Will the Real Cindy Sherman
Please Stand Up?

Eva Respini

Cindy Sherman’s photographs are not self-portraits. It is true that she is the model for her own pictures, but that is beside the point. As a matter of practicality, Sherman prefers to work alone. To create her photographs, she assumes multiple roles of photographer, model, makeup artist, hairdresser, stylist, and wardrobe mistress. With an arsenal of wigs, costumes, makeup, prostheses, and props, Sherman has deftly altered her physique and surroundings to create a myriad of intriguing tableaus and characters, from screen siren to clown to aging socialite. Through her skilful masquerades, she has created an astonishing and influential body of work that amuses, titillates, disturbs, and shocks.

The fact that Sherman is in her photographs is immaterial; but the ongoing speculation about her identity gets to the very heart of her work and its resonance. The conflation of actor, artist, and subject and Sherman’s simultaneous presence in and absence from her pictures has driven much of the literature on her, especially in relation to debates about authorship in postmodern art. The numerous exhibitions, essays, and catalogues dedicated to her career have contributed to the mythology around Sherman the artist, especially as her fame has risen. Time and time again, writers have asked, Who is the real Cindy Sherman? This is entirely the wrong question, although it’s almost unavoidable as a critical urge. Curators and critics have suggested which photographs reveal the real Cindy Sherman, and almost every profile on the artist includes an account of how unassuming she is “in person.” But it is Sherman’s very anonymity that distinguishes her work. Rather than explorations of inner psychology, her pictures are about the projection of personalities and stereotypes that are deep-seated in our shared cultural imagination. Even Sherman’s public portraits are manufactured, such as the 1983 Art News cover (which carried the title Who Does Cindy Sherman Think She Is?) (fig. 1), featuring a bewigged Sherman in her studio, enacting the role of the “artist” and recalling scenarios, she addresses the anxieties of the status of the self with pictures that are frighteningly on point and direct in their appraisal of the current culture of the cultivated self.

Sherman’s work is singular in its vision, but infinitely complex in the ideas that are contained by it and radically original in its capacity for multiplicity. For more than thirty years, her photographs have encapsulated each era’s leading ideas, striking a deep cultural chord with scholars, curators, artists, students, and collectors alike. Sherman’s work has found itself at the crossroads of diverse theoretical discourses—feminism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, among others—with each camp claiming the artist as a representative of their ideas. The contradictory and complex readings of Sherman’s work reinforce its ongoing relevance to multiple audiences and, in fact, speak to the contradictory forces at play in our culture at large—the surface appearance of ideas in the form of fleeting images that are often mistaken for content and depth. Like any retrospective of a working artist, this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue provide an unfinished account of a career that continues to flourish. Because she is a prolific artist (some five hundred photographs and counting) and a vast literature already exists on Sherman, I will not attempt here a comprehensive account of her entire career. Rather, I will try to trace how her work has been received and interpreted over the last three decades within a critical context, and to investigate some of the dominant themes prevalent throughout...
Sherman’s work— including artifice and fiction, cinema and performance; horror and the grotesque; myth, carnival, and fairy tale; and gender and class identity—in tandem with her techniques, from analog and digital photography to collage and film. Sherman works in a serial fashion; each body of work is self-contained and has an internal coherence. In acknowledgment of this working method, I also examine some of Sherman’s major bodies of work in depth. Together, these transverse readings—across themes and series—map out the career of one of the most remarkable and influential artists of our time.

To grasp the scope and inventiveness of Sherman’s work, it is worth revisiting her formative cultural and artistic influences. She was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, in 1954 and grew up in suburban Huntington Beach on Long Island, forty miles from Manhattan. Belonging to the first generation of Americans raised on television, Sherman was fully steeped in mass-media culture, and she recalls watching such TV programs as the Million Dollar Movie and the Mary Tyler Moore Show and such films as Rear Window. Another activity that kept Sherman occupied was dressing up: “I’d try to look like another person—even like an old lady [fig. 2]. . . . I would make myself up like a monster, things like that, which seemed like much more fun than just looking like Barbie.” Even in childhood, Sherman’s invented personas were unexpected, providing the seedlings for her diverse artistic oeuvre.

In 1972, Sherman enrolled at Buffalo State College in western New York, where she initially studied painting. She was adept at replicating details on canvas, but she soon became interested in photography, especially as it was being used by conceptual and performance artists. Sherman failed a mandatory photography course because she wasn’t proficient at the requisite technical skills. When she took the class again, her subsequent teacher, Barbara Jo Revelle, was less concerned with technical perfection and exposed her to contemporary art movements. Sherman became aware of and interested in the work of feminist artists who performed for the camera, such as Lynda Benglis, Eleanor Antin, and Hannah Wilke, as well as male artists such as Chris Burden and Vito Acconci, who used their own bodies as the focus for their art. Equally influential on Sherman was meeting fellow art student Robert Longo (whom she dated for several years) in her sophomore year: “Robert was really instrumental in opening my eyes to contemporary art, because in the first year of college, you study ancient history in art—and in suburban Long Island, where I grew up, I had no exposure to contemporary art. But I hung out with Robert and these other people, going with them to the Albright-Knox [Art Gallery], which is right across from the college, and I saw contemporary art first-hand. That’s when I started to question why I should paint. It just seemed not to make sense.”

Another influence on Sherman was the alternative space Hallwalls, located in a converted ice-packing warehouse, where many artists had studios. Hallwalls was established by Longo and Buffalo native Charles Clough, who both had studios in the building. Their first collaboration was an impromptu exhibition of their own work on the wall of the hall between their studios. “When Winer, director of the New York City Artists Space in November 1977, marking the beginning of a long relationship with Sherman, Hallwalls attracted a number of notable artists and filmmakers during Sherman’s tenure there, including Vito Acconci, Martha Wilson, Lynda Benglis, Jack Goldstein, Dan Graham, Buffalos, Bruce Nauman, Nancy Holt, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Irwin, Richard Serra, and Katharina Steudernig, as well as critics and curators such as Lucy Lippard, Marcia Tucker, and Helene Winer. When Winer, director of the New York City Artists Space, visited Buffalo, she saw the work of Sherman, Longo, Clough, Nancy Dwyer, and Michael Zwack, and offered an exchange exhibition of artists associated with Hallwalls at Artists Space in November 1977, marking the beginning of a long relationship with Sherman. Hallwalls also sponsored events with local institutions CEPA and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Buffalo was gaining a reputation for avant-garde art and becoming a destination on the conceptual art map, with Hallwalls at its center. Sherman attended college at a time when attitudes about fashion and women’s...
bodies were changing. Gone were the girdles and restricting undergarments of her mother’s generation, replaced by a more natural approach to grooming. Yet Sherman remained fascinated with makeup and artificial beauty enhancers, even though as a student she wore scant makeup and few adornments. For fun, she would spend hours playing with cosmetics and clothes, sometimes dressing up as characters—such as a pregnant woman or Lucille Ball (see page 68)—to go to openings and parties, and she soon began making photographs of the characters she had been dreaming up for years.

