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GENDER AND VISION THROUGH THE LENS OF CINDY
SHERMAN AND THE PICTURES GENERATION

A Thesis Presented

by

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of

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Chapter 1: Introduction

New York, 1977. As Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" predicted 12 years earlier, the Minimalists and Conceptual artists of the previous generation had taken the Modernist goal of exploring medium to its seemingly inevitable and percussive conclusion.¹ A new group of artists, struggling with themes such as identity, politics, artistic invention, and the newly immersive world of images and films that surrounded them (Figures 1-3), were entering the scene and turning the whole art world on its head. The Pictures Generation, facing a post-peace-and-love era, found in this new culture of images a way in which to critique, engage, and exploit the recently exposed nerves that had resulted from the tumultuous previous generation. Cindy Sherman, already beginning to build a name for herself in Buffalo, became one of the most successful of the group. Sherman delved headfirst into the new problems of identity and gender relations embedded in the ubiquitous imagery of advertisements, magazines, television, and cinema.

The artists who made up the group which would later come to be known as the Pictures Generation came largely from two sources: CalArts, or the California Institute of the Arts, in Los Angeles, and Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, in Buffalo. This thesis will largely focus on the Hallwalls group, of which Cindy Sherman was a member.

¹ Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago [u.a.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009. 148-172.

CalArts Mafia

CalArts was founded in 1970 in reaction to the more traditional art schools that already existed in Southern California at the time. The school, funded by Walt Disney and headed by abstract painter Paul Brach as dean and Conceptual artist John Baldessari as faculty leader, did not focus on teaching technique, but rather on the creativity of the student. Baldessari's teaching assistant, Tom Radloff, was infamous for stamping works with this phrase: "Nice idea, but it's been done already by_____." Each student was challenged not only to be as original as possible, but also to defend his or her works as well as possible.² In this way, CalArts created a generation of artists devoted wholly to original expression, who were also well versed in theory, and who could talk circles around more experienced artists from other programs.

The students were also encouraged to question any and all orthodoxies, much in the same way that the school itself did. Baldessari, as the intellectual leader of the school, encouraged appropriation and reproduction rather than traditional creativity. One student of Baldessari, Jack Goldstein, who had already received professional training at the Chouinard Art Institute and who will be discussed later in Chapter Three, really began making his mature works under Baldessari's tutelage. It is at CalArts that Goldstein began to incorporate the repetitive reproduced images and distancing techniques that would eventually become emblematic of his style.³

² Eklund, Douglas, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.). *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*. New York : New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2009. 25.

³ Eklund 2009, 25.

The CalArts artists also became known as a competitive group. The school seemed to attract the most ambitious of the best and the brightest, perhaps in part owing to the competitiveness of the application pool: only one in twenty-four undergraduates were accepted for the first class of students.⁴ In any case, the nickname the “CalArts Mafia” stuck. The students were given free range to create their own art, and the tools with which to critique not only their own works but also those of others, further fueling intense rivalries both within the group and beyond.⁵

“We Had a Hall, We Had Walls”

The group at Hallwalls, on the other hand, was not “groomed” in the same ways. The name, says artist and member Nancy Dwyer, came from the old ice manufacturing plant in which the group was situated: “We had a hall, and we had walls.”⁶ This group, lead by Charles Clough and Robert Longo, consisted of artists, many of whom were more traditionally trained in the arts at local and state universities in the area, attempting to create a learning and exhibition space for themselves based on the models of CalArts and the nonprofit exhibition center A Space, in Toronto.⁷ Dwyer describes A Space as being “left-over Hippie land.”⁸ The artists at Hallwalls benefitted from the communal environment it offered, frequent visits from many important artists at the time, including

⁴ Eklund 2009, 22.

⁵ Eklund 2009, 28.

⁶ Dwyer, Nancy. Interview by Rosemary Owen, Oct 1.

⁷ Eklund 2009, 80-81.

⁸ Dwyer, Nancy. Interview by Rosemary Owen, Oct 1.

Vito Acconci and Richard Serra, and government subsidies for the arts, often brought in by Longo and Clough.⁹

Sherman, who at the beginning of her artistic career had been working in super-realist painting, had begun to study photography upon joining Hallwalls. After having seen Suzy Lake's artworks involving studied transformations over a series of photographed portraits, Sherman began to make works using her own body as a canvas on which to create new characters.¹⁰ Beginning during her time at Hallwalls and continuing through her introduction into the New York art scene, Sherman created her own paper doll series, made up of photo-montages, with photo images of her own body as the doll (Figure 4).¹¹ Another, more personal expression of Sherman's ideas moving from Hallwalls to New York, was the way in which Sherman and Dwyer would dress up as characters in order to go out at night. While not intending to be dramatic or theatrical, Dwyer says, the two simply wanted not to be like the other girls at the club. According to Dwyer, they just wanted to "be weird and have fun." Interestingly, Dwyer notes, the idea was not intended to be a statement on gender or identity: as a statement, "[It] wasn't conscious, but ended up being a practical one."¹²

Between 1974 and 1977, artists from both CalArts and Hallwalls began to move to New York.¹³ For Sherman, Dwyer, and other artists connected to the Hallwalls group, the move was largely precipitated by Clough and Longo, who were the driving forces behind finding both funding and recognition for the group. "We were not very organized," says Dwyer. However, both Clough and Longo knew that there was strength

⁹ Dwyer, Nancy. Interview by Rosemary Owen, Oct 1.

¹⁰ Eklund 2009, 85.

¹¹ Eklund 2009, 88.

¹² Dwyer, Nancy. Interview by Rosemary Owen, Oct 1.

¹³ Eklund 2009, 80.

in numbers, and that a movement was more powerful than the artists individually.

According to Dwyer, Clough and Longo had a “programmic sense... Robert did that naturally.”¹⁴

Naming the Movement

The artists from CalArts and Hallwalls found a home for their work in the gallery Artists Space, run at that time by Helen Winer, a curator from the West Coast very much supportive of the Hallwalls artists. In an article written for the *New York Times* just before Winer left to create the gallery Metro Pictures, *Gallery View* writer John Russell noted the “unstandardized arena” created by the gallery.¹⁵ For the art world at this time, this type of alternative space was the place to find exciting new works that were being overlooked and neglected by the increasingly archaic institutional museums.

Additionally, because the Artists Space was run by the Committee for Visual Artists, Inc., which was guided by the principal that “artists are the best judges of new art,” the artists exhibited gained the extra cachet of being “chosen” by the previous generation.¹⁶ By being exhibited at the Artists Space, the Hallwalls and CalArts groups were exposed to a much wider audience, eager to find the latest and greatest new artist.

The term “Pictures” in relation to this group of artists came from art historian Douglas Crimp. In the fall of 1977, Crimp curated an exhibition in collaboration with Helen Winer at Artists Space.¹⁷ It included the works of Troy Brauntach, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Phillip Smith. The name “Pictures” came from the

¹⁴ Dwyer, Nancy. Interview by Rosemary Owen, Oct 1.

¹⁵ Russel, John. “GALLERY VIEW; A Birthday at Artists Space.” *The New York Times*, October 21, 1979.

