Rediscovered: Cindy Sherman’s Celluloid World

Photographer Cindy Sherman discusses her craft, her new book (“The Complete Untitled Film Stills”) and one never-before-seen shot.

NEW YORK — Cindy Sherman answers the door of her apartment wearing a white T-shirt and blue athletic pants, her strawberry blonde-streaked hair pulled back into a ponytail. Petite and fit, Sherman almost looks like she could be a suburban soccer mom. Almost.

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One of the most successful and critically praised
photographers of her generation, Sherman is known for her portraits, which can be mysterious, dark, disturbing and ultimately, beautiful. She is a master of manipulating her own image, having transformed herself into glamorous starlets, clowns, centerfolds, characters with odd prosthetic body parts and various dead people for her portraits. But it would be a mistake to confuse the artist with her work.

“Sometimes people expect me to be as weird as some of my images,” says Sherman, 47. “I feel like I have to be normal in order for the weirdness to come out.”

In Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills series, which she began just after graduating from college in the mid-Seventies, the artist cast herself as a succession of actresses, from the young, naïve ingenue to the sizzling European siren. There was a frightened Kim Novak-like character who could have stepped out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie and a seductive Simone Signoret-type, lighting a cigarette.

While Sherman has explored other characters, it is the Untitled Film Series that has brought her the greatest recognition. It should come as no surprise then that finding a never-before-seen image from the series is a big deal.

Sitting at a large farmhouse table in her country kitchen with the sun streaming through the window and a SubZero refrigerator gently humming, Sherman drops her head for a moment and takes a deep breath before beginning the story of how the image was discovered.

“The very first role of film I shot for that series was done before this show I was having up in Buffalo,” she says. “I chose six images from that role of film and then forgot about it. About 10
years ago, someone from Hallwall’s [the alternative space founded by Robert Longo, Sherman’s former boyfriend], called me and said, ‘I think we found a role of your film.’

“At the time, I liked a few of the pictures, but they didn’t fit in with what I was doing,” she explains. “I thought, ‘One of these days I’m going to do something with these.’”

She finally has. With the publication in October of “The Complete Untitled Film Stills,” (DAP) all 60-plus images from the series, including the never-before-seen shot, will be collected in a book.

“I’m pretty excited about the book,” says Sherman, with characteristic understatement. “In a way, we’ve been talking about doing a book since the Museum of Modern Art bought the series.” (MOMA reportedly paid $1 million for the Untitled Film Stills in 1995.)

“I figured there would be curiosity about the new image, but I hadn’t really thought of it because I was kind of embarrassed to be adding this extra one because it was kind of like an afterthought,” Sherman says.

She likes the image, however, because it’s a bit ambiguous. The actress in the picture is sitting on the floor in a pleated skirt in silhouette but with her head turned toward the camera. The lights are shining at the camera and the film set is messy.

“It seemed like more of a behind-the-scenes shot of the series,” Sherman says. “She seems like an ingenue or wannabe or maybe it’s a screen test.”

Just then, there is a rustling sound in one of the back rooms. Sherman excuses herself.

“Frida, bad girl, bad girl,” she says, returning to the table with Frida, a green parrot, who sits on her owner’s lap and allows the feathers on her head to be stroked.

Asked if she developed plots for her characters, Sherman replies: “Some of the characters were influenced by European actresses of the Fifties and Sixties. When I was doing the makeup and wigs I’d look in the mirror and see Simone Signoret,
but I didn’t do it consciously. Sometimes I’d look at the contact sheets and see Sophia Loren, but it was an actress of that type. It wasn’t her, but it reminded me of someone like her.

“I tried not to think of much of a plot,” she continues. “I found I was more successful that way. It was too campy if I showed extreme emotion, if I was extremely happy or sad. If I was a blank canvas, I would be ripe for the viewer to imbue with their own narrative.”

Much of the inherent power of Sherman’s film stills series comes from her ability to create characters that seem authentic, with references to horror flicks, B movies and gangster films, but are entirely fictional in the end. That the photographs have the ability to develop in a viewer’s own imagination is one of their greatest strengths.

One of Sherman’s most controversial photographic series had naked plastic dolls as its subject. The dolls in sex scenes were burned and gouged, broken and mutilated and then put back together. “Sometimes I like reading what critics have to say,” she says. “Even the bad things I take to heart. Sometimes criticism can work for you. But with a lot of criticism I’ve gotten, I’ve realized that some people just couldn’t stand to see those kinds of images.”

Sherman is so attuned to her own rhythms that she says she stops working on a series when she gets bored. “What I really want to start doing,” she explains, “is start writing a screenplay for another film, but I don’t really have a clear idea of what I want it to be about.”

