

Plastic Surgery

by Dennis Kardon



Untitled
1999



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Cindy Sherman, May 15-June 26, 1999, at Metro Pictures, 519 West 24th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.

Cindy Sherman's new photographs are being met with glib dismissals around town, which I find disheartening. Comments have ranged from "stale Hans Bellmer remakes" to "Laurie Simmons meets dog chew toy." This response signals a turning away from art that seeks to invoke strong feelings through the intensity of its revelations. For me, Sherman's new work is emotionally wrenching.

The black-and-white photographs depict small dolls, mostly action figures, but include a few Barbies and kewpies. They're all altered with the addition of different heads, body hair, over-sized penises and nipples breasts, and all are burned, slashed or otherwise mutilated. Sometimes the mutilation becomes the body orifice -- a burn hole for a rectum, slashes for labia, sometimes dripping or oozing a semen-like substance.

The photos usually picture two dolls, often placed in sexual positions. In one work, a male doll is posed behind a wheelchair holding a flayed topless trunk dripping fluid, while the severed head of a female doll lies on the ground. The figures have the most peculiar expressions on their little painted faces.

For many viewers, Sherman's new work may seem to come from nowhere. But a glance at her retrospective catalogue shows a long-standing fascination with the grotesque. Starting in 1984 she was using "damaged" personae in the fashion series photos -- insane women, scarred women, ugly women. As early as '87 she was using prosthetic body parts -- buttocks, bellies and breasts. And in '92 she was employing sexualized mannequins. What makes this new work so different?

Sherman's photography is more or less comprised of two separate components. The first is the formal mechanics of making the picture: the color, the lighting, the focus, the grain. The earliest "Untitled Film Stills" series was black and white, and occupied the mid-to-dark-gray range. Its long depth of field appropriated the look of the Hollywood B movie. The new work displays a wide variation in both gray scale and grain, but overall the photographs seem whitish and grainy with uncertain focus. They have the feel of an examining room or clinic.

The second component in Sherman's photos involves the element of play, the almost child-like activity the artist uses to create the content of her tableaux. In the early series it was a dress-up game of trying on different personae. In the most recent work it involves a pseudo-sociopathic doll play.

The "Untitled Film Stills" were lauded because they coincided with a broader discussion of the artificial construction of identity, especially female identity. Sherman's photographs represented a self-conscious investigation of female roles.

In the new work, the photos are not only depictions, but also documents. The pictures become a form of evidence used by the viewer to make conclusions about the artist's identity -- in this case, the artist as sociopath. It's the viewer's feelings about the maker of the scenes that gives her new work its emotional charge. Formerly, the viewer saw how arbitrary concepts of identity could be.

Sherman's approach to her own career has been admirable. She's not manipulative or proprietary about the ways that her work gets used in the world, preferring to let it speak for itself. That it always does just that -- announces itself formally as a Cindy Sherman, and enunciates its issues without obfuscating jargon -- is a tribute to her formal, intellectual and emotional rigor. The public personality she presents is nice-girl artist, modest and gracious and never snobbish.

In the mid-'80s, when Sherman started to tackle the issues of mortality and disgust (coincidentally the twin issues engendered by the AIDS epidemic), she started to access something darker and more repressed in herself. When other successful artists of her generation seemed satisfied to milk the golden cash cow, Sherman was testing the machine that had brought her fame by examining the mechanisms of loathing and repulsion.

Formally, she adopted closer points-of-view, lurid color and darker lighting, with more images hidden or emerging from shadow. She also gradually changed the theatrical element from babe-in-jep glamour to getting ugly to a fascination with the truly hideous. This play was more disturbing, and the persona it



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suggested was more dangerous to reveal. The persona of nice-girl artist playing with the horrific became a matter of the artist discovering horror within herself. Not so nice, but quite human.

Making and playing with dolls has always been a young girl's pastime, but the act of burning and mutilating these human surrogates is the very definition of sociopathy. Locating that pathology in herself and then exposing it photographically for us to examine seems exhilaratingly courageous. Sherman's use of black-and-white film makes it less literal, (but not less distant), so that the image recreates the dream state that it springs from.

Exposing the repressed, representing the hidden, inventing and revealing new formal means for that representation, and constructing a public arena out of the secrecy of our interior lives is the only real work left to the solitary individual artist. This is why Cindy Sherman continues to be exemplary.



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