Cindy Sherman: The Polemics of Play

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It is a rare discussion of postmodernism that does not invoke the work of Cindy Sherman. Since 1977, when she began creating her groundbreaking Untitled Film Stills, Sherman has been the indispensable reference for studies of the decentered self, the mass media’s reconstruction of reality, the inescapability of the male gaze, the seductions of abjection, and any number of related philosophical issues.

However, despite the heavy lifting that her work tends to inspire among theoretically inclined critics, Sherman is also among the most accessible and durable artists of her generation. Her work uses the visual language of genres familiar to anyone versed in popular culture, among them B-movies, horror films, fairy tales, soft-and hardcore porn, and fashion photography. These become the basis for photographic tableaux in which, for the most part, Sherman herself plays the protagonist in open-ended narratives that alternately evoke pathos, fear, disgust, and empathy. For followers of French theorists like Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, these works are full of markers of artifice and inauthenticity that undermine the authoritarian messages of their sources in mass culture. For those unschooled in the ways of poststructuralism and critical theory, they tap into cultural wellsprings of fantasy, imaginative play, and the guilty pleasures of cultural transgression. These differences of outlook add grist to the ever-present question: Just who is Cindy Sherman?

Sherman was born on January 19, 1954, in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, to an engineer father and schoolteacher mother. Much of her suburban childhood was spent playing dress up by herself or with friends. She haunted thrift shops, using her finds to recreate herself up before the mirror. This is an activity that did not cease when she entered art school at State University College at Buffalo in 1972. Occasionally she even stepped out on the town in her alternate personas.

In art school she made a number of forays into painting, and had a failed encounter with the technical aspects of photography, before she discovered the conceptual approach, which was just then gaining currency. She also made friends with a number of like-minded students, including Robert Longo, who became her close friend. Her breakthrough as an artist came soon after she moved from Buffalo to New York City following her graduation from art school. Longo, with whom she was then living, suggested that she might as well make art out of the elaborate characters she was creating. She shot the first of what would be her Untitled Film Still series in their apartment before branching out to locations around the city, in Long
Island and out West during vacations with her family. An NEA grant in 1976 allowed her to pursue this project, leading to her first exhibition of the Film Stills in 1977 at Metro Pictures Gallery in New York.

Sherman emerged on the art scene in the late 1970s in the company of a group of young artists whose work deliberately eschewed the bombast of neo-expressionism, then making a splash as a latter-day version of the macho emotionalism of Abstract Expressionism. In contrast, the works of Sherman and her colleagues were modest in scale, photographically based, and indebted to images from advertising, movies, and glossy magazines. Along with Longo, who created black-and-white drawings of isolated, writhing figures in evening dress who might have been derived from film stills, Sherman’s contemporaries included Sarah Charlesworth, who isolated details of glamorized images borrowed from glossy fashion magazines against lustrous monochrome backdrops; Richard Prince, known for cropped and reconfigured images of cowboys appropriated from ads for Marlboro cigarettes; and Sherrie Levine, who gained fame for rephotographing pre-existing photographs.

The meaning of such works, according to then pervasive theories of post-modernism, resides not in the image as such, but rather in the conventions by which their sources in popular culture contribute to the construction of our sense of reality. In a prescient 1979 essay that examined Sherman and her colleagues, critic Douglas Crimp suggested that the practice of mining quotations and excerpts from media images and then reframing and restaging them in patently artificial ways provided artists with the means for interrogating the invisible understructure of representation. “We are not in search of sources or origins,” he wrote, “but structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture.”

Over the years, Sherman’s work has colonized ever greater swaths of pop and high culture, and has in the process served as raw material for ever more complex theoretical interpretations. The untitled Film Stills that launched her career consist of small black-and-white photographs in which the artist assumes the role of various female types of the sort who populate European films and B-movies of the fifties and sixties. They consist of librarians, hillbillies, seductresses, waifs, and urban sophisticates captured amid equally typecast settings. These photographs so convincingly evoke vintage film stills that some early critics were convinced they referred to specific movies. In fact, these works, for which Sherman donned various wigs and costumes and rearranged parts of her home and studio, evoke the mood and details of films that never existed.

