**CINDY SHERMAN IN A NEW MILLENNIUM : FASHION, FEMINISM, ART AND AGEING**

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**KEYWORDS**

**ABSTRACT**

If feminism and the fashion industry were once seen as adversaries, given how the strictures of Simone de Beauvoir in *The* *Second Sex* (1949) permeated so much of second-wave feminism , a consideration of ‘fashion’ is now central to contemporary feminist scholarship**.** But justas the earlier critique of fashion seemed finally to have been supplanted, certain basic arguments around dress and make-up nevertheless resurfaced within contemporary feminism. The current neo-liberal climate has led to the ever-increasing consumption of ‘fashionable’ goods, provoking unease and encouraging the contested ‘protectionist discourse’ within feminism to shield young women from just such excesses. Meanwhile, the fashion world itself,arguably more powerful than ever , has across the last twenty years continued a process of legitimising itself through its various modes of alliance with the art world; it has even hijacked elements of feminist practice in the pursuit of publicity . This article suggests that the fashion industry and contemporary feminism are nonetheless alike in one significant respect: neither have properly engaged with the needs of an ageing population. It is an omission which this article will seek to examine through a discussion of the recent ‘portraits ‘ of Cindy Sherman, an artist of great interest to feminist scholars , in whose earlier work there was a deliberate ‘anti-fashion’ element. Now ‘fashionable’ herself, a leading figure in the global art world, she has collaborated with the fashion industry in rather different ways. And her ‘portraits’ of 2012, in which she reconfigured herself as imaginary Manhattan socialites in or beyond middle age, and a later series exhibited in 2016, where she appears as as a series of ageing , anonymous ‘movie stars’, reveal more general ideological tensions surrounding the representation of women , the ageing process and the fashionable ideal. It is the dissection of thesetensions that underpin this article, for while Sherman’s work has been the subject of academic debate across a forty-year period, her use and critique of the ‘fashionable ‘ image has not been examined alongside an exploration of the expanding activities within the fashion industry itself ; nor have her recent images of ageing women been examined within this more general context.

**KEYWORDS : Fashion, feminism , ageing , art , celebrity, Cindy Sherman**

**INTRODUCTION: FASHION ,FEMINISM AND AN AGEING POPULATION**

Simone de Beauvoir , in her extraordinarily influential discussion of ‘the woman of fashion ‘ (1949/1997: 543-550) was actually protesting against the overly-feminised, physically restricting clothes inspired by Dior’s ‘New Look’ of 1947, which influenced high street fashions for the next decade. But if these particular criticisms of fashion were firmly dismantled in Elizabeth Wilson’s *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity (*1985/2003: 125-6), they have gradually resurfaced in rather different ways. Firstly, there is a growing concern with the over-consumption of ‘fast fashion’, cheap clothes made in ways that are far from eco-friendly and which can only be consigned to landfill; the fact that they are made by women across the world who work under appalling conditions seems not to affect their overall sales. Secondly, there are divisions within feminism around sexuality and dress (see Lynch 2012 , Dines 2010) driven by a desire to shield younger women. For, of course, many contemporary young women, in their daily lives , embrace both the delights of fashion and the idea of ‘post-feminism’. This particular term, suggesting as it does that the feminist project has either been superseded or is complete , has of course been hotly contested (see Negra and Tasker 2007, Negra 2009, MacRobbie 2008). Hilary Radner has also written persuasively of ‘neo-feminism ‘ (2010) and argues for a different ‘time-frame’ here ( Radner and Smith 2013). But despite debates around terminology and the role of fashion within a culture of neoliberalism, fashion itself has now become an accepted part of feminist scholarship. Angela MacRobbie has actually interrogated the industry itself , with its largely female workforce and discriminatory working practices ( MacRobbie 1997 :1998) while other feminist scholars have sought to examine the theoretical issues at stake for feminism in the study of fashion (Church Gibson 2000 : Parkins 2007).

This feminist interest coincides with the fashion industry itself starting to flourish as never before ; it now has extraordinary power on a global scale, achieved and assisted by excessive, endless internet activities and its profitable alliance with ‘celebrity culture ‘ (see Church Gibson 2012). According to a Congress Joint Committee report of 2015 , the industry had become ‘a 1.2 trillion dollar global industry ‘ surviving a difficult economic period after the global economic crisis of 2008 and continuing to grow even stronger worldwide (McKinsey/Business of Fashion 2018 ) . At the same historical juncture , a number of well-known artists - including Sherman herself - have seemingly been seduced by a relatively new form of patronage, that of a commercial collaboration with a well-known fashion house. And some fashion designers have proclaimed their own ‘feminist ‘ credentials, producing couture T-shirts emblazoned with feminist slogans; in February 2018, fashion designer Tom Ford showed off a range of ‘Pussy Power’ handbags at New York Fashion Week. ‘Feminism’ is arguably hijacked by fashion today precisely because it is now seen as something verydifferent from the dour spectre of the last century .

