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This article analyses the photographic series *History Portraits*, created by Cindy Sherman between 1988 and 1990, with the aim of better understanding the strategies employed by the American artist to produce images that can be understood as a critique of the canonical system of representation imposed by established institutions such as art schools and museums. Sherman argues that this system is not formed by "natural" or "innocent" images, but rather by idealised figures that have influenced Western culture's identity for centuries. This text uses as a reference the concept developed by Shearer West (2004) that a "portrait" is an essential form of cultural representation, capable of expressing the character, personality, social position, profession, age, and gender of the subject. The analytical tools used include the concepts of "portrait" (West, 2004), "grotesque" (Bakhtin, 1965/2010; Kayser, 1957/2013), "identity" (Butler, 1990/2017; Giddens, 1999/2002; Hall, 1996/2006), and an understanding of art from Danto's (2003/2015a, 1986/2015b) perspective. To analyse these portraits, a method based on parameters defined by Erwin Panofsky (1955/2002) was employed, consisting of two stages: one dominated by comparative analysis and the other by interpretative synthesis. Through these analyses, it was observed

that Sherman uses the grotesque in the photographs of this series as a rhetorical device to question the stereotypes conveyed by images established in art history.

Keywords: Cindy Sherman, photography, grotesque, identity, portraits

History Portraits de Cindy Sherman: Crítica à Idealização das Representações Canônicas Propostas Pela História da Arte

Este artigo analisa a série de fotografias History Portraits (Retratos Históricos), criada por Cindy Sherman nos anos 1988–1990, com o objetivo de compreender melhor as estratégias utilizadas pela artista americana para produzir imagens que podem ser entendidas como uma crítica ao sistema de representação canônico imposto por instituições consagradas, como as escolas de artes e os museus. Sherman entende que esse sistema não é formado por imagens "naturais" ou "inocentes", mas por figuras idealizadas que têm influenciado a identidade da cultura ocidental há séculos. Nesse texto será usado como referência o conceito desenvolvido por Shearer West (2004) de que um "retrato" é uma importante forma de representação cultural, capaz de expressar o caráter, a personalidade, a posição social, a profissão, a idade e o gênero do modelo. Foram utilizados como ferramentas analíticas os conceitos de "retrato" (West, 2004), "grotesco" (Bakhtin, 1965/2010; Kayser, 1957/2013), "identidade" (Butler, 1990/2017; Giddens, 1999/2002; Hall, 1996/2006) e a compreensão da arte a partir da perspectiva de Danto (2003/2015a, 1986/2015b). Para analisar esses retratos, foi utilizado um método que parte dos parâmetros definidos por Erwin Panofsky (1955/2002) e define basicamente dois momentos: um em que predomina a análise comparativa e outro em que predomina uma síntese interpretativa. Por meio dessas análises, percebeu-se que Sherman utiliza o grotesco nas fotografias dessa série como um recurso retórico para questionar os estereótipos veiculados por imagens consagradas pela história da arte.

Palavras-chave: *Cindy Sherman, fotografia, grotesco, identidade, retratos*

Introduction

The story of Narcissus, the young man who falls in love with his own reflection in the water, is yet another of the beautiful (and tragic) Greek narratives that have endured through the centuries and continue to resonate today in our society, especially when considering issues related to representation and identity. Human interest in representing the self occupies a central place in the Western imagination. It serves as inspiration for artists across various fields, such as poetry, music, and especially those inspired by the pictorial tradition of portraiture in Western culture (Argelaguet, 2007). Since the 15th century, when paintings created for this purpose began to be produced in significant quantities, this type of image has served as a reference for establishing standards of pose, clothing, and setting in visual culture, both within the field of art and in the so-called "cultural industry".

The pictorial tradition of portraiture constitutes a highly fruitful object of study for those interested in better understanding issues related to identity and the predominant forms of representation in the Western symbolic universe. This tradition reached its apex during the Renaissance but has persevered over the centuries, remaining important even today, whether as a model for paraphrases by contemporary photographers and artists or as an object of critique by various social actors.

From the 1970s onwards, the American artist Cindy Sherman explored the potential of photography as a means of raising questions about female identity in Western culture. She produced the series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980), which addressed this theme. Although Sherman does not identify herself as a feminist (Berne, 2003), this body of work became an essential reference for numerous feminist scholars who examined the limitations imposed on women's identities by the cultural industry.

Photographing herself, Sherman "participated" in scenes from films that were never made, embodying characters who never existed but who alluded both to the cinematic divas of the 1950s and 1960s and ordinary women at moments of relaxation in the privacy of their homes. This strategy was revisited 10 years later in the *History Portraits* series (1988–1990), changing only its target of critique. In this other series, the film industry was replaced by art history. Although *History Portraits* is as significant as *Untitled Film Stills*, it has yet to receive adequate critical attention — particularly in Portuguese —, with only a few relevant articles devoted to this body of work.

