

# Cindy Sherman Retrospective

December 2, 2006 thru January 28, 2007



Kunsthhaus Bregenz

**Press conference:**

**Thursday, November 30, 2006, 12 noon**

**Opening: Friday, December 1, 2006, 8.00 p.m.**

**The exhibition Cindy Sherman has been organized by the Jeu de Paume, Paris, and co produced with the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, and the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin.**

Ever since her first works some thirty years ago, Cindy Sherman has herself been pretty much the sole model for her elaborately staged images. In each series, she has used costumes, make-up, props and even prostheses to turn herself into the personas that she photographs in the studio. The result is a major body of work, and one of the first in the field of contemporary visual art to be wholly photographic.

Funny, grating, sometimes brutal, the figures in this gallery of figures explore cultural and social stereotypes and their representation in the media, from magazine centrefolds to advertisements, films and classical painting. What emerges through these images is a subtle analysis of individual identity, both the fantasies that it generates and the forces that shape it. This immersion in the uncertain, conflictual zones where individual identity struggles with the collective imaginary, stereotypes and issues of symbolic power, can be either playful or – when it touches on horror and repulsion, on the decay and dismembering of the body – very dark.

This retrospective, featuring work from 1975 to 2005, shows the development and richly inventive quality of Sherman's art and gives a sense of its structuring themes and the very pertinent questions that it raises.

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**Exhibition venues/dates**

- Louisiana Museum for Moderne Kunst, Humlebæk, Denmark, 9 February – 13 May 2007
- Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin, Germany, 13 June – 10 September 2007

**The retrospective presented at the KunsthauB BregenZ features over 250 works, most of them from the artist's most famous series:**

- *Doll Clothes*, 1975 B/W super 8 film, 2'22
- *Untitled ABCDE*, 1975 x 5 photographs: the complete series
- *Untitled from Bus Riders*, 1976-2005 x 20
- *Murder Mystery*, 1976-2000 x 17: the complete series
- *Untitled Film Stills*, 1977-1980 x 70: the complete series
- *Rear Screen Projections*, 1980 x 12
- *Centerfolds or Horizontals*, 1981 x 12: the complete series
- *Pink Robes*, 1982 x 3
- *Untitled*, 1982 x 4
- *Fashion*, 1983-1984 x 7
- *Fairy Tales*, 1985 x 5
- *Disasters*, 1986-1989 x 7
- *History Portraits*, 1988-1990 x 24
- *Civil War*, 1991 x 3
- *Sex Pictures*, 1992 x 9
- *Fashion*, 1993-1994 x 6
- *Horror and Surrealist Pictures*, 1994-1996 x 9
- *Masks*, 1995-1996 x 10
- *Broken Dolls*, 1999 x 8
- *Hollywood Portraits*, 2000-2002 x 12
- *Clowns*, 2003-2004 x 10



Kunsthhaus Bregenz

### **Biographical note**

Cindy Sherman was born in 1954 in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, not far from New York City.

She studied painting, and then photography at Buffalo. There she met the artist Robert Longo, who was to be of decisive importance in her life. Together with a student friend, Charles Clough, they created *Hallwalls*, an independent space where she exhibited alongside other up-and-coming artists.

After graduating in 1976, she settled in New York. She started photographing herself in 1977, and the use of her own image became a founding principle of her work.

Cindy Sherman lives and works in New York.

### **Cindy Sherman's work has featured in a great number of exhibitions around the world. Among the most important solo shows of recent years were:**

1997: *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*, MoMA, New York

1999: CAPC de Bordeaux

2001: Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center

2003: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

2004: *Fashioning Fiction – In Photography since 1990*, MoMA, New York

### **Exhibition catalogue: *Cindy Sherman***

co-publication Flammarion – Jeu de Paume,

texts by Jean-Pierre Criqui, Régis Durand, Laura Mulvey

### **Regis Durand**

**Excerpts from the catalogue,**

**Edited by Flammarion – Jeu de Paume, May 2006**

“With a few exceptions, Cindy Sherman's works are organized in this book, and in the exhibition, according to their respective series; the series themselves are arranged in chronological order. While acknowledging the potential for a number of transverse, thematic approaches (some are suggested below), and the occasional difficulties in determining precisely



where each series begins and ends, this series/chronological approach is still the most closely attuned to the evolution of Sherman's work, and the best adapted to an appreciation of its extraordinary internal coherence and successive developments.\*

Cindy Sherman's artistic journey impresses us with its remarkable rigor and inventiveness, its never-ending search for greater meaning and depth. Her work is also strikingly funny and extravagant, with darker elements touching on the impalpability of the self, and the omnipresence of illusion and death. At first glance all surface and sham, Sherman's images nonetheless succeed in retaining a compelling sense of mystery. A mystery that is unlikely to yield its darkness to the glare of better-informed or more systematic scrutiny. For the mysteries explored here are those of the nature of human identity, and our capacity to know or misread our true selves, to picture our own image, and invent parallel lives — a capacity that we share with no other living creature. (...)