If the fashion industry and feminism have seemingly forged a new alliance , they can also both be accused of a problematic relationship to the realities of the ageing process. The fashion industry’s tokenistic celebration of a particular form of ‘*successful’* ageing – using glamororous , financially and socially empowered **,** high-profile women **–** is as unsettling as its selective embrace of feminism. The fashion world has voiced its pride in the – arguably tokenist - older models on the catwalk and in certain high-fashion advertising campaigns, which have included women from outside the industry , often carefully selected for their cultural capital ; in January 2015 , not only was eighty-year old writer Joan Didion employed to advertise Céline sunglasses, but seventy-plus singer Joni Mitchell simultaneously became the new figurehead of the St Laurent press campaign , and in 2018 actress Isabella Rossellini, at sixty-five, returnedto work for the cosmetics company Lancôme - interestingly , twenty years earlier they had dismissed her from her post as’brand ambassador ‘ on account of her age. But despite these various high-profile appointments – which have recently seen Jane Fonda and Helen Mirren making catwalk appearances for L’Oreal -this ever-growing industry has remained, as always, dependent overall on images ofyouth and beauty,while at the same time having little or no interest in the provision of clothing for an ageing population. Even feminist activist Barbara Macdonald, although totally uninterested in fashion and dress, described in her polemic, *Look me in the Eye: Old Women, Ageing and Ageism*, the difficulty of actually acquiring any new clothes , noting the disbelief of shop assistants when she appeared before them (1984: 74). And while there is a burgeoning body of fashion scholarship, there is very little writing on the subject of ageing and fashion .There are a handful of essays (see, for example, Jermyn 2016, Church Gibson 2000 and 2013) and Julia Twigg’s monograph, *Fashion and Age* : *Dress, the* *Body and Later Life* (2013), which uses an ethnographic approach , but overall this topic does not seem to generate much scholarly interest.

Despite changing demographics, feminist work within the field of cultural studies overall has also paid insufficient attention to the process of ageing, which is still largely the provenance of sociologists, gerontologists and scholars such as Kathleen Woodward (1999) who arguably belongs to a discipline of ‘age studies’. There is of course a degree of feminist writing on the subject , including those books written by some second-wave luminaries – Friedan(1993), Steinem(2006) and Greer (1992) - together with Lynn Segal’s rather different investigation, *Out of Time* (2014). Interestingly, this last book has on its cover an image of Simone de Beauvoir, who surely began this thread within feminist writing in her book *The Coming of Age* (1970/1996). But unlike recent feminist authors, de Beauvoir directly addressed, exhaustively researched and graphically outlined the problems of poverty and physical frailty that are faced by many in their old age; she described the plight of both men and women equally. Perhaps she was setting out to counter the way in which, in her novels and her volumes of autobiography, women’s physical ageing is so often portrayed as abhorrent - the loss of looks and sexual allure are graphically described. Two years later, Susan Sontag demanded in the American press that women challenge exactly that fear- what she called ‘the double standard of ageing ‘ (Sontag 1972: 29-38). In some of the recent memoirs, the feminist authors may write of loneliness and ill-health, but from the perspective of those in a social and financial position to counter them. . However ‘Age Studies ‘ is surely a separate discipline, while much of contemporary feminist writing is concerned with issues that concern younger women.

The *practical* demands of second-wave feminism, articulated in the 1960s and 1970s , did not include a call for help with the demands of extreme old age – illness, fragility, a need for care and possibly for assisted living. Certainly, in England , most of the women who marched in the 1960s and 1970s to demand equal pay, free childcare , contraception and abortion, were relatively young at the time and so these were their central concerns. Ironically, as these women now face ageing themselves, many might wonder why nothing was said, in those early days, about the problems faced by ageing women, so many of whom have to join the flotilla of unpaid ‘carers’ for their elderly parents - until the day when they may need such care themselves, with no-one necessarily on hand to provide it. There is still a silence; there have been recent high-profile feminist campaigns and many demonstrations, but these are often organised around rather different issues ~ #MeToo and Slutwalk, for instance , although the Women’s March Against Trump unsurprisingly attracted older women. The ‘Grey Panthers’, an American initiative formed to address the concerns of an ageing population, has focussed on issues such as inadequate nursing–home care and enforced retirement, but it does not attract the kind of media attention generated by gatherings involving large numbers of much younger women.

**ART, FASHION AND CELEBRITY CULTURE**

Artist Cindy Sherman has interrogated and recreated ideas of the ‘fashionable ‘ image for nearly forty years . This , together with her acclamation by feminist scholars , her growing fascination with the ageing process – she herself is now in her sixties –and her new ‘celebrity’ status , mean that a reflection on her recent work is most illuminating for a discussion of the intersection of art, fashion and feminism and the tensions that this reveals. For while Sherman’s work has been the subject of academic debate across a forty year period , her use and critique of the ‘fashionable’ image has not been examined alongside an exploration of the expanding activities of the fashion industry itself ; nor have her recent images of ageing women been examined within this more general context. By attempting to look ‘across’ rather than along the different platforms of contemporary visual culture ( see Church Gibson, 2012: 11) the following discussion will examine Sherman’s work over the last forty years as an illustration of the new convergence of art, celebrity and fashion that reveals both a changing relationship to feminism and a growing anxiety around ageing that has been registered elsewhere in the culture but as yet inadequately discussed.

