



LEFT Cindy Sherman,
Untitled Film Still #7, 1978.

OPPOSITE Cindy Sherman,
Untitled #474, 2008.

The Cindy Sherman Effect

BY INVENTING HER OWN GENRE, CINDY SHERMAN HAS
INFLUENCED THE WAY GENERATIONS OF ARTISTS THINK ABOUT
PHOTOGRAPHY, PORTRAITURE, NARRATIVE, AND IDENTITY

BY PHOEBE HOBAN

Starting with the game-changing black-and-white “Untitled Film Stills” she created in the late 1970s, Cindy Sherman has shown herself to be the ultimate master of self-morphing, utilizing everything from old-fashioned makeup and prosthetics to digital technology, inventing and portraying extraordinary alter egos and multiple identities that brilliantly reflect our image-saturated culture—and in the process inventing her own genre.

Call it the Cindy Sherman effect. Whether it’s those iconic stills of faux cinema moments or her more recent scary-funny clown series, the tragicomic coven of aging society women or the larger-than-life

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ABOVE **Ryan Trecartin**, *P.opular S.ky (section ish)*, 2009, HD-video still.
BELOW **Jillian Mayer**, *I Am Your Grandma*, 2011, video still.



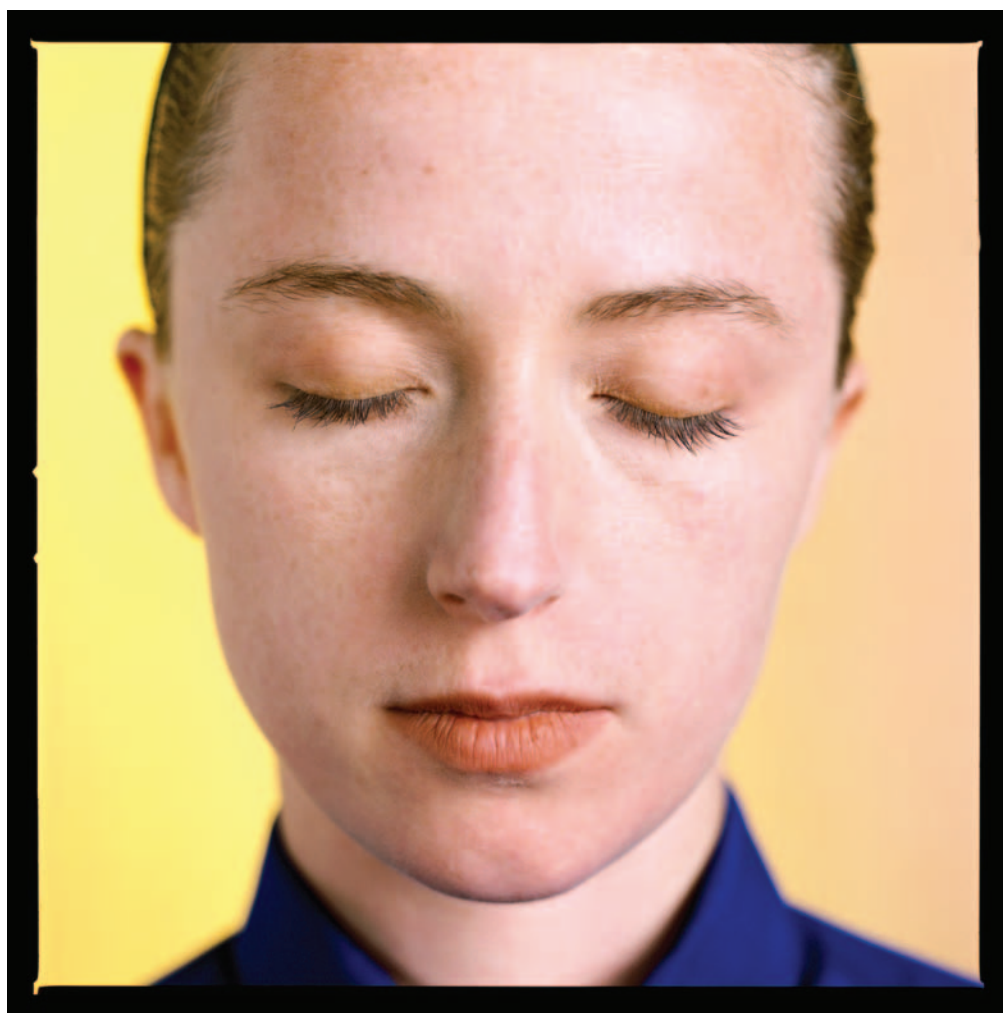
TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ELIZABETH DEE, NEW YORK; BOTTOM: COURTESY DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY, MIAMI

