

LEARNING NOTES:

Cindy Sherman



Cindy Sherman. Photo: Inez and Vinoodh

About Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is a highly influential American contemporary artist who lives and works in New York NY. Born in 1954 in Glen Ridge NJ, she first turned her attention to photography at Buffalo State College, where she studied art in the early 1970s. She rose to prominence in the late 1970s and is regarded as one of the most significant artists of the Pictures Generation, a group that included artists such as Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Louise Lawler. This group gained widespread attention by responding to the rise of mass media, advertising and celebrity culture.

For over four decades, Sherman has interrogated themes around representation and identity in contemporary media. She is globally renowned for her exploration of identity and gender through the performance of meticulously observed personas for the camera. Sherman plays the model, in her work, displaying the diversity of human types and stereotypes in society. Her groundbreaking work has earned her an enduring legacy as a pioneer who revolutionized the role of the camera in artistic practice.



Cindy Sherman, Untitled #706, 2026 © 2026 Cindy Sherman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

What does her work look like and how does she make her work?

Photography

This is the foundational medium of Sherman's career. Her practice includes early black and white photographs, her pivotal Untitled Film Stills series (1977 – 1980) consists of photographs recalling the film stills used to promote movies, from which the series takes its title. They recall scenes from 1950s and 1960s films noir, B-movies and European art-house cinema. In the early 1980s, she transitioned to large-format color photography, which allowed her to scale up her portraits of societal characters.

Theatrical effects and styling

Sherman acts as her own director, model and stylist. She brings familiar characters to life by carefully harnessing combinations of vintage clothes, elaborate costumes, heavy makeup, wigs and specific facial expressions—characters are deliberately ascribed exaggerated and constructed personas. This process connects to her personal philosophy on character creation.

'I wish I could treat every day as Halloween and get dressed up and go out into the world as some eccentric character.'—Cindy Sherman¹

To explore the more grotesque aspects of humanity, Sherman incorporates medical prosthetics, masks and fake body parts into her studio work, distorting the human form to create unsettling imagery. The Disasters series, for example, began in the 1980s to respond to the AIDS crisis.

¹ 'Cindy Sherman', Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), n.d. Cindy Sherman



Cindy Sherman, Untitled #701, 2026 © 2026 Cindy Sherman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Green screen and studio backdrops

In series such as ‘Society Portraits’ (2008), Sherman experimented with green screen technology and ornate frames to drop her characters into artificial fantasy environments that heighten their sense of social isolation.

Digital technologies and multiple exposures

In her later work, Sherman embraced digital tools to alter her images. For a 2016 commission for Harper’s Bazaar magazine, she used multiple exposures to duplicate the women within a single frame, suggesting a fractured and unstable sense of identity. Her ‘Ominous Landscape’ series (2010/2012) features figures digitally superimposed against bleak island landscapes shot on Capri, Stromboli, Iceland and Shelter Island.

Film

While predominantly a photographer, Sherman has directly engaged with moving images, notably directing the mainstream Hollywood horror film ‘Office Killer’ in 1997.



Cindy Sherman, Untitled #710, 2026 © 2026 Cindy Sherman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

What are the main themes in Cindy Sherman's work?

Identity as performance

A central concept in Sherman's work is that identity is complex, constructed and performed. Sherman's work 'subverts the visual shorthand we use to classify the world around us, drawing attention to the artificiality and ambiguity of these stereotypes and undermining their reliability for understanding a much more complicated reality.'²

The self

Sherman uses herself as a model not to reveal her personal life, but to create and construct new characters.

'When I'm shooting, I'm trying to get to a point where I'm basically not recognizing myself. That's often what it's about.'—Cindy Sherman

Femininity and the gaze

Sherman's work addresses the layered presentation and public perception of femininity, specifically the relentless gaze to which women are subjected. Her series explore the cultural interaction between female roles and images, illustrating how media forms like cinema, fashion and magazines shape gender expectations.

² 'Cindy Sherman', Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)



Cindy Sherman, Untitled #704, 2026 © 2026 Cindy Sherman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Media archetypes and stereotypes

From her student days creating the Bus Riders, Murder Mystery and Line Up series (1975 – 1976), Sherman has captured everyday personalities and cultural stereotypes. Her iconic ‘Untitled Film Stills’ (1977 – 1980) imitated 1950s and 1960s Hollywood, film noir, B-movies and European art-house cinema to recreate familiar character types, while keeping the narratives intentionally ambiguous.

The grotesque, horror and the abject

Sherman often turns away from glamour to investigate darker human experiences. Through the lens of horror and the abject, she uses unsettling visual strategies to challenge standard notions of desire, beauty and safety.

Class, wealth and privilege

In works like her Society Portraits (2008) as well as her editorial collaborations, such as those using garments from the Chanel archives (2026), Sherman appears to satirize the upper echelons of society. Her images contrast sumptuous haute couture with bleak surroundings, showing characters heavily absorbed by their wealth and social status.

Aging and vulnerability

Her Flappers series (2016 – 2018) focuses on characters who adopted radical modern fashions in the 1920s as a form of empowerment, however, she shows them decades past their heyday. These depictions offer a nuanced, sympathetic look at the aging process, contrasting with harsher Hollywood tropes of deluded, aging actresses.

Questions for discussion

- Sherman notes that she tries to reach a point where she does not recognize herself in her imagery. If the artist successfully transforms herself, what are we looking at when we view the final photograph?
- Sherman's images are designed to be intentionally ambiguous, leaving room for the viewer to imagine their own narratives. How does this open-ended style invite us to insert our own biases, memories or life experiences into the artwork?
- Sherman compares her desire to dress up as eccentric characters to treating every day as Halloween. How does her studio play, mirror or challenge the way everyday people use fashion, clothing and makeup to present different versions of themselves to the public?
- In her later series, Sherman explores aging by depicting characters who seem unaware they are past their prime, yet she treats them with sympathy. How does viewing these images affect your perception of how contemporary society treats aging and visibility?

Glossary

Archetype

A familiar character, image or idea that appears across different cultures and time periods. Examples include figures such as the innocent, the hero, the outsider or the caregiver.

Conceptual photography

A type of photography where the main purpose is to communicate an idea or explore a theme. The image is often carefully staged or constructed rather than simply documenting a real moment.

Digital collage

An art technique that combines, cuts and layers different digital images or photographic elements to create a new composition. These combinations can produce unexpected, altered or surreal images.

The abject

A concept in art and cultural theory that refers to things that challenge our sense of comfort, identity, or order. It often relates to subjects that create mixed feelings of attraction and discomfort, such as bodily change, decay or vulnerability.

The male gaze

A concept from feminist art and film theory that explores how women have often been represented through a male perspective in visual culture. It examines how images can reinforce ideas about women as objects to be looked at rather than as active individuals.

The Pictures Generation

A group of American artists who became prominent in the late 1970s and 1980s. They used existing images from advertising, film, television and popular culture to question how media shapes ideas about identity, gender and society.

Subversion

The act of challenging or questioning accepted ideas, traditions or systems. In art, this can involve changing familiar images or symbols to reveal new meanings or encourage critical thinking.

Additional information

- **Cindy Sherman Artist Page**
- **'Cindy Sherman' Exhibition Page**
- **'The Women' Exhibition Page**
- **'1977 – 1982' Exhibition Resource**
- **Ursula Magazine: 'Options For How to Be'**
- **Artist Profile: Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)**