

Wadsworth Atheneum  
January 18 to March 9, 1986

Cindy Sherman  
MATRIX 88

Untitled #112, 1982



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All of Cindy Sherman's photographs feature the artist herself, transformed with the assistance of makeup, costumes, lighting and routine photographic effects, into fabricated images. Sherman's protean theatricality has enthralled, disarmed and puzzled viewers over the past decade. These photographs are content-laden and emotionally engaging. Yet, the wide variety of divergent meanings and feelings they seem to provoke in viewers make them frustratingly ambivalent as well. They can be read in many ways and often are. Some think them anti-feminist. Others are certain they are just the opposite, a clear assault on denigrating stereotypes. Are they narcissistic, the crowning achievement of the Me Decade? Or are they ego-submerging, anti-self-portraits?

This elusiveness, though far from new in the visual arts, is in part typical of many of the most interesting developments in recent years. Younger artists seem particularly resistant to any fixed theory or a rigid stance. The coexistence of multiple interpretations and even ambiguity have been openly welcomed into art of all disciplines, sometimes to the discomfort of the viewer. (These inclinations might be linked to the credence currently given to the theory of indeterminacy, a scientific belief that even Albert Einstein found disquieting.)

But this elusiveness might also be explained by the fact that in each photograph Sherman the impostor is presenting a performance of sorts. She is like an actress capable of creating many diverse roles. Each successful performance is imbued with a kaleidoscope of meanings. Sherman has made of the photograph's frame a kind of proscenium arch and has created for herself a stage on which she offers a sequence of dramatizations.

Sherman joins a number of contemporary artists who have used their own selves in various roles of disguise, putting themselves both in the center of their art and in fictional, quasi-autobiographical situations where they would not normally be. Most of the artists exploring this creative use of self and dissemblance have been women (e. g., Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper, Laurie Anderson).

The earliest photographs (Untitled A, B, C, E, 1975) have a flat-footed frontality which vanishes in the stylized, cheesecake poses of the Untitled Film Stills of 1977-79. These black and whites mimic Hollywood publicity stills infused with dreams of stardom. Her next series, which moved into color and used backscreen projections, featured more natural looking women (Untitled #67, #70, 1980). They were followed by a return to highly theatrical figures in "the horizontals" which intentionally play off the convention of magazine centerfolds (Untitled #86, #96, 1981). The next feature dramatic lighting effects similar to those found in Old Master portraits and include several androgynous figures (Untitled #103, #109, #112, 1982). In 1983 she rakishly tweeks the nose of the fashion industry in a series commissioned by Dianne B. (Untitled #118, #119, #122). These incorporate the sense of humor and the gross exaggeration that are found also in her most recent works (Untitled #140, #146, #152, 1985). The longings and dreams of the earlier Untitled Film Stills have been replaced by fairytales which caricature the ominous and the absurd. In these Sherman does not hesitate to flaunt the repugnant. Beauty for the moment, has been replaced by the beast.

Sherman's photographs are emphatically not self-portraits nor are they the acting out of her personal fantasies. Sherman is far more calculating in her



Untitled #119, 1983

construction of these portrayals than viewers might first conclude. Despite her convincing "performances," she does not seem to be emotionally entwined with the characters once the scenes are shot. Rather she coolly adjusts and manipulates each new scene with a firm hand. Says Sherman, "I enjoy the control of being the director as well as the actor." She is also the makeup artist, costumer and lighting designer.

In these photographs Sherman contrives poignant moments of innocence, melancholia, vulnerability, distress and brave optimism. "These are pictures of emotions personified, entirely of themselves, with their own presence. I'm trying to make other people recognize something of themselves, rather than me," she has said. These are not personal revelations but rather fabrications for public consumption which may ignite for viewers a spark of recognition of the complex realities of the

society in which we all live.

We also take simple delight in her impressive virtuosity. She is extremely good at what she does. However, these works are not just about cleverness and disguise but also about the issue of deception itself. Consider how the camera - supposedly the most truthful of all mediums - can assist in perpetrating deception, how women are encouraged by our culture to "play" a variety of different roles, and how we sometimes deceive ourselves as we concentrate upon deceiving others. Sherman even ignores occasional details of camouflage which then remind us that these photographs are not intended to be wholly trompe l'oeil in themselves but rather about the act of deception. We always know Cindy Sherman is the real person behind these various disguises, as both actor and director.

Sherman has been one of the most respected and influential photographers to emerge in the

past decade. Her work is seriously regarded. Yet, the survey of her photography from 1975 to the present assembled here in MATRIX speaks also of playfulness and sport. (Indeed, Sherman's work is full of "play." Each representation is a play on images, a highly sophisticated visual pun. A "play" is also, of course, a dramatic performance on a stage.) Even as a child Sherman enjoyed the process of dressing-up. This interest continued, hours at a time, in college where she was an art student. Resisting conventional definitions of high art, Sherman has drawn on the pleasurable distractions of her childhood as the device for making works of art.

