Visit the Met's Rei Kawakubo Show in NYC—and Make a Day of It

by Candice Rainey

Check out the designer's avant-garde fashion and then see Cindy Sherman's self portraits at Mnuchin Gallery.

In the mid ‘90s, I was attending a very suburban public high school and kept telling everyone I wanted to “work in fashion” someday, though I didn’t have a clue what that really meant beyond it sounding like I had some semblance of plan. My reference points were fairly banal—guilty pleasure films of the decade (I was convinced my studied exploration of Drew Barrymore’s look circa Mad Love obviously meant I had an eye for clothes), the Violent Femmes, and Claire’s. I had never heard of Rei Kawakubo nor her vanguard label Commes des Garçons, which she founded in 1969 and is revered (or rather worshipped by some) for its experimental, borderline surreal designs—puffed up sweaters with extra limbs, voluminous dresses that look like they could float on their own as if they were pumped full of helium. But I do remember discovering her simultaneously alongside Cindy Sherman, which is a lot of feral artistic vision to happen upon at once for a teenager with vague notions about what constituted as experimental fashion and vanguard art.

In 1994, Sherman collaborated with Kawakubo on a somewhat mutinous ad campaign for the line, shooting herself as a tatted-up, post-apocalyptic punk wearing checkered gloves and pointing her trigger finger to the side of her head. The image was disturbing but addictive—like something you might get in trouble for looking at if a teacher found it tucked in a pocket of your three-ring binder. I never read Judy Blume nor tore through Sassy on my bedroom floor, but I think one of my formative moments, that blink of time where you instantly become intellectually curious about the world because something in the cultural ether scares the bejesus out of you, was staring at that image and being completely bewildered by it.

It just so happens that both of these women currently have stellar New York exhibits just a few short blocks away from each other on the Upper East Side. Rei Kawakubo’s Comme des Garçons retrospective "Art of the In-Between" opened this week at the Met. It’s brilliantly curated by Andrew Bolton who manages to give Commes des Garçons fans what they want—the 1997 "Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body" collection also lovingly known as “lumps and bumps”—while observing Kawakubo’s proclivities for tartan, flowers, and giving the proverbial finger to function and wearability. It’s all staged in a circular maze—a collaboration between Kawakubo and the Met—that nods to Zen Buddhism, space, and emptiness and also places the actual pieces jarringly close to viewers.

At the Mnuchin gallery, about a five-minute walk from the Met, you can see more than two dozen works by Sherman, spanning 30 years in "Once Upon a Time, 1981-2011." All are pulled from three different series: "Society Portraits" (Sherman as UES women battling age with plastic surgery), the "History Portraits" (Sherman as Renaissance and Rococo figures) and the seminal "Centerfolds" series (Sherman as a modern
version of the reclining woman but all lost in private moments as opposed to, you know, tugging at a bikini string). Seeing the progression of her work is riveting and a palpable reminder that Sherman is as New York magazine art critic Jerry Saltz once called her, a “warrior artist,” and that “Fashion helps Cindy hide in plain sight; in turn, she plays havoc with fashion.”

Maybe some innovative curator will pair the two under one roof some day. Until then, we say build a day around both shows. Start with the Comme des Garçons retrospective in the morning (it opens at 10 a.m.) when the museum is generally less busy. If you need to caffeinate beforehand, get an espresso and a sticky bun at Flora Bar coffee (from the Estela guys) which is only six blocks away at the Met Breuer.

For lunch there’s a couple of options before heading to Sherman’s show. Antonucci is one of our favorite trattorias—amazing pastas and low-key Italian food in a light pink room filled with weird art. Plus it has sidewalk seating when it’s warm out and is on a pretty block. We also like Sant Ambroues for its super-Euro grab-and-go sandwiches (mini tomato mozzarella on brioche, jambon beurre) and its cappuccino or gelato to go. There’s excellent people watching opportunities here and it is always packed.

The Sherman show is at the lovely Mnuchin Gallery, which feels like a townhouse owned by someone with incredible taste and a lot of money. Best part? Admission is free. When you’re ready to process everything you’ve seen over cocktails, head to Bemelman’s Bar at the Carlyle, a classic when it’s time for a glass of rosé, or something stiffer.