¹⁶ Russel, John. “GALLERY VIEW; A Birthday at Artists Space.” *The New York Times*, October 21, 1979.

¹⁷ Eklund 2009, 111-112.

fact that, as Crimp saw it, the single underlying factor in all of the works presented was recognizable images. These images—worked, distorted, and reused—set the stage for many critiques and observations about society and image culture. The word “picture” itself, Crimp wrote, was also ambiguous. Not only does it refer to many different types of images, but it also is a verb, that is, to picture. Crimp felt that the word “Pictures” described the many facets of the works exhibited.¹⁸

Crimp, in conjunction with the exhibition, wrote a catalogue entry of the same name, which he published in *October*. In his catalogue entry, Crimp cited Fried’s concern with the “theatrical” elements, and particularly temporality, that Fried identified within Conceptual and Minimalist arts, and upon which much of the work of the Pictures Generation was based. Crimp acknowledged this tendency in Pictures Generation works, but interpreted it much differently than Fried had. Rather than being a “denigrating” influence on art, Crimp suggested that this aspect of time within the Pictures Generation is integral to both the way in which the art worked and the way in which the viewer observed it.¹⁹ Instead of adhering to Michael Fried’s “particular and partisan” brand of modernism, Crimp described the work as descending from a type of modernism that included cinema and surrealism, both of which included temporal aspects.²⁰ According to Crimp, the temporal aspect added a dimension of “psychological anticipation,” further engaging the viewer with the work.²¹

In her recent book on the Pictures Generation, Vera Dika argued that this temporal aspect was not theatrical, but rather, cinematic. While the scope of her work

¹⁸ Crimp, Douglas. “Pictures.” *October* 8 (April 1, 1979): 75.

¹⁹ Crimp, 77.

²⁰ Crimp, 87.

²¹ Crimp, 79.

went beyond only the Pictures Generation to include other artists of the time period who were also engaged in the cinematic, Dika wrote that in defining the many incarnations of the word “pictures,” Crimp omitted one usage that is of particular importance to the works: pictures as a colloquialism for movies.²² She explained how the gritty, dark, and dangerous sides of New York life at the time “facilitated” the more cinematic elements of the work of Pictures Generation artists. Dika asserted that the newness, interest, and potency of these works was largely derived from the incorporation, not just of popular images, but of popular cinema into high art.²³ Dika’s argument here is very compelling. Artists like Jack Goldstein, for example, in his 1975 work *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, directly appropriates the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer logo, which would be recognizable to nearly anyone as a cinematic reference. Increasing usage of cinematic imagery on television and in advertising as well seemed to have been a large influence on many of the artists working at that time.

From 1974 to 1984, the Pictures Generation in New York worked through the problems precipitated in the 1960s throughout their art. They incorporated the newly immersive tropes of television, advertisements, and cinema in order to bring the issues faced closer to home, and to make them more impactful.²⁴ In this thesis I will investigate the works of Cindy Sherman, particularly her construction of gender and the subject-viewer relationships, in connection with the Pictures Generation. I will determine how the techniques of the Pictures Generation were incorporated in her works, how other members of the Pictures Generation influenced her, and how she may have affected them.

²² Dika, Vera. *The (Moving) Pictures Generation : The Cinematic Impulse in Downtown New York Art and Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 6.

²³ Dika, xvii-xix.

²⁴ Eklund 2009, 8-11.

Finally, I will investigate Sherman's works post- Pictures Generation to determine the lasting effects of these techniques and strategies on her work.

Chapter 2: Cindy Sherman and the Construction of Gender and Viewer-Subject Relationships

After moving to New York in 1977, Sherman, whose work was not included in the “Pictures” exhibition, shifted away from her paper doll series in favor of her *Untitled Film Stills*. These works, some of her most recognizable, assumed a very cinematic style, as the titles imply (figures 5 and 6). What these cinematic elements meant for the work differ from writer to writer. Complications arose from the fact that, while the images appeared to be voyeuristic in nature, the woman in question in each shot was in fact Cindy Sherman herself. By putting herself in the role of the model, Sherman dismantled the power dynamic of the subject/photographer relationship. This is a technique she continues to employ throughout her career. As readings of Sherman’s works have become more and more nuanced, a single thread nevertheless unites many of them: the use of psychoanalytic theory as a way of connecting the issues confronted in Sherman’s works back to the political and social institutions which she was both miming and criticizing.

The images themselves were shot in black and white. Sherman “played the role” of the female protagonist, and placed herself in a vulnerable or voyeuristic setting, looking off camera to somewhere outside the shot. At some moments the woman appeared to be in distress, at other moments she seemed to be lost in her thoughts. Some shots evoked a sense of bourgeois glamour, while others seemed to show a much lower-class setting, complete with grimy walls and wrinkled garments. Regardless of the exact

setting, each of these images presumably implied some sort of narrative, all of which were created and acted out by Sherman herself.

First Feminist Critique: The Fractured Mirror

In 1983, Judith Williamson wrote one of the first feminist critiques of Sherman's works that is still cited to this day. In "Images of 'Woman,'" Williamson argued that Sherman played off of the viewer's preconceived notions about gender, or rather, femininity, in order to make the image "work." Williamson described Sherman's works as a broken mirror, each shard reflecting a stereotypical picture of femininity, complete with the illusion of depth.²⁵ Each image showed the viewer a different "narrative," one that the viewer herself created by projecting her own inhibitions onto the image, which itself was truly ambiguous: if one saw sexism in the image, this sexism was what the viewer brought along to the work with her, and, as Michael Starenko, cited by Williams, stated it, she'd "bought the goods."²⁶ Williamson also argued that Sherman's works revealed the "raw nerve of femininity"; the connection between vulnerability and eroticism, which would be discussed by many authors writing after her.²⁷ How erotic this vulnerability was to a viewer was determined by what the viewer was herself bringing to the image.

Sherman, in these early works, relied heavily on a "low" cinematic language in order to give her message an immediate apparent meaning. Williamson argued that one particular technique Sherman critiqued from popular media sources like advertisements and news/infotainment outlets was the woman as index. In other words, an image of a

²⁵ Judith Williamson, "Images of 'Woman,'" *Screen* 24, no. 6 (November 1, 1983): 106.

²⁶ Williamson 1983, 103.

²⁷ Williamson 1983, 104.

woman's emotions was used in order to give a story, a product, or a narrative some sort of emotional tone. Sherman's characters, however, exhibited a fairly ambiguous expression, one that required a narrative to stabilize it. Without this narrative, Williamson argued, the viewer could only bounce between the woman and the implication of a story that was supposed to be there but wasn't, indicating the necessity of the story in the creation of the woman's identity for the audience. This necessity, she continued, was based on a social construction of femininity in which "the feminine is an effect," a reaction.²⁸ Williamson argued that Sherman's work taught its viewers to be more critical of the imagery that surrounded them:

Certainly it also illuminates the process of reading all still images, *especially adverts*, in the way objects, details, arrangements, and settings construct a story and an identity simultaneously [*italics mine*].²⁹

In this way Sherman's early works gave the viewer a tool with which to dissect any imagery that attempted to provide a superficial story and/or identity and dissuaded the viewer from any serious looking, or really any looking at all.

