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Film Stills

By
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Kevin Jordan Film Stills

ABSTRACT

Film cinematography has always fascinated me, particularly the way composition, color, and lighting augment the subject's mood and can evoke an emotion out of viewers. I want to emulate this in my portraits, with the goal of transporting the viewers into another world.

Advisor: Martin Benjamin

Cindy Sherman

A large inspiration for my photography project was the “Untitled Film Stills (1977-1980)” project by Cindy Sherman (American, b. 1954). These portraits were the first I was aware of that were influenced by cinema. In the project, Cindy posed and shot photographs of herself in stereotypical female roles and poses of 1950’s and 1960’s Hollywood cinema, art cinema, and fashion (Rosenberg). The work is a wonderful exploration and critique on female representation in cinema and other media, a product of the feminist movement. Despite each photograph being a self portrait, Cindy was able to play a variety of “roles” with the use of makeup, wardrobe, wigs, stage scenery, and props. The amount of variation in her work she was able to achieve with these tools is incredible. The role playing she did in both playing characters and playing “Hollywood”, a massive institution with much greater financial and personnel resources, was an interesting challenge to take on. In addition to this technical challenge, her work also takes on the challenge of superficiality in media and the effect of its suffocating stereotypes in regard to social and cultural identities (Rosenberg).



Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still #1* 1977

The first photograph in Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still* project, *Untitled Film Still #1*, can be deceiving at first glance. The image shows a person holding an object in their hand with their shadow cast on a white wall behind them. The shadow, if viewed alone, resembles a man in a top hat holding a pistol but, we can see that the subject is a woman with short hair holding a pair of glasses. The posture of the subject, level-footed, arm bent at ninety degrees, and a stern look on her face, gives the woman a powerful appearance. She looks alert and ready for whatever may be beyond the left side of the frame. This portrayal of power is stereotypically limited to the portrayal of men in film so it is fitting what Sherman has done with this image, highlighting the contrast of masculine and feminine representation in media.

Technically, it is also a great image. The shadow is defined well on the white wall hinting at the use of a hard, small light source. In black and white image making it is extremely important to have contrast in lighting values to define and draw out the subject. Sherman uses this technique here with her wardrobe and lighting choice. This also has the effect of accentuating the effect of there being two people in the photograph. The inclusion of the traditional subject and the shadow provides context and contrast as masculine and feminine subjects and commentary on their relationship.



Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still #13* 1978

One of the famous film stills from Sherman's Untitled Film Stills project is Untitled Film Still #13 (1978) . The photograph is of a young woman reaching high to grab a book off of the shelves in what looks like a library. The woman is dressed like a young school girl in a white blouse and a headband. Additionally, the woman is looking up in an innocent yet sexual manner. This image is based on cliches of women that Sherman was forced to look up to as a youth (Rosenberg). These women were cast as virgins in romance movies who were seeking out their womanhood. Sherman is satirizing this stereotypical female image. It is fitting that she has chosen to pose in front of a section of books about art and movies, further drawing attention to the media's connection and construction of this imagery. The creativity on the part of Sherman to use mimicry and punch the establishment with their own fist was genius. By inserting herself, she had the opportunity to change the context of the issue surrounding the portrayal of females and poke fun of the media.

Technically, the photograph is very well composed. Sherman sits in the right third of the frame and the lines created by the book shelves create a leading line that points us towards the subject.



Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still #21* 1978

Arguably Sherman's most iconic film still is *Untitled Film Still #21* (1978). It has become so famous that many artists across different mediums have recreated the image. It is a close up of a young woman in a hat with a bow. She is shot from a low angle, which typically makes a person seem powerful but the skyscrapers behind her seem to cancel out that effect. Her eyes, at a sharp angle, and facial expression show hints of a perplexed and worried mood as if she is feeling remorse. Many have claimed that the image represents a "country girl" coming to the city for the first time. The look on the woman's face is the look of someone who was not expecting what the city would be like. This reactive face helps to sell the image as a film still and as part of a larger narrative. It looks like it could be a still of a female character in an Alfred Hitchcock film.