In *History Portraits*, Sherman approached the history of portrait production in Western society, drawing her potential readers'[1] attention to the artificiality of images consecrated by Western tradition. Although the series is titled *History Portraits*, among the pictures chosen by Sherman to constitute the series, in addition to portraits, other images belonging to the Western canon were also selected. As analysis has shown, this choice reflects the artist's aim to critique not merely portraiture itself, but the broader stereotypes conveyed by the body of works that constitute the Western canonical system. In this series, Sherman focused on the idealisations produced by the visual conventions used to represent European men and women from the 15th century onwards (Fabris, 2004).

The series produced between 1989 and 1990 contains 35 images. Although all were evaluated, this article analyses explicitly three works from this collection. This selection, motivated by the typical space restrictions of academic articles, prioritised photographs that best illustrate the strategies employed by the American artist to critique the canonical system of representation in art history.

The analysis of the photographs used a method based on the parameters defined by Panofsky (1955/2002) and, to reflect on the results found in these analyses, the concepts of "identity" (Butler, 1990/2017; Giddens, 1999/2002; Hall, 1996/2006);

[1]The choice of the term "reader" instead of "spectator" intends to highlight the understanding that the reading subject possesses more active than passive characteristics.

"portrait" (West, 2004); "grotesque" (Bakhtin, 1965/2010; Kayser, 1957/2013); and Danto's (2003/2015a, 1986/2015b) propositions about the role of the work of art in contemporaneity were chosen.

Danto and Art Criticism after the End of Art

Cindy Sherman belongs to a group of artists who, from the late 20th century onwards, used their work to question the concepts of "authorship" and "originality" that guided artists until the early 1960s, as well as to expose the internal contradictions of enlightenment-based discourse and its complicity with the dominant social and cultural order (Moorhouse, 2014; Mulvey, 1983; Owens, 1994). Because of these characteristics, she is commonly classified as an artist associated with postmodernism (Cotton, 2004/2010; Gompertz, 2012/2013; Memou, 2012/2012).

Artists and thinkers associated with postmodernist ideas tend to understand art history as an institution with a central role in producing beliefs and values within a society, used by the hegemonic class to reaffirm its discourse in which White men are privileged over other social actors. Through their work, they therefore seek to weaken the representations consecrated by this institution.

This is the case of Sherman's series analysed here, *History Portraits*. For this reason, the perspective on artworks defended by the art critic Danto (2003/2015a, 1986/2015b) was used as a reference. Danto understands that, in contemporaneity, "artisticity" is not something to be perceived solely in the artistic object itself, but in the relationship of the object with various other socio-historical factors, including the art world itself. According to this perspective, it is more important for an artwork to provoke in its readers a reflection on the context in which it is situated than to offer a fleeting aesthetic experience.

This approach has been successfully used to understand works by postmodern artists such as Sherman and was therefore chosen as the reference for analysing the photographs in the series. This approach deliberately places the aesthetic aspect in the background because it is interested in provoking readers beyond mere aesthetic experience — namely a critical evaluation of Western art history. This judgment refers to the way in which consecrated works of art history have, over the centuries, uncritically naturalized the incorporation of this social order. To this end, Sherman produces works that appear to be but are not self-portraits (Danto, 1990; Krauss, 2006; Owens, 1994; Williamson, 2006), using the grotesque as a tool to deconstruct the illusion that these works are neutral creations.

Portrait

The history of human representation is almost as long as that of civilisation, forming part of artistic and religious expressions since the most primitive groupings (Argelaguet, 2007; Coelho, 2008). In the history of Western art, the portrait

holds a prominent place in the canon (Newall, 2009/2009), but defining precisely what constitutes a portrait is no simple task. For Guarín Llombart (2004), the portrait is a visual form that humans developed to overcome death. From this perspective, the portrait would be an object of remembrance for future generations (Kanz, 2002/2008), but not a perfect remembrance because, as Argelaguet (2007) observed, "a portrait is never authentically objective" (p. 19).

Even though it is not "perfect", the portrait has always been a highly coveted object by social agents who possessed some degree of power and the economic resources necessary to pay for its creation. According to Brown (2004), this interest derives from the tendency of human societies to organise themselves into hierarchies of wealth, power, and social position — qualities that the portrait can express visually. From this point of view, in composing a portrait, the image's ability to instruct potential readers about the authority of the depicted subject would be as relevant as its resemblance to the model's appearance (Argelaguet, 2007).