Fetish and the Cinema: The Work of Laura Mulvey

In her collection of essays entitled *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Laura Mulvey addressed issues of the gaze, fetishism, and contemporary culture. While she largely examined these problems through cinema, she did address Cindy Sherman's work directly in her

²⁸ Williamson 1983, 103-104.

²⁹ Williamson 1983, 104.

essay entitled “Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-1987.” This essay, first published as “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body. The Work of Cindy Sherman” in *New Left Review* in late summer 1991, investigated the several psychoanalytical concepts Mulvey believed to be present in Sherman’s works. Mulvey began her analysis of the works with a quote from Sherman:

When I was in school I was getting disgusted with the attitude of art being so religious or sacred, so I wanted to make something which people could relate to without having read a book about it first. So that anybody off the street could appreciate it, even if they couldn’t fully understand it; they could still get something out of it. That’s the reason by [sic] I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it.³⁰

Mulvey called this stance “non-theoretical or even anti-theoretical,” and argued that Sherman’s works served as a “counterpoint to feminist theoretical and conceptual art.”³¹ In this way, Mulvey argued, Sherman was able to bring back the “politics of the body,” and discuss depictions of women in a much closer, more concrete way.³² Sherman led the way, according to Mulvey, in finding a way to depict the alienation women felt from their bodies due to the appropriation of female bodies for social and political causes, like advertisements in the socio-economic sphere or the abortion debate in the political sphere. For Mulvey, Sherman’s works fell into a larger feminist movement in the seventies, in which feminism moved beyond straightforward political activism to an

³⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 65.

³¹ Mulvey 1996, 66.

³² Mulvey 1996, 65.

investigation of political aesthetics, or of this aesthetic takeover of the female body by patriarchal, political, and economic forces. This shift allowed feminist theorists to determine how women were portrayed in images as a symptom for how women were treated in patriarchal society. Therefore, when Sherman made a work that was both a parody and a critique of popular imagery, for Mulvey, she was pointing to the symptoms of female oppression or repression in patriarchal society.³³ Mulvey repudiated critics who accused Sherman's work of being sexist or a "regression." In fact, she claimed, these images were uncanny, "a re-representation, a making strange."³⁴

Like Williamson, Mulvey also noted the erotic tension of Sherman's early works, produced by the women's vulnerability and the voyeuristic aspects of the photographs. She noted how the voyeuristic aspects of the photographs become unstable, as the viewer knew that while Sherman was the character, she was also the artist. Mulvey described this as "voyeurism that turns around like a trap." The viewer came to feel uneasy because she recognized that the artist, who was also the model, had set up this voyeuristic experience, and therefore captured the viewer.³⁵

Mulvey then looked at the critique Sherman made about the identity of the white female in patriarchy. She argued that because the "character" was always caught in a moment of pause, such as looking back, reflection, or some other type of respite or unease, the character was denied any true narrative. This aspect, in combination with the voyeurism and eroticism of the images, suggested to Mulvey that Sherman was examining the "looked-at-ness of femininity." That is to say that the actual feminine identity of each of the characters was wholly, exclusively, in her looks. Sherman's works

³³ Mulvey 1996, 66.

³⁴ Mulvey 1996, 67.

³⁵ Mulvey 1996, 68.

also pointed to the instability of these identities, Mulvey argued (in much the same way that Williamson did), because each image proposed a different type of feminine identity.³⁶

Rosalind Krauss and Generalized Memory

In her analysis of Sherman's body of work from her early career through 1993, Rosalind Krauss described the works as being born from a "generalized memory," because no "original" existed. Those who mistook Sherman's works for copies of actual films, Krauss wrote, were buying into the "myth," in the way Barthes defined it. Krauss described the buying of myth in capitalist terms: "The salesman's pitch names it, and the buyer, never looking under the hood, accepts the name, is satisfied (or suckered), by the pitch."³⁷ The so-called myth was to remove any sort of meaning from the sign, the sign being whatever was pictured, or sculpted, etc. When one removed meaning from the sign, it could become an "instance." In other words, the sign became something that could stand in for all other things like it, without anyone actually looking into the particulars. For example, a shopper might reason: "The stainless-steel cook-top range is the standard for solid, well-made, modern cooking equipment, so that is what I will buy on my next trip to the store." This shopper has bought into the "myth" created by the salesman, without, as Krauss put it, "looking under the hood."³⁸ Ideally, for the salesman, that is, the buyer put the message together herself, using the language created for her by the salesman, and in this way it seemed to be an obvious conclusion. The fact

³⁶ Mulvey 1996, 68-69.

³⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993). 20.

³⁸ Krauss 1993, 20, 25.

that the conclusion seemed to be obvious impelled the buyer to skim over the details, and not look more closely at them.³⁹

Krauss argued that to buy what Sherman's works seemed to be selling, from a patriarchal, western, and white perspective, was to buy the definition of art as Zola defined it: art as a "piece of nature seen through a temperament."⁴⁰ In other words, it was to accept the idea that Sherman was simply copying a media image through her own perspective. Krauss argued that what was "under the hood" was the construction of a femininity through lighting, stage, and outfits, without the actual creation of a character. It was as if Sherman was saying, "femininity is something that is constructed, just as I have done here." Here Krauss agreed with Williamson, and in fact quoted her directly.⁴¹ To buy the myth was to believe that there was in fact some character behind the scene.⁴²

Krauss also, in her analysis, examined several other ways in which critics bought the myth. Some historians, like Peter Schjedahl, tried to connect the signifiers (the things that come together to create the meaning, or signified; in this case, lighting, props, pose, etc.) to something "deeply personal" about Sherman.⁴³ Krauss also took Arthur Danto to task for believing that Sherman's works exhibit a variety of types of the Girl. In so doing, Krauss wrote, Danto was compiling a list of so-called universally believed "types," which again bought into the myth that such a thing existed.⁴⁴

Krauss specifically addressed Mulvey on several points (most of which concerned Sherman's later works and will therefore be addressed in Chapter Four), including

³⁹ Krauss 1993, 25.

⁴⁰ Krauss 1993, 28.

⁴¹ Krauss 1993, 28.

⁴² Krauss 1993, 32.

⁴³ Krauss 1993, 36.

⁴⁴ Krauss, 1993, 40.

Mulvey's assertion that women's alienation from their bodies due to imagery created by outside forces could be analyzed as a symptom of the way women were alienated in society under patriarchy. Krauss claimed that Mulvey based this concept on three interconnected ideas: (1) that there were differences between the gender roles of men and women in cinema, because men were typically portrayed as active and women as passive, or otherwise subsidiary to the man's doing, (2) that viewers were assumed to be male, more specifically Caucasian male, and that the movie was catered to that audience, and (3) that these gender "assignments" were based on the unconscious construction of gender identities addressed by psychoanalysis.⁴⁵ It was with the third point which Krauss took issue, because, she stated, it lumped together too many assumptions. It was of particular importance to tease the assumptions apart, she said, because they related not just to film, but to "women in patriarchy" more generally.