Though the photographs suggest a variety of scenarios, they differ from conventional film stills that tend to focus on moments of dramatic action between two or more characters. Sherman’s heroines are always alone, nearly expressionless, and caught up in very private emotions. They seem to be women with impenetrable interior lives, caught in a moment of quiet contemplation.
Thus, they are fantasy objects of a peculiar type. There is almost always an undercurrent of anxiety, which may have something to do with the idea that they are outsiders, and even seductresses are oddly out of sync with one’s expectations. The dark-haired vixen of Untitled, 1978 (p. 172), wields her evening bag like a weapon as she casts a guarded glance in the direction of a male visitor whose presence is suggested by wafting cigarette smoke and a coat flung over a chair that is visible in the reflection of a mirror. In another Film Still a woman in a lacy dress lies diagonally across a bed, but rather than seduction, her pose and attitude suggest shock or grief as she grips a handkerchief in one hand and a clump of bedsprad in the other.

The Film Stills have a built-in aura of nostalgia. The film itself was already becoming a relic of a bygone era during Sherman’s childhood and the generic female types she recreates here are icons of the fifties and sixties, thus already historical by the time she started creating these works. Sherman has noted that she was consciously going for a more mysterious ambiance, which lead her to mime the look of films by Hitchcock or European directors like Antonioni or Fellini. In terms of types, she chose women who, in her words, “don’t follow the accepted order of marriage and family, who are strong, rebellious characters [and] are either killed off in the script or see the light and become tamed, joining a nunnery or something.”

This characterization of the types in the Film Stills is curiously at odds with the vast critical literature that has grown up around them, which tends to regard the women in these photographs as common prototypes or media clichés constructed out of male fantasies. Sherman’s Film Stills are frequently cited as quintessential examples of postmodern strategy. They are often used to illustrate the notion of the simulacra, formulated by French theorist Jean Baudrillard to describe the fictional nature of our apparent reality. Baudrillard suggested that our sense of the world is formed, not by interaction with any actual or concrete “real,” but by the interplay of empty signifiers. As a result, according to Baudrillard, we are surrounded by “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality,” or as others put it, by copies without originals. Sherman’s stills of fictional films seem to fit this bill perfectly.

Related to the theory of the simulacra is another idea that gained enormous currency in the art debates of the early 1980s and also became attached to Sherman’s work. This is the argument that our very sense of self has been created by the unreal media images that bombard us from the worlds of Hollywood, fashion, and advertising. In this light, Sherman’s Film Stills present a disparate assortment of female types, but in the end tell us nothing about the woman who is enacting them. As feminist critic Judith Williamson argued in a 1983 article, Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills are simultaneously “a witty parody of media images of women” and “a search for identity.”

This interpretation leads to perhaps the most common theoretical explanation of Sherman’s Film Stills. As formulated by critic Craig Owens in an influential 1983 article, Sherman presents us with the idea of femininity as masquerade. This converged with feminist theories about the male gaze that observed how Western
art, and more recently the popular culture of film and advertising, have traditionally been organized around the satisfaction of the male viewer. The voluptuous nudes of Ingres and Titian, provocative damsels selling cars, and Hollywood’s seductive screen sirens all share in the perpetuation of male fantasies about women as pliable, passive, and ever-available. Thus they tell us nothing about woman in herself. Certain proponents of a psychoanalytic approach to art have extrapolated from this idea to make the argument that the very idea of woman in herself is a fantasy. From this perspective, Sherman’s masquerade reveals our culture’s vision of woman as an empty signifier, whose necessarily fractured being is defined by a phallic lack. She serves patriarchal culture as a fetish that can never be possessed because it doesn’t really exist.

