

27 Cindy Sherman

Glenridge, NJ 1954 – lives in New York

Untitled #415. 2004

C-print. 172,7 × 113 cm (framed: 177,2 × 117,5 cm) (68 × 44 ½ in. (framed: 69 ¾ × 46 ¼ in.)). On the reverse of the frame in black felt-tip pen signed and dated: Cindy Sherman 2004. There also a label of Metro Pictures, New York. One of 6 numbered copies from a total edition of 6 + 1 AP. [3102] Framed.

Provenance

Private Collection, North Rhine-Westphalia (acquired in 2004 at Metro Pictures, New York)

EUR 160,000–200,000

USD 188,000–235,000

Exhibition

Welt-er-findung. Oberstdorf, Kunsthaus Villa Jaus, 2011 / Cindy Sherman. Silkeborg (Denmark), Museum Jorn, 2017 / Cindy Sherman. Weserburg, Museum für moderne Kunst, 2018–19 / Cindy Sherman. Anti-Fashion. Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; Hamburg, Deichtorhallen; Antwerpen, FOMU Fotomuseum, 2023–2024, ill. p. 106, 160

Literature and illustration

Cf. (each a different copy): Exh. cat.: Cindy Sherman. Clowns. Hanover, Kestner Gesellschaft, 2004, ill. n. p. / Francesco Bonami (ed.): Cindy Sherman. Milan, Mondadori Electa S.p.A., 2007, ill. p. 92 / Exhib. cat.: Cindy Sherman. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2012, ill. p. 193 / Exh. cat.: Cindy Sherman. Queensland, Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art Brisbane; Wellington, City Art Gallery Wellington, 2016–17, ill. p. 77 / Exh. cat.: Cindy Sherman. London, National Portrait Gallery; Vancouver, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2019–20, ill. p. 199

Cindy Sherman has captivated the art world with her role-playing since the early 1970s – acting as photographer, director, make-up artist and lead actress all in one. In 1977, shortly after moving to New York, Sherman created the first images of the celebrated *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980), the series that laid the foundation for her artistic practice. It marked the beginning of the vast and multifaceted encyclopaedia of roles and subjects through which Sherman continues to fascinate and challenge audiences today. With an astonishing repertoire of props, she explores a broad spectrum of human identities and social archetypes – from the pin-up parody of the “Centerfolds” (1981) and the art-historical references of the “History Portraits” (1989–90) to the ageing society lady of the “Society Portraits” (2008) and the grotesque clown (2003–2004).

Throughout her work, Sherman repeatedly explores the darker territories of human experience. In her *Clown* series, she focuses on a profoundly ambivalent figure in which humor can shift into tragedy and laughter into madness at any moment. Sherman described the series as an attempt to capture “the layered emotional depths hidden behind a painted smile.” The clown mask, charged with cultural and psychological associations, becomes the ideal vehicle for this exploration.

In these life-sized photographs, Sherman stages 18 different clown personas, searching for traces of individuality that shine through layers of makeup, disguise, and digitally manipulated backdrops. Four of the clown figures – including the work viewed here – are dressed entirely in designer fashion and were published in *British Vogue* as early as 2003, albeit against different digital backgrounds. Clothing functions here as a deliberately employed prop, creating distance while exposing identity itself as a constructed performance.

Untitled #415 demonstrates Sherman’s remarkable ability to probe the tension between outward appearance and inner psychological reality. Formally reminiscent of circus posters designed to attract mass audiences with the cheerful spectacle of the clown, the work simultaneously draws on the deeply ingrained pop-cultural iconography of the sinister clown and its many cultural references. The painted grin recalls the face of the Joker, the embodiment of evil concealed behind the fool’s mask; the glittering bowler hat and piano-key belt evoke the casual brutality of Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*; the mysterious pink drink appears more like a dangerous substance than a harmless refreshment; and the unusually dark background creates an atmosphere of unease and claustrophobia.

The *Clown* series is a striking example of how Sherman uses appropriation, exaggeration, and distortion to reveal the implicit meanings embedded within collective visual culture. First exhibited in 2004 at the Metro Pictures in New York, the *Clown* series quickly became one of the artist’s most sought-after bodies of work. CH