Krauss began the breakdown by defining the reason for men's activity and women's passivity according to psychoanalysis: the castration complex. The woman becomes the "bearer of meaning," because without her feeling of lack (of the phallus), the whole system of phallus as signifier falls apart.⁴⁶ In typical cinematic imagery, the woman becomes the eroticized fetish, making it possible for the male gaze to be the "comfortable voyeur": through disavowal the man is able to see the woman as whole, while simultaneously recognizing her as the other. Krauss identified this element of psychoanalysis in Mulvey's argument. Mulvey described Sherman's works as rehearsing this voyeurism in an endless cycle of "her vulnerability and his control."⁴⁷ This is the segment of the argument in which Mulvey stated that Sherman's works denied the

⁴⁵ Krauss 1993, 44.

⁴⁶ Krauss 1993, 49.

⁴⁷ Krauss 1993, 52.

presence of the narrative, because the woman in the picture was already caught mid-action. This repetition of female vulnerability and male control, Krauss wrote, indicated that Mulvey had fallen for the myth. Krauss seemed to disregard, however, Mulvey's further point that this voyeurism became unstable as the viewer knew that the photographer was also the subject, capturing the viewer in a "voyeuristic trap." It opens the question as to who has the power in the relationship: the viewer, with his seeming control over the woman's vulnerability, or the photographer, who has set up the shot in order to capture the would-be voyeur in the act. Is it still voyeurism if the subject set the trap in the first place?

Conclusion

Sherman's early works, which on the surface seemed to be a simple and humorous send-off of the types of images a cinephile of the 1950's might encounter, were telling in their superficiality. These weren't pictures of a particular woman with her own personality, thoughts, feelings, and complexities, but they were pictures of a flesh and blood human being. They were literally pictures of a woman as she walked down the street, as she read a letter, or as she stared off into space. The picture wanted us to believe that there was something more going on; that the femme fatale was waiting for her newest in a long line of lovers, or the sweet little newlywed was getting a letter from her husband.

Psychologists have long believed that assigning narratives to people and objects is natural,⁴⁸ but Sherman's works pointedly stated that what we create as the narrative is

⁴⁸ Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 100–122.

heavily based on a biased set of information that is projected to us nearly every second of every day through this newly immersive world of imagery. Furthermore, this narrative-construction, when looking at typical daily imagery like advertisements, is accomplished nearly as quickly as the image is consumed. To use an old trope, it is to read a book by its cover. It happens so quickly that the typical observer is unaware of the creation of the narrative at all.

Sherman's works were biased, but her perspective of the white middle-class female was (and I think it would be very easy to make the argument that it still is) nearly unrepresented in this plethora of imagery that is nonetheless heavily dependent on the female body. Krauss and Mulvey utilized psychoanalysis in their examinations of Sherman's works because it is a method to connect the way in which the images are working to the workings of the social constructions that they are criticizing. Psychoanalysis is the bridge between what an artwork is doing and the realities of the patriarchal world from which the artist is working. In the case of Sherman's works, however, it seems as though no bridge was necessary, the images were already firmly rooted in that which they were mimicking and critiquing, and the systems that Sherman was critiquing were already within the work. Additionally, while Sherman's works still may be as potent as ever for today's younger viewers, who were not alive to see these sources in their original context, they may not be working with the same "generalized memory" that Krauss discussed of the "baby boomers" in her work, or those viewers who lived through that cinematic age at some point in their lives. Members of the younger generation could likely be said to have more of a dream of a memory of the Hollywood glamour of the 1950s than any actual connection to the cinematic references of the time.

Her works accrue new meanings with each passing generation because while what the signifiers mean might change, the notion of patriarchy embedded in each image will continue to have meaning as long as there is a patriarchy.

This is an important point of connection which I will come back to in the next chapter: that members of the Pictures Generation were all working from this new world of imagery and its potential to manipulate and change the ways in which we not only think about the world in a conscious way, but the ways in which we internalize culture and it becomes a part of our subconscious. How do the works of Cindy Sherman and others of the Pictures Generation encourage the viewer to slow down, take a second, third, or fourth look at a work of art, and what tools do they give us for looking at “low” images in movies, magazines, and advertisements?

Chapter 3: Major Tendencies of the Pictures Generation and Relevance

As we have seen in Chapter One, the artists of the Pictures Generation were a fairly loosely knit group, trained in different disciplines, and even in different parts of the country. That being said, the tendencies that many of the artists shared were fundamental to the success of the artists and the success of the work. Themes of time and memory, the way in which the works were presented and staged, and the ways in which the artists distanced their works from the source material: all of these motifs factored into the works of Pictures Generation artists and their legacy.

Time and Memory

Time—that “theatrical element” that Michael Fried so loathed in Minimalist and Conceptual art—was dramatically emphasized in Pictures Generation art. These temporal aspects, in fact, were often what make the art so powerful. Vera Dika asserted that the temporal aspects of Pictures Generation works were in fact cinematic in nature, rather than theatrical. The difference, she stated, between cinematic and theatrical temporality is mechanical intervention; in other words, cinematic time is “mechanically produced time.”⁴⁹ With this mechanical intervention, Pictures artists were playing with concepts of time in relation to memory and identity in a manner that was unique. Dika’s assertion that the temporal aspects are cinematic in nature is an important distinction to make in analyzing these Pictures Generation works. While the presence of the viewer

⁴⁹ Dika 2012, 6-7.

was necessary to the functionality of the work, either the “automaton stare” of the camera lens or the movement of the film reel directly mediated the temporal elements.

Furthermore, Pictures Generation artists were of the first generation to see films outside of the context of the theater, as movies were increasingly televised throughout the day. In this way Pictures Generation artists largely experienced the cinematic through the medium of television and video, rather than celluloid.⁵⁰ Pictures artists, then, while mixing concepts of time, identity, and memory, were also working through the increasingly complicated and overlapping fields of film, video, and photography.

This interplay of time, memory, and identity was exemplified in the works of Pictures Generation artist Ericka Beckman. Beckman’s films, which were handmade and contained many homegrown special effects that left her Pictures cohorts astounded, often depicted child-like environments and activities. She wished to explore the creation of the self during childhood, having herself and her co-actors dress in gender-neutral clothing. She was attempting, not unlike Sherman, to show the constructedness of gender stereotypes, and particularly, the emptiness of the concept of femininity.⁵¹

In *We Imitate; We Break Up* (figure 7), Beckman is dressed in a short-sleeved button-down shirt with a neat tie, a pleated skirt, and bright blue plimsolls. At times, she runs away from “Mario,” represented in the film by enormous white marionette legs. The film background is entirely black, with only Beckman or Mario in any one shot. The film is repetitive, active, almost exhausting in youthful exuberance. At moments, Beckman runs with her ball to the refrain of “Mario wants it. I still have the ball, Mario wants it! He’s after me. He is against me!” Suddenly, the action stops, and another theme is

⁵⁰ Dika 2012, 128.