Entralgo (2004) concurs with Brown's (2004) view that the primary function of a portrait is often to convey the social status of the subject to readers. However, Entralgo further argues that a skilled artist can transcend this function by imbuing the image with a psychological dimension. In such cases, the artist depicts not only what the subject represents but also what they feel themselves to be, or aspire to be. Thus, beyond serving as a memento, a piece of propaganda, or an anthropological document, a portrait can offer readers insight into the intimate psychological reality of the individual portrayed.

As has been noted, despite its substantial presence in Western culture, there is no consensus about what a portrait is. Generally, the type of approach varies according to the theoretical field of the analyst, which can be pretty varied, including art history, anthropology, sociology, among other fields (Newall, 2009/2009).

In this article, the concept developed by Shearer West (2004) will be used as a reference, which states that a portrait is a relevant form of cultural representation, capable of expressing the character, personality, social position, profession, age, and gender of the subject. This implies that the analyses contained in this text are more concerned with the symbolic aspects expressed by the photographs analysed than with any formal issues they might raise for potential readers.

This choice is justified by the American artist's decisions when producing the series analysed here, since the images Sherman selected as references to create her portraits belong to an approximate period — from the 16th century to the mid-18th century — when portraiture was accessible only to kings, the clergy, aristocrats, and wealthy bourgeoisie (Coelho, 2008). Consequently, although some portraits from this period present psychological nuances of their subjects, the predominant function of these images was symbolic: to explain to subjects and followers that they were facing leaders with special powers who therefore deserved respect (Brown, 2004).

Grotesque

In Western culture, the grotesque is often understood as that which is strange, deviating from what is normal, clean, and hygienic. From this perspective, bodily detritus, semen, blood, decomposing matter, and other elements that typically provoke disgust and revulsion are considered grotesque (Kayser, 1957/2013).

In art, the grotesque is commonly used as a counterpoint to the dominant values of classical art, which are characterised by order, clarity, and cleanliness. Grotesque qualities thus represent the opposite of what is typically found in portraits of kings, nobles, and wealthy bourgeois individuals. They are perceived as a degradation of what would be considered perfect, balanced, clean, proportional — in other words, of classical beauty. In *History Portraits*, the American artist employs the grotesque as a rhetorical device to develop her critical commentary on the portraits that are abundantly present in the history of European art. That is, Sherman's use of the grotesque seeks to provoke the "unusual disruption of a canonical form" (Sodré & Paiva, 2002, p. 25).

According to Kayser (1957/2013), there are two modes of grotesque expression in art: the romantic and the tragicomic. The first type presents images in which a dark and tragic world predominates, offering readers frightening and uncanny elements. This type of grotesque is characteristic of works from the romantic movement. It can be observed, for instance, in the paintings of Géricault, in which corpses and severed human limbs are depicted. The second type, by contrast, is predominantly comic or laughable, resulting from absurd combinations of existing beings and exaggeration, in the style of the grotesque described and analysed by Bakhtin (1965/2010) in his book on Rabelais' work.

In *History Portraits*, Sherman's use of the grotesque does not seek to elicit a sense of horror so intense that it leads readers to paralysis or transcendence (Kayser, 1957/2013), nor the easy laughter characteristic of "popular comic culture" (Bakhtin, 1965/2010, p. 29). The deformation of the human figure and the inclusion of eccentric elements present in her portraits aim to draw attention to the artificiality involved in the construction of traditional classical compositions, rather than to provoke an aesthetic experience in readers.

Although the use of the grotesque in the series under analysis is more closely aligned with what Kayser (1957/2013) classified as "comic", the way Sherman applies the grotesque in her compositions produces a different effect. She employs it as a rhetorical element whose function is to disturb readers, directing their attention to that "ugly" detail, which is uncommon in classical portraits. Upon sensing that "something is wrong" with the images, this perception may prompt readers to reflect on the reason behind the insertion of these unsettling details in the portraits.

Contemporary Constructions of Female Identity

The consolidation of industrial society and the growth of cities brought about far-reaching transformations in people's lives across all domains, contributing decisively to the decline of lineage, gender and social status as determining factors in shaping an individual's identity, particularly in large urban centres (Butler, 1990/2017; Hall, 1996/2006). Immersed in a complex and unstable web of affects, in which actions could no longer be defined and located through stable reference points, the "self" came to be seen as a reflexive project, "for which the individual is responsible" (Giddens, 1999/2002, p. 74).

In this context, commonly accepted conventions and hegemonic identities — rooted in traditional hierarchies and power relations — began to be challenged by various social movements, particularly the feminist movement. This gave rise to a range of studies on the effects of male domination and its consequences for the construction of female identity (Castells, 1997/2018).

