

CINDY SHERMAN

American, born Glen Ridge, NJ, 1954

Untitled Film Still #14, 1978

Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches

Gift of Lynn Hauser and Neil Ross, 2019.15

The women of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*—a celebrated series of seventy black-and-white photographs that cast the artist as a myriad of female archetypes from the world of cinema—exist in a state of irresolution. Her characters are typically framed alone, eyes searching beyond the picture frame, either reeling from an unseen event or waiting for something to happen. The subject of *Untitled Film Still #14* (1978) stands anxiously in front of a mirror, her look suggesting a disruption beyond our field of vision. Telling details, such as the faint thread of smoke in the bottom right corner and the reflections of a cocktail glass and a jacket slung over a chair, hint at a second, troublingly absent figure, whose next move we can only imagine.

The temporality of *Untitled Film Still #14* is complex. The image conjures suspense, a present anticipation of an uncertain future. Yet this is a second-hand suspense, as elements of gesture and décor like Sherman's black dress and her pearl-clutching gesture refer back to horror and melodrama films of the 1950s and early '60s, when women were depicted primarily as victims and sex objects. Sherman alludes to these tropes, but also resists them: her character wields a knife-shaped object in her right hand, perhaps challenging the very conventions of victimhood that the composition invokes. Her character is poised between a toxic nostalgia for icons of female passivity and the potential for feminist empowerment.

Film theory is often used to discuss Cindy Sherman's images, particularly their sophisticated references to genre and their critique of cinema's stifling male gaze. But the *Untitled Film Stills* also help us understand the uncanny temporality that defines the cinematic medium, which film theorist André Bazin famously described as "change mummified." Cinematic time reanimates frozen traces of the past in the eye of a present beholder; the *Untitled Film Stills* similarly combine retrospection and expectation for artist and viewer alike. For Sherman, re-embodying dated female stereotypes offers an unlikely site of playful self-renewal; for the viewer, these suspended narratives validate our cultural memory even as they invite us to imagine different, more radical outcomes.

—Michael Metzger

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