

Cindy Sherman predicted the selfie, so goes the claim. From our current standpoint, it is all too easy to analyse her many hundreds of **photographic** self-portraits made since the late 1970s as cultural forebears of the **digital** medium. What this BBC *Arena* film opens up, alongside that bold claim, is a question about the mystery of Sherman as a person: who is she and why has she done what she's done? Always reclusive, refusing public appearances, and elusive about her work, Sherman seems to have designed the enigmatic tone with which she is publicly discussed. Here, a small but rewarding effort has been made to peel back the masks.

Cynthia Morris Sherman grew up in what she describes as a very normal, suburban **American** childhood. She was the youngest of five siblings, which made her feel like an outsider but also fuelled her independence. A conclusion is drawn: because of her status as the left-behind youngest, she became someone who always wanted to disrupt established order. But she is also described as a shy and isolated person who would retreat to her bedroom to dress up and "escape herself". Who is the real Cindy? A number of friends and relatives are brought in for the occasionally perceptive comment. They include former partner and artist Robert Longo, a number of gallerists, her two stepdaughters, and actor Kim Cattrall. The picture that emerges is of an artist who is wryly perceptive, even irreverent in the face of received tradition. We also glimpse a person not immune to self-doubt but who is guided by discipline and diligence.

The show delves into the ambiguities that have arisen surrounding her artistic purpose. Is she an iconoclast, critiquing and trying to change the world around her; or is she more of a romantic who responds to personal loneliness and is frightened by a world that is becoming superficial and grotesque? Sherman has the complexity to fall, at points, into both brackets: her famous *Untitled Film Stills* fit more into the latter category, whilst the later "Fantasies and Disasters" and "History Portraits" fit the former, as her style grew more overtly political. Yet there exists no credo that can sum up her work. Largely, this is because of Sherman's famed obscurity. She avoids the media and never publishes photographs of her "real" self (even on her recently started Instagram account). Director Clare Beavan pulled off a major coup here by securing an audio interview with Sherman at her New York loft, in which she explains why she doesn't like talking about herself.

For newcomers to Sherman's strange world, this is a comprehensive, chronological survey of her work. For those more familiar, it showcases her range as well as the continuities that have linked early to mature periods, such as her critique of the prescriptive roles society has placed on women. Alongside bold claims for Sherman as predictor of everything digital, that feminist mission – in many ways more relevant – has never wavered.

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