Sherman , whose first exhibition was held in 1980, is now an extraordinarily successful and widely respected artist. One of her ‘ Centrefolds’ series from the 1980s, offered for sale in 2012, commanded the third-highest price ever paid for any photograph - and the highest-ever for a woman photographer. Her recent work , described towards the end of this essay , can be seen online ; the pictures are all there to be consumed, but an academic press might not be able to reproduce too many of them. For after nearly four decades, Sherman is still at the very centre of an increasingly competitive, highly lucrative ‘art world’. In 2012, her ‘ Retrospective’ exhibition held in New York’s Museum of Modern Art drew large crowds; the global display of her newer work in 2016 attracted attention in each and every location. She has also joined the stable of well-known artists who have accepted commercial work from the luxury fashion brands; they include Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Richard Prince, Yayoi Kusama, Tracey Emin and the Chapman Brothers, among others.

The extension of fashion’s tentacles – in search of cultural capital - means that international art fairs and high-profile gallery openings increasingly act as fashion showcases (Schieren and Sich 2011, Thornton 2009) while luxury brands continue to build galleries and museums and fashion entrepreneurs collect expensive art (see Thornton op.cit., Ryan 2012, Pedroni and Volonté 2012 ). The ever-strengthening links between art,fashion and celebrity go deeper still**.** For across the past three decades, fashion houses and their designers have not only sponsored shows and individual artists, but have themselves been the subject of increasingly successful exhibitions, culminating perhaps in the extraordinary ‘blockbuster’ show of Alexander McQueen’s designs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2011 (see among others Church Gibson 2012). Now , too , they tempt selected artists, including Sherman, into overtly commercial collaborations. The handbags, trunks and monographs created for the Louis Vuitton brand are probably the best-known, owing to Jeff Koons’ most recent work for them. In 2018 , he created two collections of handbags , bearing both his own initials and the Louis Vuitton logo, but in fact featuring the paintings of canonical artists of the past. Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, Turner, Monet and Van Gogh were among the artists Koons co-opted posthumously and whose works were used to decorate bags costing thousands of dollars. For those who might argue that this new form of patronage is no different from working for Renaissance Popes and Princes, the answer might be that not only that the artists of the Quattrocento were paid rather less, but more importantly, that many of their commissions were designed for sites where they could be freely consumed by the public.

Sherman herself, in recent years , created for Louis Vuitton a special edition of the brand’s historic ‘steamer trunk’ and a corresponding series of advertisements, while, in 2012, she created images to advertise a new make-up range for the international brand, MAC. These partnerships are among the indications that Sherman herself is now very much a part of the artist-as-celebrity pantheon. She is now one of the lionised artists invited to endless functions and – in her case – to sit in the front row at fashion shows. Her new celebrity status actually inspired a disgruntled boyfriend, Paul Hasegawa-Overacker, to direct a film, *Guest of Cindy Sherman,* in 2008. This was prompted by his being exiled to an outer table at a celebrity dinner while Sherman herself was seated at the top table with other well-known figures. She is of course attired today for such occasions in designer clothes, many offered to her by fashion houses anxious for yet another opportunity to acquire cultural legitimacy and artistic capital. Yet for so long the face of Sherman herself was hardly known, for of course it was transformed and reconfigured for each artwork, while interviews with her were invariably illustrated by the latest artistic reworkings of her appearance. Now she is often pictured in her own clothes , usually casual designer outfits, as ‘herself’ rather than as artistic recreation.

Andy Warhol, of course, whose face was instantly recognisable through his own effective self-publicising, designed dresses for the New York boutique, Paraphernalia, as long ago as the 1960s (Church Gibson, 2012) and the liaison created between art, fashion and music in New York was described by Elizabeth Currid as the ‘Warhol Economy’ (2008). But now fashion can happily swallow up and even transform what was once deliberately subversive - and overtly feminist - artwork. This is perfectly exemplified in the purchase by Selfridges, London’s fashionable department store, of Barbara Kruger’s famous anti-consumption billboard artworks . The best-known of these, with the slogan ‘I shop therefore I am ‘ was used, instead, to coax visitors into the shop’s annual sales while another billboard slogan, ‘Buy me – I’ ll change your life’ , was hung above displays of luxury goods, all ironies lost in the translation from anti-capitalist artwork to in-store advertising. It is unsurprising that Kruger herself , a contemporary of Sherman in what was nicknamed the ‘Pictures Generation ‘ group of the 1980s and an avowedly ‘feminist artist’, has been consistently unwilling to comment on this deal with Selfridges, and the consequent reinterpretation of her artwork.

Kruger has however continued to create slogan pieces that question consumption, gender and politics - and most notably interrogated the fashion industry directly in a performance piece, ‘The Drop’, in 2017. As part of Performa , the biennial performance art festival held in New York - who received the profits made by her work - a store in Soho , on a street housing well-known fashion boutiques, was given over to her installation , ‘The Drop’. This was a parody of the weekly dropping–off of previously publicised new designs that characterises the contemporary fashion industry. The ‘audience’ obediently queued outside the shop as if waiting for fashion goods; when admitted, they entered a space designed to look like a mini-skatepark , selling branded T-skirts, hats and skateboard decks, all created by Kruger. In 2018, in an ironic contrast, Sherman herself entered into collaboration with real-life skatewear and streetwear company Supreme , a global behemoth who create ‘real’ queues across the world and who early on appropriated for its branding the typeface and colour always used by Kruger in her artworks, without permission. Now two of Sherman’s ‘Grotesques’ series from the 1980s will be used for very expensive skateboards as part of their ‘Artists’ series - which includes the work of Damien Hirst and Basquiat. And through her most recent fashion partnership, with New York’s Dover Street Market shop in 2018 , it is possible to buy highly-priced sweatshirts printed with images from her very first exhibition, of the ‘Untitled Film Stills 1977-1980’ , which excited art critics and feminist scholars alike .

