentially unreal—or surreal—consequences of a camera's supposed truth. Because these images are of a young woman, it is easy to assume that the travails of experience have not yet weighed her down. This means that art—the art of the pictures—is enough to salvage the self that will turn so angry as the artist matures. Just why this happens seems to have little explanation or justification; it simply takes place. The experience of the later photos, determined as they are to read the female in a critically harsh light, does not lend hints Sherman's audience might grasp to understand. It is as if, behind the ugliness of the rubber vaginas or under the make-up of the bleach-blonde bimbo, a still greater anger is in place. What would make Sherman work this way?

The darker pictures belong to the later 1980s and early 1990s; they are grotesque and horrific, creating a vast gap between the film stills and the works made up of synthetic body parts. Certainly there is a long history of the deliberately ugly in art; however, in Sherman's work the disfigurement is so extreme it more or less loses its power to shock. I mean by this that Sherman is overreaching in displaying her sense of broken decorum, in which the images become examples of extreme malformation, to the point where they are no longer scary but instead absurd. There has always been something surreal in her sensibility—the film stills invert expectations by suggesting a reality that is, finally, heavily imagined. The image of a pair of buttocks with huge boils—*Untitled #177* (1987)—seems deliberately meant to offend our sense of physical dignity—our *own* dignity, as well as that of people in general. Much of the force of Sherman's esthetic comes from the sense that we, too, share in the general debacle of humanity, although it is easy to distance oneself from the alienated, alienating grossness of these pictures. Despite the almost laughable bad taste of the photos, it becomes clear that they are based on the construction of Sherman's imagination more than they are revelations of her psyche. In the first case, Sherman rarely reveals her body in these images, so it harder to say that it is *she* we are talking about; and in the second, the use of artificial parts contributes to a distanced reading of their meaning.

Still, the cankerous skin and sexual extremism of these images begs the question, Why would anyone want to look at them, even if the absurdity of the human (female) condition is the main point. In *Untitled No. 250* (1992), a hag's head stares directly at the viewer, synthetic blond hair trailing from her mostly bald head. The arms, which prop up the head, are clearly made of wood, while breasts with outsize red nipples and a pregnant belly lead to a huge, legless vagina. The body rests on hair, and it is all too much to take in—it is as if Sherman had determined that this phase was to be a catharsis of a permanent sort. But the irrevocably monstrous parts don't disturb so much as look ridiculous—a quality that Sherman explores for the rest of her career. One can't imagine

a body of work more distant from the art that first brought fame to Sherman, who in her twenties seemed to have solved the ongoing dilemma of women, forced as they are to perform their gender.

There is a group of photos from the 1980s in which Sherman tries out, in color, a wide variety of poses; the idea seems taken from the film stills—indeed, almost all the work subsequent to them owes its tenacity and power to the innovations of her first project—but with a slight feeling of asperity that becomes full-blown fury later on. In a great image, *Untitled #119* (1983), Sherman portrays herself as a chanteuse in mid-note, wearing plastic anchor earrings from which artificial pearls hang, her arms outstretched and mouth open wide. It lacks the gender contempt of other pictures taken during this period, which is why it may be more appealing. This is theater of an affecting kind, in which the role does not alienate so much as placate via a half-absurd vulnerability. Another image from 1984, *Untitled #132*, shows Sherman in a red-and-yellow striped dress, with a cigarette in her left hand and a beer can in her right. Her face, though, partially in shadows, seems bizarrely scarred despite her tentative smile. Again, it is an image of obvious vulnerability, although the idea of physical disfigurement as evidence of psychic distress or, on a larger level, cultural disturbance, starts to come into play. Sherman's audience doesn't know why this change happens, but it may be that the artist simply became tired of maintaining a nice persona, since the grotesqueries start as soon as 1985, when in one image Sherman appropriates a man's wig and a pig's snout in the light of dusk.

The tension in a behavioral sense between the good Cindy Sherman and the bad Cindy Sherman shows us that the role-playing has consequences, not only for her viewers but for the artist herself. Transgression occurs to remind us of the cost of the performance, which by the mid-1980s onto the early 1990s becomes overtly absurdist, caricatured to the point of being preposterous. In the late 1980s, Sherman incorporates imagery meant to suggest the Old Masters—Renaissance imagery that holds onto disfigurement as a way of undermining the authority of art history. *Untitled #215* (1989) shows us a young priest, outfitted with the garments of his profession; once again we see a bland gaze into the distance, the symbol of the Cross barely visible in the hem of the lower skirt. In another work, *Untitled #183* (1988), Sherman acts the part of a Renaissance matron, wearing huge false breasts made visible by deep cleavage. Her dress is an ivory color, which contrasts with Sherman's red lips, which is the only note of hue in the photograph. Caravaggio comes to light in *Untitled #224* (1990), in which a garlanded Sherman, wearing a toga, holds green grapes in her hand, while a cluster of red grapes lies before her on a table. These descriptions give an account of just how various the disguises of Sherman are, creating a feeling of creativity whose repertory seems endless.