Child's play? Obviously not. But her approach is refreshingly straightforward and candid. These are childhood fascinations writ large.

Sherman herself is eager to acknowledge this. Though a gifted pretender, she is not pretentious: "I'm doing one of the most stupid things in the world which I can't even explain, dressing up like a child and posing in front of a camera trying to make beautiful pictures."

Cindy Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey in 1954. She received a B.F.A. in 1976 from State University of New York in Buffalo where she was one of a number of artists associated with Hallwalls, an informal alternative space set up by artists Robert Longo and Charlie Clough. She has lived in New York City since 1976 and was a recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for photography in 1984.

Andrea Miller-Keller  
Curator of MATRIX

PLEASE NOTE:

Cindy Sherman will give an informal MATRIX Lecture on Wednesday, February 5, 1986 at 6 p.m. at the Wadsworth Atheneum. The event is co-sponsored by the Hartford Art School, Contemporary Artist Lecture Series.



Untitled Film Still #13, 1978

Works in MATRIX:

Untitled (A), 1975, black and white photograph, 20" x 16".

Untitled (B), 1975, black and white photograph, 20" x 16".

Untitled (C), 1975, black and white photograph, 20" x 16".

Untitled (E), 1975, black and white photograph, 20" x 16".

Untitled Film Still #2, 1977, black and white photograph, 30" x 40".

Untitled Film Still #13, 1978, black and white photograph, 40" x 30".

Untitled Film Still #17, 1978, black and white photograph, 40" x 30".

Untitled Film Still #48, 1979, black and white photograph, 30" x 40".

Untitled #67, 1980, color-coupler print, 20" x 24".

Untitled #70, 1980, color-coupler print, 20" x 24".

Untitled #86, 1981, color-coupler print, 24" x 48".

Untitled #94, 1981, color-coupler print, 24" x 48".

Untitled #96, 1981, color-coupler print, 24" x 48".

Untitled #103, 1982, color-coupler print, 30" x 19 3/4".

Untitled #109, 1982, color-coupler print, 36" x 36".

Untitled #112, 1982, color-coupler print, 45 1/4" x 30".

Untitled #118, 1983, color-coupler print, 40" x 30".

Untitled #119, 1983, color-coupler print, 30" x 40".

Untitled #122, 1983, color-coupler print, 40" x 30".

Untitled #140, 1985, color-coupler print, 72 1/2" x 49 3/8".

Untitled #146, 1985, color-coupler print, 72 1/2" x 49 3/8". Lent by Harriet Lipton, New York City.

Untitled #152, 1985, color-coupler print, 72 1/2" x 49 3/8". Lent by Phoebe Chason.

All works are lent by the artist, courtesy of Metro Pictures, Inc., New York City, unless otherwise noted.

Selected one-person exhibitions: Hallwalls, Buffalo '76, '77, '79; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston '80; The Kitchen, NYC '80; Metro Pictures, NYC '80, '81, '82, '83, '85; Saman Gallery, Genoa '81; Young/Hoffman Gallery, Chicago '81; Texas Gallery, Houston '82; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris '82; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam '82 (travelling); The St. Louis Art Museum '83, Fine Arts Center Gallery, State University of New York at Stony Brook (also to Zilka Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT '84; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago '83; Akron Art Museum, OH '84 (travelling through '86 to Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; Des Moines Art Center; The Baltimore Museum of Art; Broida Museum, NYC).



Untitled #122, 1983

Selected group exhibitions:  
Artists Space, NYC Hallwalls  
'76; Artists Space, NYC Four  
Artists '78; Castelli Graphics,  
NYC Likely Stories '80; ARC,  
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville  
de Paris, Ils se Disent  
Peintres, Ils se Disent Photo-  
graphes '80; Centre Georges  
Pompidou, Paris Autoportraits  
'81; Hayden Gallery, Massachu-  
setts Institute of Technology,  
Cambridge, MA Body Language:  
Figurative Aspects of Recent  
Art '81 (travelled); Walker Art  
Center, Minneapolis Eight Art-  
ists: The Anxious Edge '82; The  
Renaissance Society, University  
of Chicago Art and the Media  
'82; Venice Biennale de'Arte  
'82; Kassel, West Germany Docu-  
menta 7 '82; Institute of Con-  
temporary Art, University of  
Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
Image Scavengers: Photography  
'82; Hirshhorn Museum and  
Sculpture Garden, Washington,  
D.C. Directions 1983 '83; Whit-  
ney Museum of American Art, NYC  
Biennial '83, '85; Tate Gal-  
lery, London The New Art '83;  
Contemporary Arts Museum,  
Houston The Heroic Figure '84  
(travelled); Sydney Biennial,  
Australia Private Symbol Social  
Metaphor '84; Centre Georges  
Pompidou, Musée d'Art Moderne  
de la Ville de Paris, Alibis  
'84; Hirshhorn Museum and  
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