⁵¹ Eklund 2012, 127.

integrated: Beckman dances with Mario as she recalls the times when they were friends and not competing with one another. The fragmentary nature of the action, the repetitiveness of the themes and refrains in both visual and auditory stimuli, and the exclusive focus on figure over background seems to suggest a dream-like state, if not a memory.

By re-creating her own formative years and her own social upbringing in a manner that explicitly recalled the language of the dream-state, Beckman was in some ways re-writing her own memories. As she stated in 1980, “Film is creating a reality through the makeshift. My films move backward, using narrative structures as does the mind of anyone trying to grasp the meaning of images in his memory.”⁵² This conception of memory as being essentially visual was important to the work Beckman made.

In the catalog for the 2012 *Pictures Generation 1974-1984* exhibition, Donald Eklund wrote about how many of the Pictures Generation artists mimicked the “and now for something completely different” structure of television.⁵³ The short, choppy, seemingly unrelated bits of content, easily digestible through the format of television, resembled the way in which Beckman’s work seemed to jump from one “memory” to the next. In fact, the marionette legs that tormented Beckman in *We Imitate; We Break Up* were not entirely unlike the Green Giant’s hands in 1960’s commercials, reaching down to point out to the tiny animated folks at the state fair why his diagonally cut green beans were better than the competition (figure 8).⁵⁴ Where Beckman’s work differed from commercially produced media, and where it had something to offer in the understanding

⁵² Eklund 2009, 125.

⁵³ Eklund 2009, 131.

⁵⁴ *1960s Green Giant TV Commercial*, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8ilBsr9n3o&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

of time and memory in the context of video, was in the duration and repetition of the work. Video and print media has long been recognized for their power to reshape the memories and consciousness of their viewers, often without the individual's awareness.⁵⁵ By repeating her own recreated memories at an increasingly frenzied pace, Beckman's work asked the viewer to wonder about how a person's memory could become stuck in an obsessive feedback loop, and how media in general might be feeding and creating memory loops of its own. This memory feedback loop was evident in most of the Pictures groups' works, and generalized memory and narrative in Sherman's early works were what made them function as something other than decoration, as I discussed in Chapter Two.

Techniques in Production

While time and memory were important themes within Pictures works, the way in which the pictures were staged and presented added another layer of meaning and context. While many artists relied on a slick Hollywood vernacular in order to communicate in a familiar way, this was frequently in contrast with the often-handmade imperfections of the actual work. Pictures artists left visible imperfections in their work, and at times even considered it a point of pride. It was a way of distinguishing their works from the corporate ones they were copying, imbuing the works with a sense of the actual hand that produced them.

One notable exception to this trend was Jack Goldstein, who utilized a team of professionals to create his most famous works. In *Jump* (figure 9), for example,

⁵⁵ Mordechai Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg, *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). 3-4.

Goldstein used these professionals in order to rotoanimate a clip from the 1938 Nazi propaganda film *Olympia Part Two: Festival of Beauty*.⁵⁶ It is interesting that Goldstein's work was so invested in utilizing professional production teams, as his works were further removed from the advertising and television references that other members of the Pictures group were trying to mimic. Goldstein was able to separate his works from those that he was copying while still keeping the glossy Hollywood veneer that many other artists felt compelled to poke holes into. That handmade quality of the other artists was necessary in order to be distinct from the overly slick productions of the "real thing."

It is also very interesting to note that Goldstein's work was created on 16mm film, with an aspect ratio of approximately 1.33. This aspect was a practical component of the hardware he used, but it also more closely resembled that of television than it did cinema. *Shane* (1953) (figure 10) (a movie which Goldstein alluded to briefly in his film *Shane* (1975)) was one of the first movies to be projected on a large screen with a widescreen aspect ratio, which was created by lopping off sides of the film, as the technology did not, at that time, make it possible to film in a wide aspect ratio with only a single camera (CinemaScope was being used by another studio only months later in 1953). This suggests that if Goldstein wished, he too could recreate this widescreen aspect ratio, but that he chose instead to retain the 1.33 aspect ratio, alluding not only to television, but also the earliest of films, silent movies.⁵⁷ In this way, Goldstein blurred the lines between

⁵⁶ Dika 2012, 32.

⁵⁷ The Changing Shape of Cinema: The History of Aspect Ratio, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/68830569>. Theaters had changed to the widescreen format in the mid 1950s in order to better compete with television and bring a greater audience to the theater.

television and film. This was particularly important in Goldstein's work because he created from an explicitly cinematic starting point.

This mixing and playing with the increasingly fuzzy lines between film, photography, and television, as well as the distinctions between these media and more traditional media such as drawing and painting, was part of what united the Pictures artists. When Sherman made her *Untitled Film Stills*, the tension between the mediums of film and photography helped to create the non-narrative images that so befuddled viewers.

Presentation and Staging

Many of the artists of the Pictures Generation would pick a single point of focus in order to expertly direct attention toward one aspect or another of the work. By placing the works in the context of single color back-drops, or pushing the subject of the photo right up against the picture plane, the artists picked a singular spot on which to focus, in contrast with many of the types of media from which they were working. The resulting image was inescapable but often alluring in its aesthetic fullness. In this way, the viewer was invited to inspect closer, and to wonder what it meant, what was behind the image. In some cases, such as Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, there was nothing there, and that was the point.

While the pieces extricated the subjects from their respective backgrounds, settings, etc., that is not to say that the works extricated the subjects from their social and political subject matter. Pictures artist Sarah Charlesworth was a prime example of this. In her *Modern History* series (figure 11), produced in 1978 and 1979, Charlesworth took

the front page of popular newspapers and removed everything from them except for the images and the banner heading. What was left was an at-a-glance look at the priorities of the countries, cultures, and institutions that she was analyzing. The size, placement, and hierarchy of images were all glaringly obvious as soon as the “stories” behind the images were removed. Additionally, as the title implies, these works were produced contemporaneously with the events depicted. Charlesworth would pick a single event, and see how the reverberations of that event were felt throughout her sample of international newspapers.⁵⁸ All of these images would be recognizable to viewers, and the revelations about prerogatives of these papers would be shocking.

Laurie Simmons’s photographs from 1976 and 1977 were also stripped down to a single focus, albeit in a different way (figure 12). Instead of removing the background, Simmons removed the human subject. She used dolls as stand-ins, photographing them at times in a typical suburban home setting, at other times in more conceptual settings, with outlines of chalk in place of home decor.⁵⁹ With the doll as subject, the viewer was able to skim over it entirely: it was recognizable as a woman, conservatively dressed. The background was then the true subject. Without a specific woman on which to place a narrative (that did not exist), the viewer was left to question the space in which the woman stand-in resides. Simmons placed the doll in backgrounds that were difficult to read, and from which it was difficult to create a narrative. Yet, these settings seemed foreboding and full of an intensity that refused to let up. Simmons’s photos showed the viewer a domestic sphere that was familiar yet fraught with peril, an uncanny quality not unlike that of Cindy Sherman’s early works.

⁵⁸ Eklund 2009, 148.

⁵⁹ Eklund 2009, 177.