All of these explanations seem to define Sherman as a postmodern feminist, skillfully manipulating media imagery to reveal the phallogcentric basis of a male-dominated society. However, despite its centrality to postmodern debates, something about Sherman’s work always seemed to escape these characterizations. Critics wondered: Was she really challenging the status quo or was she actually perpetuating it? Was she or was she not really a feminist? How were viewers expected to respond to these reductive clichés of femininity?

On one side of this debate were critics like Craig Owens, who argued that Sherman’s work deliberately subverts the male gaze by challenging prevailing stereotypes and by refusing to offer the illusion of an apparently stable identity. On the other were feminist critics like Mira Shor who held that Sherman’s work simply perpetuates clichés of femininity while feeding into pervasive myths about female beauty and vulnerability.

Sherman’s next body of work greatly complicated the matter. In 1981, she created a series of photographs that suggest the poses and vulnerability, though not the state of undress, of girlie magazine pin-ups. These untitled Centerfolds borrow the horizontal format of the girlie magazine pin-up to depict women of various sorts lying prone beneath the camera’s eye. However, though the poses and layout are suggestive of centerfolds, the characters were quite unlike those normally found in the pages of Playboy. Instead her characters wear school-girl sweater sets or terry cloth bathrobes which underscore their uneasy innocence. Completely absent are such common centerfold props as corsets and high heels. Instead, these women suggest awkward adolescents or young women as yet uncomfortable with their sexuality.

These works were commissioned by Artforum for a photo spread but were ultimately rejected by the editors, who feared they simply reinforced existing stereotypes about women’s victimhood or submissiveness. The most controversial was a photograph of a disheveled blonde woman, bathed in morning light, who is drawing black sheets up to her neck (p. 174). Some critics saw this as a depiction of the aftermath of a rape. Sherman counters that she was thinking of a woman who had partied until dawn and was now trying to fall asleep in the early morning light.
Countering the reading of this work as a surrender to oppressive fantasies are critical commentaries that see this series as an effort to undermine the controlling male gaze. Curator Lisa Phillips argues that, because she is both creator and subject of these images, Sherman wrests control from the voyeuristic male gaze of the pinup's usual consumer. Craig Owens puts it another way, noting, "Sherman's photographs themselves function as mirror-masks that reflect back to the viewer his own desire ... but while Sherman may pose as a pin-up, she still cannot be pinned down."

Sherman followed these photographs with works that pursued another aspect of female objectification. In the mid-eighties and then again in the nineties, she created several series based on fashion photography. However, despite the fact that these works were commissions from fashion magazines and fashion houses, they again deliberately eschew the conventions of the genre, instead suggesting Sherman's love/hate relationship to the female quest for beauty. Clothes provided by fashion designers became the inspiration for characters of the sort rarely if ever encountered in fashion magazines. In Untitled, 1983 (opposite), posing against what appears to be a cheap flowered bed sheet, she protectively clutches at her crotch and looks at the camera with a startled, school-girlish expression, which is much at odds with the seductress implied by her trussed, form-altering lingerie. Frequently in these works, one can barely make out the contours of the garment being featured. In several she wears a large fake nose and deliberately unattractive wigs. One of the most anti-glamorous, Untitled, 1983 (p. 176), features a standing Sherman in a bleach-blonde wig that all but obscures her face. She wears a severe black suit and stands against the wall clenching her fists like a cornered animal.
Untitled, 1983.
Color photograph.
94 1/4 x 49 1/4 in.
(240.7 x 114.9 cm)
While French *Vogue* was not pleased with Sherman’s approach, other fashion editors and designers, including Comme des Garçons, Issey Miyake, and Dianne B were enthusiastic about Sherman’s reenactments of their clothes. Their willingness to embrace even the most extreme efforts to subvert the fashion industry’s code of glamour and seduction casts light on charges that the fashion industry is simply a system for the subjugation of women. Instead, it suggests that fashion can also embrace an attitude of play and self-mockery not unlike Sherman’s own.