In the 1980s, following texts such as those by Butler (1990/2017), several feminist theorists began to argue that female performances in society should not be regarded as natural, since a sexist and heteronormative logic shaped them. These performances, they argued, were reinforced by social practices historically rooted in patriarchal structures — such as portrait painting and visits to major museums — practices saturated with images from the history of art that confined women to secondary roles within Western societies.

This article adopts this contemporary approach to identity, which holds that there is no pre-given identity for any subject. Instead, each person is understood as a reflexive project, embedded within networks of social power into which they are inserted from birth (Butler, 1990/2017). It is understood that the media, museums, and school textbooks, among other institutions, play a significant role in establishing and legitimising a pre-discursive, predetermined field within which subjects are immersed, and which therefore plays a key role in shaping their identities.

Method

After an overall analysis of the series, it was observed that the set of photographs could be divided into two groups. The first group predominantly consists of photographs in which the reference to famous works of art created by celebrated "masters" of painting is discernible; the second group, by contrast, is characterised by images resembling portraits that refer to common types found in European painting from the 15th century onwards, but that do not correspond to any specific work.

As illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the photographs *Untitled #205* and *Untitled #228* belong to the first group, as they directly reference the paintings *La Fornarina* by Raphael Sanzio (1483–1520) and *Judith With the Head of*

Holofernes by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), respectively. Meanwhile, *Untitled #221* (Figure 3) does not refer to a specific artist but to a type of portrait produced during the Renaissance in the 15th century.

Figure 1: La Fornarina *(1519–1520)* and Untitled #205 *(1989)*
Credits. Raffaello Sanzio, 1519–1520 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raffaello_Sanzio_-_La_Fornarina_(ca._1519-1520).jpg)/Cindy Sherman, 1989 (https://www.wikiart.org/en/cindy-sherman/untitled-205-1989)

Figure 2: Judith With the Head of Holofernes *(1497–1500) and* Untitled #228 *(1990)*
Credits. Sandro Botticelli, 1497–1500 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Judith_met_het_hoofd_van_Holofernes_Rijksmuseum_SK-A-3381.jpeg)/Cindy Sherman, 1990 (www.wikiart.org/en/cindy-sherman/untitled-228-1990)

Figure 3: Giovanna Tornabuoni *(1489–1490) and* Untitled #221 *(1989) Credits.* Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1489–1490 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ghirlandaio-Giovanna_Tornabuoni.jpg)/Cindy Sherman, 1989 (https://www.wikiart.org/en/cindy-sherman/untitled-211-1989)

The analyses of the images were conducted using a method similar to the parameters developed by Panofsky (1955/2002), consisting essentially of a descriptive-analytical phase followed by a synthetic phase. Despite the similarity to Panofsky's proposal, the method applied here presents a fundamental difference: it does not adopt the final level of analysis as proposed by the German scholar, who argued that the intuition of a layperson might be more effective than the intellectual capacity of an experienced researcher, nor does it consider that only the aesthetic features of the work are essential for supporting the interpretation.

Therefore, in the analyses undertaken here, the interpretative synthesis was not based solely on intuition or formal characteristics of the work, but instead on information and speculations derived from the first part of the analysis. Accordingly, the study of each image took into account not only its formal aspects and its relation to the historical context, but also its dialogue with other images from art history and from the photographic series itself.

It is important to emphasise that no analytical method can be considered perfect; however, these methodological choices are aimed at mitigating the two main problems associated with image analysis: superficiality in analyses and circularity in interpretation (Ginzburg, 1986/2003).

Analytical Stage

The *History Portraits* series, created between 1988 and 1990, comprises 35 photographs that can be grouped into two main categories. This article presents an analysis of three selected images that represent these categories, beginning with *Untitled #205* (1989; see Figure 1), which belongs to the first group — photographs that explicitly reference canonical paintings.

In *Untitled #205*, Sherman transforms herself into a model of Raphael, one of the great masters of the Renaissance. In the original 16th-century painting, the young Italian woman is portrayed in a medium shot, her body positioned in three-quarter profile, drawing readers' attention to her face and décolletage, highlighting her sensuality and suggesting an openness to being looked at. According to Kanz (2002/2008), the gaze and posture of the Italian sitter hint at an intimate relationship between her and the painter — an interpretation consistent with the oft-repeated narrative in art history that *La Fornarina* was a portrait commissioned by Raphael to honour his lover, the baker's daughter, praising her beauty and sensuality.

This example highlights another trait of portraiture: beyond recording a sitter's features or individual character, it can also express the relationship between artist and model (Argelaguet, 2007).