Sherman has referred to Untitled #479 (plate 11), made for a class assignment exploring the passage of time, as her “first serious work.” Similar to a storyboard or filmstrip, the twenty-three hand-colored photographs (one exposure short of the film roll’s twenty-four) resemble other works of Sherman’s from the same year, Untitled A–E (plates 4–8), a series of five head shots in which a coquettish young woman is transformed into a dopey-looking train conductor, who morphs into a young woman staring at the camera, who turns into a shy girl in barrettes, who turns into a self-assured woman (wearing the same hat, incidentally, as in image A). Reminiscent of casting photographs where an actor shows off a range of emotions and characters, the pictures possess a playfulness that can also be seen in her other early satires of genres or types, such as the bus riders (fig. 3), a succession of characters inspired by people she observed on Buffalo’s public transportation. Sherman’s exploration of stereotypes (especially in the head-shot format) is reprised in later works, most notably in the head-shot series of 2000–2002.

It was during the early days of experimenting with the plasticity of identity and photography that Sherman’s ideas about art began to take hold: “When I was in school...”...

Suzy Lake, an artist whom Sherman has cited as an influence, produced gridlike transformations, such as the 1973 Miss Chatelaine (fig. 4), presenting multiple looks of a single character. Eleanor Antin’s landmark multipart work Carving: A Traditional Sculpture (1972; fig. 6) and Hannah Wilke’s S.O.S. – Starification Object Series (1974–82; fig. 5) each depict the transformation of the artist recorded over a number of pictures presented side by side. Wilke’s parody of the stock poses struck by fashion models in S.O.S. – Starification Object Series is echoed in the hyperfeminized characters who appear at the end of the sequences in Sherman’s Untitled #479 and Untitled A–E. While in many ways Sherman’s work represents a break from these artists’ more direct and political address of the camera, the legacy of their performative experiments and their exploration of surface appearances as powerful signifiers of cultural clichés and ideologies continues to resonate with Sherman’s art today.

Similar to a storyboard or filmstrip, the twenty-three hand-colored photographs (one exposure short of the film roll’s twenty-four) resemble other works of Sherman’s from the same year, Untitled A–E (plates 4–8), a series of five head shots in which a coquettish young woman is transformed into a dopey-looking train conductor, who morphs into a young woman staring at the camera, who turns into a shy girl in barrettes, who finally changes into a self-assured woman (wearing the same hat, incidentally, as in image A). Reminiscent of casting photographs where an actor shows off a range of emotions and characters, the pictures possess a playfulness that can also be seen in her other early satires of genres or types, such as the bus riders (fig. 3), a succession of characters inspired by people she observed on Buffalo’s public transportation. Sherman’s exploration of stereotypes (especially in the head-shot format) is reprised in later works, most notably in the head-shot series of 2000–2002.

It was during the early days of experimenting with the plasticity of identity and photography that Sherman’s ideas about art began to take hold: “When I was in school...”...
I was getting disgusted with the attitude of art being so religious or sacred, so I wanted to make something that people could relate to without having to read a book about it beforehand,” she said. “So that anybody off the street could appreciate it, even if they couldn’t fully understand it; they could still get something out of it. That’s the reason why I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it.”

Fig. 7
Cindy Sherman, Untitled (Secretary), 1978. Gelatin silver print (printed 1993), 14 x 9” (36 x 23.5 cm)

By 1950s and 1960s Hollywood, film noir, and to which she would occasionally come back, was that you couldn’t tell whether each magazine... What was interesting to me, was that you couldn’t tell whether each photograph was just its own isolated shot, but you could tell that they weren’t from real movies. Maybe they were done to illustrate some sleazy story in a magazine... What was interesting to me, was that you couldn’t tell whether each photograph was just its own isolated shot, or other images (moving and still) through which we see the world. But they look like copies, further complicating the cycle of representation in which they are enmeshed.

Before the “Untitled Film Stills” Sherman was making a series of outsize pictures arranged into mini-narratives, such as A Play of Selves (fig. 8), a melodramatic allegory told through 244 cutouts of various characters that interact with one another. Although she wanted to continue making narrative pictures, she found the process of cutting too labor-intensive, and an idea developed after she visited the loft of David Salle, who had a stash of photographs from the art department of the midtown soft-core magazine where he worked. Cheesy and retrograde, the pictures encouraged Sherman to think about stock images. She recalls: “They seemed like they were ’50s movies, but you could tell that they weren’t from real movies. Maybe they were done to illustrate some sleazy story in a magazine... What was interesting to me, was that you couldn’t tell whether each photograph was just its own isolated shot, or other images (moving and still) through which we see the world. But they look like copies, further complicating the cycle of representation in which they are enmeshed.

Before the “Untitled Film Stills” Sherman was making a series of outsize pictures arranged into mini-narratives, such as A Play of Selves (fig. 8), a melodramatic allegory told through 244 cutouts of various characters that interact with one another. Although she wanted to continue making narrative pictures, she found the process of cutting too labor-intensive, and an idea developed after she visited the loft of David Salle, who had a stash of photographs from the art department of the midtown soft-core magazine where he worked. Cheesy and retrograde, the pictures encouraged Sherman to think about stock images. She recalls: “They seemed like they were ’50s movies, but you could tell that they weren’t from real movies. Maybe they were done to illustrate some sleazy story in a magazine... What was interesting to me, was that you couldn’t tell whether each photograph was just its own isolated shot, or other images (moving and still) through which we see the world. But they look like copies, further complicating the cycle of representation in which they are enmeshed.

Before the “Untitled Film Stills” Sherman was making a series of outsize pictures arranged into mini-narratives, such as A Play of Selves (fig. 8), a melodramatic allegory told through 244 cutouts of various characters that interact with one another. Although she wanted to continue making narrative pictures, she found the process of cutting too labor-intensive, and an idea developed after she visited the loft of David Salle, who had a stash of photographs from the art department of the midtown soft-core magazine where he worked. Cheesy and retrograde, the pictures encouraged Sherman to think about stock images. She recalls: “They seemed like they were ’50s movies, but you could tell that they weren’t from real movies. Maybe they were done to illustrate some sleazy story in a magazine... What was interesting to me, was that you couldn’t tell whether each photograph was just its own isolated shot,
or whether it was in a series that included other shots that I wasn’t seeing. Maybe there were others that continued some kind of story. It was really ambiguous.”

The first “Still” she made were conceived as a distinct set of six images of the same blonde actress playing different roles, and in their first showing at Hallwalls in 1977–78 (fig. 9), some were cropped slightly differently than the prints today. Sherman has referred to the protagonist as a “trashy has-been,” a type that she has explored in a number of other series (such as the murder mystery pictures and the head shots). In one, the blonde is looking over her shoulder at herself in a mirror (fig. 10); in another, she is splayed on a bed in bra and panties clutching a mirror (fig. 11); in another, she was photographed all over New York City (near the World Trade Center, on the West Side piers, in Chelsea), as well as elsewhere. Untitled Film Stills were rarely credited. Sherman’s “Stills” mimic the publicity-still format—eight by ten inches, glossy—and often look like throw-away prints rather than precious works of art. “I wanted them to seem cheap and trashy,” Sherman recalled, “something
you’d find in a novelty store and buy for a quarter. I didn’t want them to look like art.”20 However, at this stage Sherman was already deeply invested in her art, and the dual status of the pictures—as works of art that appear to be cheap prints—contribute to the layered complexity of the series.