With these fashion images, Sherman’s personas began to shift from images of vulnerability to images that were overtly threatening, grotesque, or disturbing. This became even more pronounced in the photographs that followed the fashion images. These works originated in an invitation by *Vanity Fair* to create a series based on fairy tales. Using theatrical makeup, fake appendages, masks, and dramatic nocturnal lighting, Sherman recreated herself as a pantheon of monsters, hags, and misshapen creatures of the sort who inhabit the margins of fairy tales. Though many (but by no means all) of these monstrosities were apparently female, it was clear that Sherman had moved far beyond any conventional commentary on female roles. Again there were a variety of critical interpretations. Some critics saw a connection to feminist discussions about Western culture’s suppression of female magic and shamanism that considered women with unusual powers to be witches. Others connected the work to Bruno Bettelheim’s theories about the function of fairy tales as repositories of primal fears that children must overcome to successfully enter adulthood. Psychoanalytic interpretations dwelt on the stage of adolescent development when sexuality inspires anxiety and dread, but is also inescapably alluring.

Works in this series found Sherman sprouting horns, pointed ears, and an enormous warty chin; bathed in deep purple shadows and transformed into a snout-nosed human/animal hybrid; lying corpse-like on the ground with blotchy, dirt-covered skin (Untitled, 1985) (p. 178); and leering at the viewer as a half naked, demonic gypsy (Untitled, 1985) (p. 179).

With these works Sherman seemed to have come full circle from the Film Stills’ exploration of women’s conformity to social roles. Here she exaggerates the outsider status hinted at in those personas with a set of characters who exist only in the world of fantasy and nightmare. Sherman has suggested that these works are in part about dealing with fears of death. But despite their darkness, these works are not simply repellent. They are leavened with humor and a sense of the absurd. Like traditional fairy tales, they invoke evil and irrationality in order to bolster our ability to master these frightening forces.

Sherman ventured further into the territory of disgust with her Disaster photographs. In many of these works, Sherman as protagonist begins to disappear, leaving only unpleasant traces behind. One depicts a recently disturbed field of dirt out of which poke a scattering of body parts—a nose, lips, teeth, an ear and some stiffened fingers. The mirror of a discarded makeup compact oddly reflects part of a
face—is it a memory of the victim or a glimpse of the murder? Arguably the most repulsive image in this series presents a field of half-eaten candy covered with sand and a pile of vomit. A pair of sunglasses in the distance reflects back the face of the apparent author of this scene (Untitled, 1987) (p. 180).

These works are the antithesis of Sherman’s earlier exploration of cinematic representations of women. While the untitled Film Stills, Centerfolds, and Fashion photos are about surface images and social masks, the Disaster series instead focuses on the body at its most corporeal. Though equally fictional, they suggest the idea of the body as a set of physical processes and discrete parts that, once blasted apart, can never be satisfactorily reassembled.

Over time, as Sherman’s work has moved away from standard female types and toward increasingly bizarre and at times repellant personas, a new set of theo-
retical interpretations has sprung up around her work. These link her focus on disgust with the notion of abjection. As articulated by French feminist Julia Kristeva, the use by contemporary artists and writers of taboo materials like dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food, and references to taboo subjects like castration and dismemberment, serve as means of confronting subjects otherwise unmentionable in polite society. Kristeva describes the abject as “What disturbs identity, system—order. What does not respect borders, positions and rules, the in between, the ambiguous, the composite.” From this perspective, Sherman’s work undermines an oppressive social order by breaking down conventions about cleanliness, hierarchy, and propriety.

After all but disappearing physically from her work, Sherman the sitter returns in the next set of photographs, which present her reinvention of the histori-
cal portrait. Though these works also use prostheses and bizarre makeup, they are less confrontational than the immediately preceding work. Here Sherman is working with Renaissance, Baroque, and nineteenth-century portraiture. We are made to understand that high art, no less than mass media, traffics in the construction of fantasy. Even the portrait, the painting genre that is supposedly the most realistic, is based on conventions of female beauty rooted in male desire; it reassembles the body to suit the illusion and relies on completely artificial means to create the appearance of naturalism.

