

Art

Six Women Artists Furthering Cindy Sherman's Vision

● Jacqui Palumbo 6月 24, 2019 1:24pm



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

As time passed, Sherman's quiet subversions of femininity blossomed into more pointed, caustic, or grotesque takes. She became famous art-historical subjects with fleshy prosthetic breasts; depicted herself as dead or monstrous in the sylvan world of fairy tales; and assumed the identities of childhood-nightmare-inducing clowns. This decade, she has been preoccupied with concepts of social status, aging, and the commodification of beauty on the internet. Her Instagram account is a work of art in itself. In an age when people are Facetuning their visages into uncanny-valley likenesses, Sherman, too, digitally stretches, nips, and tucks her features to show the artifice of online personas.

Since her rise to prominence in the 1980s, younger artists have been influenced by the alternate plane where Sherman's personas reside. As Moorhouse has pointed out, Sherman does not impersonate specific people—"Instead, her invented characters occupy a private world: one whose cultural sources are readily recognisable, but which is nevertheless self-contained."

Out of all of Cindy Sherman's cinematic influences, it's Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) that she recalls most vividly from childhood. As curator Paul Moorhouse points out in the exhibition catalogue for Sherman's retrospective at London's National Portrait Gallery, running from June 27th to September 15th, the artist shares striking similarities with the film's protagonist, who observes strangers from afar and imagines the intimate details of their lives.

For four decades, Sherman has cast herself as new characters based on what she sees. In her beloved "Untitled Film Stills" (1977-80), she played leading roles in imaginary films, but with familiar archetypes—women who are vulnerable, distraught, longing, or on the run; the object of her fear or desire just beyond the frame.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #413*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #574*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Ilona Szwarc



Ilona Szwarc, *Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilona Szwarc, *The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a "picture" forever arranged, #1*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Below, six early and mid-career artists speak to the resounding impact of Sherman's work. Each of them first encountered her photographs in high school or in undergraduate programs. Some took direct inspiration from Sherman's images, while others simply see a kindred spirit in how they construct their narratives—but all of them have created their own conceptions of reality that can be traced back to Sherman's pioneering, radical world.

Ilona Szwarc first encountered Sherman's *Untitled #479* (1975) as a student at New York's School of Visual Arts nearly a decade ago. She was struck by how the sequence showed Sherman changing from a bespeckled young woman into a flirtatious and self-assured bad girl over the course of 23 frames.

That particular work "inspired me to inspect my experiences of slow, sometimes invisible transformation specifically—my own process of cultural assimilation," Szwarc explained. Szwarc's exploration of her sense of self, as a woman and a Polish immigrant, is a thread throughout her visually divergent projects. "I am always switching between different expressions and personalities depending on what language I am speaking, never arriving at a fixed identity," she said.

Szwarc often returns to the duplicity of self. An early series shows American adolescents who share distinct likenesses with their American Girl dolls. In a later, more exploratory body of work, Szwarc cast American women as her doppelgängers and conducted unsettling makeup tutorials with them, treating herself "as an object and a subject at the same time," she explained.

But it's her latest series, "Unsex me here" (2019)—which exhibited at Los Angeles's Make Room this past spring—that most directly recalls the ongoing transformation Sherman explored in *Untitled #479*. Named after Lady MacBeth's famous plea to shed her female sensitivity and become capable of baseness, Szwarc's images depict a woman of status sitting comfortably in her elegant home and



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #479*, 1975. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.



Ilona Szwarc, *I am a woman and I play the horror of my flesh*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

embracing her change into a beast. The camera becomes a vanity mirror for her gaze as she presses fur and scissors to her cheek. She wears a snout, but in one frame, we see it before it’s applied: as a disembodied rubber mask.

Sherman, too, is not interested in visual trickery, but shows the rough edges of artifice. “Makeup and prosthetics are never applied with perfection, but with intentional crudeness,” Szwarc said of her forebear, adding that such an approach “pushed me to move my characters even further, to the space of the backstage.”



Cindy Sherman *Untitled*, 1981
Metro Pictures



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Header video: An excerpt from Rachel Maclean, Make Me Up, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.