During her first directorial outing she was swept up with the idea of an artist making a film. “Office Killer,” (1997) starred Molly Ringwald, Jean Tripplehorn, Eric Bagosian and Carol Kane as a shy and ultimately demented copy editor, who becomes the victim of downsizing and kills her fellow employees.

“It’s not exactly a horror film, but it has elements of the horror genre,” Sherman says. “I liked the idea of a horror film because it’s supposed to be bad and trashy and it was.
“Making the film was definitely the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life,” she says. “I didn’t realize the amount of power a director has. The hardest part was getting used to the actors and knowing what to tell them to do because I work so intuitively.”

Working on her latest series, clowns, allows Sherman to continue her solitary work. She chose clowns, she says, for their ability “to be really funny and really creepy.” As with all her work, Sherman’s intensive research turns up arcane and useful information. While reading up on clowns, she learned that there are guidebooks on how to be a clown, with specific instructions on makeup. “You put talcum powder into a sock,” she said. “Maybe that was done for the men not to feel too frilly.”

Five clown portraits were included in a recent exhibition of Sherman’s work at the Serpentine Gallery in London, which will travel next to Scotland. The clowns are still a work in progress. Sherman has been adding digital backgrounds to some of the portraits so she can put two or three clowns in one photo. “I want them to interact with each other,” she says.

Sherman has always been fascinated with makeup and costumes. Even when she lived at Hallwall’s before the idea of the film series took shape, she’d stay in her studio putting on makeup to create characters — she was into conceptual, minimal, performance and body art – while a gang of artists hung out in the living room watching TV. Sherman would often come out in character and join the party.

In one of the clown photos Sherman wears a pink wig and John Galliano kimono. Is she a fashion buff? “I’m interested in fashion, but it’s more as a personal sideline,” she says. “I’m interested in fashion in the same way that I’m interested in looking at TV and magazines and galleries.

“I definitely like my shopping,” she adds. “There are some things that I buy and never wear. I think I’m just buying them as an object. I’ve done that with a lot of Comme des Garçons stuff.”

But Sherman’s work and fashion have been closely intertwined. Several months before her Serpentine show, British Vogue offered Sherman a few pages in the magazine to do with what she liked. She decided to do clowns in designer clothes.
“Every couple of years, someone wants me to do something with their clothes,” she says. “I did some direct-mail campaigns for Comme des Garçons for about four seasons.”

As for fashion photography, Sherman is not a big fan. “Guy Bourdin was fantastic,” she says. “Helmut Newton, I’m not a fan of all his work.”

Neither was Sherman a big fan of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work. She told The New York Times recently that she saw him as much more commercially oriented than herself. But Sherman has made peace with her competitiveness with Mapplethorpe. She’s even curated an exhibition of his work, “Eye to Eye,” at the Sean Kelly Gallery in Chelsea through Oct. 18.

In general, Sherman has some pet peeves with fashion photographers. A technical purist, she is naturally offended by images that have been digitally altered. “The main thing that annoys me about fashion photographs is airbrushing the models to perfection.”

Sherman herself was influenced by performance artists of the Seventies, people like Hanna Wilke and Vitto Acconci.

She doesn’t have much enthusiasm for today’s crop of hot, young female artists, who shall remain nameless. “The gang that came out of Yale is very influential, but it all looks very similar,” she says. “They’re being hyped too much. I’m not sure what they’re trying to say about female sexuality. Are they being antifeminist or ironic. Some of it looks a little too fashionable.”

Sherman says she comes from a generation of female artists who don’t wear any makeup or try to look glamorous, which sounds ironic, given all the time she spends on her visage. Of course, that’s work. “I’m into glamour now, too,” she says. “What bothers me is artists who try to get into this whole celebrity thing and become famous just for getting their pictures at parties in Vogue.

“I think a lot of them think being famous is the key to being successful,” she adds. “I guess they’re just trying to make use of the publicity machine. But any cheap use of publicity is pathetic. My generation never thought we’d make money from our art. In a way we were naïve.”
While Sherman has always been reticent to talk about herself and her work, she says she’s become more comfortable generally in public. “I don’t do many interviews and I don’t like to have my picture taken,” she says. But it’s a misconception to say she’s shy. It’s also a misconception to think that Sherman plays other roles as an escape from her own life.

“It’s definitely fun to do and it can be therapeutic, too,” she says. “It’s not like I’m fantasizing about living other lives. It’s not showing any dissatisfaction with my own self. It’s really much more about playing.”