Cindy Sherman's work was the first that exposed me to the idea of emulating the look of blockbuster movies. As a tribute to her work, I decided to use the same naming scheme she did. I like this naming scheme because it explains and points to a collective of work and does not limit the meaning, as specific titles sometimes do. Additionally, through her work I learned how expressions and simple body language or actions can together form a complex emotion, and also create a narrative. For some of my film stills I started with an emotion I wanted to express and then figured out how to convey that emotion with wardrobe, composition, pose, props, and color. The last takeaway which I learned about through Sherman's works was the ability to use photography as a tool to critique society. I think that this work, critical of mass media culture, is more pertinent today than ever with social media. Images and advertisements in the digital age have a massive reach and audience and help perpetuate stereotypes and expectations.

Dennis Hopper

Dennis Hopper (American, 1936-2010) was an actor, photographer, and director. After getting his big break acting on television, he moved to movies acting alongside James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Giant* (1956) (The Telegraph). In 1961, actress and then wife Brooke Hayward bought Hopper a Nikon camera for his 25th birthday (Hagan). He took his camera everywhere with him and would photograph his artist and actor friends as well as anything else he found. Hopper used his excellent eye for composition to make some incredible photographs on the sixties, which were collected into the book *Dennis Hopper: Photographs 1961-1967*. I can't help but believe that his photography work helped him on his directorial debut on the indie film *Easy*

Rider (1969). The film was a commercial and artistic success which won him the Cannes award for the new director category (Hopper Art Trust).



Dennis Hopper *Double Standard* 1961

One of Hopper's most famous photographs is *Double Standard* (1961). The photograph was captured in Los Angeles from a car at an intersection. The name comes from the two signs for the Standard Oil gas station on the corner of the intersection. The photograph is really an iconic piece of history from Los Angeles in the 1960's. The advertising and signage, in addition to, the car design makes the period of the photograph unmistakable for many.

What really sets the photo apart from others is its composition. The photograph uses several key concepts such as reflection, leading lines, and the frame within a frame. The power lines that part with the streets have a very interesting effect. Compositionally, it is popular to have leading lines converging at a point in the distance to highlight the presence of a subject that may be approaching or leaving. Instead the lines of this photograph lead the eyes closer to the foreground highlighting the gas station that sits inside of the triangle of power lines. At the same time, the outside of the frame has the effect of leading our eyes down the long roads as the utility poles get smaller. The choice to take the photograph as a point of view shot also adds to the composition. The scene is framed nicely by the both the hood of the car at the bottom of the frame and the interior of the car at the top. The angle formed by the top of the car mimics and interacts with the angles of the power lines well. Additionally, the inclusion of the rear view mirror, which is well situated on the right third of the frame, places you into the scene as if you were in the car.

Gregory Crewdson

Gregory Crewdson (American, b. 1962) is another photographer that has inspired my work. His most famous work is a collection of surreal cinematographic images in rural settings. The lighting, composition, and color of the images invite you to enter the world of the photograph and the eerie subject matter reels you in. Not only does Crewdson set out to make cinematic images but also, operated as if he were making a film. He works with many people to achieve his vision including, but not limited to, a director of

photography, producer, and location manager (Crewdson). Crewdson also sections out his time like a film production with pre-production, production, and post-production. His pre-production involves scouting locations or even having sets built from scratch on a soundstage (Crewdson). In production, he uses an 8x10 film view capture his images, focusing on different areas of the frame in each shot. In post-production, he scans the film, and combines them digitally (Crewdson).

You may notice that, in much of Crewdson's work, everything is in sharp focus. This is the result of his post-production process which involves focus stacking. Focus stacking is a process by which you combine several images with different focus points in order to get an image with a larger depth of field (or area in focus). Crewdson really likes the effect this has; he think that it helps the viewer to dive into the photograph, and I agree. Creating composite images also allows you to change the lighting in some of the images to produce an interesting effect. Crewdson has stated he's not trying to "cheat" an image,

"In the end, I consider myself a realist photographer. And so when I'm using digital technology, it's not with special effects in mind. It's really to try to recreate what I saw in front of me, in terms of focus and depth of field and clarity. It's not trying to create something fantastical at all" (The New Yorker).