The “Untitled Film Stills” are irrevocably tied to the history of performance art, and Sherman has cited the influence of the work of 1970s artists such as Eleanor Antin, Hannah Wilke, and Adrian Piper.21 Sherman’s work also has affinities with a tradition of artists performing for the camera that pre dates the 1970s performative experiments. Although Sherman may not have been familiar with these precedents, photographers have exploited photography’s plasticity from the dawn of the medium, posing, performing, and masquerading for the camera to create a multitude of personas, fictions, and narratives that probe the nature of the medium and the genre of self-portraiture. A year after photography’s invention, Hippolyte Bayard’s Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man (1840) was an open acknowledgment of photography’s capacity to create fictions. Twenty years later, the Countess de Castiglione, an extravagant French socialite, collaborated with court photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson to direct, stage, and photograph herself in costume, presenting a range of characters that reflected her fantasies (fig. 13). Pictorialist F. Holland Day assumed the persona of Jesus Christ for his 1898 series of pictures depicting the Crucifixion, after fasting for several months and scarring his body. The Surrealist Claude Cahun’s self-portraits have been cited as an important precedent for Sherman’s exploration of the malleability of identity. Cahun’s gender-bending self-portrait in drag (fig. 13) recalls another significant exemplar known to Sherman, Marcel Duchamp’s female alter ego, Rose Sélavy (fig. 14), photographed by Man Ray around 1921. An overlooked figure in this tradition is Gertrud Arndt, a Bauhaus student who masqueraded for the camera in a series of self-portraits taken in 1930 (fig. 15). Like Sherman, she enacted a series of stereotypes, such as the femme fatale, bourgeois lady, and widow—all interpretations of the multiplicity of female identity. These early examples ushered in the era of set-up photography, best exemplified by the work of Paul Outerbridge and Edward Steichen and copied by countless anonymous professionals (fig. 16). They became the norm in the worlds of advertising and fashion as the picture press became the dominant mode of disseminating images. These would have been the kinds of images Sherman absorbed as a child, informing the female stereotypes in the “Film Stills” as much as the iconic characters from film did.

For Sherman, performing for the camera was always undertaken in relation to the act of photographing: “Once I’m set up, the camera starts clicking, then I just start to move and watch how I move in the mirror. It’s not like I’m method acting or anything. I don’t feel that I am that person,” she has explained. “I may be thinking about a certain story or situation, but I don’t become her. There’s this distance. The image in the mirror becomes her—the image the camera gets on the film. And the one thing I’ve always known is that the camera lies.”22 Sherman acknowledges that we are conditioned by cinema and other media, and she uses these associations to steer her viewers in many narrative directions. The
cracks in the facade of the work (obvious makeup, ill-fitting clothes, repeated props, blank expressions) reveal the artificiality of her enterprise, and as viewers we become knowing participants in the fiction of photography. Sherman is interested in the disrupted narrative, the apparatus of it, and the process of the narrative structure, rather than a convincing performance.24

The photographs are not seamless copies, nor were they ever meant to be. Rather, they are comments on images themselves. Seen as a whole, the series points to how Sherman's work to theorist Jean Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum: “The condition of being a copy without an original.”28

Sherman’s work is… is the simulacral nature of what they contain, the condition of a life beyond a model.29

The "Stills" are all this and more. They struck a deep nerve within critical art historical circles and became a talisman of many of the emergent ideas of the 1980s, when photography and art were commingling and the nature of photography’s veracity was being debated. The "Stills" engender a number of different readings because they contain and support all those meanings—their strength is their mutability and elusiveness.

The "Stills" became a key example of the developing ideas of postmodernism, as articulated primarily by Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens.29 Along with the work of Richard Prince, Sherrin Levine, Louise Lawler, Robert Longo, Laurie Simmons, Barbara Kruger, Jack Goldstein, and Troy Brauntuch (some of whom exhibited with Sherman at Metro Pictures), Sherman's photographs helped define this critical discourse. Postmodernism proposed a rethinking of the tenets of modernism, attacking the basic assumption of the original artwork and the genius artist. These artists came to define postmodern artistic practices by creating art from existing material (such as news pictures, advertisements, television, and movies), suggesting the finiteness of the visual world and the depreciation of the primacy of a single image. They engaged with photography's capacity to examine and undermine the production of stereotypes and representations by acknowledging that in our dominant camera culture, pictures (moving and still) mediate our encounters in the world. The artist and critic Thomas Lawson wrote in his influential essay “Last Exit: Painting,” “The photograph is the modern world,” positing that natural perception has given way to photographic perception.30

While his essay primarily addressed painting, he did make a point that artists in the late 1970s and the 1980s used photography as the main, if not dominant, tool with which to explore the nature of representation.

A hallmark of postmodern art was the influential Pictures exhibition organized by Douglas Crimp and presented at Artists Space in fall 1977. Sherman was not included in Pictures, which featured Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrin Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, but an expanded version of the exhibition's brochure text that Crimp later published in the journal October included a discussion of Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills."24 Pictures signaled the emergence and recognition of the influence of media culture on a variety of artistic practices, and would become shorthand for referring to a generation of artists and their shared artistic concerns. The artists associated with the Pictures exhibition came to represent the spirit of criticism of the era and an involvement with images and ideas born out of mass culture. Referred to as postmodernists, appropriation artists, and “pictures” artists, they produced works (in a variety of mediums) that represented several strategies— including appropriation, approximation, parody, and recontextualization—that are largely related and often lumped together in the assessment of the 1980s. Despite individual personalities and practices, these artists were all exploring similar ideas that worked against the modernist paradigm.

Although Crimp’s theories would become the touchstone for the period, he was not working in isolation. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Thomas Lawson, and Andy Grundberg were other leading voices in the development of postmodern culture and theory.31 Additionally, French theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, whose writings were increasingly available through translation, were influential, particularly Barthes’s 1967 manifesto “The Death of the Author.” Another key text for postmodernists was Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), where he asserted that photographs have rendered earlier forms of picture making, such as painting, obsolete.

Postmodern artists were the inheritors of the strategies and experiments of Conceptual art, in which photography began to play an increasingly pivotal role as traditional forms of painting and sculpture were rejected in favor of performance-based, ephemeral, and earth art practices. Postmodern artists coming of age in the 1970s were educated not as photographers but as fine artists. Many of them were influenced by the matter-of-fact attitude toward photography adopted by artists
Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Lee Friedlander (fig. 20) had also expressed an interest in pop culture, photographing signs and window displays and celebrating the poetry of the everyday. However, by the 1980s a different set of rules had come into play, partly because modern art (which was largely defined as the rarefied art of painting) had itself become a commodity, and artists were looking to other sources and material for inspiration to work against the modernist paradigm. In addition, the late 1970s and 1980s marked a shift to new operational modes, where hip hop, DJs, mix tapes, and other forms of sampling became the norm in culture at large. Music, art, film, and theater were increasingly cross-pollinating each other in New York, contributing to the rich artistic boom of the era.