Sherman preserves Raphael's framing and pose so readers can instantly recognise the consecrated work. However, she dismantles its seductive stance by replacing attributes traditionally deemed "attractive" to the male gaze with elements commonly judged "unpleasant". In this reworking, Sherman focuses her intervention on the face and breasts, elements frequently treated as conventional symbols of seduction.

It is noticeable that the combination of elements in Raphael's painting contributes to the portrayal of the young Italian woman as an object of desire for a potential male reader. She wears a diaphanous veil that reveals her belly, and her bodily expression replicates a gesture that echoes the classical form of the *Venus Pudica* — a pose that appears to conceal her intimate parts but, in practice, draws attention precisely to those areas. In Sherman's photograph, however, the soft lighting typical of the Renaissance painter is replaced by harsh lighting, more akin to the baroque style of Caravaggio. The model presents not beautiful breasts, but "monstrous protuberances with hard fibreglass nipples" (Woods-Marsden, 2009, p. 32); the belly appears swollen, suggesting a possible pregnancy, and the elegant (and expensive) turban that once adorned the Italian model's head — made of velvet and precious stones — is replaced with a cloth resembling a kitchen towel wrapped around her head. The ribbon worn by the model on her arm bearing the painter's name is exchanged for a piece of fabric without any reference to Raphael.

Finally, the sensual and inviting gaze of the baker's daughter (*La Fornarina*) becomes cold and even hostile in Sherman's interpretation. This gaze closely

recalls that of Victorine Meurent when portrayed as a reclining Venus by Édouard Manet in his famous painting *Olympia* (1863). This parallel is significant because, in art history, Meurent's gaze marks a rupture from the tradition of the reclining Venuses initiated by Giorgione and Titian in the 16th century — representations in which Venus is depicted as a domesticated goddess, submissive to the male gaze. The mimicry of that body language in the analysed photograph therefore follows a similar strategy of critique, reaffirming gender asymmetries between men and women, as revealed through the models' gaze (Berger, 1972/1999).

In line with the confrontational tone of *Olympia*'s gaze, the character Sherman interprets in her portrait appears entirely uninterested in attracting the male gaze, as was common in that tradition. Her *Fornarina* seems uncomfortable with being observed, almost as if refusing to be transformed into an object of readers' desire.

The distortion of the body in the images of this series is, simultaneously, a deformation of classical works themselves, promoting their "de-idealisation". Through this strategy, the American artist enables readers — by comparing her photographs with canonical paintings — to perceive her critical stance. The distortion of the body and gaze of the model in *Untitled #205* thus serves as a critique of the representational system prevailing in that period.

As previously mentioned, the formal aspects in this series — such as colours, composition, and poses — are not intended to produce an aesthetic experience in readers, but rather to mimic the original composition celebrated in art history, allowing readers to recognise, if not the original work, at least a suggestion of a canonical artwork. This is the case of *Untitled #228* (1990; see Figure 2), the other work selected for analysis within the first category.

Although *Untitled #228* is not, strictly speaking, a portrait — since it does not seek to imitate a real person — it was chosen for analysis because it contributes to understanding the strategy Sherman develops in her critique of the Western canonical system of representation through her portrayal of Judith, the famous biblical heroine.

In addition to portraits, the iconography of art history includes a vast collection of Christian images depicting saints, martyrs, and religious scenes, often repeating specific visual forms regardless of historical period or style. Like portraits, these images also express power relations, and their continued presence in the Western symbolic universe contributes to the reinforcement of beliefs and values.

According to the Old Testament, Judith saved her people from a tragic fate by beheading the leader of the enemy army after seducing him. The story can be interpreted as a symbol of courage and cunning triumphing over brute force, or of virtue triumphing over evil.

This latter interpretation prevailed in the 16th century, when such paintings were associated with the Catholic counter-reformation's struggle against the Protestant reformation. Despite its popularity at the time, this visual motif

has appeared throughout art history, interpreted by painters such as Giorgione (1504), Cranach (1515), Caravaggio (1599), and Klimt (1901), among others.

In this photograph, the reference to *Judith With the Head of Holofernes* (1497–1500), by Sandro Botticelli, is quite evident, as can be observed in Figure 2.

In *Untitled #228*, Sherman adopts a solemn pose, typical of old portraits whose aim was to preserve an idealised image of the subject for posterity. In such representations, the painter attributes noble meanings to the subject's form — strength and dignity, for instance, as clearly visible in Botticelli's painting (Brown, 2004).

In Christian iconography, Judith's serene expression corresponds to the moral beliefs of that religion, which accepts any sacrifice by the faithful provided it serves a higher good — in this case, saving her people from enemy invasion. Formally, Sherman's composition reproduces Botticelli's framing and structure, which served as her reference. However, some details differ, such as the positioning of the arms and hands, which contribute to a distinct meaning from the 16th-century work.