**SHERMAN AND FEMINIST CRITICISM**

The work is what it is and hopefully it’s seen as feminist work, or feminist-advised work. But I ‘m not going to go around espousing theoretical bullshit about feminist stuff (Sherman , quoted in Cain 2016 )

If Sherman’s earlier work directly interrogated gender and identity, her later ‘portraits’ show us women engaged in more problematic modes of ‘dressing-up’. From the start, feminists were fascinated by Sherman’s work, for here was a woman artist, always photographing only herself, but recreating this ‘self’ quite differently in every image. By totally transforming and disguising herself in each photograph through make-up, dress, and hairstyling, her work reflected current feminist ideas of dress and make-up as ‘masquerade’. But as the quotation above suggests, Sherman sought to resist ‘theoretical bullshit ‘ even as she sought the accolade of ‘feminist work.’ Sherman, born in 1954, is of course close in generation to many second-wave feminists - but if the scholars among them consistently praised her work, they had to ‘fly in the face of her own expressly non-theoretical, even anti-theoretical gaze‘ (Mulvey , 1991 , 138).

Her first exhibition was held in 1980, just as feminism itself had successfully moved from counter-culture to centre stage and feminist scholars were taking their place within the academy; her unsettling images of women were heralded as feminist art and her questioning of the fashionable ideal applauded. The imaginary films from which these sixty-nine ‘stills’ might have been ‘taken’ are varied ; they seem to be from imaginary 1950s and 1940s B –movies in the main, with some referencing of *film noir*  and European art cinema. There are images in which she presents herself so as to resemble particular film stars, but in many others she simply ‘becomes’ a young , vulnerable, anonymous woman , seen in a lonely urban space, or a domestic interior made strange. Crouching on a kitchen floor, lying on a bed, waiting with a suitcase at the side of a lonely road, or solitary and surrounded by skyscrapers, so many of these women seem vulnerable in some way, despite their defences of carefully-applied make-up and becoming dress - or undress. Laura Mulvey wrote of this series:

The accoutrements of the feminine that struggle to conform to a façade of desirability haunt Sherman’s iconography. Make-up , high heels, back-combed hair, respectable but eroticised clothes are all put on and ‘done’. Sherman, the model, dresses up into character while Sherman, the artist, reveals her character’s masquerade (Mulvey 1991: 141).

These particular photographs were created when Sherman was still a part of what was nicknamed the ‘Pictures Generation ‘ group, who were exploring mass media images - films, advertisements, television, at the time when second-wave feminists were themselves developing new theories around the ways in which women were traditionally portrayed, posed and adorned in the media. They were unsurprisingly fascinated by Sherman’s work since here was a young woman artist directly interrogating traditional, accepted images of women and their accepted modes of self-presentation. Judith Williamson published an early essay in *Screen*, a journal which played a significant role in developing new feminist discourse (Williamson 1983: 102-116). She praised Sherman for the fact that her ‘pictures force upon the viewer that elision of image and identity which women experience all the time ‘ (Williamson 1983 : 102).

Laura Mulvey ’s intervention in 1991 discussed not only the ‘Untitled Film Stills’, but later work which includes her first fashion - or ‘anti-fashion’ – images. Mulvey invokes not only her own concept of ‘the male gaze ‘, which she sees Sherman as subverting, but also the feminist reconfiguration of ‘the abject’. Her essay covers Sherman’s work across the ten-year period from 1977 to 1987 and therefore includes the ‘Centrefolds’ series of 1981, commissioned by the influential magazine, *Artforum* , which rejected them for publication , and her very first ‘ fashion’ commission of 1983. These photographs too – disturbing and deliberately grotesque – were also spurned, by the designer who had extended the original invitation.

It would be interesting to see what Williamson and Mulvey might make of her recent work, not only the two series which portray much older women, but also her later fashion work , created as it arguably is from the position of a knowing *insider* rather than a rebellious young woman. If in the 1980s and 1990s, she chose to critique fashion just as so many feminists had done, now she – like the second-wave feminists – is ageing herself and her perspective has seemingly shifted. This is seen as vital in an understanding of her recent work by feminist art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau. She chose to call her essay on Sherman’s work originally published in 2014 ‘*The Coming of Age : Cindy Sherman, Feminism and Art History’* now republished in her book *Photography after Photography : Gender, Genre*, *History (* 2017) *.* The essay title is not only a nod to de Beauvoir’s seminal text of 1970 (op.cit) , but a reference to Sherman’s move from young, overtly feminist artist to an establishment figure with what appears to be a complex attitude to ageing. Solomon-Godeau, who has written consistently about Sherman’s work , discusses the ‘ageing’ of feminism alongside that of Sherman herself. She argues that the ‘society portraits’ of 2008 are, contrary to most critical assumptions, ‘problematic both for feminism itself and for women more generally ‘ (2016: 203). This essay, first published in 2014, could not, of course, discuss the ‘ageing film stars’ series, first exhibited in 2016. And Solomon-Godeau does not deal with Sherman’s changed and changing attitude to *fashion* and her possible co-option by the industry; nor do other of her critics note, or chart , this process.

