

PHOTOGRAPHY / Andrew Palmer on the civilised delights of Cindy Sherman and the desperate lives of the Tuareg

Staging the self



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AFTER photographing herself as the female lead in some 80 Sixties B-movies, and as everything from a Renaissance Madonna to Louis XIV in Old Master paintings of the eighteenth-century (not to mention a handful of lewd post-holocaust landscapes in which she is invariably the prime attraction), one wonders just where Cindy Sherman will go next: the Tuareg people of Niger, perhaps. She could go armed with the latest in Afro wigs, a paint pot of brown mascara, and a suitably tinted pair of plastic breasts. Then she could photograph herself in one of her fictional husband's mud-packed abodes, in a dust storm, flanked by some of the few cattle the Tuareg people have left, maybe, or next to one of the many desiccated wells.

There is always the possibility, of course, that such an enterprise would receive critical acclaim. There would be the usual talk of feminist parables or of how, by playing on the stereotypical image of black Africa, Sherman had in some way exposed the myth.

The possibility is remote, though. For, as the retrospective at the Whitechapel illustrates, Sherman's ability to act out roles has its limits. She is at her best when she knows her cultural script so well that she can improvise — she is a natural, for example, on the stage of the sulkily downbeat landscape of smalltown America. But she requires a more involved disguise when trying to emulate eighteenth-century European grandees, and Sherman as a Tuareg woman would demand a little too much suspension of disbelief.

Her first work, the Untitled Film Series produced in the 1970s, saw Sherman as the subject of numerous pictures, generally of the sex-murder genre, in imitation of Hollywood B-movie stills. True to the status of the B-movie (which had no stars, no celebrities) the female lead is not instantly identifiable — she is an anonymous actress acting out a role, and it is the role, or at least the narrative that determines it, that is significant. Sherman is "unrecognisable" as Sherman. She is a female caricature — whether it be the young *ingénue*, the hooker, the nurse, the housewife, the hitch-hiker — there purely to entice passers-by.

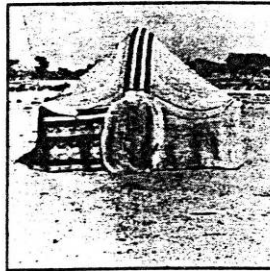
If you were to take any one of these stills, and attach a title to it, the shot would immediately lose its potency, and to some extent its violence, because we would then, comfortingly, be able to associate it with "a film". The power of these exceptional shots resides in the fact that they are simultaneously recognisable as being from one film or another, yet in actuality from no film at all — so we are left almost embarrassed by the extent to which we have unconsciously accepted the popular cultural stereotype.

It could be argued that the Untitled Film Stills brought photography into the realm of high art without a photographer. Indeed, in many cases Sherman did not take the shots herself at all — an assistant did. Nor did she bother herself with the technical side of things — and the disregard of such factors as focus

and depth of field was a deliberate conceit: "These could have been produced by anyone, like film stills were."

If her early work was a photographic success, Sherman's later images suffer somehow from her having become too aware of herself as *The Photographer*. From 10 x 8 rough-and-ready black and white, she moved into the studio and produced large, colour cibachromes, with increasingly complicated make-up and lighting. For a while she maintained, in spirit at least, the cinematic caricature idea. But by this time the director had changed from some Hitchcockian imitator to David Lynch, and it was almost as if Sherman was paying tribute to her own rise to stardom.

Sherman stopped doing film stills when, as she says, she ran out of clichés and, with the rip-offs of the Old Masters, she embarked on a different sort of mimicry altogether. These huge cibachromes are far more technically sophisticated, with extraordinary two-dimen-



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sional, painterly surfaces; but the plays on form are not nearly so rewarding. All right, she has drawn our attention to the fact that eighteenth-century portraitists were inclined to distort their subjects' forms according to the aesthetic code of the day (breasts were made large, hands and noses small) but ultimately all these false noses, mammaries and bald pates evoke the same sort of faintly amusing fun as, say, having a snap taken of one's head stuck through the comic poster board on Blackpool beach.

Sherman seems literally to have shot herself once too often. By the time she came to hang herself in heavy gilt-edged frames she had almost become a parody of her own ideas. In an interview for *The Late Show* last August, she implied that the Old Master works should not be taken too seriously. Referring to their success in the New York art market, she said: "I feel guilty for having made this work that I didn't really care about — if

they want to like it then let them like it — but for me it was necessary to get rid of the last vestiges of play-acting and get into something else." We can only look forward to that.

When Gordon Brent Ingram went out to Niger to photograph the Tuareg, he was armed with nothing save his camera and a burgeoning conscience. And one can't help feeling that he might have aided his cause with a little less self-effacement and a little more of the Sherman gall. Ingram's exhibition at the RIBA, entitled "Gardens of Despair: Tuareg responses to desertification", is a demonstration of the ethical hang-ups to which academics are prone when working in other cultures.

The Tuareg are facing a crisis: their traditional way of life as pastoral nomads has gradually been wiped out as the southwards spread of the Sahara has subsumed their grazing grounds. Their response has been to settle around whatever water they can find, and dabble in agriculture. "The gardens have become refuges," says Ingram, "and desperate experiments for survival."

In this well-produced series of photographs Ingram shows us the dramatic encroachment of the desert; he shows us their wells, and their gardens, ecologically precarious rows of maize. In fact, he shows us a great deal of the Tuareg environment in a range of shots, supplemented by (very necessary) explanatory text. What is omitted is the Tuareg themselves. Of the 35 prints (both cibachromes and black and white), only three or four have people in them. And in all but one of them, the people are lost somewhere in the middle distance.

This is not because the Tuareg were camera-shy. Rather it was a question of Ingram trying not to be invasive, not to show his subjects in the "wrong" light, either as noble savages or starving Africans: "I had problems deciding whether to include this in the show," he says of a particularly inoffensive group of women sitting around making baskets.

The result is that the accompanying text overruns the pictures: the more we hear about the Tuaregs' attempts to determine their predicament, the more we want to see some indication of their emotional response to the environmental catastrophe.

On the existing evidence Ingram, an art school graduate before turning academic, certainly has the photographic expertise required to take on such an enterprise (the one shot in which he does home in on his subjects is a tantalising taster). But, Ingram insists, the three years he spent with the Tuareg was not long enough. Fifteen years, he says, would just about do it.

Fifteen years of sensitive, unobtrusive, objective voyeurism! Perhaps the idea of Sherman going out to Niger isn't so ridiculous after all.

□ *Cindy Sherman is at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Whitechapel High St, London E1, until 22 Sept (071-377 0107). "Gardens of Despair" is at the RIBA, Portland Place, London W1, 23 Aug-19 Sept (071-580 5533 (4334).*

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