photographic murals that popped up at the 2011 Venice Biennale (much to the delight of visitors who posed with them), Sherman's brilliant manipulations of her own image have mirrored—and in some cases anticipated—the zeitgeist. Now, with the major career retrospective that opens at New York's Museum of Modern Art on February 26 (up through June 11), the full extent of Sherman's imagination and prescient vision will be on display.

"Her work has in some ways presaged the media age

making each of her staged characters the star of an implicit narrative, from the lush color centerfolds that followed the "Film Stills," in 1982, to the strangely sexualized "Broken Dolls" of the '90s. No wonder the work of so many artists parallels Sherman's, or at least mines similar conceptual veins: role-playing and the nature of identity; sexual and cultural stereotypes; the pressure to conform to the images of perfection promulgated through television, film, and advertising.

Abe Frajndlich, portrait of Cindy Sherman on the cover of *Penelope's Hungry Eyes*, 2011.



that we live in now and also absolutely responds to it," says MoMA photography curator Eva Respini, who co-organized the retrospective, which includes 175 images. "A number of younger artists are very much indebted to Sherman in their exploration of not just identity but also the nature of representation. Now we all take it for granted that a photograph can be Photoshopped. We live in the era of YouTube fame and reality-TV shows and makeovers, where you can be anything you want to be any minute of the day, and artists are responding to that. Cindy was one of the first to explore the idea of the malleability or fluidity of identity."

Sherman's coup was to cast herself as subject matter,

Think of Lisa Yuskavage's send-ups of idealized female anatomy, George Condo's bizarre cast of invented characters, or the work of such chameleon-like performers as Tracey Ullman, Anna Deavere Smith, and Tamy Ben Tor. And then there is a whole new crop of artists whose sensibility has been shaped by the Internet and social media, major influences that didn't even exist when Sherman first began her photographic odyssey.

Sherman's paradigm shift was one step ahead of technology. Her kaleidoscopic investigation of the essence of her own—and, by extension, society's—identity complex has relied on ingenuity, not gigabytes. Thanks to today's digital hegemony, the notion of fluidity—for Sherman an

intellectual and artistic ploy—is now not just de rigueur but de facto. Polymorphously perverse has become pervasive. The implicit has become increasingly explicit. Artistic personae can not only be instantly created but also instantly animated and disseminated. Art via avatar.

Take Ryan Trecartin, who was anointed an art star in 2009, when his work was seen in the New Museum’s “Younger Than Jesus” show. Now 30, he began taking pictures of himself and his friends role playing and cross-dressing while still in junior high school, when he was also introduced to Sherman’s work. Trecartin’s trippy videos feature himself and others in wild makeup, wigs, and costumes à la Sherman—if Sherman were on acid. His psychedelically hued, reality TV–infused shape-shifting is Proteus in a Cuisinart—perfect for the attention-deficit disorder of today’s app-addicted world. Says Respini, “He’s sort of the 21st-century inheritor of Cindy’s legacy.”

The work of 27-year-old Jillian Mayer is somewhat similar to Trecartin’s and shares with it a Shermansque sense of masquerade. In the hilarious video *I Am Your Grandma*

(2011), Mayer plays both the future grandmother of a furious infant and the bawling baby. But this is grandma as gremlin.

Wearing various Mardi Gras getups—makeup, headgear, and masks that are alternately insectlike, coneheaded, witchy, and shamanesque—she chants, “I wish I could have met you. I would have hugged you so. But you are in the future, you get loved by video.” In the disturbing *H.I.L.M.D.A.* (2011), Mayer, like Sherman in her “History Portraits” (1988–90), appropriates a famous artwork. Her impersonation of Venus de Milo takes a violent turn when she amputates her own arms.

Says Mayer, “Cindy Sherman opened a lot of the doors. She was the trendsetter in terms of distorted characters within self-portraiture. Originally painters painted self-portraits, and then she kind of blew it open with photographic portraiture, and now there are all these avenues younger artists are taking, which would not have been so easy without her work.”

