

A self-portrait by Cindy Sherman. She is lying down, wearing a bright orange sweater, with her head tilted back and eyes looking upwards. Her right hand is visible near her face, with red-painted fingernails. The background consists of a textured, stone-like surface. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting the texture of the sweater and the contours of her face.

Cindy Sherman
Centerfold
(Untitled #96)

MoMA

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GWEN ALLEN

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK



Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954). Untitled #96. 1981. Chromogenic color print, 24 × 48" (61 × 121.9 cm).
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF CARL D. LOBELL



FIGS. 1–5. Clockwise from top left: Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954). *Untitled Film Still #21*. 1978. Gelatin silver print, 7 ½ × 9 ½" (19.1 × 24.1 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. HORACE W. GOLDSMITH FUND THROUGH ROBERT B. MENSCHEL; *Untitled Film Still #62*. 1977. Gelatin silver print, 6 ¼ × 9 ⅝" (15.9 × 23.6 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF THE ARTIST; *Untitled Film Still #13*. 1978. Gelatin silver print, 9 ⅞ × 7 ½" (24 × 19.1 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. ACQUIRED THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF JO CAROLE AND RONALD S. LAUDER IN MEMORY OF EUGENE M. SCHWARTZ; *Untitled Film Still #37*. 1979. Gelatin silver print, 9 ⅞ × 7 ⅞" (24 × 19.2 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE; *Untitled Film Still #6*. 1977. Gelatin silver print, 9 ⅞ × 6 ½" (24 × 16.5 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. ACQUIRED THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF JO CAROLE AND RONALD S. LAUDER IN MEMORY OF EUGENE M. SCHWARTZ

FOR MORE THAN FORTY YEARS CINDY SHERMAN HAS BEEN CELEBRATED FOR HER extraordinary ability to create vivid scenes and characters. She first captivated the art world with her *Untitled Film Stills*¹ (1977–80), a landmark series of eight-by-ten-inch black-and-white photographs in which she transforms herself into an astonishing variety of female stereotypes drawn from Hollywood and European art-house films as well as B movies [FIGS. 1–5]. The Stills inspired countless critics to discuss Sherman's work in relation to the medium of film, with cinematic terms—such as director, auteur, actress, makeup artist, costume designer, stylist, and lighting technician—often being used to describe the artist. Less frequently discussed, though equally important for understanding Sherman's work, is her use of print media, especially magazines. Since early in her career she has investigated the visual conventions of magazines—from pulp and confession rags to fashion and men's erotic magazines—and considered their effects on our individual and collective psyches. This book is about one of Sherman's earliest forays into the visual culture of magazines, the so-called Centerfolds series (1981)—specifically *Untitled #96*—in which she explores issues of representation, power, and gender in relationship to the pornographic centerfold.

In the early 1980s Sherman was commissioned to create new work to be published in the influential art magazine *Artforum*. She chose to take on the theme of the centerfold model. Although the magazine's editor ultimately rejected the project, the artist decided to pursue it on her own, producing a total of twelve large-scale color photographs (*Untitled #85–#96*). The Centerfolds show young, often reclining women (all are, of course, Sherman herself) in private, somewhat melancholic moments of reverie, longing, or waiting. Some simply stare into space, their expressions difficult to read. While none of the photographs are nudes or explicitly sexual, they were intended to make viewers question their conscious or unconscious assumptions and impulses when looking at a pornographic centerfold—a format that perhaps had a far greater hold on the male (and female) imagination in the 1980s than it does today, when pornography has largely migrated from print to digital platforms.

In *Untitled #96* a young woman lies on her back against a “harvest gold” brick-patterned vinyl floor of a type that was common in 1970s American kitchens. She wears a schoolgirl outfit: an orange V-neck sweater, an orange-and-white gingham skirt, and white tennis shoes. Her hair is cropped and her face bare of any obvious makeup. She clutches a scrap of newspaper that appears to have been torn from the classified section. Among the only words that can be deciphered are “know yourself/know your future,” suggesting a fortune or horoscope. Her left leg is tucked under her right and bent back so that her heel touches her backside, and her skirt rides up, exposing part of her thigh. There is something unsettling about this tightly cropped figure, splayed diagonally across the horizontal picture plane, with her vacant, faraway expression. Her mood seems to change, depending on how we imagine the narrative that is simultaneously implied and withheld. Is she hopeful or wistful? Slightly apprehensive or just introspective? Her complete absorption in her own thoughts and lack of awareness of being seen gives her a vulnerability—and casts the viewer as a complicit voyeur.

When the *Centerfolds* debuted at the New York gallery Metro Pictures in November 1981, the photographs became a lightning rod for political debates. Some critics read them as a feminist parody of soft-core porn; others criticized them for depicting women as victims, inviting identification or even titillation. As the artist later explained, “I wanted a man opening up the magazine to suddenly look at it in expectation of something lascivious and then feel like the violator that they would be, looking at this woman who’s perhaps a victim . . . [although] I didn’t think of them as victims at the time.”² The series placed Sherman’s work in the spotlight, and *Untitled #96* in particular has become iconic. (Indeed, it was chosen as the cover image for the catalogue to the major traveling retrospective of Sherman’s work organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 1997.) Considered in the context of Sherman’s career to date, the *Centerfolds* can be seen as a pivot point between the artist’s early work with cinematic roles and genres and the many other complex subjects she has gone on to tackle.