In the composition created by Sherman, even after beheading her lover, Judith remains impassive. The model's hands point downwards, her chest exposed, forming a triangular shape in which her head occupies the top vertex, and the other two are formed by a mask (representing the severed head of the general) and her left hand, which holds a small dagger. This "triangle" is centred in the upper half of the image, in the foreground, concentrating much of the visual tension and drawing readers' attention to this area of the photograph.

Sherman's intent in concentrating the visual tension within this triangle appears to be to highlight the importance of these elements to readers, as will be explored further. The positioning of the arms, presenting the head and dagger in opposite directions, suggests a causal relationship: the dagger was used to cut the head held in her right hand. Sherman's character plays the role of a killer, but more attentive readers might wonder: is it possible to decapitate someone with such a small knife?

The Christian literary source does not specify the size of the object used by the heroine to behead the Assyrian general, which calls for an iconographic investigation. According to Panofsky (1955/2002), Judith is predominantly depicted wielding a large knife or an imposing sword, and this perception is significant for addressing the question above.

Botticelli likely based his visual version on the *Book of Judith* and the broader tradition of Judeo-Christian imagery. Sherman's version is based on the Italian master's painting; however, Holofernes's head is replaced by a grotesque mask, and the elegant setting — featuring delicate multicoloured fabrics — is transformed into a backdrop of curtains and brightly coloured cloths haphazardly hung along a wall. Instead of the traditional sword, Sherman's Judith bran-

dishes a small dagger, which would seem highly improbable as an instrument for beheading the general, making the scene all the more bizarre.

By choosing a mask in place of the general's head and a knife that appears incapable of performing a decapitation, the American photographer is likely drawing readers' attention to this incongruity. These two elements — the grotesque head and the tiny dagger — differ markedly from the original painting and the traditional Western depictions of this scene, to the point of being almost caricatural. This impression is reinforced by comparing Botticelli's background with Sherman's image.

It does not take much scrutiny to notice that Sherman used low-quality materials to recreate Botticelli's artwork, one of the great masters of the Renaissance. This impression is confirmed when readers compare other images in the series with the original paintings (where such comparisons are possible). The grotesque mask held in one hand, the overly small knife, and the heavily made-up face are all elements that suggest a certain air of falseness in this contemporary imitation. Falseness, in this context, means that Sherman's image does not intend to be a faithful reproduction or even a paraphrase of Botticelli's painting.

This perception becomes even clearer when readers recall the original reference, marked by the luxury of the scene, the balance of the composition, and the size of the sword. Unsurprisingly, this sense of falsity can be observed throughout the series, mainly due to the materials used by the artist to build the sets and costumes, as well as her effort to make them conspicuously visible.

Types

While the reference to great masters of art history, such as Botticelli and Raphael, is apparent in the first group of images in the series, the second group was produced without these distinguishing characteristics that allow for the definite identification of a specific artwork. Instead, these constitute more general types that refer, for example, to Italian portraits produced from the *Cinquecento* onwards. As it is possible to observe in *Untitled #221* (1989; see Figure 3), it is not possible to identify with certainty which portrait the photograph refers to, nor which artist may have inspired its creation. Despite this uncertainty, readers can understand that it represents a particular type of portrait typical of the beginning of portrait history.

In *Untitled #221*, Sherman poses in profile, absorbed and expressionless, which lends greater solemnity to the character she embodies. The framing and pose evoke paintings produced in the 15th century, such as the famous portraits of Battista Sforza (by Piero della Francesca, 1473–1475) and Giovanna Tornabuoni, whose figure was immortalised in 1490 by Domenico Ghirlandaio, a painter popular among the wealthy Florentines of that period.

While we focus on Giovanna's portrait, despite the initial apparent similarity,

a closer look will allow readers to notice that there are more differences than similarities between the two portraits. In the noble Italian's portrait, luxury, restraint, and decorum predominate, according to the dominant aesthetics of the moment. In contrast, in Sherman's 20th-century portrait, everything appears fake, crude, and ugly.

The sense of falseness noted in the analysis of *Untitled #228* also resonates in the portraits of this group. Giovanna wears an exquisite silk dress appropriate to her social status. In contrast, in *Untitled #221*, the objects composing the scene appear rough and unfinished, starting with the pale blue background made of cheap fabric — probably a simple bathroom curtain or even a bedsheet.