**A Cindy Book, c. 1964-1975**

**Bus Riders, 1976-2005**

**Murder Mystery, 1976-2000**

*A Cindy Book* is an apparently typical adolescent photograph album: a sacred record of its creator's most important "life moments." The difference is that what seems to matter most is not the moment itself, but the subject's own image in the photograph. *That's me*, says the recurrent handwritten inscription: at different ages, on holiday in Maine, at my cousin's wedding, at my first dance, etc. As if Sherman ("the subject") took perpetual delight in spotting herself amongst a group of other people, overjoyed by the fact of her own existence, the diverse situations in which she finds herself, and the plasticity of her being, allied to the continuity of a specific identity. (...)

*Bus Riders* (1976-2005) marks the defining reversal in Sherman's work. The subject is no longer a somewhat hysterical "self" proclaiming its ubiquity and overweening desire for recognition amid a diverse array of appearances and situations. Now, through mimicry and play-acting, the subject seeks instead to appropriate the multiple identities of those around her. (...)

*Murder Mystery* (1976-2000) create their own hermetically sealed, introspective, fictional universe. The characters represent the standard cast of protagonists in a fictional murder scenario, captured here by the subject/producer in a sequence of brief cameos, for our prurient, omniscient scrutiny, just as they are by the author of a crime novel. We, the



spectators/readers, are invited to spot the clues and construct our own theories as to "whodunit": the murder is clearly a high society crime (witness the maid and butler, the characters in riding clothes and evening dress etc.) There is a photographer, and a detective, a femme fatale, and the usual witnesses. (...) Here, the artful, virtuoso makeup and disguises used by the subject to appropriate each role, convey a playful, childlike sense of jubilation. Significantly, both the *Bus Riders* and the *Murder Mystery People* seem to usher in two elements that feature in later works: a taste for types and stereotypes, and the presence of tiny, undeveloped clues that betray the fictive nature of the narrative scene.

#### ***Untitled A-E, 1975***

This short series of five works emerges, with hindsight, as a turning point in Sherman's work. The five images are all frontal portraits of young women, smiling at the camera. At the same time, the subject appears in a number of guises that go on to feature in later works (the clown, the young *ingénue*), treated here with the minimum of artifice, in a manner reminiscent of children's dressing-up games. The narrative dimension is relegated to the background, in favor of simpler, less anecdotal, forms: the images hint at potential fictions or worlds, rather than specific narratives. (...)

#### ***Untitled Film Stills, 1977-1980***

Without doubt the most important series in Cindy Sherman's early work, the sixty-nine *Untitled Film Stills* create a metamorphic world in which the subject invents a succession of more elaborately-constructed identities, complete with props and settings, but which are still not always necessarily entirely explicit. The subject's jubilant "chameleonism" appropriates a range of different worlds: stereotypes from everyday life (the young housewife, the student etc.), but also literature, painting, and of course cinema (Italian Neorealism, or American film noir, for example). (...)

The series' success lies in the tension established by the artist between our immediate recognition of a reference or stereotype ...and the creation of a space onto which the viewer can project his or her fictional imaginings and desires. Each scene is constructed for the viewer alone; the images are the precursors of a fictional narrative. (...)

#### ***Rear Screen Projections, 1980***

This series marks Cindy Sherman's passage from black-and-white to color images, and significantly larger formats (20 x 24 in./50.8 x 61cm.). The series also introduces a new approach and technique, the subject appears as a



more everyday figure, less overtly linked to specific cultural or social references. Young, modern-looking women are captured against a projected background (interior or exterior), in close-up or in the middle distance, sometimes positioned off-center within the frame, and apparently caught unawares in the course of a narrative situation, the exact nature of which is not immediately apparent. (...)