Cynthia Morris Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, in 1954, the youngest of five children. She grew up in Huntington Beach, a Long Island suburb forty miles outside Manhattan. As a child, she loved to play dress-up, creating elaborate costumes out of a trunk of old clothes, some of which had belonged to her great-grandmother [FIG. 6]. She would spend hours transforming herself into various make-believe characters and creatures. “I was more interested in being different from other little girls who would dress up as princesses or fairies,” Sherman recalled. “I would be the ugly old witch or the monster.”³



FIG. 6. Snapshot of Cindy Sherman (left) and friend Janet Zink dressed up as old ladies, c. 1966

Coming of age at a time when more and more American families owned television sets, she also watched a lot of movies on TV. In 1972 she enrolled at Buffalo State College in western New York, where she majored in art and famously flunked a required introductory photography course because of her undeveloped technical abilities. It was while taking the class again with a different instructor, who taught Sherman about more conceptual modes of working, that the artist began to take pictures of herself. Around the same time, she started dating fellow student Robert Longo. Together with a group of other young artists, they founded the alternative space Hallwalls in Buffalo, staging exhibitions of each other’s work and organizing workshops and lectures with distinguished contemporary artists such as Robert Irwin and Vito Acconci.

During this period, Sherman experimented with altering her appearance using wigs, makeup, glasses, and clothing, and by varying her facial expressions and body language. She documented these dramatic makeovers and exhibited the resulting photographs in a serial manner to suggest the passage of time. For example, in *Untitled #479*, made for a class assignment, she metamorphizes over the course of twenty-three images from an ordinary, bookish college student into a glamorous, cigarette-smoking vamp [FIG. 7]. Sherman’s experiments



FIG. 7. Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954). Untitled #479. 1975. Twenty-three hand-colored gelatin silver prints, overall $20\frac{1}{2} \times 33\frac{1}{2}$ " (52.1×85.1 cm). COLLECTION DOROTHY AND PETER WALDT

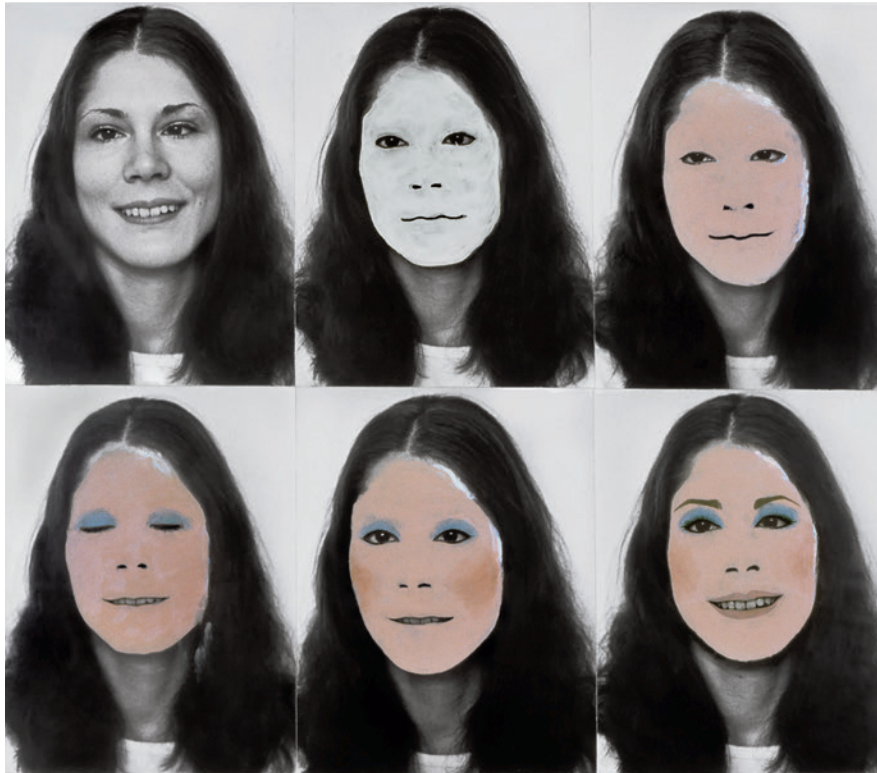


FIG. 8. Suzy Lake (Canadian, born United States 1947). *A Genuine Simulation of... No. 2*. 1973–74. Six gelatin silver prints and commercial makeup mounted on fiber-based print, 27 $\frac{5}{16}$ \times 32 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (70 \times 82.5 cm). THE MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS. SAIDYE AND SAMUEL BRONFMAN COLLECTION OF CANADIAN ART

with self-transformation were influenced by an earlier generation of performance and Conceptual artists such as Suzy Lake [FIG. 8], Eleanor Antin, and Hannah Wilke [FIG. 9], all of whom used serialized self-portraits to engage issues of gender and identity. Sherman also turned to magazines as a source of inspiration during college. In a series of works called the Cover Girls, she parodied covers from women's and fashion magazines, including *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, and *Family Circle* [FIGS. 10, 11]. She displayed the original magazine covers alongside mock-ups in which her face is superimposed on the cover model's, first striking an uncanny resemblance to the original and then spoofing the image with a goofy or unflattering expression. Demonstrating Sherman's impressive skill in mimicry, the series was an early take on subjects the artist would return to again and again later in her career: the grotesque and women in the media.

After college, Sherman moved with Longo to Manhattan, where they fell in with a group of artists that would later become known as the Pictures Generation,



FIG. 9. Hannah Wilke (American, 1940–1993). *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series*. 1974–82. Ten gelatin silver prints with chewing gum sculptures, overall 40 \times 58 $\frac{1}{2}$ \times 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (101.6 \times 148.6 \times 5.7 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE

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