

DIRECTIONS

CINDY SHERMAN: FILM STILLS

MARCH 15-JUNE 25, 1995



Untitled Film Still #54, 1980. Silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

This exhibition is the first in which all of Cindy Sherman's "Film Stills" will have been shown together and treated as a single body of work. Much of the information and all of the quotations from Sherman in this essay are from a conversation between the artist and the author in New York on September 20, 1994.

THE "UNTITLED FILM STILLS" SERIES, SIXTY-nine black-and-white photographs made between 1977 and 1980, established Cindy Sherman's reputation in the art world when they started to be exhibited at that time.¹ Alternately poignant and funny, the photographs suggest, without actually imitating, stills from popular films of the late 1940s to the early 1960s in which the female character, always Sherman herself in various costumes and disguises, enacts the disquieting vulnerability, anxiety, self-consciousness, or fear often inherent in those movie characterizations of women. While the appearance of her photographs coincided with the publication of pioneering feminist studies on the subject of women in film and other media,² Sherman herself was perusing the decidedly low-brow popular film and fan magazines. Like many of her contemporaries in the art world, she was flirting with popular culture (advertising, illustration, film, and TV) as a source of imagery. She wanted, she says, an art that was immediately accessible, "not one that you felt you had to read a book about to understand."

Juxtaposing all the film stills reveals various strategies and formal devices the artist employed, and relationships between images that are not necessarily apparent when only a few are shown together. Sherman experimented, for example, with spacial and compositional effects, sometimes using extreme close-ups and cropping, at other times long shots with the figures set deep into space. Viewing the works in their entirety, we become aware of the recurrence of certain motifs, almost an iconography: mirrors and framed photographs; half-read letters; figures sprawled across beds or framed by doorways, shot from above or below, sometimes with their heads and legs cropped; and a dramatic, destabilizing use of diagonals.³

The first six film stills form a distinct group. They were shot in grainy black and white to resemble movie film or the type of badly printed photographs often found in flea-market bins. For Sherman the images represent a single blonde actress, captured at different points in her career and marked by changes in her appearance dictated by her roles in various films. Sherman always conceived the character in the stills as relating to another figure, who is either partially seen or

imagined. The edge of a sweater against the back of the chair discernible in *Untitled Film Still #5*, for example, is a prop used to imply another character.

Numbers 7 through 9, taken at the summerhouse of the parents of Sherman's then-boyfriend, the artist Robert Longo, were Sherman's first "location" shots in which a setting suggested to her a particular image. The theme of an offscreen presence or barely visible second character is evident here as well (the artist Nancy Dwyer sits under the big hat in the lower left corner of *Untitled Film Still #7*). Although most were actually shot by Longo, Sherman set up the camera on a tripod, directed the photographs with such commands as "get in full door," "come closer," and "look up," and later cropped the images to achieve the desired effect.

Soon thereafter, Sherman started to make lists of and then to photograph stereotypical characters she had not yet covered, such as "angry housewife" (#10) or "librarian" (#13). These were shot in her loft, and its white painted brick wall and wood floor provided a recognizable backdrop for many of the images. The bookshelves in *Untitled Film Still #13* contain Longo's art books, for which Sherman reaches on an upper shelf, while her own film books, with titles like *Stars of the Twenties*, *Cranes of Horror*, and *The Movies*, are on the shelves below. Other photographs were staged in Sherman's bedroom after she removed her personal articles, thereby creating the ambience of a lonely motel room or that never-really-lived-in feeling of a movie set (although incongruous details such as the doggy pillow in #11, in which she wears her mother's wedding dress, throw us off track). Intended to portray a dialogue between two people—not a moment of introspective self-examination—the scenarios are often quite involved in Sherman's mind. She describes *Untitled Film Still #14* as possibly the most thought out and set up of her scenes. A single glass of wine and a jacket hanging from a chair, both visible only in the mirror, suggest the off-camera presence of a second person, one to whom the character has turned and who is the cause of her distress. Like the mirror in #14, the framed photograph on the wall in *Untitled Film Still #16* hints at a dialogue with another person. For Sherman, the woman is a "Jeanne Moreau kind of character," and the man in the picture on the wall behind her might be the "father who owns the company and who has cut her out of the will."