Women played a leading role in the formation of postmodernist work. Photography was still regarded as a second-class citizen, and as such it held an appeal for artists like Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine (fig. 21), Sarah Charlesworth, and, of course, Sherman. Working in an era that celebrated a return to painting, such as John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, perhaps best encapsulated in Baldessari’s wry painting An Artist is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer (1961–68; fig. 18), which challenges the conventions of “good” (i.e., traditional) photography. Richard Prince (fig. 17) and Sherrie Levine appropriated freely from the plethora of images in our culture, and Jeff Koons engaged in similar practices with sculpture. It’s not as if artists hadn’t borrowed from pop culture in the past, but the 1980s ushered in a new way of thinking about it. Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and his incorporation of everyday objects as art were important precedents for how postmodernists would come to use life and “low” culture as material for their art. Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol were equally significant for how they utilized popular photographic images in their work. Other lesser-known precedents included Robert Heinecken’s Are You Rea (1964–68; fig. 19), in which he exposed magazine pages to light against photographic paper, collapsing the verso and recto into a single image and melding advertising and editorial texts and images. Moreover, traditional photographers like Fig. 18

Fig. 18

Fig. 19
Robert Heinecken. Are You Rea #1. 1964–68. Lithograph, 10 3/16 x 7 5/8” (27.4 x 20.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Clark Winter Fund

Fig. 20
specifically the expressionist and figurative works of a group of "bad boy" painters who operated on an overtly macho public stage—Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, and David Salle (the rising stars of the Mary Boone Gallery)—those women claimed photography for themselves. It is perhaps partially due to this context that Sherman's work appealed to feminist theorists, but also because it emerged with some of the most ambitious and challenging photography made by women since Diane Arbus. Sherman recalled, "In the later '70s, when it seemed everywhere you looked people were talking about appropriation—then it seemed like a thing, a real presence. But I wasn't really aware of any group feeling... That probably did increase the feeling of community was when more women began to get recognized for their work, most of them in photography: Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer were in doing this other kind of work—we were could also have been that many of us were system then among the women artists. It was a feeling of community was when more histories and referents other than the modernist history of photography. Sherman's work is often read as a tacit rejection of the ideals of photography, and Sherman's work was at the center of this fertile and radical repositioning of the medium. The vast majority of the figures in Sherman's photographs are women, so inevitably the discourse on her works must acknowledge gender as an important element in their meaning and reception. The construction of female identity, established through visual codes like dress, hair, and makeup, had been rejected by feminist artists in the 1970s. Sherman's reappraisal of these roles was both an embrace and a rejection, establishing a complex relationship to feminism. Furthermore, her role as both subject (and object) and producer of images of women put her in the unique position of enacting stereotypes that critique feminine roles and conventions. Later series, with increased suggestions of violence and mutilated bodies, inspired further feminist discourse on the polemics of gender and sexuality in contemporary culture. Feminist readings of Sherman's work emerged mostly after postmodernism was established, partly as a response to the male-dominated postmodern discourse but also as a by-product of it, as feminist perspectives offered an alternative to the male-centric modern tradition. Essays by theorists Laura Mulvey and Judith Williamson were particularly influential in this regard. While Sherman didn't necessarily see the "Film Stills" through a feminist lens, she...
also didn’t negate this reading of her series: “I know I was not consciously aware of this thing the ‘male gaze.’ It was the way I was shooting, the memory of the style of black and white grade-Z motion pictures that produced the self-consciousness of these characters, not my knowledge of feminist theory.” She continued, “I suppose unconsciously, or semi-consciously at best, I was wrestling with some sort of turmoil of my own about understanding women. . . . I definitely felt that the characters were questioning something—perhaps being unconsciously, or semi-consciously at best, spectators to their own lives.”

The centerfolds refer to both the printed page and the cinema—two constant inspirations for Sherman. The size of the prints, with their allusion to the Cinemascope format, allows for a more physical viewing experience than that offered by the “Untitled Film Stills,” and a sense that the viewer is entering into (or being surrounded by) a fictive space. Originally commissioned by Ingrid Sischy, then editor of Artforum, these send-ups of men’s erotic magazine centerfolds were ultimately not published and similarly provocative ads by Robert Morris and Eleanor Antin, “where they used themselves in a kind of joke about advertising.”

Sherman’s centerfolds depict a variety of young women, mostly in supine positions, photographed close up and cropped so that they seem compressed into the frame and the photographic space is flattened. In many of these pictures, the women are in a state of reverse or daydreaming, seemingly unaware of the camera and staring outside of the picture frame. The characters are in extreme emotional states, ranging from terrified (Untitled #92; plate 96) to heartbroken (Untitled #90; plate 97) to melancholic (Untitled #98; plate 93). The suggestion of interiority is a shift from the surface masquerades and blank stares of the “Untitled Film Stills” and earlier work. The saturated palette contributes to both the intensity and the flattening of looking at photographs of exposed women, but she takes on the roles of both victim and to her seemingly dreamy state. In Untitled #92, the cool blue tones of the picture enhance the girl’s terror-stricken expression. The photographs are at once seductive and anxious-making. It’s as if we’re witnessing a private moment unfolding, which leads to a number of readings about the status of the viewer as a voyeur in the work. Sherman plays into the male conditioning of looking at photographs of exposed women, and similarly provocative ads by Robert Morris and Eleanor Antin, “where they used themselves in a kind of joke about advertising.”

