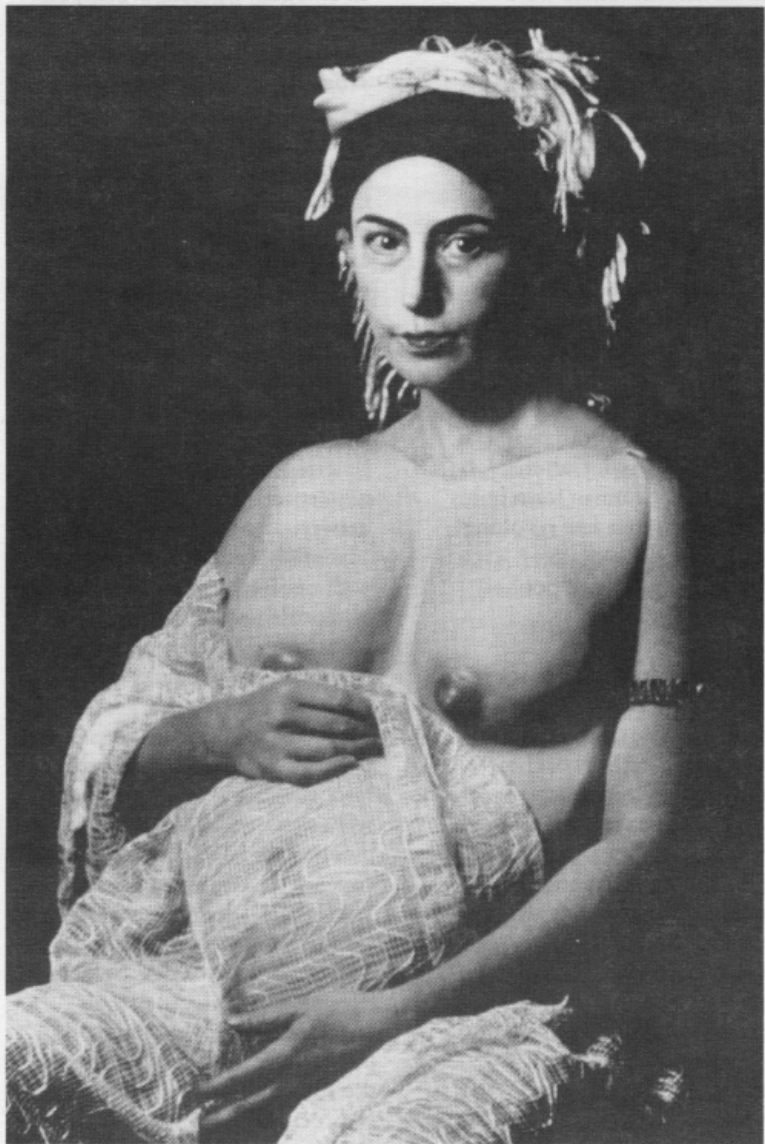


Cindy Sherman
MATRIX/BERKELEY 138

University Art Museum
early September - late October
1990

#205 from the Italian Series, 1989



Since the mid-1970s Cindy Sherman has been creating photographs that run helter-skelter across the topology of human identity. Among the earliest of these was a series of black and white "movie-stills" that reproduced the look of 1940s and '50s Hollywood cinema and focused on aspects of the classic female ingenue, portrayed invariably and in great variety by Sherman herself. These were followed by larger color works derived from the photographic styles of fashion and "girlie magazines." The glamour and seductiveness of these images began to pale, however, when Sherman, again disguised as a multitude of personalities, appeared with strange bruises or oddly unconcealed prostheses. By the late 1980s, her photographs had become extremely large and grotesque, with a sense of horror and witchery reminiscent of the morbid fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. At one point, all that remained of the human form in her photographs were a few revolting bits and excrescences: a disembodied finger or a pool of vomit.

While this progression in her *oeuvre* might seem to indicate Sherman's descent into an expressionistic netherworld of emotion and dis-ease, such a view is belied by the calculated artifice of even the most bizarre images--there is nothing conventionally expressionistic in the way they were made. Rather than expressing a unique and purely private state of mind, Sherman's images are always poised in an uneasy balance between self-expression and participation--albeit ironic--in the dominant social conventions of

representation. Her characteristic distortion and disfigurement of the female form, for example, may be less about some internal misery than they are problematizations of the representation of women in a misogynistic society; in such images, Sherman seems to be directly challenging the complacency of the viewer's objectifying gaze.