By the year 2000, Sherman makes it clear that travesty and acute irony would be her major themes—they remain founded in relation to the female figure and psyche. The clown images of the early to mid-2000s are aggressive and spooky to the point of seeming dangerous. Her make-up, garish in primary colors, is matched by looks of real malevolence. This asperity of tone dominates the work of the past decade, which relentlessly attacks the dignity of the female condition. It is a misogyny of a strange sort,

perpetuated by a woman who apparently doubts the worth of women. Some of the most horrific images take their cue, once again, from the feeling of vulnerability—for example, in an image from 2000, *Untitled #359*, we see a middle-aged woman wearing white make-up around her eyes and above her lips, and false eyebrows too high up on her forehead. Wearing a motley group of chain necklaces as decoration, the artist, with red lips, looks determined to please. This emotion is repeated in image after image, which, inevitably, despite Sherman's obvious brilliance in creating new forms, mimics a woman's anxiety as an object no longer attractive to men. Pancake make-up is distributed thickly on her face, turning her into a caricature apparently sunburned nearly past recognition.

In the most recent works, the images of the last five years, we see an aging artist who continues to flail the archetype, now often of the society woman. The picture of a former, currently desiccated beauty comes up frequently; vulnerability has become repellent in many of the pictures. For example, in *Untitled #465* (2008), Sherman appears as a grand dame outside in Central Park in a strapless dress and a choker of pearls. One huge earring is visible. One can see the wrinkles underneath the rouge on her cheeks and above her lips; she is half turned to stare down her audience with a gaze that makes Medusa inoffensive! The notion of bitterness is never very far away, and the role Sherman plays seems unappeasable, she is so angry and so willing to communicate her anger. In another picture, *Untitled #476* (2008), Sherman takes on the role of a rich woman, sitting in a long, dark red dress and holding a gray terrier. Her wig is silver-haired, and behind her is a completely banal seascape. The image shows off a person trapped by the very comforts of her success, and perhaps it is not going too far to see in it a touch of allegory, applying to us as well as to the artist herself.

Sherman doesn't take particular interest in art outside her imaginary costumes, but in the work of the past two years she has staged herself against graphic work, usually of nature. In one untitled image from 2010, she wears a costume vaguely reminiscent of a Cossack, complete with an eye surrounded by a sunburst and three linked chains on her jacket. This picture occurs on the left; on the right, we see her in longish brown hair, wearing a floor-length maroon skirt. Behind the two figures is a print of a path decorated on each side by trees; the image is black and white. In both cases, Sherman's gaze is blank, registering nothing as she looks at her audience. In a similar construction, also from 2010, the figure on the left wears a transparent robe over a blue dress printed with white flowers; in this picture she seems tired, visibly aging. On the right, Sherman wears a flesh-colored costume that offers nudity as some kind of ludicrous entertainment: the costume has outsize breasts and a triangle of pubic hair. Wearing a page boy haircut, Sherman holds a blatantly false sword, while behind the figure is a complicated, seeming 19th-century study of a lake surrounded by dark forest; again, the graphic imagery is black and white. The idea of myth surfaces, and we realize that Sherman is attempting to portray a laughable mythology of self.

In these latest works, it seems as though Sherman is not ending with a bang, but rather with a whimper. But Sherman is not yet sixty, so it is likely premature to characterize this as her goodbye to art. Prodigious in her output of about five hundred images, the artist

captures the story of femininity without succumbing to ideology. Or so it would seem. Underneath the costumes, beyond the imperious gaze, one senses that Sherman's ideas about the desire to be accepted and loved possess a certain subversive quality. Women *learn* the kind of behavior Sherman mocks; it is not as if they are genetically programmed to please. In a sense, then, this art is made more radical by the notion of vulnerability that carries it along, so it cannot be said that Sherman is merely playing dress-up. My own view of the circumstances of her art is that she performs and embodies the behavior of her gender at the same time. It is a theater that becomes so genuine, a political realism breaks into the picture. This is not the surface of Sherman's art; rather, it is its deeper context. Indeed, it is something the audience must intuit because the context is never made clear. The anger with which Sherman imbues her pictures is much more accessible; however, it is a distancing effect. Somewhere between the glibness of her costume and the vulnerability of her mythic personae is an *actual* Sherman, someone who clearly belongs to the annals of contemporary art history.