Sherman’s centerfolds depict a variety of young women, mostly in supine positions, photographed close up and cropped so that they seem compressed into the frame and the photographic space is flattened. In many of these pictures, the women are in a state of reverse or daydreaming, seemingly unaware of the camera and staring outside of the picture frame. The characters are in extreme emotional states, ranging from terrified (Untitled #92; plate 96) to heartbroken (Untitled #90; plate 97) to melancholic (Untitled #98; plate 93). The suggestion of interiority is a shift from the surface masquerades and blank stares of the “Untitled Film Stills” and earlier work. The saturated palette contributes to both the intensity and the flattening of looking at photographs of exposed women, but she takes on the roles of both victim and
in a way that would make a male viewer feel uncomfortable—like seeing your daughter in a vulnerable state.” 45 This is typical of the debates that have surrounded Sherman and her work; the artist’s accounts of her own intentions often conflict with the scholarly debates about feminism and the role of women in her pictures. The contravention and discussion around the centerfolds, and Untitled #93 in particular, are emblematic of the competing readings of her work. Like the “Untitled Film Stills,” the impact of the individual centerfolds was generally overlooked in service of the theories about the work. While certainly those readings shed light on the photograph, they didn’t acknowledge how all-encompassing Sherman’s pictorial worlds are—so persuasive, in fact, that critics were up in arms about the depiction of violence, terror, and fear in her characters. The centerfolds’ references to the printed page and the feminine stereotypes found bounding across the pages of fashion magazines were further developed by Sherman in works made for, by, and about fashion. It seems only natural that she would take up the subject of fashion itself as fashion has been a constant source of inspiration for Sherman and often a leading ingredient in the creation of her characters. After all, fashion is a masquerade that women engage in on a daily basis, in hopes of attaining a more beautiful, sexy, and polished version of themselves. It is an aspirational medium sold via magazines, advertisements, billboards, television, and the Internet with a rich visual language that communicates aspects of culture, gender, and class. Sherman’s interest in the construction of femininity and mass circulation of images informs much of the work that takes fashion as its subject, illustrating not only a fascination with fashion images but also a critical stance against what they represent. Sherman’s first fashion commission, in 1983, was from the New York boutique owner Dianne Benson, who also hired Robert Mapplethorpe, Laurie Simmons, and Peter Hujar to produce photographs for advertisements. Sherman’s advertisements (fig. 34) ran in the March, April, and June 1983 issues of interview magazine. With an element of slapstick humor and theatricality, these parodies of fashion photography were never meant to stand in for traditional fashion shots. Rather than projecting glamour, sex, or wealth, they feature characters that are far from desirable—goofy, hysterical, angry, and slightly mad—challenging conventional notions of beauty and grace. The traditionally ubiquitous fashion model is replaced here with powerful and strong women, whose diverse behavior ranges from temper tantrum (Untitled #122; plate 84) to delirious outburst (Untitled #119; plate 83) to prudish giggling (Untitled #131; plate 89). The characters have an eccentric, almost gothic quality. Some critics have noted that it was in these works that Sherman’s preoccupation with the grotesque began, seen here in the use of melodrama, violence, and mutilation and eventually expressed through bulbous prostheses and hybrid species in later series such as the fairy tales and sex pictures.46 In 1984, the French fashion company Dorotheé Bis commissioned Sherman to make photographs for Vogue Paris. More extreme than the Benson pictures made a year earlier, they feature ugly characters with bloodshot eyes, bruises, and unflattering pancake makeup. Sherman said about this series: “This is going to be in French Vogue. I’ve really got to do something to rip open the French fashion world.” So I wanted to make really ugly pictures. The first couple of pictures I shot and sent to Dorotheé Bis they didn’t like at all. . . . That inspired even more depressing, bloody, ugly characters.”47 The fashion in the pictures is layered, oversized, not at all body conscious or sexy. In Untitled #133 and #137 (plate 87), the women are wrapped in heavy winter coats and sweaters and have a sullen look, disheveled hair, and bruised faces. These characters are beaten down and leader, in stark opposition to the gazelles typically found bounding across the pages of fashion magazines. On close inspection, though, the clothes are luxurious and expensive (by designers Comme des Garçons and Issey Miyake) and point to how wealth and class play into conventions of beauty and aging, topics that become more acute in later bodies of Sherman’s work from 2000 on. Violence and power are also at play here—an uneasy cruelty, perhaps a suggestion of the implicit violence found just beneath the surface of many fashion pictures. A decade later, in 1993, Harper’s Bazaar commissioned Sherman to make editorial pictures for a feature that included clothes by Christian Dior, Jean-Paul Gaultier, John Galliano, Dolce & Gabbana, Calvin Klein, and Vivienne Westwood. In these pictures, clothes are utilized like costumes to create bizarre characters, such as a coy court jester (Untitled #277), a puckered-up Cinderella (Untitled #292), and a hung-over Ghana (Untitled #319). Similarly, Sherman’s 1994 commission from Comme des Garçons for an advertising mailer includes peculiar characters like a Kabuki-esque mime (Untitled #296; plate 143) and a tattooed truck-stop diva (Untitled #299; plate 85). By hiring Sherman, Harper’s Bazaar and Comme des Garçons embraced the artist’s
challenge to the conventions of high fashion and beauty and acknowledged that their own clothes and media influence were complicit in the masquerade of fashion. With these pictures, the circle was completed, as the ideas of the postmodernists were now co-opted by the very media they were commenting on. This strategy was reprised in the 2004 collaboration between Sherman and German photographer Juergen Teller for Marc Jacobs, which featured both artists dressed and posing in character for the camera, looking sometimes like a flamboyant couple groping each other and other times like frumpy siblings (fig. 25). The exaggerated characters in Sherman’s fashion pictures turned to ostentatious heights in 2007–08 with a series of over-the-top fashion victims dressed in head-to-toe Balenciaga clothes commissioned by Vogue Paris as a way to align themselves with the cutting edge. Thus the pictures operate on several levels: the photographs are at the center of a rejection of fashion’s desire machine, yet they participate in it at the highest echelon.

Sherman’s early fashion work marks the beginning of her exploration of the ugly, macabre, and grotesque and a trajectory of the physical disintegration of the body, which she explored to their fullest potential with several series in the 1980s and 1990s, including the fairy tales (1985), disasters (1986–89), civil war (1991), sex pictures (1992), horror and surrealistic pictures (1994–96), masks (1995–96), and her 1997 film Office Killer. While she did create other series during this period, such as the snout-nosed face in Untitled #153 (plate 2), the pictures are theatrical and revel in their own artificiality. In these fantastical mise-en-scènes, elements of metamorphosis are rampant, with animal/human hybrids (such as the snout-nosed face in Untitled #153) and figures that appear neither male nor female, and barely human (see plate 127). The series encompasses a nightmarish perspective on the world that becomes increasingly pronounced in Sherman’s work in the years to follow.

With the fairy tales, Sherman introduced prosthetic parts as a stand-in for the human body, a practice that would soon replace the figure altogether. Even when Sherman is in the photographs, she appears doll-like and artificial, as in Untitled #193. Reminiscent of a crime scene photo, the picture shows a dead woman lying on the ground and covered in dirt, her glassy eyes opened wide, as if shocked by her own violent demise. Unlike a police photograph, however, this larger-than-life glossy picture is full of seductive detail, with rich descriptions of the colors and textures of the gravel background, the woman’s mussed hair, and her waxy face. With this picture, the suspense and suggestion of violence lurking in the “Untitled Film Stills” and centerfolds is amplified and articulated.

In the series referred to as the disasters (1986–89), Sherman continued the theatrical devices, themes, and motifs explored in the fairy tales. The figure disappears (or is only nominally present) in favor of outlandish and revolting scenes that explore the psychic terrain of the object. The pictures feature mutilated body parts, blow-up dolls (Untitled #188), rotting food, and substances that look like vomit (Untitled #182; plate 110), faces, and blood,
and recall female bodily functions such as menstruation and giving birth, as well as bulimia, an illness associated with women (see Untitled #175 [plate 116]). Despite their gruesome qualities, the pictures are not without humor, as seen in the reflection of a screaming face in a pair of glasses in Untitled #175. These landscapes of decay are visually rich and painterly in texture and color. Sherman said of these pictures that she “wanted something visually offensive but seductive, beautiful, and textural as well, to suck you in and then repulse you.”

While some of the photographs do have shock value, that is not their primary intent; rather, the carefully arranged tableaus are surrogates for larger narratives of violence, decomposition, and death.