Until 1978, Sherman worked almost exclusively in the places in which she lived, but she had in mind areas around the city that she wanted to use in her photographs. In Longo's van, loaded with wigs and costumes, she began scouting the city with him, jumping out and

photographing in locations that evoked characters or situations for her. The film stills numbered 17 to 20, shot on Twenty-Third Street in New York, feature a dark-haired character Sherman calls simply "the girl." Shot on the same day are numbers 21-23, "city girls" with their white collars, and 24 and 25, "pier girl." Critic Rosalind Krauss observed:

With each reframing and each new depth of field and each new condition of luminosity, "the character" transmogrifies, moving from type to type and from movie to movie. From #21 and the Hitchcock heroine to #23 and the hardened, *film noir* dame, there is no "acting" involved. Almost every single bit of the character . . . is a function only of work on the signifier: the various things that in film make up a photographic style.⁴

In photographs numbered 26 and 27B to 30, Sherman returned to interior locations. Shot in the hallway, stairwell, and all around her apartment are the "battered woman," "lunatic," and "crazy, escaped mental patient." As if to emphasize uncertain distinctions between generic types or individuals, the woman in *Untitled Film Still #27*, for example, wears the same wig as the one in the earlier *Untitled Film Still #6* ("Black Bra") and, Sherman says, in some way is the same character. In #27, Sherman merely wanted, she says, "to do a sad picture, a Shelley Winters type—crying in her booze and smoking." We see her, or at least the costume, again in *Untitled Film Still #50*. The subject in *Untitled Film Still #35*, with frazzled hair, rumped housedress, apron, and chunky shoes—a "dirty and beat up and kind of strong character"—was based on a "sort of Sophia Loren movie like *Two Women*," which Sherman had never seen and knew only from stills.

Sherman made the photographs numbered 37 through 48 on a three-week trip through the Southwest with her parents. To keep herself entertained and do some work on the road, she brought her camera, tripod, and a suitcase of wigs and costumes. Inspired by the changing sites, she bought additional clothes in thrift stores along the way. The variety of the photographs demonstrate Sherman's sensitivity to the nuances of the locations and her ability to coax suggestive meanings out of them. The character in *Untitled Film Still #37*, which was shot in a rented cabin, is a "Barbara Stanwyck type—rugged and smart, trying to hold everything together, to hold her ranch intact." Sherman's conception of #38 is that the character, possibly having escaped from a mental hospital, is being chased. Taken with a newly purchased telephoto lens, its hallucinatory ghostliness is heightened by the accidental

slipping of the camera after Sherman had set it up and focused it. *Untitled Film Still #43*, shot in Monument Valley, pays homage to the many John Ford movies filmed there. *Untitled Film Still #48*, "highway girl," one of Sherman's most haunting images, was taken at sunset, with a flash. The last in a series, it is the only one that shows the character standing in the road (not sitting on her suitcase) and is the only one she printed.

The remaining stills were again made in various locations in New York. Numbers 53 through 56, shot in one night and among the most striking of them, track one character as she moves from inside to outside and back again, forming an unintentionally narrative sequence. The photograph of the dark-haired "city girl" in *Untitled Film Still #57* was taken at a huge planter at the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, which became the site of several other stills on the same shoot, its specificity skillfully disguised. When Sherman found herself too often reusing locations and repeating types from earlier photographs, the film stills series came to a logical end. She had perhaps discovered the limitations of the genre: only a few motifs emerge from the movie-studio publicity shot because the film model, or number of roles women play in films, is itself limited.

What, then, are we to make of these images, in which Cindy Sherman photographs herself, not as herself but as various actresses playing, in turn, parts in assorted types of movie roles? Although in all of the film stills Sherman, in many disguises, is the person photographed, the works are not autobiographical, nor are they projections of her inner fantasies. Rather, for the artist, they are investigations into narrative form and the ways we read situations when cued by location and character types. In movie books or publicity stills women are characteristically seen screaming in terror, laughing, or conveying some other clearly graspable reaction to a situation. Purposely ambivalent, Sherman's stills, she notes, "would be the rejects." Thus, her images, while they often represent specific scenarios or actresses to her, become every viewer's Rorschach; her "military type" (#54) is another person's Marilyn Monroe.