The result of the focus stacking effect, in addition to the color choices, gives his work a very painterly feel. I believe this is due to the number of shades of each color he uses, akin to a painter mixing paints, having several variations of each color and blending

them together. The color tones are typically dark or cool but, also have hints of warm tones, bright colors, and complementary colors.



Gregory Crewdson *Untitled* from *Beneath the Roses*, 2006

The first image of Crewdson's I want to talk about is not a portrait but an untitled "townscape" from 2006. The image portrays a sleepy town in the early morning. The roads are covered with an untouched dusting of snow that a car has started to drive through. This specific moment for me is very tranquil. Although it's a small town, the roads are clearly deserted, made noticeable by the untouched snow. I can imagine being in that car, slowly driving through town and hearing the snow crunching under the tires. Additionally, being the only car on the road allows you a moment of calmness. You don't need to worry about traffic so you can enjoy the moment.

The composition and lighting are also fantastic. The field of view is wide, looking as if it is the point of view of the human eye. The rule of thirds is present to some extent. The rightmost lightpost lands near the intersection of the top right thirds lines. The corner of the gold toned building also falls near the opposite thirds lines. The lines formed by the roads and the buildings create a nice depth and send my eyes down the road.

The lighting is typical of many of Crewdson's photographs; there is a cool and soft light throughout much of the frame. The cool snow on the ground is broken up with the shapes of the warm lights spilling out from the restaurants, shops and theater. They accent the photograph well along with the headlights shining from the car and the yellow stop lights.



Gregory Crewdson *Untitled (Dylan on the floor)* 2001

“Untitled” (Dylan on the floor), 2001 is another stunning photograph by Crewdson. Besides the beautiful lighting in this image what stands out to me is the story that can be told. We immediately see the man in distress on his knees with an untucked and wrinkled shirt. His sweaty face looks crazed, afraid, and exhausted. He looks as though he has been trying to reach something that is beneath the floorboards, using a handsaw to cut holes into the floor. The image reminds me of the short story Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe in which a man goes crazy after hiding a body under the floorboards of his house. The interesting thing about this image is that it has you as the viewer

wondering what beneath the floor is glowing, how the man found it, and what will happen next. In this way, I like how it is open to interpretation and can start a discussion.

Gregory Crewdson's work has informed mine in several ways. Firstly, I was inspired by Crewdson's process. It was interesting to hear how he operated so similarly to a movie production. This gave him creative control in some of his work to create an image from scratch but also involves a lot of work. I didn't have a crew working with me but on a few of my shoots I obtained a better understanding of what goes into the process of work like Crewdson's. Secondly, Crewdson's surreal subject matter rubbed off on me. My goal was to ultimately to draw the viewers into the world of the photograph and I think studying his work was important because he does an excellent job at this. Additionally, I reminded myself through his work that the location or setting of a photograph can also be a character and can interact with the subjects in the photograph. Especially because I chose to shoot single subject work, this was important.

The Beginnings of My Film Stills Project



Untitled Film Still #19

The beginning of my film stills project entailed a process of learning to analyze lighting setups from films that I liked. In one of the first attempts, Untitled film still #19, I tried to create a look similar to the Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction*. By looking at the interior shots from the film I noticed that there seemed to be a hard light coming from above pointing down. This was deduced by looking at the highlights on the hair and hands of the characters. Additionally, I could tell that the lights used in the film were “hard” lights because they casted harsh shadows on the face and hands of the characters so I used a studio strobe without the softbox. To fill in the shadows a bit and brighten up the face

with soft light, to look like the movie, I bounced the light from a strobe off of a circular reflector. To further the reference, I had my subject hold a toy gun and look unphased while about to shoot someone. I composed him on the left third with the gun on the lower right third and I used a low angle to make the subject seem even more menacing and powerful. I really like how the highlights on the hand look to give him an aggressive look.