These grotesque bodies of work marked a turn away from the representations of women, perhaps reflecting Sherman’s response to the feminist critical discourse surrounding the “Film Stills” and center-folds. Although debates about feminism and the issue of pornography certainly continued with the sex pictures, the disasters and the subsequent horror and surreal series engendered new ways of framing her work in terms of the psychoanalytic, grotesque, and abject, as articulated by art historians such as Amada Cruz, Hal Foster, and Norman Bryson, among others. The lack of the figure was read by Cruz as a rejection of the “socialized body that we encounter daily in the media” and by Foster (who read Sherman’s pictures through Julia Kristeva’s construct of abjection) as proof of the “body turned inside out, of the subject literally abducted, thrown out.” However, Sherman’s shift was motivated at least in part by practicality; she was getting increasingly tired of using herself as a model and had become interested in the theatrical narratives made possible by using dolls, prosthetic body parts, and props. She also made these pictures in response to her increased popularity in the art world. Sherman added makeup and pubic hair to the plasticized, hairless medical dolls and they simply mimic erotic poses and bodies themselves are sterile and medical, while the scenarios are pornographic, the bodies themselves are sterile and medical, and they simply mimic erotic poses and acts (both gay and straight). Their manufactured quality enhances the allusion to pornographic photographs and videos, forcing viewers to become self-conscious about watching themselves watching, keenly aware of the cycle of fetishism and voyeurism on which pornography thrives. Sherman commented on people’s reactions to viewing the work: “I got the feeling at the opening and at the other times I would walk into the gallery that people would look around and quickly leave. I think someone told me that they couldn’t stay in the gallery very long. . . . I think the show made people very uncomfortable.”

The sex pictures are distinctly unerotic. While the scenarios are pornographic, the bodies themselves are sterile and medical, and they simply mimic erotic poses and acts (both gay and straight). Their manufactured quality enhances the allusion to pornographic photographs and videos, forcing viewers to become self-conscious about watching themselves watching, keenly aware of the cycle of fetishism and voyeurism on which pornography thrives. Sherman commented on people’s reactions to viewing the work: “I got the feeling at the opening and at the other times I would walk into the gallery that people would look around and quickly leave. I think someone told me that they couldn’t stay in the gallery very long. . . . I think the show made people very uncomfortable.” Although the scenarios were obviously fake, they nonetheless succeeded in making the viewers feel complete in the act of looking and photographing.

On one level, the sex pictures were Sherman’s response to Jeff Koons’s bombastic paintings of himself having sex with his wife, Ilona Staller, a former porn star also known as Cicciolina (fig. 26). But they were also made against the politically charged backdrop of debates about censorship and federal funding of the arts after a public outcry against government sponsorship of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. Sherman said: “The censorship issue is important. . . . I felt that my previous show, . . . was so commercially successful that it made sense to go out on a limb in these difficult times. Since I really don’t expect people to buy my art anyway, and because I don’t have to worry about funding or being censored at this point, I thought I might as well really try to pull out all the

Fig. 26
Jeff Koons. Ponytail, 1985. Oil, ink, silkscreen on canvas, 40 x 60” (101.6 x 152.4 cm)
stops and just make something that directly deals with sexuality and censorship without compromising my values. The sex pictures also operated under the specter of AIDS, during a period when the body and its surrogate took on new meanings in the context of images of wasted AIDS victims. Devoid of pleasure and intimacy, Sherman’s sex pictures reflect a fear of the body and suggest the degeneration and dehumanization of sexual desire. In opposition to the use of the body as a direct instrument of action in art of the 1960s and early 1970s, the bodies in Sherman’s sex pictures are empty receptacles that function as signifiers for death, power, and aggression.

The relationship of the sex pictures to Hans Bellmer’s experiments with dolls (fig. 27) has been discussed numerous times in the literature on Sherman. Bellmer’s Poupées, which he constructed and photographed in the 1930s, are surrogates for his fantasies and imagination and comprise terrifying images of women. As a female author of her works, however, Sherman creates photographs that suggest a critique of the fetishes of male artists such as Bellmer and other Surrealists who engaged in similar fantastical dismemberments of the female body. While Bellmer’s Poupées are a key precedent, perhaps a more fruitful and revealing comparison is with Sherman’s contemporary Charles Ray, in particular his sculpture Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley . . . (fig. 29), a life-scale depiction of the artist engaged in an orgy with himself, made in the same year as Sherman’s sex pictures. While Sherman’s pictures are artificial and de-individualized and Ray’s sculpture is realistic, they share an oddly asexual quality in their examination of how the body functions in a masturbatory image culture that seems to endlessly multiply on itself. Robert Gober also explored the fragmented body in his sculptural works, which resonate with many of the themes found in Sherman’s sex pictures. Like her pictures, Gober’s dismembered and damaged bodies (fig. 28) were a response to AIDS and political art under fire, as well as an exploration of the language of identity politics. Both artists paint a bleak picture of the cultural and political landscape of the early 1990s.

The artificial tableaus of body parts and grotesque subjects appeared again in
Sherman’s 1997 feature film, Office Killer (fig. 30), starring Carol Kane, Molly Ringwald, and Jeanne Tripplehorn. Set in the generic offices of a Consumer Reports–type magazine, Office Killer follows Dorine (played by Kane), a mousy copy editor whose accidental murder of a coworker precipitates a killing spree, after which she hides the bodies in her basement to play house with them. The film resonates with much of the photographic work Sherman was making at the time—especially the colorful tableaus of vomit, body parts, and excrement—and her love of horror films is seen in the movie’s campy melodrama (an underappreciated aspect of the work). In the film, the office is dominated by female characters wearing power suits and gaudy jewelry, smacking gum, and being catty. Ringwald’s character, Kim Poole, an ambitious young office worker, is reminiscent of the office girls in the “Untitled Film Stills” (such as #21 [plate 35]) or Untitled #74 (plate 108) from the rear screen projection series that followed in 1980. The film’s self-awareness and referentiality (to her own work and to B horror movies) echo the strategies of Sherman’s photographic work.

It seems inevitable that Sherman would turn to the subject of art itself at some point in her career. The body of work known as the History portraits (also referred to as old masters) was first exhibited in 1990 at Metro Pictures to great acclaim. A critic noted in his review that the gallery “resembled the Impressionist wing of the Met on a busy Sunday” and that the extensive press coverage of the exhibition accorded the works “the kind of cultural legitimation usually reserved for traditional Masterpieces.”60 The series began in 1988, when Artes Magnus, a producer of limited-edition tableware made by artists, invited Sherman to create a dinnerware and tea service with the French porcelain house Limoges, which houses the original molds for the eighteenth-century designs made for Madame de Pompadour, mistress of King Louis XV. Sherman’s porcelain objects (fig. 31) are adorned with images of herself as Pompadour, and later that year, for a group exhibition at Metro Pictures, Sherman produced a photograph based on the character (Untitled #183; plate 128). The next year, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, Sherman produced a group of pictures for a show at Chantal Crousel gallery in Paris inspired by that event (Untitled #193–201; see, for example, plates 119, 120, 122, 125, and 139). As the series continued to take shape, she made a second group of pictures during a two-month stay in Rome in late 1989, and then produced the last group in the series when she returned to New York. These classically composed portraits, presented in ornate and gilded frames, refer to Old Master paintings in their format and size. The subjects, who include aristocrats, Madonna and child, clergymen, women of leisure, and milkmaids, pose with props, costumes, and prostheses. The portraits borrow from a number of art historical periods—Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical—and make allusions to Raphael, Caravaggio, Fragonard, and Ingres. (Of course, all the Old Master painters were men.) This free-association sampling creates an illusion of familiarity, but not to specific eras or styles (just as the “Untitled Film Stills” evoke generic types, not particular films). With the exception of a few works that were inspired by specific paintings, most of Sherman’s subjects are...
anonymous, although their status, roles, and class are denoted through clothing, props, backgrounds, and set dressing. The obvious use of prostheses builds on the theatricality of the fairy tale and disaster series, and the large noses, bulging bellies, squinting breasts, warts, and unibrows that populate these pictures make for less-than-graceful portraits of nobility, one critic described them as “but-ugly aristocrats.”