Through leaving the backgrounds (or in some cases, the subject) blank, thus framing the intended target of insight, Charlesworth and Simmons encouraged the viewer to see something, something that is often a stand-in for something one sees every day, in a new light, offering a new perspective on the ubiquitous imagery designed to hardly be looked at. This simultaneous stripping down of background but elaboration of the singular focus of the work created a tension that intrigued and ensnared the viewer, and made the viewer wish to know more.

How Close is Too Close?

By working with these slick Hollywood vernaculars and making images that were visually striking and seductive, the Pictures artists were able to critique perceived social realities, constraints, dualities, and hypocrisies in a way that was interesting but also incredibly enticing. This created a different problem of sorts. Jackson Pollock of the previous generation of artists didn't want his works to be used as ironic catchphrases, as beautiful living-room décor for the bourgeoisie, but was that a problem for members of the Pictures Generation?⁶⁰ In many ways, the works of Louise Lawler, for one, depended on it. Part of the reason for the success of the Pictures Generation works was that they were so marketable, so beautiful, so alluring. Like any artworks, they greatly risked becoming a part of the machine that they were critiquing. If one watches the 2000 film *American Psycho* starring Christian Bale as a 1980's sociopath stockbroker, one of the most unavoidable decorative items in his apartment is an enormous Robert Longo

⁶⁰ Timothy J. Clark, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2001), 371–403.

lithograph from *Men in Cities*. Is this a problem, or is this a way of developing the critique even further, pushing the boundaries between high and low even further than they had previously?

While some artists continued to stretch in both the high art and low advertisement directions (see Robert Longo's ad campaign for Bottega Veneta (figure 13)), some artists, such as Cindy Sherman, moved away from an easily digestible, easily copied and exploited style to a much less immediately alluring approach. As I will demonstrate in the Chapter Four, Sherman, after her work in New York City during the Pictures Generation's era, moved to a new style relying heavily on abjection, one that was not readily adopted for the selling of shoes or handbags.

Chapter 4: Cindy Sherman after the Pictures Generation

After the Pictures Generation mostly went their separate ways in the mid-1980's, Sherman's works clearly began to head in a different direction. Perhaps seeing how easily the cool, glossy images were incorporated into the machinations they were created to critique, Sherman began to experiment with a new form of critique: abjection. By turning to psychoanalysis and abjection, Sherman removed herself from the easy, slick images of the Pictures Generation, while still maintaining a vernacular that was possible for a layperson not well versed in psychoanalytic theory to understand.

Artforum Centerfolds

At the tale-end of the Pictures Generation movement in New York, Sherman created several centerfolds for the art magazine *Artforum*. These images (figure 14), in which Sherman presented herself in a horizontal format, pushed up against the picture plane, seemed to be the beginning of her transition out of the Pictures Generation, and into the grittier and more surreal work she would later produce. The centerfolds maintain many of the voyeuristic and fetishistic qualities of the earlier *Untitled Film Stills*, but move toward an even more pointedly eroticized visual language. By pushing the figure so close to the picture plane, Sherman made this voyeurism and eroticism uncomfortable. However, it was the wrinkles in the character's clothes and the beads of sweat on the forehead that further made the image difficult to look at. These features marked a distinct break with the polished veneer of her earlier works.

Rosalind Krauss also noted that the horizontality of these pictures broke with the more traditional verticality of portraiture in high art. Not only did this format make reference to a specific type of image, but it also made its criticism of traditional media formats more visible, according to Krauss, because of its break from the norms of not only painting tradition, but also film, television, and print media. She went on further to say that the horizontal axis worked to desubliminate the image, because the vertical is the axis of the fetish and “the plane of beauty.”⁶¹ The image was further desublimated because of the downward angle of the camera lens, which Krauss described as “animalistic.”⁶² In this case she takes direct issue with the work of Laura Mulvey, who described the horizontal structure of Sherman’s works as an examination of the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of femininity.⁶³ Krauss declared this take on the horizontality of Sherman’s works to be an acceptance of cultural myths.⁶⁴ Both critics, however, agreed on the mixture of low and high, i.e. the “low” format borrowed from centerfolds and cinema, married with the thought and feel of high art.

Sherman’s works in this stage also began to take on larger formats. Whereas her *Untitled Film Stills* were displayed in an 8x10 inch format, the centerfold images, and the rest of Sherman’s works moving forward, began to become overwhelming and unavoidable in scale: a typical display size for her later works would be 72x49 inches.⁶⁵ This change in scale served to make the image more overpowering, but also pushed the typically low format into the realm of high art.

⁶¹ Krauss 1993, 93.

⁶² Krauss 1993, 97.

⁶³ Mulvey 1996, 69.

⁶⁴ Krauss 1993, 93.

⁶⁵ Mulvey 1996, 71.

Detritus

After her Artforum centerfolds, Sherman's work began to move away from the world of commercialized imagery. Instead, she took on the portrayal of women in media more directly, and crucially, engaged more fully with the dissociation many women feel from their bodies as a result of media imagery, particularly in the world of fashion (figure 15). It is in these images that some of the figures began to become grotesque, disfigured, or simply off-putting. In contrast with the smooth, airbrushed perfection of typical models, these bodies were distorted. They in some ways were the very opposite of the models, and revealed the Other to the fashion models, or the monster hiding behind the feminine façade.⁶⁶

From this point onwards, Sherman's works disintegrated into more and more disturbing, monstrous, and uncanny territory. In her "art history portraits," Sherman recreated renaissance, baroque, and classical style paintings (figure 16). She dressed herself in period costumes and recreated the settings and accoutrements. She then added an element of the hideous, the distressing, by giving the subject scars, drooping, misshapen breasts, garish makeup, bulbous noses, and the like. In doing so she moved from simply making the beautiful ugly (or at least not beautiful), to desublimation. She questioned what the proper subject was supposed to be.⁶⁷

In its latest stages, this progression in Sherman's works eventually led to a total removal of the body from the picture. What was left was the scar, the snot, the puke, etc. This retrospectively inevitable conclusion to the series begged the question, why begin the move to the ugly, the aggressively unsettling?

⁶⁶ Mulvey 1996, 70.

⁶⁷ Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (October 1, 1996): 111.

The Trauma of the Gaze

Hal Foster, in his article *Obscene, Abject, Traumatic*, discussed the Lacanian definition of the gaze at length, particularly in relation to artworks that heavily utilized the disquieting and beastly. When Foster discussed the gaze, he, unlike many critics, was not necessarily speaking in terms of the male gaze, since, as he noted, the gaze exists regardless of the subject.⁶⁸ He described the subject as paranoid because of this gaze, which existed in the world, not in the eye. This means that the gaze is ever present, and the subject is ever aware of it. The subject not only notices the object, but also notices the object “noticing” her.⁶⁹ According to Lacan, the glint off a shiny object is what reminds the subject that she, the subject, is looked at as well as doing the looking. For Lacan and Foster, the ability to create works of art, to picture our world, was the way in which one can “tame the gaze.” Instead of being simply caught in the gaze as animals are, the image-screen, in this case the site of the representation (drawing, photograph, movie, etc.), protects the subject from the return of the maleficent gaze.⁷⁰

Foster further discussed how art in the postmodern period had increasingly moved away from pacifying the gaze and instead had been working to intensify it.⁷¹ Foster described this as the new work of the Avant-Garde in art. Subduing the gaze no longer worked to describe a social order and system that was itself breaking down.⁷² The

⁶⁸ Foster 1996, 106.

