Cindy Sherman Retrospective

An artist to be taken seriously

Richard Phillips
18 August 1999

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney is hosting a major retrospective by American artist/photographer Cindy Sherman. The exhibition, which includes photographs from the mid-1970s through to 1996, is jointly organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and Los Angeles and will be shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto after the Sydney season concludes on August 30.

Sherman first won artistic recognition for her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80)—a series of 69 enigmatic black-and-white self-portraits emulating movie publicity shots from the 1940s and 50s. Over the last 30 years she has risen to become the most widely known and financially successful art photographer in the United States. Her latest photographs are large colour prints of masks and dolls, as well as detailed arrangements of dummies, body parts and other inanimate objects.

Sherman's prints generally sell for between $20,000 and $50,000. A 20 x 25 centimetre print from the *Untitled Film Stills* series was recently auctioned by Christie's for a record $190,000—an unprecedented figure for a living artist/photographer. In 1996, New York's Museum of Modern Art paid $US1 million for the complete *Untitled Film Stills* series.

Much praise and numerous critiques have been published about Sherman. She has been elevated to virtual heroine status by a number of post-modernist ideologues. "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman", an essay by Amelia Jones in the current exhibition's catalogue provides an example of the overblown verbiage used by some critics. [1] Those able to decipher this impenetrable essay will discover little substance, let alone any explanation of the evolution of Sherman's work over the last two decades, its strengths and, most importantly, some of its underlying weaknesses.

Born in New Jersey in 1954, Sherman grew up in suburban Long Island and attended the State University College in Buffalo, New York where she studied painting and photography. After initial difficulties with the technical aspects of photographic printmaking, Sherman was introduced to conceptual art and began using the camera to produce self-portraits. The first of these are included in the retrospective.

After graduation Sherman moved to New York with artist Robert Longo, and at the end of 1977 began to produce the first of her *Untitled Film Stills*. Using her apartment and a range of locations in and around New York City, Sherman's strangely nostalgic and lonely self-portraits record her masquerading as a range of characters: a blonde actress, a secretary, housewife, schoolgirl, a Latin film star and a young girl running away from home.

None of Sherman's photographs are titled, her aim being to force the viewer to draw their own conclusions from the works. "These are pictures of emotions personified, entirely of themselves with their own presence—not of me," Sherman commented in an earlier exhibition catalogue.

"The issue of the identity of the model is no more interesting than the possible symbolism of any other detail. When I prepare each character I have to consider what I'm working against; that people are going to look under the make-up and wigs for that common denominator, the recognisable. I'm trying to make other people recognise something of themselves rather than me."

In 1980-81, Sherman began using colour film and placed her invented characters in front of scenes projected onto backdrops. Known as the *Rear Screen Projections*, these photographs were inspired by television images and other contemporary visuals. These were followed by *Centrefolds*, photographs commissioned for the *Artforum* magazine. The larger-than-life images parodied semi-pornographic magazine photographs. Artforum rejected the pictures with some feminist critics claiming that Sherman was "reinforcing sexist stereotypes". The *Pink Robe* series followed in 1982 together with commission work for some prestigious fashion houses.

One of the most striking images from this period is her 1983 *Untitled #122*, a stark self-portrait in which Sherman wears a platinum blonde wig and shoulder-padded overcoat. The long blonde hair covers Sherman's face, one blood-shot eye is partially visible, her arms are by her side, and fists are tightly clenched. The character, who is charged with unreleased tension and anger, is ready to fly into a rage. What individuals or event, what sort of society, has produced this almost apoplectic state? The untitled photograph provides no real clues and therefore forces the viewers to find their own answers.

Fairy Tales (1985) marked another departure. Sherman began using a range of theatrical props and other accoutrements to create disturbing and partly comic images influenced by horror movies. This was followed by the *History Portraits* (1989-90), in which the artist, using plastic body parts and other bits and pieces, photographed herself as characters drawn from old master paintings, in particular Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus*, Jean Fouquet's *Madonna of Melun* and Raphael's *La Fornarina*.

Sex Pictures (1992), Sherman's next major series, was produced in response to attacks on freedom of expression by the Christian Fundamentalists and extreme rightwing elements in the United States. It followed government amendments prohibiting the National Endowment for the Arts from providing grants for art work considered obscene and the attempted prosecution of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati over an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. Sherman's sexually explicit and partly abstract photographs mock conventional conceptions of obscenity and defied

those demanding increased censorship. The photographs are a surreal combination of artificial body parts, fake genitalia and dismembered medical dummies in lewd poses.

The most recent photographs included in the current retrospective—the *Horror* and *Surrealist Pictures* (1994-96)—are without doubt Sherman's most demanding images. Many have been favourably compared to paintings and prints by Hieronymous Bosch, Giuseppe Arcimboldo and Francisco Goya; in particular Goya's *Los Caprichos* and his famous *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*.