The history portraits toe the line between humorous parody and grotesque, as in Untitled #10 (plate 10), which pokes fun at the Renaissance treatment of female anatomy by featuring an obviously artificial, improbably globular breast.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

For the first time in Sherman’s work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman’s previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women’s witchy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general “Old Master” era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.
Sherman has inserted her own interpretation of these ossified paintings, turning them into contemporary artifacts of a bygone era. Sherman continued to test the boundaries of portraiture, photography, and perhaps most importantly, identity with a series of head shots executed in 2000–2002 and referred to as Hollywood/West Coast/East Coast. The format recalls ID pictures, head shots, or vanity portraits made in garden-variety portrait studios by professional photographers (who are fast becoming obsolete in the digital era). In her role as both sitter and artist and created new avenues through which to explore the very apparatus of portrait photography itself. Shown at Metro Pictures in 2001. Whatever part of the country they’re from, we’ve seen these women before—on reality TV, in soap operas, or at the PTA meeting. The series marked a return to a more intimate scale and the figures after Sherman had been working for almost a decade with dolls and props. The series also recalls early works, such as Untitled A–E, where the focus was on the transformative qualities of makeup, hair, expression, and pose, and the recognition of certain stereotypes as powerful transmitters of cultural clichés. Here Sherman utilizes makeup, clothes, and styling to project well-drawn personas. The pictures speak to the pervasive youth-obsessed culture of the twenty-first century and expertly capture the slippage between the artificial face of our personas—the photo-op-ready glamazons—and the sincere individuals underneath the garish makeup and silicone implants. Sherman has explored the theme of failure in several of her series, played out to a certain extent in some of the protagonists of the “Film Stills” and to a greater end with works she created in the mid-1990s. With this series, however, the desperation of the characters is palpable. While there is an element of satire, there are equal, if not greater, parts of compassion for, and affinity with, these women. The uneasy relationship between artificial surface appearance and inner psychology in portraiture is explored in a series of pictures of clowns Sherman made a few years later, in 2003–04. This series builds on the exploration of the conventions of portraiture seen in the history portraits and head shots, but it is also an extension of Sherman’s interest in fairy tales, black humor, and masks. The clowns evoke circus posters in their style but represent a range of emotions and states, from hysterical passion to tragedy. Rather than simply impersonate the clichéd clown, Sherman created a cast of players who are cruel, wicked, disturbed, even lustful—in her words, “intense, with a nasty side or an ugly side, but also with a real pathos.”

Clowns wear masks and are predomi-
nantly men, and for these portraits Sherman adopted a variety of male characters as well as ambiguously gendered ones, recalling the hybrids of the fairy tales and sex pictures. She was interested in moving beyond the strict set of defined roles and codified types generally assigned to clowns (like the happy or sad clown) to reveal the persona underneath, who might be “an alcoholic, or even a child molester.” (For instance, in Untitled #416 [plate 149] the clown inexplicably wears a neck brace, suggesting violence or an accident.) This opens the door to multiple layers of meaning and narrative: the surface facade denoted by makeup and clothes, as well as the underlayer expressed by Sherman through gesture, pose, and styling.

There is a deeply unsettling quality that permeates the clowns, underscored by the aggressive makeup and garish Day-Glo backdrops. Sherman shot the characters on slide film and made all the backgrounds digitally, allowing her to incorporate digital backgrounds with a few of the head-shot pictures, such as Untitled #408 (plate 103) and #409, and would shoot her first complete series digitally with the Balenciaga pictures in 2007–08.) The new digital techniques she employed in the series recall her college experiments with cutouts of multiple figures, such as Doll Clothes, her 1975 stop-motion animated 16mm film, and the 1976 collages Untitled #408 and #409 (plates 103 and 104), which evoke the early experiments in motion photography by Eadweard Muybridge. Plate no. 495

Fig. 36
Eadweard Muybridge. Plate no. 495 from Animal Locomotion. 1887. Collotype, 7 1/4 x 14 3/4” (18 x 37.5 cm).
University of Pennsylvania Archives
examined the pathos of the clown; several works by Nauman feature clowns in histrionically extreme states, most memorably in his 1987 video installation Clown Torture (fig. 37), a disturbing spectacle of noise exploring themes of surveillance, torture, and madness. Like Nauman, Sherman uses the guise of the clown to explore uncanny and monstrous impulses that have a complex hold on the public imagination.

The larger-than-life clowns made way for the 2008 series of society portraits, an even larger set of pictures (some tower over eight feet tall). They are a continuation of themes explored in the head shots and the series of Balenciaga pictures made in 2007–08 for Vogue Paris. The 2008 society portraits feature women “of a certain age” loom large, unmistakably visible. Among other locations.

The larger-than-life clowns made way for the 2008 series of society portraits, an even larger set of pictures (some tower over eight feet tall). They are a continuation of themes explored in the head shots and the series of Balenciaga pictures made in 2007–08 for Vogue Paris. The 2008 society portraits feature women “of a certain age” loom large, unmistakably visible. Among other locations.

The larger-than-life clowns made way for the 2008 series of society portraits, an even larger set of pictures (some tower over eight feet tall). They are a continuation of themes explored in the head shots and the series of Balenciaga pictures made in 2007–08 for Vogue Paris. The 2008 society portraits feature women “of a certain age” loom large, unmistakably visible. Among other locations.

The larger-than-life clowns made way for the 2008 series of society portraits, an even larger set of pictures (some tower over eight feet tall). They are a continuation of themes explored in the head shots and the series of Balenciaga pictures made in 2007–08 for Vogue Paris. The 2008 society portraits feature women “of a certain age” loom large, unmistakably visible. Among other locations.

The larger-than-life clowns made way for the 2008 series of society portraits, an even larger set of pictures (some tower over eight feet tall). They are a continuation of themes explored in the head shots and the series of Balenciaga pictures made in 2007–08 for Vogue Paris. The 2008 society portraits feature women “of a certain age” loom large, unmistakably visible. Among other locations.