⁶⁹ Foster 1996, 108.

⁷⁰ Foster 1996, 109.

⁷¹ Foster 1996, 106.

⁷² Foster 1996, 116.

method that many artists turned to, as Sherman did, in order to heighten the discomfort or the gaze was abjection.

“Wild Light”

Krauss also discussed the gaze, specifically in relation to Sherman’s later works, to a different effect. Like Foster, Krauss agreed that in these later works the gaze was not the male gaze, in which fetish is a condition of vision, but rather was a subjectless gaze. That halo of light around backlit subjects, the glinting and gleaming of shiny objects, which Foster addressed in Lacan’s analysis, was also included into Krauss’s critique. It was what Krauss called “wild light.”⁷³ For Krauss, the gaze that was pictured or represented by this “wild light” often came into play in Sherman’s works. Further, this “wild light,” according to Krauss’s interpretation of Lacan’s works, served to make the subject aware that there were points of view outside of her own, and that those points of view were forever closed off. These multiple points of view also served to make the gaze “unlocatable.” This was certainly unsettling for the viewer, and Krauss argued that in Sherman’s works, when this “unlocatable gaze” was combined with a horizontal format, the result was a desublimated image.⁷⁴ The works in which Sherman combined this horizontal formatting and the gaze also were her most abject.

Abjection to the Obscene

For Hal Foster, this strategic transition in the avant-garde between the 1980’s and 1990’s

⁷³ Krauss 1993, 106.

⁷⁴ Krauss 1993, 109, 111.

was exemplified by Sherman's work during this time period. In the late 1980's, Sherman's "art history" images attacked the image-screen, that is, they desublimated the image, and depicted the subject in an uncanny way with scarred, drooping breasts and disturbing facial prostheses. Simultaneously, and then subsequently further into the early nineties, Sherman began her "disaster" and "fairytale" series (figures 17 and 18), which worked to tear away at the image-screen that she was simply identifying in many of her earlier works. The way in which she went about doing that was through abjection, Foster's defining feature of the new avant-garde in the nineties.

Foster took his concept of the abject from psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who defined it as "neither subject nor object, but before one is the first (before full separation from the mother) or after one is the second (as a corpse given over to objecthood)."⁷⁵ That is to say, the abject is that which made one cringe, that which makes the toes curl. It is blood, vomit, fecal matter, the stuff of which we are all made. In some of Sherman's works of this genre, there was no direct "subject," there was only the abject matter left in the image.

For Foster, some of Sherman's "fairy tales" and "civil war pictures," that depicted only the abject, pushed the abject to such an extreme as to border on the "obscene," a condition in which there seemed to be nothing protecting the viewer from that which she saw, as though there was no "image-screen." That is to say, it was as though one could reach out and touch what sat before her (not that she would want to).⁷⁶ This phenomenon in art, Foster pointed out, was not exclusive to Sherman's works, but was rather a part of a larger movement in the avant-garde returning to and reusing the ideas of surrealist

⁷⁵ Foster 1996, 112.

⁷⁶ Foster 1996, 113.

painters working earlier in the century.⁷⁷

Cosmetic Band-Aid

For Laura Mulvey, Sherman's "civil war pictures" and the like left nothing but "disgust" on display. Mulvey described this move to abjection as the way in which Sherman revealed the female body, or rather bodily fluids, in order to show what "the cosmetic is designed to conceal." In her analyses of Sherman's earlier works, Mulvey discussed the interior versus exterior of the feminine body, or rather the interior mind versus the exterior fetishized body. This phase of abjection, Mulvey asserted, completely demolished this boundary, and showed us the blood, pus etc. Mulvey also noted the unfortunate ways in which women participated in the interior/exterior binary, and themselves used the cosmetic tools available to remove any trace of these substances.⁷⁸ These images provided the "truth" of the female body: they removed the cosmetic cover from the wound of castration.⁷⁹ And with this wound laid bare, there was no way in which it could be disavowed, and therefore there was no way for the fetish to occur.

These works, in Mulvey's mind, questioned the root of the phantasmagoria of the female body, and how to analyze it. The phantasmagoria of the female body, or the ever-shifting, dream-like impression of the female body, was used as a screen. In psychoanalytic terms, it provides a site for fetishism to occur. Without this artifice of changing femininity, the fetish is uncomfortable, and is unable to persist. So, for Mulvey, the high-stakes game Sherman was playing was "lifting the veil" on the artifice,

⁷⁷ Foster 1996, 118.

⁷⁸ Mulvey 1996, 71.

⁷⁹ Mulvey 1996, 74.

giving the viewer the tools to see this mechanism that so enables the fetishization of the female body.⁸⁰

Lifting of the Final Veil

Rosalind Krauss began her analysis of abjection in Sherman's work with a quote from Mulvey:

However, even this bedrock- the vomit and blood for instance- returns to the culturaleal significance: that is, to the difficulty of the body, and above all the female body, while it is subjected to the icons and narratives of fetishism.⁸¹

Krauss, in her analysis, took issue with Mulvey's "truth of the wound" interpretation. For Krauss, the abject matter, the "wild light" and the horizontal image format held over from earlier works, served to further desubliminate the image. The body was placed into the image, only to be "formless."⁸² Pulling away the veil, for Krauss, did not reveal the "truth of the wound," or really any Truth. Rather, Sherman's works laid out their subject matter, exploring how to put these individual bits together, layer by layer, with no "veil" at all.

For Krauss, Sherman, throughout her work, was constantly playing with signifiers in order to further desubliminate the image, but this aspect of her work was constantly overlooked in favor of talking about the works in terms of the male gaze, as Mulvey did.

⁸⁰ Mulvey 1996, 74.

⁸¹ Mulvey, quoted in Krauss 1993, 192.

⁸² Krauss 1993, 193.

For Foster, however, Sherman's works were not about the male gaze at all, either. Instead, Foster's narrative of how Sherman's works progressed through the early 1990's suggested that the gaze became increasingly maleficent in the work, as the subject was first caught by, invaded by, and finally obliterated by the gaze. It was at the final point, in which Sherman's abject works were at their most extreme that the two critics agreed. While Foster wrote that these works were "obscene," without subject, and removed the protection of the image-screen, Krauss wrote that the works had no "veil," and that the subject was simply "formless."