Untitled Film Still #21

Untitled Film Still #21 was based on the 1980 film *Raging Bull*. In the ring side scene where Jake LaMotta loses via TKO the lighting is very dramatic. The most prominent feature is the highlights on the side of the boxers. Since the light does not fully wrap around the actors faces I knew that the lights were on the sides of the boxers. I

experimented with lights on the sides of my subject which you can see on the left shoulder of the subject. I decided to pull one light in front of the subject so that the light highlighted the black eye and just kissed the the opposite eye, like an extreme version of Rembrandt lighting. I had the subject look down so that he would appear to be furious and about to attack. To make him look more like a boxer in a fight I used a trick I learned online to make fake swear. A mixture of water and vegetable glycerin was sprayed onto the subject to simulate beads of sweat on his head and body.



Untitled Film Still #3

Untitled Film Still #3 is one of the first I did which was not inspired by another image or film. It was also the first shot on location. I had access to this location and knew it had a really grungy feel and would make a great place for a photoshoot. The location inspired

me to create a scene of someone tied to a chair and gagged. I really like silhouette figures and I thought this was the perfect way to make the subject with the hammer look even more ominous and threatening.

I learned the advantages and disadvantages of shooting on location . On location shoots bring a nice level of realism to the photograph. The coloration and texture of the walls would have been very hard to simulate in a studio environment. The valves, pipes, insulation and ventilation hose, which add a lot to the atmosphere of the image would be difficult and costly to reproduce. Lastly, I feel that the atmosphere helps the subjects because many of them did not have acting experience. When shooting on location however, you do give up some control. The room this is shot in is tiny and had some immovable objects that I needed to work around when placing lights and finding a good composition. I had to be very careful to make sure that I kept what I wanted out of the frame and was leaning and squeezing into corners to take some of the images.

Film Stills Part Two



Untitled Film Still #1



Untitled Film Still #2

Untitled Film Stills #1 and 2 are inspired by film noir films. My initial idea was to create a scene of a detective but, others have mentioned to me it looks like someone devastated by something in the news. To add visual interest I made a cardboard cutout with slits in it and put it in front of my light source to mimic the look of blinds. I especially like the way this looks on the lampshade. The lamp, teacup, ashtray, and hat were all purchased at a thrift store to give the image a more vintage feel. The color scheme was created to look like the classic Hollywood gold and teal look. I accentuated this color scheme in post by pulling the shadows blue and the highlights a little orange. I especially like how the shirt of the subject looks. Its blue color and the variations in lighting reminds me of Crewdson's work. Compositionally, I shot the subject from a high angle to underscore their feeling of being overwhelmed. In #2 the lines on the floor are parallel to the desk

and the corner formed by the floor points toward the subjects head. I think this has a nice effect of leading the viewer's eye to the subject.



Untitled Film Still #4

This image was most likely inspired by one of my favorite childhood television shows *Scooby-Doo*. I wanted the subject to look shocked at something he found. For a more stylized look, I put a blue color gel on the light that was simulating moonlight. This blue light also pairs well with the warm light of the lantern.



Untitled Film Still #25

This film still is the only composite image of the group. It was the result of experimenting with EL (Electroluminescent) wire and attempting to recreate the stars and solar system. The center colored portion of the image is a long exposure of EL wire as it is twirled around the subject. The outside of the frame is a shot of paper towel dust on a sheet of glass. I got this idea from Joey Shank's Shanks FX channel on YouTube. Inspired by Crewdson's images of people in tractor beams, I wanted to create an image of an alien appearing.



Untitled Film Still #8

This Image was created using the Nikon D7100s double exposure mode. I realized I could make someone look like an astronaut with this feature while experimenting with a water bottle and forced perspective. The “helmet” is actually a 4” christmas ball. After taking the image of the subject and then the ball, the camera combines the images like a double exposure. I wanted to have the subject look in awe as if she’d seen the most beautiful thing in her life. I really like this picture next to Film Still #25 aligned so that the astronaut is looking at the alien.