Her work of the 1980s and 1990s continued to reflect various feminist preoccupations. The 1981 ‘Centrefolds’ showed her as clothed , vulnerable, often distressed young women in the kind of poses familiar to us from men’s magazines. In 1985 , she explored the more unpleasant aspects of ‘fairytales’ in a sequence of the same name , and in the ‘History Portraits’ (1988-1990) she presented grotesque images of herself, seemingly created by high-canonical ‘old masters’. Even the ‘Sex Pictures’( 1989-1992) pleased some women. Confounding any expectations, here the artist herself disappeared entirely from the frame, to be replaced by objects : prosthetic body parts, a limbless torso where sausages protrude from a vagina, a severed head sprouting a penis, grotesque sex dolls with missing limbs , all parodying pornographic images. Lastly, of course , there are the ‘fashion photographs‘ of the 1980s and 1990s, as critical of fashion as the most censorious of second-wave feminists might wish.

**FASHION IMAGES : FROM CRITIQUE TO COLLUSION ?**

I really started to make fun , not of the clothes , but much more of the fashion. I was starting to put scar tissue on my face to become really ugly… I’m disgusted with how people get themselves to look beautiful (Sherman on her 1983 fashion shoot , quoted in Mulvey 1996 : 70 )

In February 2016, in an interview given to an issue of  *Harpers’ Bazaar,*  for which she created both a fashion feature and a cover shoot – both very different from her earlier ‘fashion’ work – Sherman explained that she had always been fascinated by fashion photography. Shea Spencer , writing in *Artforum*, suggests that, for artists, ‘fashion photography is unique, in that it is the only applied photography that consistently allows for fantasy and personal imprint ‘ (Spencer 2016 : 240). So it was unsurprising that when in 1983 Sherman accepted a commission from designer Dorothée Bis, the images that she created were rejected, since they did indeed bear her unmistakable ‘imprint’ of that time, that of the grotesque. These photographs showed her transformed into women with curiously arranged and sometimes bloodied limbs, scarred or bruised or puffy faces, contorted or deadened expressions, distorted teeth and even - in one shot- a seemingly-blackened eye. This image, ‘Untitled 137’*,* shows us a woman,naked but for a red coat,who could be a victimof domestic violence; her face is utterly devoid of expression, there is bruising around her eyes and her hair is standing on end. Sherman explained in interview at the time :

I ‘ve really got to do something to rip open the French fashion world. So I wanted to make really ugly pictures. The first couple of pictures I sent to Dorothée Bis they didn’t like at all. That inspired even more depressing , bloodied, ugly characters ( Sherman interviewed for US Vogue, 1984 , quoted in Respini, Sherman and Burton 2012).

Mulvey championed these images, later published in *Interview* magazine, saying that Sherman ‘parodies the kind of feminine image … geared to erotic consumption and .. turns upside down conventional codes of female allure and elegance ‘ (Mulvey 1991, 143). Ten years later, when *Harper’ Bazaar* asked for an ‘artistic contribution’, Sherman chose once again to produce a set of fashion images, using clothes provided by well-known designers; in this rather different context of ‘art’, as opposed to ‘fashion’ , the still-challenging pictures were completely acceptable to the magazine (see Loreck 2002: 258-9).

Since designer Dorothée Bis had rejected her pictures , Sherman then opted to work with designers whose own ‘fashion ‘ was rather different and who welcomed her confrontational approach to fashion imagery. In 1994 she created a series of advertisements for designer Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, whose own designs alwayschallenge convention . For Kawakubo herself has consistently interrogated gender, even reshaping the female body completely through a series of humps and bumps in her controversial collection for Spring 1997.

In the 1990s Sherman was still involved in a clear critique of conventional fashion; in 2002 , Hanna Loreck published an essay on her ‘fashion photographs ‘ as feminist activity (Loreck 2002: 255-276). But this would be difficult to do today, since the overall context of fashion photography has changed considerably. Fashion photographers themselves have increasingly deployed sensational images, in attempts to generate publicity: bloodied models, cleaver-wielding models, fashion shoots constructed around murder and mutilation. Even in 1993, Sherman’s idea of using a model whose underwear was stained, seemingly with the blood of her own menstrual flow, was happily received by *Harpers Bazaar* (see Loreck 2000: 270 ). Magazine publishing itself has also changed; many of the new titles that emerged twenty or more years ago - *Tank, Purple* and *Acne* among others – give equal status in their pages to fashion and art.

Sherman’s later ‘fashion images’, too, are much less confrontational, especially in a climate of unconventional , innovative fashion photographs**; s**he has also dispensed with blood, bruising and scar tissue. Her unusual images are now sought after by leading fashion houses. In 2006 , she worked with designer Marc Jacobs and leading fashion photographer Juergen Teller, who himself appeared alongside Sherman in a advertising campaign designed to resemble bizarre family portraits.

