Cindy Sherman Puts 30 Years of Photography on Display in New York

‘Once Upon a Time,’ the three-decade survey of the photographer’s work, is her first New York show since her seminal MoMA retrospective in 2012.

KARA WEISENSTEIN

Even though Cindy Sherman has made a career out of self-portraiture, when she showed up at Mnuchin Gallery for the opening of her first New York exhibition since 2012, I was nervous I wouldn’t recognize her. In Once Upon a Time, a 30-year survey co-curated by Philippe Ségalot and gallery partner Sukanya Rajaratnam, the artist’s chameleonic abilities are on full display. Sherman’s body of work explores representation and how film, television, and advertising influence our personal identities and understanding of the world. She uses elaborate makeup, costumes, props, and prosthetics to transform herself into portraits mining stereotypes and drawing attention to the power structures that propagate these images.
For those who’ve mostly seen Sherman’s work piecemeal, *Once Upon a Time* offers a chronological sampling of it. The show draws from three of Sherman’s major series: the *Centerfolds*, the *History Portraits*, and the *Society Portraits*. In the earliest works, Sherman poses as *Playboy* pinups, but fully clothed and seemingly lost in thought. In later pieces, she imitates the style of Old Masters, upending art’s historically male gaze. The most recent compositions are of aging grand dames Photoshopped into haughty New York locales.

Sherman has famously said her work isn’t overtly political. She maintains that her practice is more about inhabiting characters and transforming herself with elaborate costumes and props than about making a statement about female representation in art. "If you think about the *History Portraits*, she’s dressing up as amalgams of paintings that were done by men to propagate a certain idea of womanhood," Rajaratnam tells Creators. "In other words, there’s a longstanding culture of female representation, and whether Cindy does it consciously or unconsciously, she’s tapping into that political dialogue.

As Sherman’s career has evolved, so have the politics around feminism, representation, and gender identity. Over the years, her work has been claimed by both sides. "For example, her *Centerfolds* were rejected [by first-wave Feminists], because they were considered anti-feminist, and now they’re considered feminist. I think each side co-opts her work all the time, and that’s very interesting to me," Rajaratnam says. "Cindy is probably not thinking about any of this. She’s alone in the studio doing her thing. But the work lends itself to [interpretation], and that’s what makes it so profoundly rich."
Sherman, it turns out, is petite and blonde. At the opening, swarmed by associates and admirers, she wore an electric blue suit and towering platform sandals. It was kind of stunning to think that this very normal-looking human inhabited multitudes of women and men, street urchins and socialites, pin-ups and birthday clowns. "What Cindy does beautifully, is to expose those archetypes as constructs, but she does it not in a strident way, she does it with a sense of empathy and grace," Rajaratnam says. That malleability is apparent throughout the more than two dozen works on view in *Once Upon a Time*. Her practice is more like that of an actor than anything—moving through life and an expansive career, you can sense Sherman trying people on, exploring the perceptions and realities of the human, and feminine, experience.

*Cindy Sherman: Once Upon a Time* is on view at Mnuchin Gallery through June 10.
Image Slideshow:

Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery. Photo Tom Powel Imaging.