As Whitney Museum curator Donna De Salvo observes, “Cindy is an incredibly influential figure. She fundamentally nailed it in terms of understanding the way images are constructed. Portraiture was never considered something conceptual in quite the way that she took it on.”

By deconstructing and reinventing portraiture, which in itself was something of a dead genre when she arrived on the scene, Sherman influenced not only photographers but also painters and performance and video artists. And by limiting her subject matter strictly to herself, while at the same time excavating countless permutations, she inspired a generation of younger artists to explore their own identities across a range of mediums. “What she does is within a very narrow set of parameters

that she’s been able to mine brilliantly for the last 35 years,” says Respini.

Photographer Abe Frajndlich’s recent book *Penelope’s Hungry Eyes*, published by Schirmer/Mosel, a collection of his portraits of famous photographers, features a stunning picture of Sherman on its cover. Eyes closed, bare of any artifice but the slightest hint of makeup, Sherman is shown totally unmasked.

Says Frajndlich, “What Cindy did, starting with the ‘Film Stills,’ is she realized the degree to which the stills used to promote cinema influenced the way people portrayed themselves, and she saw it as pure theater. That’s what I see as

OPPOSITE Catherine Opie, *Pig Pen (Tattoos)*, 2009.

RIGHT Katy Grannan, *Dale, Lombard Street*, 2006.



one of her great strengths—the theatrics of camera vision. And she played it out incredibly, and then she just used that as the stepping-stone to take it further and further and further out. So much of her work is performance, so much is improvisation, so much is theater. I am sure there are all kinds of people who look at Cindy as their god.”

Other Sherman progeny include Nikki S. Lee, who impersonates a member of a cultural group (yuppies, senior citizens), interacts with each group, and then documents it in a snapshot; and Yasumasa Morimura, who photographs himself as various cinematic femmes fatales, from Audrey Hepburn to Elizabeth Taylor. Then there is Laurel Nakadate, who doesn’t so much transform herself as insinuate herself into a narrative by picking up single men on the street and then videotaping them as they engage with her in an anonymous fantasy.

Sherman's dazzling skill as a perpetual shape-shifter is perhaps her major contribution to contemporary art. A less conspicuous but equally important legacy involves the way her work has permanently blurred the line between fine art and photography. Sherman's oeuvre, from her first solo show, in 1981, helped bring about a seismic shift in the curatorial and art-historical debate about photography as high art. Although there are many famously innovative photographers who came before her, from Man Ray to Diane Arbus, all of them were considered first and foremost photographers. Thanks in part to Sherman, since the early '80s photography has been considered on a par with painting.

"I think I was part of a movement, a generation, and maybe the most popular one of that movement at the

photographers has followed in Sherman's wake. Catherine Opie's work focuses on gender identity. In the 1990s, she began taking pictures of herself and her lesbian friends in Los Angeles sporting obviously fake mustaches. In a later series, the transgender element became more nuanced. "After the portraits became very well known, [people] would point to a portrait and say, 'Is it a boy or a girl?' And I would say it's a woman, but that's not the point of the body of work. The point is that we are very fluid with gender," Opie explains in a video interview on YouTube.

Katy Grannan has taken a different tack in her striking explorations of mutable identity. For her series "The Westerns," she placed ads in local newspapers inviting people to pose as they wished for photographs. Cultural stereotypes have clearly permeated the collective unconscious;



LEFT Alex Prager, *Desiree*, from the series "The Big Valley," 2008.

OPPOSITE Julie Heffernan, *Self Portrait Sitting on a World*, 2008, oil on canvas.

time, but it probably would have happened without me," says Sherman. "The art world was ready for something new, something beyond painting. A group of mostly women happened to be the ones to sort of take that on, partly because they felt excluded from the rest of the [male] art world, and thought, 'Nobody is playing with photography. Let's take that as our tool.'"

Observes Dennis Scholl, who was an early collector of the work of Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Catherine Opie, and Katy Grannan, "I really think about all the women who went to Yale to study photography who would have never had an inkling of pursuing this kind of art if it weren't for Cindy. She made it seem possible, and she also took photography and helped make it not the redheaded stepchild. She played a lion's share in the crossover of photography as fine art."