Asked by Balenciaga for a series of photographs in 2008 , she created pictures in which, even though some of the ‘women’ she ‘becomes’ look worn, tired or even slightly manic, they are all recognisable fashion *types*, employees, spectators or simply hangers-on, a kind of industry in-joke seemingly relished by the French fashion house . For the cosmetic company, MAC , in 2011, she created three images – a ditzy ‘heiress’ , a demented ‘cheerleader ‘ and a pink-wigged clown; the brand’s executive director revealed in interview that this collaboration was ‘ a good thing to do ‘, generating as it did a positive response across the worlds of art and fashion , even if its effect on sales was less successful (James Gager, interviewed in *Popsugar*, 2016 ). In 2010, the glossy magazine *Pop* commissioned a ‘zine insert’ from Sherman and here she took up an earlier offer by Chanel to use anything she wished from their archive. In each of the resulting pictures Sherman becomes an unsmiling sombre-faced woman, without glamour, wearing a strange and usually unbecoming mixture of vintage designs and recent styles, standing in a sunless, sombre landscape and seemingly ill-at-ease. If some saw the images as unattractive, the house of Chanel used the pictures quite happily . Sherman herself said:

I was conscious about the choices I was making with the pieces , to select things that didn’t read ‘fashion ‘ – I was looking for things that had some other kind of quality’ (Sherman in Slater, July 2016).

In 2016, *Harper’s Bazaar* again asked her to collaborate with them, on a fashion shoot, four different cover images and an article, all entitled ‘Project Twirl ‘. The feature article-cum-interview began :

Sherman and *Bazaar* have been plotting. The idea: a satire of that storied – well, snapshot - species, the street style star ( Brown, 2016 ).

This cosy, conspiratorial tone was obviously acceptable to Sherman, who herself seemed critical of ‘famous-for-being famous’ women and their social media activities :

I was physically repulsed after looking at some of these accounts – thinking how this person travels with hair and make-up and a photographer and is just going to visit her sister in LA. They’re not even selfies, they’re set-ups. Then some of them get paid to wear the clothes ? I guess it makes sense – it’s business , but there’s just something so dead about the whole thing. It’s so self-involved (Brown, op.cit.)

Yet she then says, quite unselfconsciously, in the very same interview:

Stores call me and say, ‘We’ve got this for you ‘. When I say I’m too busy , they *send* them’ (ibid.).

And the cover story has details of Sherman’s personal life – spa visits, for example – of the kind that accompany most fashion-celebrity stories. Interestingly, most of the ’Project Twirl ‘ images show smiling , perfectly attractive women , looking very like some of the older ‘street style stars ‘ who many journalists dislike for their interference with ‘fashion dissemination’ - but who have nevertheless been appropriated, for maximum publicity, by the industry. There is nothing ‘grotesque’ here.

**SOCIALITES AND MOVIE STARS : AGEING, AMBIVALENCE AND DRESSING UP**

At the age of sixty-two, following a four year hiatus, Sherman returned to her work of photographic portraiture. Given her own recent anxieties about ageing, which she has discussed quite openly in press interviews (see, for example, Eckardt, 2016, Adams 2016 ) some of these ‘portraits’ of imagined older women do show a sense of distaste, which can also be seen in the ‘Headshots’ series of 2000 (see Solomon-Godeau, 2016 ). Despite the avowals of Sherman herself, in endless interviews, as to her admiration for these supposed ‘movie stars‘ (see, for example, Eckardt op.cit., Slater 2016) we should remember not only the ‘intentional fallacy’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946) but the workings of the unconscious. In her interviews, she has talked of having had Botox herself, and has wondered aloud if she should ‘go further’ (Adams 2016, Eckardt 2016). Yet, at the same time, she also speaks admiringly of the English Classics Professor and television presenter, Mary Beard, consistently vilified for her uncompromising appearance, her long grey hair and her sagging face. In response, Beard famously declared: ‘This is what fifty-nine year old women who have not had work done look like’ (quoted by Sherman in Adams 2016).

In the work displayed in her globally-touring exhibition of 2016, the new ‘portraits‘ of Sherman disguised as ageing Hollywood stars, all seemingly trapped in the dated clothes and make-up of their youth, and posed in the quasi-seductive manner demanded by production stills, were shown for the first time. Alongside them were the ‘society portraits’ first shown in 2008, in which Sherman creates other imaginary older women, of the kind regularly shown off by Ari Seth Cohen in his blog *Advanced**Style****.*** Here she recreates herself as a series of rich, ageing ‘socialites’, posing before backdrops signifying wealth and status, always in a veritable armour of expensive, ornate clothes, lavish jewellery, elaborately-coiffured hair and heavily-applied cosmetics – which, in some of these images, inadvertently reinforces deliberate signs of surgical ‘intervention’. Both sets of ‘portraits’ were even larger in size and scale than her earlier work.

The images in the ‘society portraits ‘ series are designed to emphasise that nothing in the privileged habitus of these rich, powerful women can protect them. They are rich and empowered, certainly; their clothes and jewellery are evidence of great wealth. But their money and their status do not seem to have made them happy, nor are they at all relaxed in these ‘portraits’ . Only one - slightly younger than the other – manages a tremulous half-smile. The others return the gaze of the camera with expressions varying from stoicism to near-distaste.

Here the images have once again that hint of the grotesque which was evident in many of the ‘Headshots’ series from 2000-2002. Here women from humbler backgrounds were posed as longing to project youth and beauty – and are cruelly exposed. Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that here and in the ‘society portraits ‘, there is a radical divergence from all the artist’s earlier images of women :

…in both of these ‘portrait’ series,which feature only female subjects who are either the approximate age of Sherman or older, there is a significant change from Sherman’s earlier imagery …..where earlier work demonstrates that femininity is an empty signifier, such as to imply that there is not and cannot be a ‘real woman‘ in the image, these other series imply that these are indeed in some fashion ‘realistic’ representations of a certain type of woman (Solomon-Godeau 2017: 204).