***Centerfolds/Horizontal*s, 1981**

These horizontal, large-format images (24 x 48 in./61 x 122 cm) evoke the double-page spreads of fashion or "adult" magazines. They were originally commissioned by the magazine *Artforum*, which ultimately refused to publish them. The protagonist is viewed in extreme close-up, generally seated or reclining. The figure is photographed from above, heightening our impression of a narrative in progress: something has happened, or is about to happen... (...)

What seems important in this series is the close focus on the protagonist (to the detriment of the setting, props or background), and hence on the detailed transformations in her appearance, through the use of makeup, hair and clothes. The clothes are especially important here, to the point where they become the setting into which the protagonist is introduced. (...)

***Pink Robes*, 1982**

***Untitled #102-116*, 1982**

***Fashion*, 1983-84**

***Fashion*, 1993-1994**

The importance of fabrics and clothes becomes apparent in these four series (one of which was created ten years after the others), whose basic subject matter they are.

In the *Pink Robes* series, the protagonist appears to adopt a completely unstaged, unaffected pose, staring straight at the camera, in total contrast to Sherman's earlier works, with their emphasis on dressing-up and play-acting. As if Cindy Sherman was seeking to prove, with heavy irony, that "naturalism" is simply another layer of disguise, and perhaps the most enigmatic of all. The subject's facial expression and general appearance suggest someone caught unawares while getting out of bed, or the bath, modestly holding their robe against their body. The series evolves through a sequence of subtle chromatic and stylistic variations, like a suite of old-fashioned studies based on the nuances or a particular color, or the drapery of a figure's clothing, but suffused and perverted here by a troubling sense of intimacy.



This pivotal series develops in two different directions: on the one hand (in *Untitled* #102 to 116) we have a succession of tightly-cropped images of women with hardened expressions, characterized by strong contrasts of light and shade; balancing this are two series of so-called *Fashion* photographs created ten years apart, but linked by their prominent use of haute-couture clothes, which are given Sherman's "traditional" treatment as items for dressing-up or disguise.(...)

***Fairy Tales, 1985***

***Disasters, 1986-89***

Cindy Sherman's *Fairy Tales* are the stuff of nightmares (but then fairy tales often are): fantasy cohabits dangerously with elements of the macabre, and a strange, troubling quality. All trace of realism is expunged here, in favor of the artificial and the non-human. For the first time, the artist makes undisguised use of prostheses and dummies, creating scenes that are both grotesque and mysterious. (...)

The images are sometimes unidentifiable in relation to particular fairy tales or traditional stories. More importantly, however, they should be seen as invitations to the viewer to project his or her own memories or unspecified fantasies. (...)

***History Portraits, 1988-90***

***Sex Pictures, 1992***

The grotesque vein that emerges in the preceding series continues to flourish here in comic mode (comedy is never far from the surface in Cindy Sherman's work. There is jubilation in her excesses, and her sheer sense of pleasure in play-acting, theatricality and props is evident throughout her work, even in the "darkest" images.)

The first and most striking aspect of the *History Portraits* is their very nature as portraits in the classic sense of the term. The subject poses with a range of props, costumes and prostheses, which are themselves often explicit references to Old Master paintings. (...)

The *Sex Pictures* are, in fact, not exclusively pornographic, but alternate between obscene visions of the body and "straightforward" illustrations of specific practices. The details of the poses and actions are relatively unimportant, however. What matters is the pictures' disturbing dehumanization of sexual desire: the fact that the sex act has, in a sense, been delegated to be carried out by plastic dummies whose obscene exhibitionism is itself horribly humanizing. This is a troubling world, midway



between the human and the non-human, where transgressions of every sort are permissible—as in the phantasmagorical works of Bosch. (...)

**Civil War, 1991**

**Horror and Surrealist Pictures, 1994-96**

These two series are a logical extension of the *Sex Pictures*, featuring bodies that have been dismembered or reduced to the status of incomplete objects. The *Civil War Pictures* are details of cadavers, mostly feet and hands, strewn upon the earth with which they will soon be mingled. (...) The Civil War is, of course, a reference to the conflict between the northern and southern American states from 1861 to 1865... but it also is the war that continues to rage throughout the modern world, the anonymous, everyday violence whose consequences are seen in tiny "forgotten" wars, news reports and morgues all over the world. (...)

