The Depiction Of Women In Cindy Sherman's Art Photography

Cindy Sherman was brought up being the youngest among her four siblings, which meant she sought attention from a very young age and most often had to entertain herself, which she would do by dressing up and creating various characters due to her extensive costume wardrobe. Despite no one in her family questioning her dressing up, Sherman believed that they were just glad she had found something to occupy herself with. It was here she would often catch herself wondering, 'If you don't like me this way, how about you like me this way? Or maybe you like this version of me." When Sherman joined Buffalo State College, she first began painting as her medium, however, it was during this time she began to discover her childhood habit of dressing up. She then began gathering clothing from thrift stores to reinvent these various roles and personas which were then expressed through her new interest of photography; leading to the attribute of her work that Sherman has grown known for. Sherman essentially transposed her compulsion into her art. "I didn't think of what I was doing as political. To me it was a way to make the best out of what I liked to do privately, which was to dress up." – Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman has become best known for her works revolving around the social pressures women were expected to live up to; with most of her collections primarily focusing around feminism. One of Sherman's most famous works that ascended her into becoming a famous photographer, as well as conveyed her as a feminist artist by many, was the Untitled Film Stills. This series proposed a collection of 69 black and white photographs, with Sherman herself posing as characters from old black and white films in the 1950s and 1960s that never actually existed. In this, Sherman asserts her discontentment with the female being illustrative of male desire by subverting the stereotypes of women of that imagined in the phallic scenes of these 50s and 60s black and white films. By acting out the stereotypical roles of the seductive blonde, the femme fatale and the submissive housewife, Sherman identifies how our patriarchal society is to blame for the construction of the feminine gender. By revealing this artificial construction of gender, Sherman helps female spectators recognise that they are not just fetishised objects, and enables them into gaining insight of who they really are, with Sherman also depicting the women in her photographs as agents of their own destiny. Another of Sherman's works that sparked her recognition following from the film stills was The Centerfolds. This series was made up of large-scale, horizontal, coloured photographs, with the format referring to the centerfolds in men's erotic magazines, in which featured Sherman as the model. Despite receiving much negative criticism for the vulnerability of the characters represented in this series, in which many interpreted them as victims of male assault, the collection is still widely thought of as one of her most feminist narratives. Many believe that these photographs concentrate on the feminine emotions and somewhat being lost in ones daydream. In spite of the vulnerability and sexual availability that radiates from these images, the large scale of the photographs confers an iconic power to these images of a woman resisting physical and psychological exploitation.

Most of Sherman's most famous works took place between the 70s and 80s, a critical time in art that has shown much influence in Sherman's work. It was during this time that women across mainstream media were persistently objectified and portrayed as sex dolls. Furthermore, it did not help that Hollywood consisted predominantly of male directors that often placed

women in enslaved roles who were usually overpowered and misused by male characters. These women were often placed in roles who played the sexualized victims or the sinful femme fatales who had no decisiveness in their own destiny. It was then during this time the Women's Liberation Movement was devised, an array of political campaigns that convened on issues such as domestic violence, equal pay, women's suffrage, sexual harassment, all of which are issues that we insinuate to with feminism. This movement also included campaigning for greater influence of women in politics and media. Therefore, it is undeniable that Sherman wanted to use her art in an ambiguous and innovatory way, to confront these concerns that had been engraved into society at that time.

According to the Oxford dictionary, art is defined as "the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power". However, what makes art so important is the way it has helped to divulge and challenge the unjust societal segregation we face in our daily lives, such as discrimination to race, religions, gender and sexuality, therefore making it something everyone can relate to. Sherman stated "I wanted to create something that people could relate to without having read a book about it beforehand." The impact of this emotional power that art brings allows us to communicate, explore and express our individual ideas and incite influence on others in a dynamic and pioneering way. As a consequence of this, Sherman wanted to explore the concepts of identity and sexuality through her art; with the main focus revolving around femininity and challenging society's depiction foisted upon women and the prohibitive roles they play in the media. Sherman used Hollywood and pop culture representation as the basis of many of her collections, as having grown up in the 50s when television and film were becoming more widely available, she felt there was a limitation to the way women were being represented. Sherman said "It frustrated me in terms of what was expected of me as a young girl turning into a woman." Therefore, Sherman turned to photography where she used herself as a model to narrate a story, and focused on subtle hints that allowed the observer to interpret her photographs in various ways, such as the idea of the male gaze and drawing attention on how a woman's appearance is fraternised with her identify and how she is beheld in society.

Sherman's works have undeniably hoisted many questions due to their ambiguity and the abounding interpretations they entail, more specifically her Untitled Film Stills. By ascribing the images as untitled, Sherman could then uphold the obscurity of the scenes she created. Many in the series were fiercely critical of the way women were portrayed in the media, while others were created to evoke an ambivalent reaction from the spectator. This collection pronounced many interpretations from the public, many supporting the idea that these photographs were created to subvert the stereotypes of women and reflect on paradigmatic representations of women in the media; as fetishised bodies and objects of the male gaze. However, others believed that Sherman was only reinforcing the patriarchal logic and mutilating women by framing herself in sexy, provocative and alluring positions that only fulfil the needs of the male desire. The impacts of these discussions among her work have not only pursued Sherman to become one of the worlds most successful and highest paid female photographers, but has also allowed her work to become recognised globally, fortifying her a radical spot in the history of American art and photography, and endorsing her creativity and thought-provoking messages to influence other artists as well as our society. Since her very first series, her work has fearlessly explored the fluidity of identity and gender representation which has now led greater influence on designers embracing such fluidity on the runway or in magazine editorials. Her work can be seen as a significant revelation to how our society has become more embracing and diverse in the way women are portrayed in the media and has challenged the misconception that it is our

appearance that establishes our whole identity, which I believed has changed the way women now see themselves.