



Cindy Sherman, UNTITLED, black and white photograph

Cindy Sherman's new photographs of mutilated plastic dolls are extraordinary. The show consists of 15 black-and-white images of hybridized dolls involved in macabre and oftentimes violently sexual pantomimes. The scenes take place on a shallow stage of drapery, and are photographed in low contrast matte grays and washed-out refracted light. Unlike Laurie Simmons' photographs of "passive" dolls where legs morph into various apparati (eg, guns, cameras), Sherman's dolls have been ripped apart and mis-assembled in absurd configurations. For example, in one photograph, an old man's head is not-quite attached to a doll's body with skinny Barbie legs, adolescent breasts, stunted arms, and a gigantic, slashed up dick; while, in another, miniature Barbie legs are crudely attached to a Hercules torso with tattooed Tom of Finland arms, and nail-polished fingers. Indeed, many of the "bodies" are multi-sexed (with two vaginas, for instance) or transgendered. One photograph features a bearded, anatomically "female" doll (whose vagina is where her belly-button should be) back-bending itself towards a leg-less partner who sports a mechanical penis.

All of the dolls' bodies are deformed and mutilated by slashings and gougings. In Sherman's '92 exhibition of raunchy mannequins, the life-size dolls (acquired from a medical-supplies house) were already truncated and fragmented; whereas, in this series, Sherman herself has hacked apart the bodies, singed them with fire, gouged out eyes and mouths, punctured plastic to make "vaginas", spliced penises in half, and marred legs with knives. And, yet, the images are not violent. We are thwarted from taking these images too seriously because we are always aware when looking at these photographs that these are faux vignettes of teeny-weeny Mattel dolls performing S&M acts. We are also deterred from reading these images too literally because Sherman has highlighted the constructed-ness of each scene: The dolls are placed on silly-looking bed-sheets or spreads, and are clumsily glued together—viscous, shiny glue-gun remnants

are ubiquitous throughout the series. Photographed in close-up, the effect of these make-shift "dolls" is ludicrous—and cartoony. For instance, in one image, an Igor-like figure pushes a wheel-chair carrying marred doll's legs, with a fallen, decapitated head at its wheels. In another, a high-chaired, Fernand Leger-like child fist-fucks an adult female figure whose breasts have been sawed off. In yet another, a decapitated female doll with quasi-severed clay breasts and an oozing neck is "fucked" by another female doll with muscular arms; the one "on top" grins in delight, her semi-decapitated head deformed via lacerations and burns.

With this new series of photographs, Sherman has shown how she can continually succeed in complicating libidinal desire. Vis-a-vis her recourse to the abject and to the black-and-white format, and vis-à-vis her emphasis on the fabrication of the image, she de-sensualizes and de-sexualizes her source material. For example, in one image, a Barbie lays on her back, her legs raised and splayed revealing her two vaginas (which have been burned into her plastic body, since, as we all know, Barbie does not have genitals); she has gigantic, malformed breasts, and her "happy" face is mutilated by several knife slashings; her



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right leg is not-quite attached at the joint, excreting a gooey fluid. In Sherman's hands, Barbie has been transformed into a monstrous, anti-beauty. This is a far cry from the seductive, come-hither playgirl featured in the "Untitled Film Stills".

In her elaborate Structuralist analysis of S&M porn, Sherman has created deliberately schlocky, purposely crude imagery which thwarts the traditional scopophilic dialogue. By badly parodying her source material, Sherman forces the viewer to see these scenarios as make-believe—precluding the suspension of disbelief. She tears apart the pornographic text, and disperses its flow. In so doing, she de-naturalizes and debunks its language.

With these nasty new photographs, Sherman has shown how, after a hiatus of nearly four years, she can return to the art scene with a bang. Yet again.

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