In the *Horror and Surrealist Pictures*, the artist's fantastical, gothic vision pulls back from its tight focus on the incomplete object, genitalia or scattered limbs, to encompass the whole body—a body that has, it seems, been dismembered and recomposed, and whose different parts appear to be living separate, monstrous lives, like the components of some sinister golem. (...)

As already noted by several contemporary commentators, Cindy Sherman is attacking whatever last remnants of idealized womanhood and female beauty might still be found lodged in the surrealistic imagination. As if her modern female consciousness could no longer accept the Surrealists' mythologizing use of the female form, and now sought to bring such practices to an end once and for all, through the symbolic destruction, by a magical process close to that of exorcism, of all the world's remaining beauty and idealism.

**Masks, 1994-96**

Masks are a growing, insistent presence in the *Sex Pictures* and the *Horror and Surrealist Pictures*. Their increasingly frequent use may be explained by Sherman's desire to stop using herself as the "model" in her pictures, and to delegate the onerous task of dressing up and performing to a cast of inanimate substitutes. Hence the masks, then, but also the dummies and shadow silhouettes, or even the complete absence of any identifiable figure.

In the *Masks* series, the mask becomes the subject of the picture (replacing the human subject of earlier works), and seems to acquire an autonomous life of its own. (...)



***Broken Dolls, 1999***

In this series of black-and-white photographs, all trace of a human presence (...) has disappeared, in favor of mutilated dolls that have been torn apart and placed in a variety of obscene postures, in settings reminiscent of those seen in the *Sex Pictures* and, sometimes, the *Horror Pictures*. The series' most striking aspect is the remarkable intensity and expressiveness of the figures created using these damaged, degraded object. (...)

***Hollywood/Hampton Types, 2000-2002***

Cindy Sherman has compared the figures in these portraits to failed or fallen actors: people who are working as secretaries, cleaners or gardeners to make ends meet, but who are posing here for casting pictures. They are trying to sell themselves as best they can, imploring the viewer to give them a break. (...) Whatever its superficial context, this succession of frontal portraits is both humorous and pathetic. (...)

***Clowns, 2003-2004***

The somewhat tardy appearance of the clown in Cindy Sherman's work was, clearly, inevitable. Sherman's taste for masquerades and dressing up, the mixture of the grotesque and the serious, her mildly hysterical chameleonism, all combine to conjure the essence of clowns and clowning. (...)

The clown figures are the quintessential expression of the carnivalesque quality of Cindy Sherman's work, with its attendant load of contradictions and excess.

The disturbing quality of the traditional clown's makeup is widely acknowledged—there is an inescapable hint of ambivalence, depression, even perversity, beneath the cheery mask. Inevitably, too, clowns are associated with childhood, and the ambivalence of childhood. Cindy Sherman's clowns step outside the boundaries of convention governing their traditional costumes and make-up. (...)



## **Cindy Sherman**

Exhibition catalogue, published jointly by Flammarion and Jeu de Paume

With texts by Jean-Pierre Criqui, Régis Durand, Laura Mulvey

From her first black-and-white photographs, the *Untitled Stills*, to her most recent series, *Clowns*, Cindy Sherman is one of the major figures in the current art and culture scene. As Régis Durand puts it: the development of her work is impressive in terms of its severity, inventiveness, and constant focus on delving below the surface. Her work history is also astounding for its humor and extravagance, which both also contain a rather dismal component that perhaps derives from the impossibility of comprehending the self and the ubiquitousness of illusion and death. The work that appears to exist on the surface and to play with illusions bears up to the scrutiny of the viewer and does not divulge its secret. It is not the kind of secret that would be able to unveil better information or more systematic access, instead it is tied in with the identity of man, with his ability to recognize himself and to misjudge himself, to portray himself and to invent parallel lives – something no other living creature is capable of.

This catalogue has been conceived as a monograph and comprises all the works in the exhibition, 200 reproductions, presented by series and arranged in chronological order. Each series is accompanied by an essay by Régis Durand, the curator of the exhibition. The artist's work has also been analyzed in two supplementary essays of a more general scope written by Laura Mulvey and Jean-Pierre Criqui. Conceived in conjunction with the graphic design firm deValence, this catalogue will be a valuable reference book as well as an art-object book.

### **The writers**

Régis Durand is head of the Jeu de Paume and curator of the exhibition. Laura Mulvey is professor of film and media studies at Birkbeck College, University of London.

Jean-Pierre Criqui is an art critic and the editor-in-chief of the *Cahiers du Musée national d'Art moderne*.

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