

METRO PICTURES

Krasinski, Jennifer. "About Face: Cindy Sherman's Women at Metro Pictures," *VillageVoice.com* (May 31, 2016).



Sherman's aging actresses are homages to Gish, Garbo, and Swanson.

It's been almost forty years since Cindy Sherman produced her groundbreaking "Untitled Film Stills" (1977–80), the photographic series that launched her ascent as one of the canniest image-makers of the Pictures Generation. Back then, Sherman played the ingénue, dressing herself up to perform as an actress acting for the camera, staging and shooting dramatic moments that implied they'd been plucked from longer cinematic narratives. (They hadn't.) The work was, and still is, whip-smart, cool, exuding a fresh and funny feminism, with Sherman overthrowing the male gaze by taking charge of the frame as well as the cast of characters she created to fill it.

Looking at her current show at Metro Pictures, her first exhibition of new work since 2012, one can't help but think of the Film Stills, not because these photographs bear any obvious resemblance, but because Sherman seems to have picked up a loose thread: What becomes of the ingénues?

For this latest series, Sherman imagines herself as aging actresses from 1920s Hollywood. This time, the women aren't caught inside of narratives; they're posing for publicity shots. Sherman's stars are homages, not re-creations — the artist has designed archetypes cast from the molds of Gish, Garbo, and Swanson. Some features they share: Their cupid's-bow lips are precisely painted, their eyebrows drawn on, their lashes lengthened to look like spider legs. We see the makeup crease in their wrinkles, age spots on their hands, the skin of their necks creping. Yet each woman radiates a distinct essence. One lounges in a turban and red-and-white striped caftan; another poses with her gloved hand over her heart; a third perches proudly in a flouncy white dress. Few of them look into the lens. What we understand from their age and the perfection of their poses is that Sherman's actresses are Hollywood workhorses, galloping on the treadmill of the studio system until they falter or wear out.



Her women know how to hold a frame.

For decades, Sherman refused any sort of biographical reading of her work, but in a recent interview with the *New York Times* she spoke plainly about the fact that, at 62, she's making peace with growing older. Aging isn't a new subject for the artist, but her attitude toward it has shifted noticeably. The women in her new series are less cartoonish than in her previous work, and Sherman's portrayals are more compassionate. Her 2000–02 series "Hollywood/Hampton Types," for which she transformed into women past their prime but struggling to keep up appearances, was utterly goofball by comparison — and not a little venomous. (In one photograph, *Untitled #354*, Sherman plays a character we assume to be a former beach bunny now living a suburban, civilian lifestyle: She wears a floral-print muumuu, her hair is bottled blond, her skin unevenly self-tanned, and — almost as a punchline — her smile reveals teeth whitened to a nearly neon glow.)

Sherman's earlier women are possessed by a ghoulish vanity that appears to stem from some sort of trauma. What she seems to point out is that in the pursuit of a youthful ideal, the lines between self-preservation and self-protection become blurry. The cracking armor of thickly painted makeup hides the real self, if there even is such a thing underneath it all. Sherman's image of party girls from 2007 gave us gorgons of another kind, with a *Real Housewives* vibe, dressed to the tens and only too delighted to be snapped by the paparazzi. Their awfulness is yet another lesson in who and what not to be: failures. But who's the failure? These women, for aspiring and posing? Or us, for looking and laughing?

Getting older — the fear and loathing it can inspire — isn't something only women artists metabolize. One sees these anxieties creep into the work of male artists too, though it's talked about less: in how Jeff Koons monumentalizes nostalgia for toys (Play-Doh, balloon dogs) and comic-book characters; in how Richard Prince, in his "New Portraits" series, plays the dirty old lurker, commenting on young women's Instagram posts; in how Paul McCarthy plays grizzled lecher, though with a vulnerability that's closer to that of Sherman's aging ingénues. In 2012's *Horizontal*, McCarthy made a life cast of himself, an uncanny double of his aging nude body laid out for all to see. In all of this is a type of role-play — of who and how one should be at a certain phase of life. We see that the art world isn't immune to our youth-obsessed consumer culture, which threatens artists with a fate feared more than death: irrelevance.

Which is why Sherman's choice to create personas in the spirit of early cinema sirens is more interesting than it may initially seem. Celebrity will always be with us, but movie stars — these exotics who exist both near to and far from us — now appear to be devolving, building themselves into brands rather than the mythical creatures of yesteryear. In an era marked by “selfie consciousness,” Sherman's portraits point to a classic mode of performance and to the fact that a camera demands we role-play. At this point in their careers, her women know how to hold a frame. If their faces and bodies no longer deliver a certain standard of beauty, they themselves never forget what it means to be before the lens. Sherman deftly captures the professionalism in her stars' poise and polish — and the way youth and beauty leave lasting residues beneath the skin's surface. What a woman is left with, if she survives the folly of all these fictions in which she's acted, is depth, dimension, and real presence.

One of the most affecting portraits in the exhibition is of Sherman as a regal brunette in a bright purple caftan and cape trimmed in gold embroidery. Her eyes are downcast, her eyebrows painted high on her forehead. She appears at once tragic and unbending, stoic like a guardian at a sacred temple. Like that of all Sherman's stars, her jewelry is paste and her gown is only a costume. But dazzle, as the artist has convinced us by now, isn't the same thing as deceit. Artifice is proof that reality is always an invention. Our roles are ours to choose and define, to fill as we will and as we wish ourselves to be.