In Sherman's newest works, this sort of confrontational stance coexists with a keen sense of satirical wit. Perhaps in recognition of the fact that she herself has recently been accorded the status of a contemporary master, Sherman's recent photographs abandon the look of cheap horror films for the faux elegance of simulated great master paintings. Although some of these photographs are based on actual art historical models, for example, the Caravaggio *Bacchus*, most of them simply reconstruct the general effect of some specific moment in painting history between the Renaissance and the advent of Modernism, pointing with uncanny precision to a style of representation that we can easily identify with a particular age, culture, and class. In these, as in her earlier works, however, Sherman intentionally reveals the props of her charade. In a recent interview, Sherman explained, "I want to play with what's real. The pictures are fake, yet real. But if I covered the seams so that no one knew that the nose was fake, then I'd feel I was just mimicking them. I'd be an impersonator, a mime."¹

Sherman's concentration on the period of European art between the 15th and 19th centuries extends and focuses her examination of the production of identity through

social conventions of representation. Painting of this era was generally predicated on a desire to achieve what Norman Bryson has called the "Natural Attitude," that is, a description as accurate as possible of external reality. As Bryson argues, such naturalism sought "to transcend the limitations imposed by history." However, the supposed objectivity of pure visual simulation was called upon, in effect, to naturalize and therefore legitimize the various class, gender, and religious ideologies that lay behind these "realistic" portraits.

"It is more accurate to say," notes Bryson, "that 'realism' lies rather in a coincidence between a representation and that which a particular society proposes and assumes as its reality; a reality involving the complex formation of codes of behaviour, law, psychology, social manners, dress, gesture, pose--all those practical norms which govern the stance of human beings towards a particular historical environment."²

Sherman turns the tradition of the "Natural Attitude" on its head by using photography, that apotheosis of objective representation, to indicate the ruptures, falsehoods, and hidden agendas that haunt the production of "realist" imagery. Her recent photographs artfully negotiate a position between male and female, between self and society, and between past and present that is equally inspired by critical reflection and generous imagination.

Cindy Sherman was born in 1954. She currently lives and works in New York City.

Lawrence Rinder

¹ Glenn Collins, "A Photographic Self Portraitist Never Sees Herself in Her Art," *The New York Times* (February 1, 1990), p. B3.

² Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 13.

Works in MATRIX (all works are color photographs from the Italian Series):

#205, 1989, 53 1/2 x 40 1/2". Lent by the Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, California.

#209, 1989, 57 x 41". Lent by Eli and Edythe L. Broad, Los Angeles, California.

#211, 1989, 37 x 31". Lent by Eli and Edythe L. Broad, Los Angeles, California.

#214, 1989, 29 1/2 x 24". Lent by Eli and Edythe L. Broad, Los Angeles, California.

#215, 1989, 74 1/4 x 51". Lent by Eli and Edythe L. Broad, Los Angeles, California.

#216, 1989, 87 x 56". Lent by the Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, California.

#221, 1990, 48 x 30". Lent by Sharleen and Martin Cohen, Encino, California, courtesy Linda Cathcart Gallery, Santa Monica, California.

#222, 1990, 60 x 40". Lent by Laila and Thurston Twigg-Smith, Honolulu, Hawaii.

#223, 1990, 58 x 42". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Philip Gersh, Beverly Hills, California.

#224, 1990, 48 x 38". Lent by Linda and Jerry Janger, Los Angeles, California.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York '79; Metro Pictures, New York '80; Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio '84 (traveled to Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; Des Moines Art Center; The Baltimore Museum of Art '84-'86 (catalog); The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York '86 (traveled to Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Dallas Museum of Art) (catalog); Monika Sprüth Galerie, Cologne '88; Metro Pictures, New York '90; Linda Cathcart Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '90.

Selected group exhibitions:

Metro Pictures, New York, *Opening Group Exhibition* '80; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, *Young Americans* '81; Kassel, W. Germany, *Documenta 7* '82; The Whitney Museum, New York, *1983 Biennial* '83; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC, *Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984* '84; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, *Carnegie International* '85; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986* '86, and *A Forest of Signs: Art in the*

Crisis of Representation '89; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Photography Until Now* '90; The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in conjunction with the New Museum and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, *The Decade Show* '90.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Crimp, Douglas. "Pictures," *October 8* (Spring '79).

Marzorati, Gerald. "Imitation of Life," *Artnews* (Sept. '83), pp. 78-87.

Gambrell, Jamey. "Marginal Acts," *Art in America* (March '84), pp. 114-19.

Danto, Arthur. "Art: Cindy Sherman," *The Nation* (Aug. 15-17, '87), pp. 134-37.

Johnson, Ken. "Cindy Sherman and the Anti-Self: An Interpretation of Her Imagery," *Arts Magazine* (Nov. '87), pp. 47-53.

Smith, Roberta. "A Course in Portraiture by an Individualist with a Camera," *The New York Times* (Jan. 5, '90), p. C19.

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