Not surprisingly, a second wave of innovative female

women (and men dressing as women) splay themselves, nude and clothed, in bedrooms and on beaches, in poses that look cinematic even if they are not. Shot in color, many of the images are vaguely reminiscent of Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills."

Lorna Simpson recently took a page straight from the "Stills" when she used a found archive of 1950s black-and-white photographs of an African American woman to create three different series, including one in which she replaced the woman with images of herself and another in which she added her gender-bending interpretations.

Alex Prager, who photographs her Los Angeles-based coterie to create tableaux of archetypes fully attired in makeup, wigs, and retro fashions, is a direct descendant of Sherman. Prager too draws on films for inspiration. But her pictures are, she says, "exaggerated moments I decided to create that may have happened in real life." Says Prager of

Sherman's influence, "She's a woman commenting on women and so am I. I'm also attracted to the weird and bizarre, and she's a master at that. I relate to her use of color, lighting, and the way her 'scenes' are mocked up in a way that is never too clean."

Sherman's staged scenes were in themselves something of an innovation. Respini says, "She emerged just before the boom of staged photography in the '90s, with people like Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall. And I think it's no coincidence that her extremely fictional photographs came before what is now the de facto mode of photography—staged and fictional cinematic tableaux. A lot of younger artists are interested in using a photographic space that is a fictional space, whether it's created in the studio or appropriating pictures from the Internet."

In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, Sherman's reach also extends to painters. Says Julie Heffernan, "I remember how exciting it was to see Cindy Sherman's work for the first time, to walk into a gallery and see, all of a sudden, a room full of women's faces. Disguised or not, it was thrilling. Here we were, women coming out of the woodwork. She mirrored my state of mind at the time, a woman artist who was tired of all the bravado of the male-dominated art world."

Heffernan, whose paintings sometimes include her own image and tend toward the baroque, also credits Sherman with "giving me permission to dig deeper and trust what I would find there. It was like she was telling us secrets at a slumber party and we all got more wild and indiscreet along with her."

Adds Marilyn Minter, who uses photographs as the basis of her paintings and is renowned for her lush, visceral images of mud-splashed *Sex and the City*-style shoes, models gagging on pearls, and tongues lapping oozing liquids, "Cindy changed all women's lives—she put names to the stereotypes associated with women by making pictures of them. When you can name something, you can laugh at it."

Claudia Doring-Baez has gone all out in her appreciation of Sherman's work, appropriating the "Film Stills" in a series of oil paintings for her graduate thesis project at the Studio School in New York, including such classics as *Untitled Film Still #7*, in which a slip-clad Sherman is framed in a window, holding a martini glass. Below her looms a mysterious figure in a straw hat. "I was born in 1960, so when Cindy's work came out in the '80s it was revolutionary, it was amazing," Doring-Baez says. "She was the first woman who empowered women at the time. Being a woman is an identity problem. We are all every single one of those women that Cindy created."

Of course, it is not only female artists who respond strongly to Sherman's work. John Currin says he has been fascinated by *Untitled Film Still #7* for years. "I think

Sherman has obviously influenced me, or I've just ripped things off from her. I thought the straw hat in that image was an amazing sinister presence. It stuck with me, and I used it in *The Dogwood Thieves*, which is a painting of two women clutching a hat. Cindy is someone who can create a new kind of scary clown that is not a cliché. Her work is very straightforwardly put together, but it is incredibly mysterious and magical."

Perhaps the world's most self-effacing artist (literally and figuratively), Sherman refuses to take any credit for her innovations. What has she herself discovered through her work? "I think it has made me realize that we've all chosen

OPPOSITE Claudia Doring-Baez, *Untitled Film Still #7*, 2011, oil on canvas.

RIGHT John Currin, *The Dogwood Thieves*, 2010, oil on canvas.



who we are in terms of how we want the world to see us," she says.

True to form, Sherman's approach remains modestly low tech. Although her most recent work relies on Photoshop to subtly alter her face, provide intricate backgrounds, or even clone similar personae within a single piece, "I still like the idea of challenging myself through the more hands-on methods, only because I think it's more challenging when you are limited," Sherman says.

"With Photoshop anything goes, and I don't want to make easy crazy characters just because I can. I think there are some artists who are fine without any boundaries. It somehow frees them. But I really need certain limitations to know how far I can go and work within that." Few current artists have gone as far. ■