

CINDY SHERMAN

The Role of the Still Image

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The Role of Photography

Understanding the fundamentals of photography is a key step in critically viewing and executing quality moving images. Film is the offspring of photography having proceeded the moving image by several decades. The ability to identify photographic styles and elements will enhance your ability to create great films and recognize conceptual, structural and visual conventions.

In order to master the moving image. You must first master the still image.

Photography is the first step towards imagineering visual style as it allows filmmakers to create **conceptual collateral** that can be used to successfully communicate ideas that are difficult to describe in words.

Cindy Sherman: Film Stills

Cindy Sherman (1954 - present)

Cindy Sherman is an American photographer and filmmaker known for her self portraits and for her strong feminist perspective.

She has been active in her field for over 40 years and in 1995 was the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship in recognition of her incredible work.

From a cinematic perspective, Sherman is known for creating a wide variety of photos that are distinctly cinematic in nature. Her project, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977 - 1980) consists of 69 total photographs and is one of her most prolific and culturally relevant works. Her ability to tell compelling stories with her images is her lasting legacy.



Cindy Sherman: Untitled Film Stills

Sherman's is an American icon and her work harkens back to old films, like Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.

Aesthetically, *Untitled Film Stills* is a homage to films of the 40's, 50's and 60's and the role women played in culture and society. Sherman plays with ideas surrounding feminism, femininity, sex appeal and objectification.



Untitled Film Still 3 (1977)



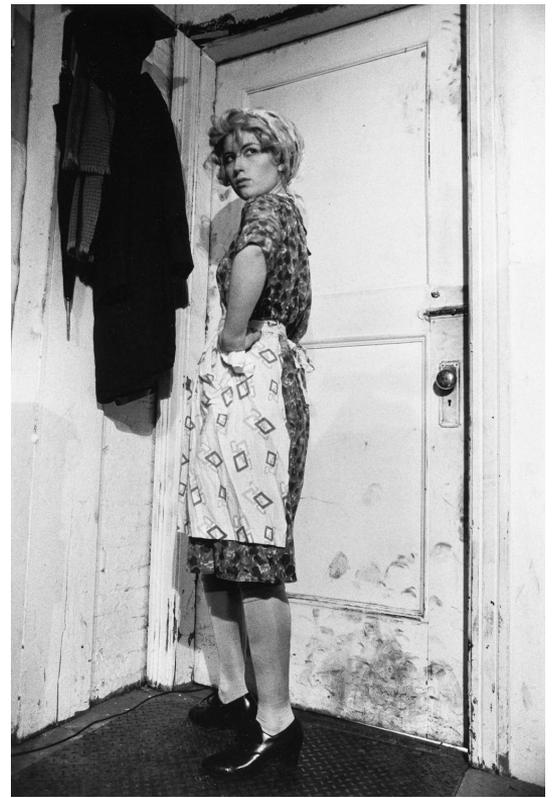
Conceptual Photography is a style in which the photography aims to illustrate an idea or tell a story. This is different from other forms of photography, such as landscape and portrait photography in that the ideas are preconceived and when the photographer successfully executes the idea, it is understood and consumable by the audience.

From the *Untitled Film Stills* series, the audience is allowed to infer and create their own story surrounding the image.

Sherman's photographs are conceptual in style by nature of their narrative implications.

Sherman purposefully left these photos untitled as a way to preserve their ambiguous nature and force the audience to actively participate in viewing her work.

What is CONCEPTUAL Photography?



"I think people are more apt to believe photographs, especially if it's something fantastic. They're willing to be more gullible. Sometimes they want fantasy. Even if they know it's fake they can believe anything. People are accustomed to being told what to believe in."

Creating Fantasy with the Still Image

Sally Mann: At Twelve

Sally Mann (1951 - Present), American photographer.

Sally Mann is one of the greatest women photographers working today and her work, like Sherman's, is conceptual in nature. While Sherman created costumes and personas for herself, Mann turned her camera on her children, "as they mimic and act out social and familial roles in the lush landscape of their rural Virginia home."

At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women, published in 1988, stimulated minor controversy. The images "captured the confusing emotions and developing identities of adolescent girls [and the] expressive printing style lent a dramatic and brooding mood to all of her images."

American culture has always struggled with images of women and girls due to the sexualization and objectification of women's bodies to the point that nearly any expression of feminine sexuality is generally considered vulgar.





Sally Mann, *Candy Cigarette*, 1989. Toned gelatin silver print. Edition 20/25.

Collection of Frank Konhaus and Ellen Cassilly

The Cassilhaus Collection

<http://sallymann.com/selected-works/at-twelve>

Dave Nitsche

Dave Nitsche is a contemporary photographer out of Illinois whose work is among the most visually compelling contemporary conceptual photography.

His photographs are simple in nature, and often use inanimate objects, rather than people, to express ideas.

The piece to the right is call *Brainwashed* from his series titled "Pointed"

<http://www.davenitsche.com/#/Galleries/Pointed/1/caption>



Critical Questions

- What stories are each these photographs/photographers telling?
- In what way are the images conceptual? How can you tell?
- Who is the subject? Is it autobiographical or is it fictional? How do you know?
- How does framing, color, shadow, shade, etc affect the image and our perception/interpretation of it? Why did the photographer choose these elements?
- What are the advantages of conceptual photography, as opposed to documentary photography?
- How does conceptual photography relate to filmmaking?
- How are Sally Mann and Cindy Sherman alike and different?
- In what way does the era(s) Mann and Sherman worked play a role in the work they created?
- Is this work feminist? Why or why not?
- Who is the intended audience?
- In what ways is Dave Nitsche the same and/or different from Mann and Sherman?
- How would you categorize Nitsche's work? What style is it?
- What story is Nitsche trying to tell with his work?
- Which photographers work is most compelling to you - why?

Assignments

RESEARCH

The Conceptual Photography Research Project

The Conceptual Photography Research Project is one that aims to introduce students to photographers and image-makers who use story and art to convey a message. Photography, the parent of the moving image, has many important implications that can help students analyze and glean new information about what makes an image successful. Students are to find one photographer who exemplifies the qualities of conceptual photography, collect 6 - 12 images of their work, and share what about the body of work conveys a story.

Requirements:

- 6 - 12 still images from one (1) photographer.
- A presentation (no longer than 5 minutes) that about the photographer and their conceptual work.
- All images in a PDF slideshow document (all 1 document) to be shown in class, saved to a zip drive.

PRACTICAL

Conceptual Photography Project

The Conceptual Photograph Project challenges students with creating their own series conceptual photographs. Using the information they learned in class and the information they gained through the Conceptual Photography Research project, students are to begin exploring their own aesthetic style and narrative ideas. There are no restrictions in terms of subject matter or approach. Students may only use Photoshop to touch up, or change basic elements of the image (color, b&w, contrast, saturation or crop). This is an individual project and students are to produce a series of between 6 and 9 images. Students may choose between two approaches for this project. 1) Each individual photograph can tell its own story, unrelated to the other images in the series. 2) All the images in the series can create one comprehensive story.

Requirements:

- 6 - 9 still images
- A presentation (no longer than 5 minutes) that explains the photographers stylistic and narrative approach.
- All images in a PDF slideshow document (all 1 document) to be show in class saved to a zip drive.