A few of the works in this series are based on actual paintings, for instance, a reworking of Caravaggio’s *Sick Bacchus* with an almost unrecognizable Sherman clutching a cluster of grapes. Most, however, simply evoke types familiar from art history. These include the Madonna nursing her child with a patently artificial breast (Untitled, 1990) (see p. 169), an absurd satin-swathed matron who seems to have stepped out of a painting by John Singer Sargent, or a Rembrandtesque old Jew poring over scripture.

After the monstrosities of the fairy tales and disasters, many critics felt that Sherman was pulling back into safer territory with the portrait photographs. However, they didn’t have long to wait for the darker impulses to return to her work.
Sherman has noted that her 1992 Sex Pictures were a deliberate response to the upsurge in the culture war that pitted religious and political conservatives against artists like Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Karen Finley. In the early 1990s, artists were in the cross hairs, held up by conservatives as exemplars of the depraved excesses of a liberal, secular humanist culture whose “pornographic” and “sacrilegious” art was presented as justification for eliminating government funding for the arts. Sherman’s response was to create a series of photographs that deliberately mined the territory of hard core pornography. Using doll parts, masks and prosthetic genitalia, she conjured up horrific scenarios of degradation, mutilation, and sexual exploitation. Freed, for the most part, from the need to manipulate her own real human body, Sherman created weird amalgams of body parts that centered around body processes and activities rarely seen in respectable art works. She created an odalisque vaguely reminiscent of Manet’s Olympia that seemed to reduce the female body to the elements most conducive to male fantasy. The face of this figure is obscured with a black mask while her body is made up of pendulous plastic breasts and a gaping plastic vagina propped onto a pair of mannequin legs. Another character assumes the come-hither pose of conventional centerfolds, but this female figure has a hag’s head, truncated legs, and a prosthetic vagina exuding a long brown sausage. Other works recall the recombinatory dolls of mid-twentieth-century German photographer Hans Bellmer, in which dolls’ legs, arms, and heads are combined in impossible configurations that are at once perversely sexual and repugnant. It is worth noting that Bellmer, working on his photographs from 1934 to 1949, also created his works against a backdrop of censorship and political conservatism.

Echoing Bellmer’s use of art as a form of protest, Sherman’s Sex Pictures were in part a protest against both the “political correctness” of the left and the censuriosity of the right during the most heated period of the Culture War. But they also were an extension of Sherman’s interest in representations of the female body and the images injected into the culture by the mass media. While the Sex Pictures were first and foremost reworkings of the hardcore pornography represented by magazines like Hustler (whose cover image in 1978 of a woman being fed into a meat grinder became a cause célèbre among feminists), they also pointed beyond this narrow genre to wider cultural obsession with sex and violence as evidenced in ever more graphic Hollywood movies.

Sherman revisited this theme several years later in her first and, to date, only full-length film. Office Killer (1997) (p. 182) is a deliberate pastiche of the franchise of slasher films that include Freddy, Scream, and Scary Movie. The classics of this genre generally revolve around crazed killers unleashed on photogenic but feckless young people who are gleefully dispatched with the maximum of blood and gore. Sherman’s version is set in a publishing office. Her killer, played by Carol Kane, is a mousy copy editor who was been downsized to work at home in the wake of an office shakeup. She gets her revenge by murdering her coworkers one by one and installing their decaying corpses in her basement where they become props for her fantasy of the ideal office.
Sherman plays this story for laughs, and her film stands out from the standard horror fare in its self-conscious absurdity and tweaking of the genre’s clichés, and for the way certain visual vignettes deliberately echo some of Sherman’s own still photographs. With *Office Killer*, Sherman comes full circle from the Film Stills, which presented characters in search of a story. Here such characters become the basis for a narrative that is in the end as strangely open ended as the fictive stills.

