Good evening!

Yesterday I had the great pleasure of spending some time at Mnuchin Gallery’s exhibition of photographs by Cindy Sherman, “Once Upon a Time, 1981–2011,” co-curated by the art adviser Philippe Ségalot. One of the upstairs galleries is devoted to a brilliant hanging of Sherman’s recent series of “society portraits,” featuring herself done up as fictional ladies of means, aging with varying degrees of grace. Sherman’s society portraits have been exhibited before, but the Mnuchin show presents an opportunity to see these ladies in their natural habitat: the elegant neo-Federal mansion that Albert Rathbone, a lawyer who later worked for the U. S. Treasury, commissioned from architect Arthur Jackson in 1913; its arched French windows witnessed such society events as the debutante tea dance and dinner that Rathbone and his wife, Emma, hosted for their daughter, and the elaborate winter-season parties that a subsequent owner, banker George Browne Post, and his wife held in the ’20s and ’30s. For the Sherman show, those elegant windows frame one of the portraits, retracing the columned arch in it, probably photographed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s medieval Cloisters up in Fort Tryon Park, which here serves as the private garden of this proud woman, resplendent in a thickly embroidered turquoise caftan.

I wouldn’t be the first to say that Sherman’s work, since the very beginning of her career in the late ’70s, has been prescient of the selfie age. But it seems to me that these portraits expose the lie at the heart of the selfie—that the diminutive, the term “selfie,” supports a comforting notion that there is, beneath the layers of life’s accoutrements, a self that consists in something other than a maze of neurons and synapses. Sherman’s ladies are 100 percent accoutrement: the rings, wigs, and gowns, the outsize brooch, white kid gloves, double strand of pearls, silk scarf, mink stole, support hose, well-groomed lapdog, palazzo steps, Old Master painting above the sofa. Her subjects are the sum of those parts; you get the sense that you’d scrub away their concealer only to find more concealer.

Thanks to Ségalot’s thoughtful and meticulous installation, there is a sight line that leads the eye from the arched, applied eyebrows of a society portrait through an archway to the arched, applied eyebrows of the subject in one of Sherman’s clown pictures hanging in an adjacent gallery. Another sight line directs the eye between two society portraits through an archway to an image in the rear gallery, one of Sherman’s Old Master photographs from the ’80s, based on a Madonna and child, provoking thoughts of these society women in a different age, in a different role. Sherman, as the Virgin Mary, feeds her obviously fake plastic child from an obviously fake plastic breast. In all her various guises, she has always been adept at exposing artifice, and hinting that it may be all there is.

—Sarah Douglas, Editor-in-Chief