In the Florentine painting, alongside the objects evoking the "refined" taste of the era, there are symbols alluding to the pious nature of the woman portrayed, such as a prayer book and a coral bead necklace identified as a rosary (Kanz, 2002/2008). In *Untitled #221*, however, there is no reference to the model's religiosity. The jewellery is simplistic compared with Giovanna's and seems fake. Finally, while the noble Italian's hair is styled in an elaborate bun (reinforcing ideas of restraint, discipline, and decorum "appropriate" for the wife of a wealthy merchant), in the photograph, the "model's" hairstyle is adorned with a hat that gives her a comic — perhaps even sloppy — appearance.

By proposing comparisons with celebrated works and styles while simultaneously exaggerating the differences between her compositions and those paintings, the American artist intends for readers to grasp this comparative gesture. Through the repetition of the pose and the air of elegance and austerity, Sherman initially evokes the profile portraits of the 15th century. However, as readers delve deeper into contemplating the image, they will notice that the elements used in its composition diverge from the original, pointing towards grotesque and artificial features. The photographer's aim is not to evoke an aesthetic response in readers— although that may occur — but to draw attention to the artificiality of the images that form part of Western art history.

These characteristics can also be seen in other images in this group, such as *Untitled #212*, which follows the same framing and pose as *#221*, and *Untitled #213*, whose face has a more exaggerated aspect (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Untitled #212 *(1989) and* Untitled #213 *(1989)*
Credits. Cindy Sherman, 1989 (https://img.artsmia.org/web_objects_cache/109000/100/20/109121/121112_mia327_010_800.jpg)/Cindy Sherman, 1989 (https://www.wikiart.org/en/cindy-sherman/untitled-213-1989)

Untitled #213 also follows the tradition of 15th-century portraits, where the subject is presented in three-quarter profile, with a landscape background in the Italian *Quattrocento* style (Laneyrie-Dagen, 2002/2013). In this portrait, a "gentleman" with a prominent forehead poses, gazing off-canvas with a nonchalant expression. This photo appears to be a synthesis of youthful portraits created by Botticelli (*Portrait of a Man With the Medal of Cosimo the Elder*, 1474) and Giorgione (*Portrait of a Young Man*, 1508–1510), as shown in Figure 5. However, it also recalls paintings by Hans Holbein, especially when disregarding the haircut and focusing on the pose and accessories, such as *Portrait of Derich Born*, 1533.

Figure 5: Portrait of a Man With the Medal of Cosimo the Elder *(1474) and* Portrait of a Young Man *(1508–1510)*
Credits. Sandro Botticelli, 1474 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_a_Man_with_a_Medal_of_Cosimo_the_Elder_-_Sandro_Botticelli_(edit).jpg)/Giorgione da Castelfranco, 1508–1510 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_a_Young_Man_Giorgione_-_Museum_of_Fine_Arts_-_Budapest.jpg)

The similarity in haircuts, which also recurs in other portraits by Bellini (*Portrait of a Young Man*, 1490–1495) and Hans Memling (*Portrait of a Young Man,* 1485–1490), suggests that this style was fashionable in Europe at the end of the 15th century, constituting a "type" documented by these portraits and confirmed by the generic title: "a young man" (Figure 6). What is unusual, however, is finding any of these works depicting a young man with a very thick eyebrow and a pronounced bald patch — both fake, as in Sherman's *Untitled #213.* As with the previously discussed images, it is noticeable across all portraits in the series that the photographer shows no interest in highlighting the psychological dimension of the subject, confirming the idea that the image refers to a type rather than an individual.

Figure 6: Portrait of a Young Man *(1490–1495) and* Portrait of a Young Man *(1485–1490)*
Credits. Giovanni Bellini, 1490–1495 (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_d%27homme_(Bellini,_Louvre)#/media/_Giovanni_Bellini_-_Louvre_RF_1344.jpg)/ Hans Memling, 1485–1490 (https://pt.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/icheiro:Hans_Memling_-_Portrait_of_a_Young_Man_-_WGA14947.jpg)

These "unusual" details that the photographer introduces in her compositions function as a kind of noise — something unexpected in the image — whose role is to alert readers to the fact that something is not "right" about the portrait before them — just like the mask replacing Holofernes' head in *Untitled #228* (Figure 2), or the exaggerated nose of the model in *Untitled #221* (Figure 3). They can be understood as a "bright arrow" pointing to the artifice that governs portrait construction in Western art history. For readers to perceive and reflect on this comparison (and the possible meanings arising from it), they must engage with the proposed game and seek the visual reference suggested in the photograph, to notice that the deformations Sherman employs aim to establish a critical dialogue between her created image and Western art history, more specifically with the history of portraiture.

