

# transformation Cindy Sherman

www.art21.org/artists/sherman



## Born

1954, Glen Ridge, NJ

## Education

BA, State University College, Buffalo, NY

## Lives and Works

New York, NY

## About the Artist

In self-reflexive photographs and films, Cindy Sherman invents myriad guises, metamorphosing from Hollywood starlet to clown to society matron. Often with the simplest of means—a camera, a wig, makeup, an outfit—Sherman fashions ambiguous but memorable characters that suggest complex lives lived out of frame. Leaving her works untitled, Sherman refuses to impose descriptive language on her images, relying instead on the viewer's ability to develop narratives as an essential component of appreciating the work. While rarely revealing her private intentions, Sherman's investigations have a compelling relationship to public images, from **kitsch** (*Film Stills* and *Centerfolds*) to art history (Old Masters and **Surrealism**) to green-screen technology and the latest advances in digital photography. Sherman's exhaustive study of portraiture and self-portraiture—often a playful mixture of camp and horror, heightened by gritty realism—provides a new lens through which to examine societal assumptions surrounding gender and the valuation of concept over style.

## Teaching Connections

### Media and Materials

performance, photography

### Key Words and Ideas

alter-ego, cinema, costume, the grotesque, narrative, portraiture

### Related Artists

Eleanor Antin, Matthew Barney, John Baldessari, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Mike Kelley

*We're brought up to believe that what we see is fact, and I guess my work has always been about that—that I can make it look like it's from a movie. But it's not really from a movie, and you think you've seen it before but you haven't!*

## DISCUSS

### Before Viewing

- How do makeup, accessories, clothing, and other props affect identity? How do they affect the way we present ourselves to the world? How can these things shape or create an alter ego, personality, or identity?
- What do portrait photographers create? For whom, and for what occasions?

### While Viewing

- How would you describe the characters that Sherman creates? Select one portrait and note the visual clues that Sherman has included in the image. What do they tell you about the character she is presenting. Who is this person? Where is she? Imagine what might have happened to this character in the moments before and after the photograph was taken.
- Sherman says that film has always been more influential for her than the art world. Describe the images that reflect her interest in cinema, and explain why.

### After Viewing

- Discuss the term **artistic license**. What is it? How might this term apply to the choices that Sherman makes in her work?
- Describe the similarities and differences between Sherman's photographs and portraits from other art-historical periods and other cultures. Discuss the contexts, intentions, and subjects in other forms of portraiture. How do they relate to or diverge from Sherman's work?



*Untitled Film Still* (#48), 1979. Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches. Edition of 10. © Cindy Sherman, courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.



*Untitled* (#424), 2004. Color photograph, 55½ x 56½ inches. Edition of 6. © Cindy Sherman, courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

## CREATE

- Create two photographic self-portraits. First, create a portrait working alone. For the second portrait, work with a partner who can act as photographer and director. Compare the two photographs, decide which presents the "truer" self, and explain why.
- Working in a small group, choose a Sherman photograph and ask each person to write a short story that relates to the character portrayed in the image. Compare similarities and differences between each of the stories, and discuss the aspects of the photograph that inspired different interpretations.



*Untitled* (#476), 2008. Color photograph, 91½ x 75½ inches. Edition of 6. © Cindy Sherman, courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.