CINDY SHERMAN: AN ESSAY AND AN INTERVIEW BY LISBET NILSON

Cindy Sherman has always photographed herself. And yet, whether in the black-and-white Untitled Film Stills of a few years ago, or in her more recent large color work, her subject is not really Cindy Sherman. In the frame is one woman (or, these days, occasionally a mannishly androgynous person) who, through the transformative power of makeup, wigs and lighting, can look childlike or grown, vampy or vulnerable, anxious, sassy, seductive, vacuous—or any combination of the above. Sherman's pictures, despite an apparent ordinariness, nudge the imagination to speculate about what, exactly, is going on. Critics have used terms such as "one-frame movie-making" to describe Sherman's photographs. About her photos, Sherman has written, "I want that choked-up feeling which maybe comes from despair or teary-eyed sentimentality—conveying intangible emotions . . . These are pictures of emotions personified, entirely of themselves with their own presence . . . I'm trying to make other people recognize something of themselves rather than me."

Sherman has had considerable critical success in art circles. She was awarded a Guggenheim grant in April; was one of a handful of photographers invited to show at the prestigious international avant-garde art exhibit Documenta 7, held in Kassel, West Germany last summer; and at the same time her photographs were included in the Venice Biennale. The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam has already accorded her a small retrospective, and her large color pictures were part of the 1983 Whitney Biennial in Manhattan. Sherman is 28. Her career is pushing six years old.

Having seen her as everything from earnest but forgettable young starlets to women who seem battered by life, one naturally grows curious about the "real" Cindy Sherman. The woman herself comes as a surprise, no matter how many of her photographs one has seen: she is small, delicate, much prettier than her pictures--with bright bleached hair and a pale, almost waiflike manner that one senses can snap quickly into steely street smarts. Sherman was interviewed by Lisbet Nilson in the lower Manhattan loft whose every nook and angle has, by now, served somehow in her pictures. She always works alone, using a 35mm camera (a Nikon these days), a 20-foot shutter-extension cord, a mirror, a dummy's head mounted on a tripod (for basic camera aiming and focus) and lighting arrangements that she maintains are "so hokey" that she'd be embarrassed to reveal them. Her inventory of props includes about 40 wigs and a widely varied wardrobe of every day costumes. But out of camera range, she is dressed very simply, and wears no makeup.

AP: Do you consider your pictures to be self-portraits?
CS: No. They may be technically, but I don't see these characters as myself. They're like characters from some movie, existing only on film or on the print.

AP: You've said that you're trying to make your photographs into pictures of "emotions personified." What kind emotions are you hoping to embody?
CS: Some are mean, tough, strong characters, and some are very vulnerable looking, masculine-type characters. Others are spaced-out women and some people who don't look as if they feel anything, they're drained of emotion. And then there are one or two who even look giddy and foolish.

AP: If these are not self-portraits, are they some way autobiographical?
CS: They're not at all autobiographical.

AP: Then who are these people?
CS: In the time that I spend in front of the camera, I think of all the movies and all the people I've ever seen, and I just try to put the pieces together in a way that makes sense. I'll just sit there and ham it up, looking in the mirror to see what works. Then there's the makeup—that really affects the kind of character or emotion that I want.

AP: Do you create some sort of story in your head about what is going on?
CS: Well, they may be very, very short stories. Sometimes I try to imagine what is going on in a scene so that I can act more. But they are not developed stories in the sense of having a beginning, middle, and end.
AP: Are you living out your fantasies in these pictures?
CS: Not really—because if I had fantasies it would be about being rich and not having to take photographs, rather than about looking dirty and ripped up, or beat up, or whatever. And it's not like I want to live out the life of a film star. When I'm working, maybe I do go into the person's character, so in a way you could call that living out a fantasy—but it's not personal.

AP: What is it about this way of working that interests you?
CS: I think it all comes from watching movies and studying peoples' faces—even on the streets and in the subways. And not only looking at faces, but at body language too, studying the way people are dressed, the way people want to present themselves. Those details can tell a whole story about a person. My photographs aren't really about any particular story, but about roles.

AP: Is it your intention that the viewer should recognize that character or role, feel that emotion?
CS: What I want to stir is some kind of gut reaction to that character or that situation. If it reminds people of a movie, say, then maybe it will also remind them of where they were when they saw that movie, and so on. I want to create that kind of chain-reaction thinking.

AP: You've said that a photograph should transcend itself. What do you mean?
CS: When you look at a photograph you shouldn't think about how it was made or who is in the photograph. Instead, you should almost be sucked into it. It should trigger your memory so that you feel you've seen it before. Some people have told me they remember the movie that one of my images is derived from, but in fact I had no film in mind at all.

AP: Do people often tell you stories that your pictures have conjured up for them?
CS: Yes, and that's great because it's usually completely different from what I would expect. Or people have titles for the pictures—I'm basically leaving them untitled now. I want the photos to tell a story, and want to leave it as ambiguous as possible so that different people will have different stories.

AP: How different do they get? Take the photograph in your recent New York show, portraying an androgynous-looking person in a brown, Mao-type. I found myself thinking that this must be a young soldier in an improvised uniform, brooding about being sent away to some strange and distant place.
CS: I see that as a Soviet worker—actually like a Lotte Lenya type in From Russia With Love or one of those movies where she's a bull dyke kind of strong woman. That's the way I see her and some people see her that way. But my sister saw herself in it, and she's not like that at all.

AP: Yet you've said that you have an enormous fear of seeing your photographs misinterpreted, of having people think you're an exhibitionist. How often have people actually challenged you on that?
CS: The thing that's always bothered me is when people misinterpret the sexual aspect—because if it's in the work, then it's so deeply embedded that I don't even see it. I've visited some collectors' homes and they always have my picture hanging over the bed. It kind of gives me the creeps. Then there are the people who nudge me and say, 'I know what you meant in that one,' and I'm thinking, 'What are you talking about?' But that's just part of the open-endedness that I've left for the work to express for itself.

AP: Assuming you were a kid who watched a lot of television and went to a lot of movies, did you ever want to be an actress?
CS: No, I never thought about that. My parents used to tease me about acting all the time, but I never thought about actually going out and doing it. I always wanted to do something with art.

AP: Do you see yourself as an actress now?
CS: Not really. But sometimes I think about that. Sometimes I wonder whether I should begin having someone else take the pictures, or whether I should begin photographing someone else. Which one would I want to give up if I had to give one of them up? I don't know. If I were to consider just acting and having someone else take the photograph—well, I'm not sure if I would be able to be as uninhibited in front of someone else's camera. I enjoy the control of being the director as well as the actor.

AP: Wouldn't it be a whole lot easier to photograph someone else?
CS: Probably not. Models would bring their own preconceptions of what I want them to look like—and I would have to direct them, and I don't want to impose on anybody. This way is a lot simpler.
AP: Have you ever done a straight self-portrait?
CS: Not really. Although some of the works I have been doing lately rely less and less on makeup and wigs.
AP: Without makeup is one thing—but did you ever want to do a self-portrait in the sense of an artist consciously trying to capture her own persona?
CS: No.
AP: But wouldn't that be an ultimate extension of what you're doing—to photograph yourself in a self-portrait, expressing 28 years' worth of emotions, memories and roles?
CS: I see myself as a composite of all the things I've done. If I were to set up a shot to show myself, I would still think about how I would want to present myself—and that would still be like another role. It would be harder to do, because I wouldn't really want to look bad, you know? You'd start thinking, 'Well, you don't want to look too good, but you do want to look artistic and smart. . . ' That, to me, would just be a big ego trip.