Therefore, when we look at these images and criticise them as we are invited to do , we are implicitly criticising ‘real’ women for their efforts in self-presentation. And the settings for the ‘society portraits’ are some of them ‘realistic’ too, computerised images of the sort of places where similar rich women may be found - including the Cloisters, a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art , and the Upper East Side. We might ask if it is just the very rich and over-privileged we are invited to scrunitise and to judge , or whether such scrutiny could extend to all older women who take such elaborate pains with their appearance. Itis thispossible shift to a wider judgment that makes these images potentially troubling.

One of these images, used in publicity material, shows Sherman as a woman of late middle age standing in ‘the Cloisters’. Her eyes are slightly bloodshot and suspiciously taut, her glistening mouth heavily outlined (‘Untitled 466’). She wears a shimmering kaftan, peacock blue with heavy gold embroidery; her elaborate gold earrings hang to her shoulders . She looks as if she resents the intrusive gaze to which she is subject. ‘Untitled 470’ is much more unsettling; here, Sherman-as-socialite stands in what seems to be a carefully-restored castle, with a deep embrasure behind her. She has carefully-arranged, obviously-dyed brown hair; her bright-red lipstick has been fastidiously selected to match exactly the colour of her silk dress, with its cut-out neckline. Her jewelled earrings reach her shoulders, while the fan she holds is not posed to deliver a coquettish gesture – rather, it is held against her body in seeming self-defence. Sadly her eyes are red-rimmed to match both dress and lipstick, while the harsh lines beside her mouth register both discontent and unease. Her apparent unhappiness might arguably be mitigated by her wealth and presumed prestige, but she is unhappy nevertheless and her discontent – like her age – is all too clearly displayed. It is the kind of portrait that a male photographer – or an artist of the past – might perhaps make of an ageing woman, were he sure that there would be no repercussions from husband or family, or wanted to ignore for once the need to flatter a patron. It does not show ‘feminist’sympathies; it is the work of someone disturbed by the fact of ageing, fascinated by the ways in which some women try to ward off its ravages, and determined to render them visible.

In another image*,’*Untitled 465’, Sherman presents herself as a woman in late middle age standing in a formal garden, at the foot of a massive stone staircase. She is facing slightly away from the camera and turns over her shoulder to confront the lens, a parody of a traditional provocative pose. She wears a black evening dress, and her back , shoulders and arms are bare. Her hair – again, harshly dyed – hangs loose over her shoulders. Her ears are decorated with sizeable pearls, as is her neck: her gaze is stony, her mouth pursed, her eyes reddened. But the most disturbing ‘portrait’ is, perhaps, ‘Untitled 468’*.* Here Sherman, as a much older woman, stands in front of a massive mock-Gothic apartment building. Her brown hair, cut in a defiantly-youthful fringe, seems slightly askew and might easily be a wig. Her face is lined, her teeth prominent, her cheeks over-rouged, her expression anxious. Her hands in their kid-leather gloves are clasped defensively across her waist, so emphasising the slightly prominent stomach below - another sign of extreme old age. Her red jersey, black velvet jacket and opulent silk scarf are seemingly chosen in a spirit of defiance. This, like all these portraits’, is notable for what seems to be a hostility to the subjects , the coldly-observed signs of expensive dress and ornament, where coiffed hair and bright make-up emphasise rather than mitigate the effects of the ageing process.

Michelle Meagher has written enthusiatically of these images , ranging them alongside very different self-portraits by ageing women artists (2014: 101-43). She seems not to diffentiate particularly between Sherman’s images and the other works she discusses. What pleases her here is the making visible of the ageing process itself. Although she does emphasise the fact that Sherman’s ‘socialites’ are struggling and failing in their attempt to ward off the ageing process, nothing at all is said about the complete lack of sympathy on display here .

Sherman herself has said of the second series, the ‘movie star ‘ portraits that ‘they are the most sincere things I’ve done since the Film Stills’ (in Adams 2016). Like Gloria Swanson as the retired, reclusive, ageing actress in the film *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1959) who is recreated in one of these images, the ‘ film stars’ she creates for us are all dressed and made-up in the styles of their heyday ; it might perhaps be remembered – even if Sherman champions these ‘stars’ - that the Swanson character is lonely, delusional and descends into madness. There are rouged cheeks , elaborate curls, turbans and – most unsettling – pursed mouths carefully painted into the style known as a ‘Cupid’s Bow’, popular in the late 1920s and early 1930s. If she is serious, that these women are to be admired, we are compelled to ask why they all cling so carefully to the clothes, make-up and hairdos of their successful youth. She has not talked of this in interview ; strangely, no one has even asked her about this most notable and noticeable element within these portraits. One interviewer (Adams op.cit.) did, however, ask her if she had been influenced by the series of photographs that the late Eve Arnold took of Joan Crawford in 1959 . Here, the ageing actress is seen in her underwear, applying make-up and curling her eyelashes, transforming herself from a woman in late middle age into ‘Joan Crawford, movie-star’. But the clothes Crawford puts on at the end of the series of pictures are in the style of 1959: she does not don the Adrian designs, the padded shoulders and biascut dresses of her earlier film career. She is seen as carrying out her *toilette* carefully, so that she will emerge an elegant older woman of the time, not as a 1930s star pickled in aspic, as she appeared in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962) One or two of the ‘movie stars’ Sherman creates for this series call to mind this latter film.