Following Sherman's directorial debut, she experimented with various ideas for new photography series, but it wasn’t until after September 11, 2001, that she settled into a new theme. Her Clown series, which dates from 2004, presents a complex response to the catastrophe and to the way that it changed the political and cultural climate of the United States. The untitled Clowns draw on the ambiguous role played by these figures in the contemporary imagination. From one perspective, clowns suggest the innocence of childhood; from another they represent the exploitation of that innocence by adults (one recalls how convicted serial killer John Wayne Gacy was known for dressing up as a clown for children’s parties). There is the cultural myth of the tragic clown, weeping beneath his gleeful makeup; the antic clown, deliberately tweaking authority figures and social order; and the murderous
clown, protagonist of countless horror flics. There is also the tradition, enshrined in many of the plays of Shakespeare, of the clown as the wise fool, able to say things no one else can (Untitled, 2004) (below).

Sherman’s clowns thus serve as icons of the widest range of human feeling and behavior. Beneath their red noses, yarn wigs, broadly painted faces, oversized jackets, and floppy shoes, they are vessels of unfathomable emotion. They suggest both the ultimate inaccessibility of others and the absurdity of our pretensions to reason, seriousness, and high moral virtue.

Any comprehensive survey of Sherman’s work underscores the inadequacy of critical models that tie her to particular theoretical positions. Taken together, these critical models add up to a completely contradictory picture of Sherman’s work.

On the other hand, her protean approach to art has made her one of the most influential artists in recent history. Her work is central to a raft of current discussions. For instance, the oddly open-ended stories that her photographs tell have everything to do with the ambiguous nature of postmodern narrative. Artists as diverse as Gregory Crewdson, Jeff Wall, Anna Gaskell, and Eleanor Antin also play on the necessary incompleteness of the still image (p. 184). Their photographs tell stories, but do...
so in stop-action episodes that require the viewer to attempt to fill in the story, to imagine what happened before, what might happen next. By offering either too many or too few clues, these artists create a state of tension that keeps the viewer constantly aware of the fictitious nature of the illusion being created. This in turn, encourages the viewer to complete the story, in effect joining in partnership with the artist in a way that undermines conventional ideas about the artist’s absolute authority.

Meanwhile, Sherman’s unabashedly female preoccupation with the body links her to other artists like Kiki Smith, Petah Coyne, and Janine Antoni who attempt to get at the experience of physicality from the inside. Like Sherman, these artists traffic in real or represented body fluids, waste and internal viscera. However, unlike the more aggressively offensive work of male artists such as Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, they turn to these substances as a means of rethinking Western culture’s traditional equation of woman and nature. Smith’s work celebrates the body as flesh, employing mediums ranging from glass and paper to wax and bronze to explore the beauty of the purely physical aspects of the human body. Antoni uses lard and chocolate as stand-ins for fat and excrement, and her performance-based works are meditations on the interweavings of the physical and the spiritual. Coyne mixes attraction and repulsion in hanging sculptures of wax, plaster, or tar in which materials that evoke living flesh play off others that suggest cinders and ashes.

In her flirtations with soft- and hardcore pornography, Sherman also appears as a godmother of the more recent “bad girls,” a group exemplified by Lisa Yuskavage, Ghada Amer, Cecily Brown, and Kara Walker, whose work also contains imagery that deals explicitly and often disturbingly with female sexuality. Yuskavage borrows from the soft-core pinup to create kitschy, lushly painted representations of doll-like women who seem to embody a mindless sexuality (opposite). Amer and Brown bury pornographic imagery under expressionistic brushstrokes or skeins of embroidery threads. Kara Walker deals with the violent legacy of slavery
with Victorian-style silhouettes that enact some of the most degrading practices of the master/slave relationship.

Like Sherman, they borrow from pornography in the service of larger questions about social values, sexual mores, and the essential nature of desire and pleasure. While acknowledging that pornography may reinforce unsavory and degrading stereotypes, they argue that it also contains the potential to destabilize social conventions that have become rigid and oppressive.

