

**UNTITLED (MP #212 edition 6/6)**



**Cindy Sherman**

**1989**

**American**

**Color Photograph**

**Acc: 2010.23**

**G: 365**

**Cindy Sherman's untitled photograph of herself in the guise of a Renaissance woman is overtly disconcerting. Her opulent dress and jewel-adorned hair run counter to her awkward, false nose. Though piously folded, her reddened hands suggest hard work. The coloration beneath her eyes betrays a very real woman, while the classical column suggests an idealized European society portrait. By using extensive makeup and costuming to assume different personas in her "History Portrait" series, Sherman at once references and challenges the conventions of female portraiture. By emphasizing the artificial and the grotesque, Sherman urges viewers to look beyond the surfaces and**

consider portraits as constructions designed to serve a social, political, or even erotic purpose. Sherman's critique is as relevant for portraiture today, in which digital photography enables easy manipulation of images to suit the sitter's purpose.

## QUESTIONS

1. Is this a real person? Why do you say that?
2. What does the artist seem to be saying about this woman?
3. Does the woman match her costume? Why or why not?
4. What does this work seem to be telling us about portraiture?

## KEY IDEAS

1. Cindy Sherman (b 1954 in New Jersey) is known for her conceptual self-portraits. She lives and works in NYC and has well over 30 one person shows at prestigious museums at home and abroad. Many art critics consider her to be not only one of the most successful female photographers of the modern era, but also as one of the most successful and influential artists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, she does not consider herself a photographer or her work photography. In fact she does not always take the photograph herself.
2. Sherman prefers the immediacy of photography over the time-consuming effort to paint perfect copies of the people and things she portrays. She works in series of photographs and typically photographs herself in a range of costumes. Some examples of her series include the *Complete Untitled Film Stills* 1977-1980, the *Sex Series* 1992 (which was a response to NEA funding for the arts cuts), and *Untitled*, a collection of 50 color images. In 1996 she directed an art/camp movie entitled *Office Killer*. More recently she has produced a series depicting herself as a clown. She photographs herself (or has others photograph her) in different scenarios which she designs and is the sole performer. She uses wigs, costumes, and elaborate makeup. Most of the women she portrays seem to be under 30 and appear bored or boring, self-absorbed or unhappy. One critic has said that she creates still lives of distressed women. "Sherman is a serious artist who is attempting to explore, and perhaps understand more profoundly, some aspects of the disturbing and psychic reality of

society at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her staged photographs and unsettling “still-life” arrangements are the means through which she is conducting this exploration.” Phillips, *An Artist to be Taken Seriously*, 1999.



3. By calling each of her images “untitled” and divesting each woman of characteristic details, Sherman keeps the information in her photographs to a minimum and dismisses photography as the art of the specific and unique. Instead, she depicts herself as an object, like a chair constantly worked and reworked in a room by an aspiring interior decorator. Clearly her work is not about self-portraiture. Since she is an actor, we respond differently to her image. Her intent is to intellectualize her images and make us think about them rather than see them as pretty pictures.
4. Sherman’s Renaissance portrait is part of her 35 picture *History Portrait Series* done in Rome 1988-1990. Here she both references and challenges the conventions of female portraiture. It is clear her art deals with female stereotypes, illustrating not how she sees herself, but how the observers sees women. Her dress and jewel-adorned hair run counter to her false, awkward nose. There are also signs of a real woman within this artificial world of costume and classical props. We are challenged to look beyond the surface image of the portrait and consider the social, economic, political, and erotic purposes that underlie portraiture. However, we should not lose sight of the humor in her work as it spoofs art history while looking at the subtle similarities and differences between the original and the new...and see them as homages to the past.



## **AWARDS AND RECOGNITION**

- **National Endowment of the Arts 1977**
- **MacArthur “Genius Grant” 1995**
- **Solo exhibitions at: MOMA--NYC, Pompidou Center--Paris, LA Museum of Contemporary Art**