Yet Sherman insists these are ‘the most sincere things that I’ve ever done – that aren’t full of irony, or caricature, or cartooniness – since the film stills series ‘ (Slater 2016) . Her ‘stars’ , she said in interview, are ‘trying to maintain some dignity as they’re ageing ‘. This might be true of certain images : a Gloria Swanson lookalike in her striped dress and turban stares grandly at an imaginary audience, another woman with bobbed hair leans on the back of a bentwood chair , casually holding a bouquet of dark red roses to complement her outfit, while a third, looking very like Mae West in her Hollywood heyday, poses regally in an elegant black dress. And certainly none of them have the reddened eyes, or the signs of cosmetic surgery, so notable in the ‘society portraits’. Nor do they look cold, or challenging.

The idea of women trying to ‘maintain their dignity ‘ is, however, belied by certain other portraits. In one of them Sherman becomes an actress with long crimped hair - as worn by Mary Pickford and the Gish sisters – who twirls a lock of this hair seductively as she looks sideways out of the frame. She wears a peach negligee, and her parted lips are painted into the ‘Cupid’s Bow’ of the late 1920s. It is an image redolent of a Lorelei on a rock , disturbing and unsettling. In another, what seem to be four ageing child stars are grouped under a tree, like young girls who have just picknicked in the country. They all have short hair that has been ‘Marcel-waved’ , another style from the late 1920s ; they too have pursed carefully painted Cupid’s Bow mouths . Elsewhere, a woman in white evening dress with a fur-trimmed cape sports the white hair-ribbon of a young girl in her bobbed hair. Other women wear ‘flapper dresses, one a Clara Bow –type headband. This is surely why it is possible , as suggested earlier , to invoke the ‘intentional fallacy ‘ , the discrepancy between an artist ‘s stated intention and the possible, perceived connotations of their work.

To wear the fashionable dress of a past era is to make a statement, one usually confined to young fashion students; designers continually recycle the past, but with careful modifications to suit changed tastes . But for a woman to preserve and to wear the styles of her own successful youth is rather different; despite the claims Sherman herself makes, it is nevertheless possible to read these images as having about them something of Freud’s ‘uncanny ‘ (1919/2003). I have invoked the ‘intentional fallacy ‘ ; obviously, there is also the question of multiple interpretations that the images may be provoking. But there are surely significant , unaddressed questions around these photographs. Both series use dress and make-up in very different ways ; the rich ‘socialites’ seem to be blamed for their attempts to use their wealth in the vain pursuit of elegance, while the ‘movie stars’ are defiant in clinging to the styles of their youth. Both series seem to encapsulate different tensions and anxieties around ageing, fashion and ideals of femininity ; both display a type of ‘performance’ using the tools of self-adornment which differs radically from that seen in the earlier work and which elicited so much praise from feminist critics.

The realities of ageing can create multifold anxieties and difficulties for individual women, but these have not been properly addressed by feminist scholarship , which as I have argued has focussed in the main on issues that concern younger women. Meanwhile ‘fashion’ imagery seems simply to present a difficult-to-achieve idea of ‘successful ageing’, whether in magazines or in the ‘blogosphere’ ; that ‘successful ‘ ageing , using the tools of the fashionable trade ‘ , is perhaps what Sherman’s ‘socialites’ and ‘movie stars’ might think they have achieved, though her work highlights their failures and lack of success. For what I have suggested here is that in Sherman’s recent work, she – an acclaimed feminist artist and one involved throughout her career with ‘fashion ‘ in different ways– has made the anxieties of ageing women explicit, but without proper acknowledgement and certainly without resolution. There are important issues here for an ageing population - but feminist scholarship , the fashion industry and Sherman the artist have all denied older women in their different ways. It is time for the academy and the industry to acknowledge and address the needs of a new demographic

Interestingly, Sherman has now taken happily to Instagram where she posts images using the ‘Facetune’app - designed to make the poster’s features in a ‘selfie’ more conventionally attractive - in quite another way. She uses this and other ‘apps’ to turn her own face and body into grotesque images , where distorted faces are smeared with wildly applied make-up, evocative of her much earlier artwork. Here of courseshe reaches an entirely new audience. In April 2018 , she posted several images from the retrospective exhibition of Dior couture garments in Paris. Most of the responses she received involved a flurry of enthusiastic superlatives and far too many heart-shaped emojis. But one follower commented tartly : ‘Ladies who lunch have never changed the course of history‘. The ‘poster’ here is referring, of course , to those rich women who wore the Dior couture of the past. Another, too, ‘found it highly depressing…rich ladies – who did nothing – wore expensive dresses – once. Who cares, honestly?’

Sherman does, obviously, showing her followers elegant clothes and rather grotesque images side by side – just as she has done in the recent portraits. What this also reveals is indicative of the complex way in which her attitudes towards fashion and the representation of women have altered. This is not only the result of her changing relationship with the fashion industry and celebrity culture but also her artistic negotiation of the realities of women’s ageing , very different from her own ‘successful ‘ personal strategies ; this in turn of course is symptomatic of a more general trend within feminism which needs to be addressed in scholarship and hopefully in the wider world.

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