After Abjection

By the 2000's, Sherman returned to head-on portraits, and by 2010 she was creating full-length photographs of herself in costume, adhered over a wallpaper-like print of landscapes or other outdoor scenes (figure 19). The wallpaper images are very reminiscent of historical periods. Some are in black and white, and look like they were made from engravings, their edges defined by natural elements in the image, such as the ends of the boughs of trees, or a clump of grass. Sometimes the images are distorted and stretched by the format. Others are in color, and are painterly in quality. They have traditional rectangular borders, like most landscapes. Placed atop these backgrounds are color photographs of Sherman, decked out in one outfit or another, most portraits being full length, some ending mid-hip. These images show Sherman completely at play, at one point even carrying juggling batons. Sherman herself, in these images, has an abstruse expression, that of the dignified, but perhaps slightly bored, subject of a historical portrait.

They are gloriously tacky. They combine disparate elements that seem to suggest a general lack of “good taste,” or rather a studied renunciation of it. These “portraits” combine elements in a manner that is completely inscrutable. For Johanna Burton, a critic writing in the catalogue that accompanied the most recent Cindy Sherman retrospective, this equates to an abstraction of sorts. One simply cannot put the images together into basically anything. Yet these different components jumbled together certainly do affect the viewer.⁸³ For Burton, these most recent images put together elements that will read differently for every viewer that comes across them. She discusses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “threshold effect,” speaking specifically in terms of gender, in which the qualities of individual people which we associate with gender expression are actually attuned and refined based on our interactions with the world, or as Burton puts it: “the message I think I’m sending might not be the one you receive.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Eva Respini et al., *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Museum of Modern Art: Distributed in the United States and Canada by Artbook/D.A.P., 2012). 64.

⁸⁴ Respini et al. 2012, 65.

Conclusion

In the late works from 1985 through 1991, Sherman attacked the very screen she was working from in her earlier works. Seeing how the early works attempted to read the screen in a new way, but were then misread, readopted, readapted, and manipulated into reading the screen in the same way as it always was, Sherman ripped and tore away at the screen, seeing nothing there worth redeeming. She brought back the sensual, beautiful image, only to kill it again, then to bring back color, light, and fun. Sherman, after learning from her work with the Pictures Generation, moved in a decidedly different direction. The images she produced after 1985 would not appear in a fashion magazine, nor on a billboard. The images she has since produced do maintain the legacy of the Pictures group in the way in which they are at some point discernible to people not well versed in theory. Her trajectory post-abjection continues to explore the piecing together of new elements, stitching together seemingly disparate ideas.

Though the aesthetic of the Pictures Generation was certainly eclectic, certain elements of advertisement vernacular and Hollywood pervaded. Yet this is not the importance of this artistic movement. This aesthetic is too easily re-manipulated, repackaged, and sucked into the vacuum that is contemporary commercialism. The lesson from this generation of artists is how we examine our own memory and how this new ubiquitous imagery creates its own memory cycles that manipulate past, present, and future. How do we examine imagery in a world where one cannot spend fifteen minutes within one's own house without seeing several dozen images? How does that manipulate our conception of ourselves? These are issues that these artists continue to address today, and it is their legacy for new artists today and tomorrow.

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Figures



Figure 1. The now infamous Weyenberg shoe ad.

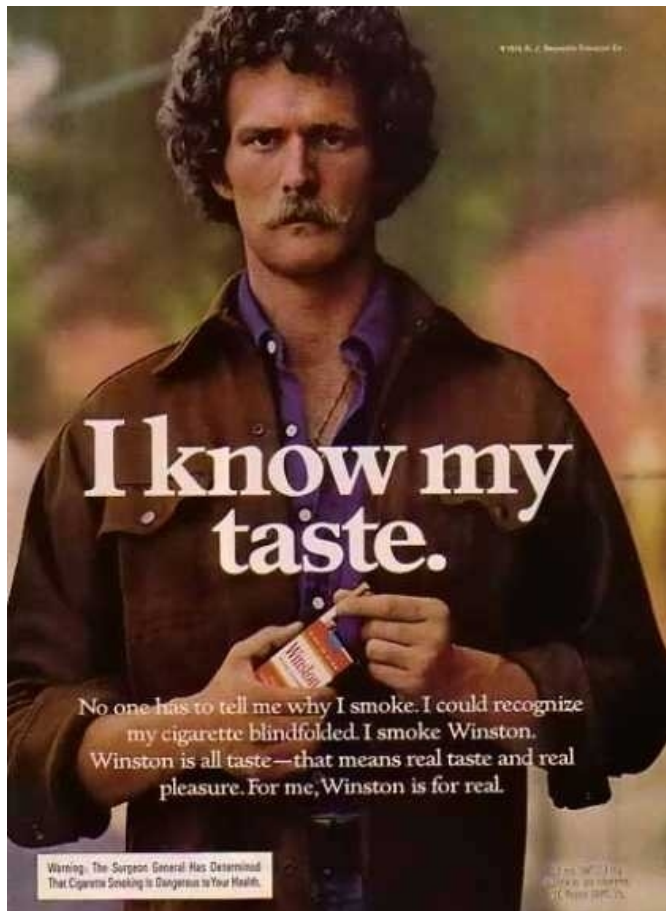


Figure 2. 1970s ad for Winston Cigarettes. A typical depiction of masculinity and its meanings in the 1970s.



Figure 3. 1970s ad for Virginia Slims. The “post-feminism” female of the 1970s.



Figure 4. From *Doll Clothes*, Cindy Sherman, 1975.



Figure 5. *Untitled Film Still #13*, Cindy Sherman, 1978.



Figure 6. *Untitled Film Still #5*, Cindy Sherman, 1977.



Figure 7. *We Imitate, We Break Up* (still), Ericka Beckman, 1978.



Figure 8. Green Giant Television Advertisement (still), 1960s.

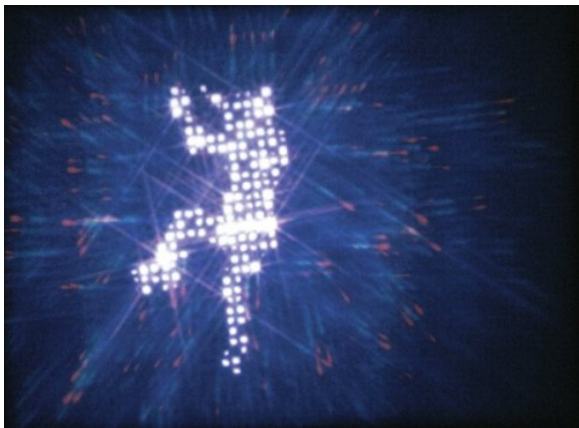


Figure 9. *The Jump*, Jack Goldstein, 1978.



Figure 10. *Shane*, 1953.



Figure 11. *April 21, 1978* (detail), Sarah Charlesworth, from *Modern History* series, 1978.



Figure 12. *Interior VIII/ Woman*, Laurie Simmons, 1976.



Figure 13. Bottega Veneta Ad campaign, Robert Longo, 2010.



Figure 14. *Untitled #85*, Cindy Sherman, 1985.



Figure 15. *Untitled #138*, Cindy Sherman, 1984.



Figure 16. *Untitled #216*, Cindy Sherman, 1989.



Figure 17. *Untitled #167*, Cindy Sherman, 1986.



Figure 18. *Untitled #153*, Cindy Sherman, 1985.



Figure 19. *Untitled*, Cindy Sherman, 2010.