Untitled Film Still #5



Untitled Film Still #6



Untitled Film Still #27

The idea for # 5,6, and 27 came from when the TV in my house stopped working and the color bars were showing for a moment. I thought that it would look interesting if there were people stuck in the screen trapped. The color bars for me are a symbol of the media and I think that many of us can get sucked into our screens. In order to execute my idea, I bought pieces of fleece, cut them into strips and glued them together. It was probably the most work i'd put into a shoot but, it was worth it when I saw the results.



Untitled Film Still #9

Film Still #9 was an experiment with discarded background paper. I realized that the paper was wide enough to make a tunnel out of so I gave it a try. To give it a more dramatic feel I decided to crumble the paper and give it more texture and to backlight the scene. I was ecstatic with the way it turned out. It reminds me very much of a Tim Burton Stop motion film because of the mysterious and dark feeling it gives me.

Film Stills Part Three



Untitled Film Still #10

I eventually revisited the idea of making paper tunnels. Instead of crumbling the paper I left it untouched and used it its natural form. This tunnel, unlike the last, was half white and half black. With the use of canned fog, I could make part of his body disappear. It gives a between life and death or heaven and hell feel to the image.

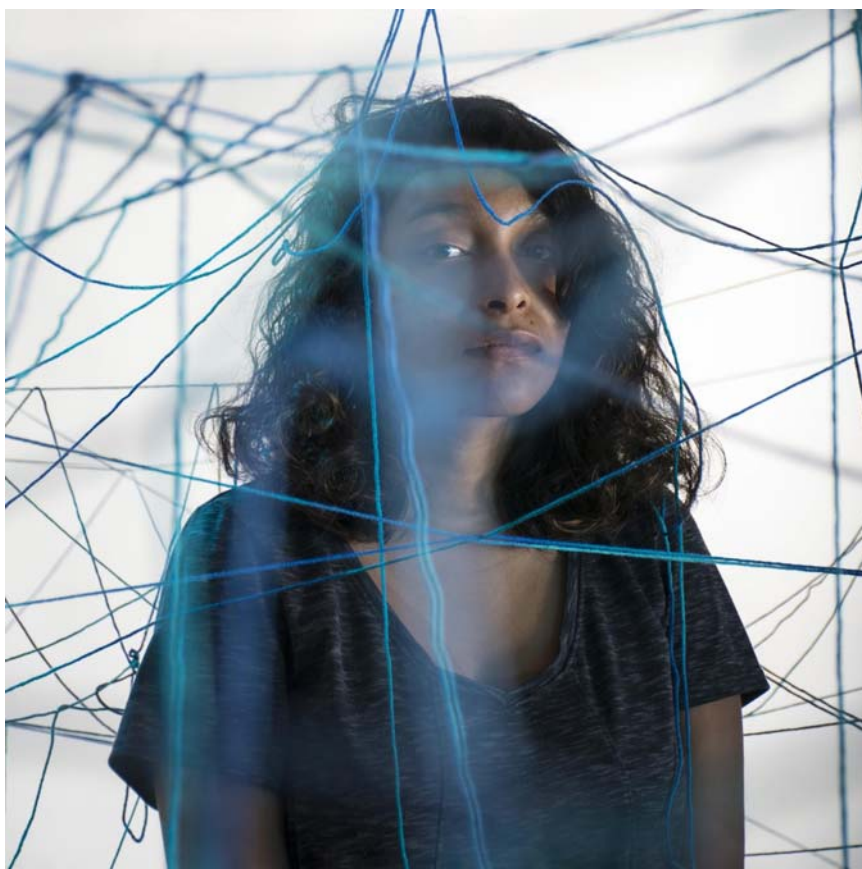


Untitled Film Still #11



Untitled Film Still #12

For film stills #11 and 12 I wanted to try and capture a specific emotion which correlates with #11. I wanted to try to portray a depressed emotion in which you are consciously or subconsciously blocking the things that can heal you. The colorful confetti is meant to symbolize the good in life and the color of the umbrella and the subjects clothing were chosen specifically to be the opposite.