These images fall into two categories: the mask portraits; and photographed arrangements of mannequins, toys, rotten garbage, broken domestic goods and unidentifiable waste products. More abstract in form, these works are intensely claustrophobic works, saturated with sadness and disillusionment. Many of these pictures are grotesque, challenge conventional conceptions of beauty, and demand that the viewer explore the darker depths of their subconscious and imagination—sensations and thoughts that generally only come to the surface during dreams or nightmares.

In a 1997 interview, Sherman explained that she started creating these images in an effort to more deeply examine and then transcend ordinary conceptions of beauty. "I like making images that from a distance seem kind of seductive, colorful, luscious and engaging, and then you realise what you are looking at is something totally opposite. It seems boring to me to pursue the typical idea of beauty, because that is the easiest or the most obvious way to see the world. It's more challenging to look at the other side," she said.

Not all of this is successful. Some photographs are simply too clever or self-conscious. The *History Portraits* (1989-90) in my opinion represent an artistic and creative low. The images are little more than smug parodies of classical art portraiture and make no emotional connection, or provoke any inner exploration by the viewer. They contain none of the intense irreverence of the best Dadaist work or the mysterious radicalism of the Surrealists. The political message, drawn from the post-modernist schema, is obvious: civilisation and history is entirely subjective—something invented, to be chopped up and reconstituted according to one's own whim. History has no value, other than what it can provide for the immediate needs of those studying it.

It would be a mistake, though, to write off Sherman or conclude that this posturing—and there is an echo of this in the *Sex Pictures* —is a permanent feature of her work. The artist/photographer's less successful work, moreover, has to be understood within the social and intellectual conditions in which it was produced.

Sherman emerged in the rarified New York art scene during the 1980s. As art critic Robert Hughes explained in his essay, "The Decline of the City of Mahagonny":

"At the end of the eighties there may have been five hundred people in the world who could pay more than $25 million for a work of art, and tens of thousands who could pay a million: a situation with no historical precedents at all. Never before have the impulses of art appreciation and collecting been so nakedly harnessed to gratuitous, philistine social display as in the late 1980s, and nowhere more so than in the United States".

And New York, Hughes declared, had become an "immense bourse in which every kind of art is traded for ever-escalating prices". A place of "premature canonizations and record bids, and the conversion of much of its museum system into a promotional machine".

The latest generation of American artists, according to Hughes, operate on the basis that "nature is dead, culture is all" and everything is "mediated to the point where nothing can be seen in its true quality". The inflated prices, art dealer speculation and vast amounts of media hype and premature careerism had so distorted the American art world "that a serious artist in New York must face the same unreality and weightlessness as a serious actor in Los Angeles."

So while the art market was booming, the artistic and intellectual life was being hollowed out with a predominance of overrated and mainly unemotional work. Typical, and especially from those influenced by the Andy Warhol school, was a tendency to blandly reproduce images from the popular media—film, television and advertising—in the belief that such presentations rebelled against traditional artistic values or represented some new initiative.

Sherman worked in, and was no doubt influenced by, these intellectually unfavourable conditions. But while popular cultural icons and conceptions were her starting point, Sherman's photographs rose above the trite and largely forgettable work then on display. Instead of passively recreating the images around her—frequently an indication that the artist has little to say—Sherman often made a real emotional connection and compelled her viewers to think.

Sherman is a serious artist who is attempting to explore, and perhaps understand more profoundly, some aspects of the disturbing social and psychic reality of society at the end of the 20th century. Her staged photographs and unsettling "still-life" arrangements are the means through she is conducting this exploration. Those approaching the retrospective with fixed ideas about what a photographer should or should not do will gain little from a visit to the exhibition. Those able to immerse themselves in her work will be rewarded.

Footnote

1. A typical paragraph:

"...Sherman's practice participates in what I have argued to be the opening of the subject to otherness (the baring of the circuits of desire connecting self and other in a dynamic of intersubjectivity) that gives what we might call postermodernism its most remarkable and particular antimodernist thrust. In feminist and phenomenological terms, the body, which instantiates the self, is a 'modality of reflexivity,' posing the subject in relation to the other in a reciprocal relationship; through gendered/sexual performances of the body, the subject is situated and situates herself through the other. The subject, then, is never complete within itself but is always contingent on others, and the glue of this intersubjectivity is the desire binding us together (the projective gaze is one mode of intersubjectivity but functions specifically to veil this contingency by projecting lack onto the other rather than admitting its own). It is the intersubjective dimension of Sherman's work that has largely been ignored (not surprisingly since it exposed the investedness and contingency of every reading of her pictures)."

["Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman", by Amelia Jones, *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*; Thames and Hudson, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; 1997, page 33]