

Gillian Wearing, Whitechapel Gallery, London, March
28 — June 17, 2012

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Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 2010, installation view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012.

photo : © 2012 Cindy Sherman, courtesy of MoMA, New York

Cindy Sherman

Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 26—June 11, 2012

Five towering versions of Cindy Sherman, each sporting a lavish period costume, greeted viewers from the walls of the artist's latest exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The largest survey of her work to date, comprising over 170 photographs, seemed determined from its outset to transform Sherman—already one of the most recognizable faces in contemporary art—into a full-fledged mascot for postmodern photography. But what appeared to be a maneuver by the MoMA's public relations team was, in fact, Sherman's latest experiment in her ongoing practice of self-portraiture: a photographic mural designed specifically for the show (*Untitled*, 2010).

The larger-than-life Sherman ambassadors are indicative of two important shifts in the artist's practice that the rest of the exhibition bears out: one that sees her increasingly engage with the grander scales and lush colours now characteristic of contemporary fine art photography; and another that sees her move from playing bit parts to taking on the role of leading lady (or man) in her images.

Digressing with chronology, the MoMA exhibition juxtaposes Sherman's photographic series in an attempt to draw out unexpected connections in the artist's thirty-year practice. These combinations work best when they offer a satisfying snapshot of Sherman's creative trajectory, such as the salon-style hanging of dozens of her history portraits, which borrow the figures and costumes of Renaissance paintings, on a wall adjacent to two of her rarely seen photo collages from 1976, *Untitled #488* and *#489*. Here, Sherman's early experiments with a labour-intensive cut-and-paste process foreshadow the repeated act of posing for the camera that the later works formalize.

At other times, however, the curatorial strategy foregrounds disparities between Sherman's bodies of work, making some appear prescient and others sorely dated. *The Untitled Film Stills* (1977—80), presented here in their entirety, continue to speak to the hold Hollywood portrayals of women have on the collective imagination, but also have the unexpected effect of making the nearby clown series (2003) seem like an embarrassing holdover from the 1990s' popular obsession with the carnivalesque.

The standout works in the exhibition are Sherman's newest photographs, a 2008 series of society portraits that examines contemporary representations of "women of a certain age." In these, Sherman adopts the dress of refined older women, but exaggerates the make-up and hairstyles often employed by them to look youthful. While the success of the film stills lay in Sherman's ability to play out female typecasting to its logical extreme, these society portraits seem the product of a more recent and insidious societal obsession with self-preservation and -presentation. Their unnerving familiarity is a testament to Sherman's aptitude for mimicking the subtlest shifts in the ways in which we represent ourselves through the camera.

[Gabrielle Moser]



Gillian Wearing, *Self Portrait at 17 Years Old*, 2003, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say, HELP*, 1992-1993.

photo : © Gillian Wearing, courtesy of Maureen Paley, London

Gillian Wearing

Whitechapel Gallery, London, March 28—June 17, 2012

The difference between the private and the public self has long been a source of fascination for Gillian Wearing, who has been making video and photography investigating the notion of identity for over twenty years. Best known for *Signs that say what someone else wants you to say* (1992–93), photographs of people in the street revealing their innermost thoughts, she once summarized the drive behind her practice as an attempt "to find ways of discovering new things about people, and in the process discover more about myself." The comprehensive survey of her work at the Whitechapel Gallery raises questions about how much an artist can achieve within this realm of investigation without becoming too self-referential or resorting to manipulative representations of others.

The exhibition is divided between two floors, marking a distinction between the more narrative works and those that derive from portraiture. Starting with the iconic video *Dancing in Peckham* only seems appropriate. It shows the artist shedding her own inhibitions to dance in a shopping centre, to the indifference of bystanders. Unadulterated moments of release are not commonly observed in the British public realm and, although this one is scripted, there is an uncomfortable tension involved in the pull that such an unusual sight exerts. It's akin to watching someone being publicly humiliated, but it's unclear whether it's the artist or the unsuspecting audience who is targeted. The other video works range from the playful mimicry of *10-16*, in which adults lip-synch the voices of children, to the heart-rending *Prelude* showing images of a woman who has passed away since the film was made. The grainy, expressive footage is accompanied by a voice recording of her sister discussing the aftermath of her death.

Taking from Erving Goffman's theory of masks, which suggests that we all enact multiple roles in our daily life, the series of self-portraits is the most accomplished. Perhaps that is because, by turning the camera on herself, the artist evades the risk of producing exploitative work. Instead, through the use of extremely realistic masks and studio photography, she becomes, in turn, each member of her family or an artist she admires. Aside from a few subtle clues pointing to the masks—delineations around the eyes, a stiffness in the mouth—the images could be uncanny portraits. The strength of this series lies in the process of completely transforming the artist while still maintaining her presence in the image. Yet it relies just as much on simple devices appropriated from theatre and psychology: assuming an identity, exploring the ways in which we present ourselves to the world and the role of the ego as a mask. It is difficult not to think of the work of Cindy Sherman or Claude Cahun, which Wearing references knowingly, but perhaps this familiarity is the strength of her work: always recognizable but never quite the same.

[Martine Rouleau]