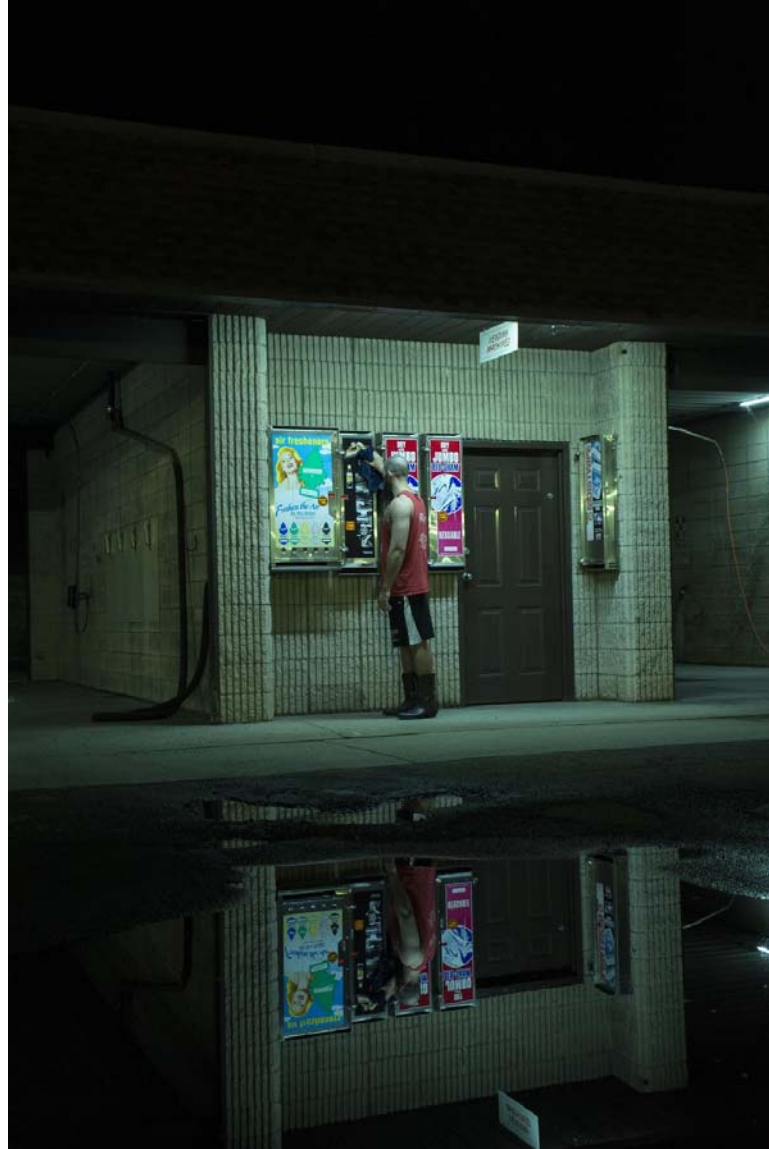


Untitled Film Still #13



Untitled Film Still #14

Film stills #13 and 14 were also attempts to capture a feeling of depression, isolation, and despair. I thought that for this emotion it would be fitting for the subject to be trapped in a mess of blue string. In #14 I gave the subject a pair of scissors and asked her to try to cut herself out of the mess.



Untitled Film Still #15

In Untitled Film Still #15 I wanted to capture a lone worker on the graveyard shift. I wanted time to feel slow and infinite like it does when you have nothing to do. To exaggerate the fluorescent light look, I pushed the photo green in post. When scouting the location I noticed puddles and was lucky that there were some to utilize when I went back.

Final Thoughts

Throughout the creation of my film stills, I learned to experiment, be patient, and be adaptable. Going into photoshoots, I would sometimes have a very specific idea of the image I wanted to capture. Only a handful of times was this one of the best image from the shoot. Often, other ideas and improvised setups were the ones that produced the best images. Additionally, there were some shoots that didn't produce any of this work. Those "failures" reminded me about the importance of preparation and experimentation and helped me going forward. In the future, I'd like to continue to make work like this and also apply what I learned to filmmaking.

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