Synthetic Stage

Synthetically, the photographs that make up the *History Portraits* series can be understood as a critique of how art history has contributed over the centuries to the construction of the identities of men and women (West, 2004) — as Butler

(1990/2017) argues. This identity does not have exclusively biological origins, but also historical, social, and cultural ones.

Sherman's strategy in *History Portraits* consists of creating photographs that offer readers portraits similar to those they should be familiar with (because they belong to that society), but, at the same time, these portraits present qualities opposite to those traditionally found in these canonised images. The recognition of this opposition creates a visual tension that, beyond attracting readers' attention, can encourage reflection on what may have motivated the artist to make these photographs.

This strategy by Sherman aligns with the ideas of art critic Arthur Danto (2003/2015a, 1986/2015b) about what the aims of contemporary art should be: the images composing this series were produced not to provide aesthetic enjoyment to readers, but to call their attention to specific political and cultural issues considered relevant by the photographer and related to the history of Western art.

Thus, instead of being structured according to the traditional canon — in which beauty is traditionally associated with qualities of cleanliness and wealth — the portraits composing this series are made with grotesque elements, making evident the dissonance between the photographs created by Sherman and the original images canonised by art history, which have served as (direct and/or indirect) references for subjects of Western culture for centuries.

Sherman assumes that, at some point, her potential readers have already been exposed to some of the images with which she dialogues — whether through museum visits, watching films, advertisements, or observing books, among others. With this contrast between the expected and the presented, the American photographer intends for readers to perceive that the two images (the "original" and the "copy") share certain qualities, above all those of falsity/artificiality.

This strategy of the artist becomes more evident as readers can perceive, in the repetitions and accumulations of particular characteristics, Sherman's critical commentary on the artificiality of composition in canonical paintings. The choice to create in her series some images that evoke not only works by famous painters but also portrait types contributes to reaffirming the photographer's intention to denounce Western art history as a meaning-producing instance that privileges a group of people, White men and women, idealised by the painter to highlight their power.

According to analyses by critics like Wolf (1991/2018), the dissemination of an ideal standard of female beauty based on Greco-Roman iconography would be one of the strategies employed by Western patriarchal society to keep women in socially disadvantaged positions. The imposition of this model would require a significant investment (monetary and physical) from women. It would most often result in frustration and illnesses such as bulimia and anorexia due to the low possibility of achieving these parameters (Baudrillard, 1970/2007).

Thus, works like *History Portraits* (images available at Sporn, 2020), which challenge the naturalisation of the visual representations of portraits displayed in museums, contribute to weakening this idealised and hegemonic perspective on the body and consequently collaborate with a set of actions aimed at the disalienation of women, allowing them to pursue the full development of their capacities.

Conclusion

This article aims not only to contribute to a better understanding of the formation of identity in Western culture (and its effects on visual culture) but also to deepen the comprehension of Cindy Sherman's work, especially her *History Portraits* series. The reflections presented here are grounded in the perspective of art critic Arthur Danto, who values the questions a work of art provokes within its culture rather than merely appreciating the momentary aesthetic experience it may provide. Within this series, the American artist, through the use of the grotesque as a rhetorical device (rather than an aesthetic one), invites readers to reflect on the artificiality involved in the production of portraits and other canonical works of Western culture — images abundant in major museums that have served as significant references in defining the identity of members of that society.

Thanks to the analyses, a deeper understanding was achieved regarding the strategies Sherman employs in her work. It became evident that, in this series, the artist appropriated the codes of posture present in portraits consecrated by the history of Western art — especially those produced by the so-called "great masters" — to create photographic portraits deliberately infused with grotesque elements. It was noted that the use of the monstrous is not intended to suggest an aesthetic contemplation to readers but rather to stimulate reflection on the supposed neutrality of canonical images and the processes and intentions involved in their production.

If, as Susan Sontag (2003/2007) states, "to photograph is to confer importance" (p. 41) on the subject captured and considering that the subject is shaped (and shapes itself) through social discursive formations (Butler, 1990/2017; Hall, 1996/2006), then Sherman's work becomes even more relevant because it aids in developing a deconstructive critique of the conventional representation of portraiture, as well as of the canonical images that comprise much of the collection in major Western museums.

By questioning the neutrality of this practice and helping to undermine these values, Sherman contributes to the formation of new knowledge and practices that differ from this hegemonic reference (Butler, 1990/2017; Foucault, 1977/2006).

History Portraits, like *Untitled Film Stills*, is a prime example of Sherman's photographic series that discusses the theme of identity production — predominantly female identity — in Western culture through the collections of leading

museums. However, it is essential to highlight that, although the vast majority of her current works continue to explore identity, Sherman is a dynamic artist, and it is possible to observe in her more recent works the exploration of other themes and strategies.

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