



HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

Out of Time: A Look Back at Cindy Sherman at MoMA

Dahlia Schweitzer | June 12, 2012



All installation views of the "Cindy Sherman" retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, 2012. (© 2012 Cindy Sherman)

LOS ANGELES — Cindy Sherman has been plagued by that one-hit wonder malaise that strikes so many musicians who deliver delightfully wonderful first albums only to follow-up with disappointing sophomore efforts as their careers predictably fade away. They leave behind only memories of that one

hit, that one perfect pop tune, only to re-emerge, briefly, decades later, in a “Where Are They Now?” moment.

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The unusual thing about Sherman, however, is that she has not faded away. Her photographs still command substantial prices, and [her recent retrospective at MOMA](#) solidifies her social and artistic significance. Nonetheless, popular consensus among many discussions of her work is that her first series — the [Untitled Film Stills](#) — was her best work,

and that everything since then has been more of the same. An endless remix, if you will, of that original pop tune.



However, while those who think this may be missing the point, they are not entirely at fault for drawing this conclusion. In fact, not only are dominant trends in art criticism about Sherman to blame for perpetuating this popular conversation, but even the aforementioned retrospective also feeds into this simplistic interpretation of both Sherman’s recent imagery and her entire body of work.

One of the major flaws of the retrospective was organizing the show in non-chronological order and mixing up very specific groups of work. If you want to look at how Sherman’s work has evolved, and understand its deeper subtexts, you have to look at it series by series. The evolutions from group to group may sometimes be subtle, but when evaluated each group at a time, over a number of decades, they are distinct and remarkable, and they paint a picture of an artist as compelling as she is prolific.



To place a work from 1994 with a work from 2004 does a disservice to both unless you are comparing the differences between them. The photographs are doing (and saying) totally different things, and the messages should not be mixed. To randomly strew the clown pictures throughout, juxtaposing them with other images from very different time periods, makes the clown pictures seem overwhelmingly important (which they are not) and makes everything look like over-the-top garish caricature (which it is not). These not only complicates Sherman's message, but it runs the risk of making it seem overly simplistic.

While it is true that Sherman has built an important body of work examining the fundamentals of appropriation, identity, and gender — the three buzz words everyone likes to use when discussing her work and the three buzz words everyone likes to hate when criticizing her work — her work goes deeper than trendy feminist vernacular. Sherman got comfortable with these elements of femininity early on, and she got even more comfortable destroying them and manipulating them.

Especially significant in terms of Sherman's work is not just the art of the masquerade, but the artificiality of its construction, the fact that it is nothing more than painting on a surface, a pretty shell. Glamorously perfect facades only conceal the actual body underneath — a raw, wet and bloody expanse that would creep out in Sherman's later work, eventually evolving into the gaping and damaged bodies of her film, *Office Killer*. This tension between inner and outer, between surface and the real underneath, only grew louder and messier with Sherman's later work. However, this evolution — or maybe more precisely de-evolution — is only apparent when Sherman's work is viewed chronologically.



Sherman's later work grew even more horrific, the external torn open, even disappearing outright, as the internal was fully exposed. Full of menacing monsters, dismembered body parts, and sinister lighting, her *Fairy Tales* series (1985) and her *Disasters* series (1986–89) seem inspired by the stuff of nightmares. If her earlier work hinted at this inner nightmare, now Sherman had thrown the door wide open. Her work had evolved from hinting at the existence of this darkness to exposing it and the creatures that live within it. The body had deteriorated, the façade had been destroyed, the internal made fully external. Sherman had finally exposed the messy reality of not only what it meant to be a woman, but also what it meant to be human.

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When viewed in terms of narrative, Sherman's photographs are richly compelling moments of story, screen shots of a drama we can only imagine. When viewed in terms of narrative, Sherman's body of work also becomes a compelling story. She is not repeating or remixing the same feminist equation. When viewed in terms of a narrative, it becomes clear that her work has evolved, has gone places darker and more complex than the *Untitled Film Stills* could only dream of. Her later work, her Hollywood and society

portraits are not campy caricatures, as implied by their juxtaposition with the jeering, brightly-colored clowns, but, instead, are morbid and extravagant portrayals of physical decay, brilliant fusions of the

grotesque and the glorious — as has been the focus of most of her work for the last thirty years. Social status, Sherman seems to be proclaiming, is no barrier against the onslaught of age, the cracking in our respective facades, the war of the internal to be made external.

To deliberately arrange the images out of sequence amounts to watching a film out of order — it is disruptive, confusing, and counter-productive to understanding the plot and the director's vision. There is a narrative to each of Sherman's individual groups of work, each one clearly focused on exploring a particular point of interest, but there is also an overarching narrative to her entire body of work, a comprehensive statement to be made about our bodies and our faces, our insides and our outsides. By not clarifying this statement, while also complicating the ability of museum patrons to discover this statement of their own volition, not only does a disservice to visitors of the retrospective, but it also plays directly into the hands of those who would dismiss Sherman for playing into trendy feminist vernacular or, worse, being a one-hit wonder.

[Cindy Sherman](#) *was at MoMA (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) from February 26–June 11, 2012.*

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