Finally, Sherman’s work reaches out to non-Western artists Yasumasa Morimura and Nikki S. Lee, who also assume characters and theatrical personas to examine the cultural and social aspects of identity. Morimura, in particular, works in a mode strikingly similar to Sherman’s (p. 186)—Western critics sometimes refer to him as the Japanese Cindy Sherman, a moniker that slights the culturally specific nature of his work. A slender Japanese man with fine features, Morimura poses in photographic recreations of famous iconic Hollywood film stars and the subjects of Western art masterpieces. Despite obvious similarities, his work differs from Sherman’s in a number of important ways. He is, first of all, a Japanese man drawing on the Western pop culture image bank, giving his work an extra layer of cultural translation. And second, he mainly portrays female characters, playing on all the complexities that come from crossing gender lines. Lee, meanwhile, shares Sherman’s interest in the performance aspect of identity, but takes it a step further by actually infiltrating various subcultures in various disguises. She has impersonated such characters as a southern redneck, a Japanese office lady, a biker chick, and a club denizen, all apparently convincingly enough to fool members of these groups.

So, who is Cindy Sherman? However widely they differ in other aspects, critical interpretations of her work share the notion of Sherman as the standard bearer for a stern polemic, whether it be a statement against patriarchy, consumerism, social order, or the false consciousness of contemporary society. The artist herself has tended to distance herself from such theoretical approaches to her

work. In her rare interviews, she confesses that she often doesn’t understand the fine points of theoretical exegeses. She also admits that some of the critical polemics have actually influenced her to change the direction of her work, noting, “The only time critical writing really affected my work was when it seemed like someone was trying to second guess where I was going next: I would use that to go somewhere else.”

On the other hand, she willingly acknowledges the female basis of her vision. In a 1997 interview, she noted, “Even though I’ve never actively thought of my work as feminist or as a political statement, certainly everything in it was drawn from my observations as a woman in this culture. And a part of that is a love-hate thing—being infatuated with make-up and glamour and detesting it at the same time. It comes from trying to look like a proper young lady or look as sexy or as beautiful as you can make yourself, and also feeling like a prisoner of that structure. That’s certainly something I don’t think men would relate to.”

While theory-based approaches bring out interesting aspects of Sherman's work, they downplay the element of pleasure that the viewer feels in looking at the work, and that Sherman obviously feels in making it. Sherman notes that the work
grows out of the notion of play. This goes back to her early fascination with dressing up and extends to her profligate mixing and subversion of established genres.

In the end, Sherman’s most important legacy may be her reintroduction of the pleasures of fantasy into an art world that often rejects pleasure as politically and ideologically suspect. The playful perversity of her work, ever more visible in recent years, serves as a reminder that the imagination thrives on fantasies that would be unacceptable if transferred to the real world. We are able to enjoy horror films and tales of mass destruction exactly because we know they are not real. And contrary to postmodern declarations that the “real” is simply an illusion, the imagination knows the difference.

Fantasy, at least the variety purveyed by Sherman, is potentially subversive today. She moves us far from the acceptably family-friendly fantasies of Disney or the newly refurbished Times Square. In their place Sherman brings forward fears and desires that we tend to suppress or ignore. She urges us to stop being uncomfortable about guilty pleasures, and to be unafraid to examine the dark side of human nature.

“My biggest fear,” she has said, “is a horrible, horrible death, and I think this fascination with the grotesque and with horror is a way to prepare yourself psychically if, God forbid, you have to experience something like that. That’s why it’s very important for me to show the artificiality of it all, because the real horrors of the world are unwatchable, and they’re too profound. It’s much easier to absorb—to be entertained by it, but also to let it affect you psychically—if it’s done in a fake, humorous, artificial way. It’s similar to the way I love being terrified by rollercoaster rides, where you’re really scared that you could die, and the adrenaline is rushing, but at the same time you know that you’re safe.”

15. Ibid.