The larger-than-life clowns made way for the 2008 series of society portraits, an even larger set of pictures (some tower over eight feet tall). They are a continuation of themes explored in the head shots and the series of Balenciaga pictures made in 2007–08 for Vogue Paris. The 2008 society portraits feature women “of a certain age” loom large, unmistakably visible. Among other locations.
空间的象征意义，以及它们如何将观众的视角带入一个超现实的、不可预知的环境。它们围绕着多个墙壁，创造出一个观众可以置身其中的沉浸式虚构环境。这些豪华的模特预示着一场终结。她们的华丽、虚荣以及对青春和地位的追求，在这个尺度上变得尤为明显。这些人物是弗里达·卡罗（plate 173）、一个拿着和平鸽的小女孩（plate 174）、一个自制的杂耍者的连体衣（plate 174），以及裹着围巾的老婆婆（图178）。这些人物在色相不同的背景下被拍摄，所以它们本质上是照片，它们漂浮在空间中，围绕并遮挡了观众的眼睛。在数字图像中，摄影师通过Photoshop来改变脸型，创造出一种怪异的效果。这是一张于2010年拍摄的肖像，如其它一些Sherman的最好作品一样，它是一个身份和性别的合成体。在无限的可能性中，照片似乎是对一个时代的注解，即金融崩溃的2008年，以及奢华与财富的消逝。在她的壁画中，一些人物显得很压抑，疲惫，甚至有点恶心。虽然她们裸脸，没有化妆，但 Sherman用同样的技术来创作壁画，这些人物被置于一个大屏幕上，它们看起来像是被创造出来的。在“未完成”系列中，数字技术被用来创造壁画。这是一次，但是数字技术被用来创造壁画。这是一次实验性的工作，摄影师对她的脸型的修改通过Digital方式实现，而不是使用化妆或假肢。因为数字技术可以创造出令人难以置信的影像，就像你不能与之交谈一样。

这些字符是黑色背景的，看起来像是由Sherman创作的，被镜像并被Photoshop处理。这些人物的存在令现实和虚幻相融合。在对过去的服饰和造型的重现中，她们看起来像是来自她们自己的幻想世界，这些幻想世界里，幻想和现实相融合。这些人物不适应一个明确的类别，就像她其他系列的人物一样。作者：瑞森

Sherman的职业生涯中，她从未公布过自己的意图。她从未承认过自己用数字技术来改变脸型，而是利用她对自己世界的理解。在试图宣称它为自己的东西时，她拒绝了任何理论框架，也没有批评过任何理论的框架。她是否已经打破了任何理论的框架，还是她已经放弃了所有的理论？Sherman的这部作品是否有内在的美学意义？Sherman从未公开过她的意图，因为她的沉默反而增加了人们对她的工作兴趣。学生和教授们已经写了很多关于她的照片，她的工作同样地被博物馆、画廊和收藏家们所接受，甚至比在流行文化中更受欢迎。
through the prism of photography, and how cultural myths, icons, and narratives to how we understand the proliferation of debates about modes of representation in Sherman's career matured during the change that occurred during that era. Her work represents the fundamental sea early 1980s she was one of the main agents arrival of photography on art's main and narrative capacity. Her work signaled brilliantly exploited the medium's plasticity particularly suited to the synthesis of the mask, and seduce. Photography is thing about photography: its ability to lie, enormously with multiple audiences. But the more questions we ask and the closer we look, the more the fiction unravels. There is no real Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily. Her work speaks to the conspiratorial role that images we carry in our collective imagination images play in society's self-visualization. There is no real Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily. Her work speaks to the conspiratorial role that images we carry in our collective imagination images play in society's self-visualization. There is no real Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily. Her work speaks to the conspiratorial role that images we carry in our collective imagination images play in society's self-visualization. There is no real Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily. Her work speaks to the conspiratorial role that images we carry in our collective imagination images play in society's self-visualization. There is no real Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily. Her work speaks to the conspiratorial role that images we carry in our collective imagination images play in society's self-visualization. There is no real Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily. Her work speaks to the conspiratorial role that images we carry in our collective imagination images play in society's self-visualization.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that Sherman is a crucial

37   See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative


38   While much of the critical discourse on the

early Sherman centerfolds focused on the phallic, sexuality as the most significant aspect of the

work, the anthropologist Michelle Dockery challenged

the formal categories associated with the vertical plane. She

located this centering of the vertical axis of high art to the


Slate: Cindy Sherman,” in Burton, ed., Cindy Sherman

40   Tomkins, “Her Secret Identities,” 81.

41   David Frankel, “Cindy Sherman’s Tales of Terror,”


42   In a letter to the editor in the next issue of the

magazine, it represents a qualitative leap in that genre,

43   Roberta Smith, “Spacewalk,” Village Voice

June 2003, 186.

44   Interview with Fuku, 165.

45   Tomkins, “Her Secret Identities,” 79.

In “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body,” 144.

46   Tomkins, “Her Secret Identities,” 81.

47   Larry Fink, “Cindy Sherman: Tales of Terror,”


48   Interview with Fuku, 164.

49   In 1981, New Directions published the book Elster’s

book The Elster’s Body, which is a collection of essays by

the Brothers Grimm and illustrated with Sherman’s photographs.

50   Tomkins, “Her Secret Identities,” 81.

51   See Anne Marie Kooiman, “Observations, Abjects, and

Masks: Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman,” and Elizabeth A. T.暑假

Cindy Sherman: Retrospective, 1–17 and

52   Michael Kimmelman, “At the Met With: Cindy


53   In “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body,” 144.

54   In his essay “Photography after Photography,”

Michael Kimmelman concludes that Sherman’s centerfolds

are a fairy tale based on a story by the Brothers Grimm and

55   Ingvild Goetz and Christiane Meyer-Stoll, Cindy

Sherman: Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art


56   Lawrence Alloway, Lois Hole, and Joseph Marshall, and

57   Tomkins, “Her Secret Identities,” 81.

58   See Murray, Cindy Sherman: Untitled; Foster, “Oklahoma, Alpina, Tuxedo”; and Johanna Burton, “A Body


59   Trumpy, Cindy Sherman: Untitled; "Portrait in the Mirrors of Cindy Sherman: Portraits in the Mirrors of Her Antics Amongst,”


60   Mike Eckmann and Lorraine Seavey, Cindy Sherman:

Diary (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1994), 69.


62   Daniel Notes, “In Your Face?,” in John Esposito and Nicole


63   Daniel Notes, “In Your Face?,” in John Esposito and Nicole


64   Due to the fragility of the original material, Only

Clown’s Legs was transferred to DVD in 2006, and can be rented

from DVD. The film was not viewed between 1975 and 2006,

the film was not dated at the Metro Pictures gallery for the first time since the year it was made.

65   Michael Kimmelman, “At the Met With: Cindy


66   Due to the fragility of the original material, Only

Clown’s Legs was transferred to DVD in 2006, and can be rented

from DVD. The film was not viewed between 1975 and 2006,

the film was not dated at the Metro Pictures gallery for the first time since the year it was made.


68   Ibid.

69   Conversation with the author, June 6, 2010.

70   Conversation with the author, June 6, 2010.

71   Conversation with the author, June 6, 2010.

72   Ibid.

73   Ibid.