Partly because they are shot in black and white, Sherman's photographs capture the unmistakable look of the 1950s and intrigue us with their resemblance to classic movie stills. Yet hers always seem a little awkward and really look nothing like the Hollywood versions. We recognize the film reference but sense that we are looking at a person imitating a film image. Occupying an intermediate zone between snapshot and movie still, where the boundaries between what we distinguish as real life and

fantasy overlap, these photographs suggest that we know what we are supposed to look like when we pose for the camera, or even for ourselves in the absence of a camera. The French writer Hélène Cixous summarizes the situation with the admonition, "Hold still, we're going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away."⁵

It is interesting to view Sherman's early series in terms of her subsequent work, which has dealt more and more explicitly with terror, the grotesque, and death and decay.⁶ Sherman's photographs since the late 1970s have confronted depictions of women in fashion photography, old master paintings, and horrific fairytales, and—with increasing use of fake body parts and absencing herself—portray brutal images of sexual disgust. She has worked in large format and in seductive color that often belies the increasing discomfort of her images. The stills address an ideal of glamour, beauty, or femininity projected onto women. In retrospect, they seem to have laid the groundwork for her later expressions of the fears that lie beneath that controlled and constructed exterior and to anticipate the powerful sense of anxiety manifest in her more recent work and in that of many younger artists.

Phyllis Rosenzweig
Associate Curator

1. The photographs are in editions of ten, in eight-by-ten- or ten-by-eight-inch format. Some have also been printed in larger sizes to resemble film posters.

2. See, for example, the now-classic text by Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18; Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," in Claire Johnston, ed., *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), 24–31; Judith Mayne, "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique* (Winter 1978): 83–107; Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974); and other feminist literature such as Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875–93.

3. Sherman's motifs and camera angles take their cue from suspense films and psychological thrillers. The films, as well as Sherman's photographs, resonate with pictorial traditions that go back to the Renaissance and early modernism. In drawings by Edgar Degas, Auguste Rodin, Egon Schiele (all male artists) the vantage point is often one of literally looking down on the subject. On the use of mirror images, pictures within pictures, and odd, uncomfortable angles used to create a mood of threat or fear, see E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

4. Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman 1975–1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 28.

5. Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 530.

6. Some critics have noted the relationship between vulnerability and eroticism or even pornography in Sherman's film stills. Other writers, such as Susan Sontag, have suggested that pornography's ultimate subject is not sex, but death. See Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," reprinted in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (Great Britain: Penguin, 1982), and cited in Eleanor Heartney, "Two or three things I know about her," *Afterimage* 15, no. 3 (October 1987): 18; Judith Williamson, "Images of 'Woman,' The Photography of Cindy Sherman," *Screen* 24 (November/December 1983): 102–16; Peter Schjeldahl, *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987), 9; Lisa Phillips, *ibid.*, 14; Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review*, no. 188 (July/August 1991): 136–50.

BIOGRAPHY

Born 1954, Glen Ridge, New Jersey; attended State University of New York, Buffalo, 1972–76, active in Hallwalls, the artist-run alternative space. First exhibited there and in New York at Artists Space and Metro Pictures. Moved to New York from Buffalo, 1977.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The list of exhibitions and the literature on the artist in art, film, and photography magazines is vast. The following publications include additional exhibition histories and bibliographies.

Cindy Sherman. Exhibition catalogue. Introduction by Els Barents. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1982; Munich: Shirmer/Mosel, 1982.

Cindy Sherman. Exhibition catalogue. Essay by Thomas Kellein. Basel: Kunsthalle and Edition Cantz, 1991.

Danto, Arthur C. *Cindy Sherman: Untitled Film Stills*. New York: Rizzoli, 1990.

Krauss, Rosalind, and Norman Bryson. *Cindy Sherman 1975–1993*. New York: Rizzoli, 1993.

Schjeldahl, Peter, and Lisa Phillips. *Cindy Sherman*. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987.

CHECKLIST

All works in the exhibition are from the series "Untitled Film Stills," 1977–80. Silver gelatin prints, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm) or 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York. The entire series is illustrated on the back cover. Some of the images may have been cropped in reproduction.

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