

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC
AND DANCE

Village Voice
March 31, 1980

PHOTOGRAPHY

Masquerading

By Ben Lifson

WILLIAM MORTENSEN. Daniel Wolf Gallery, 30 West 57th Street, 586-8432; through March 29. Hours: 11-6, Tuesday-Saturday.

CINDY SHERMAN. The Kitchen, 484 Broome Street, 925-3615; through March 29. Hours: 1-6, Tuesday-Saturday.

COLLEEN KENYON. Foto Gallery, 492 Broome Street, 925-5612; through April 12. Hours: 12-5, Wednesday-Saturday.

Cindy Sherman's recent work at The Kitchen tells us that Mortensen's mind, not his method, was flawed; that nothing about the directorial mode itself determined the failure of his performance. Sherman's pictures are just as contrived, and rely just as much on setting, costumes, make-up, and acting. But where Mortensen is imitative, visually repetitious, emotionally crude, vague, heavy-handed, and flaccid, Sherman is original, inventive, emotionally acute, observant, light, and vigorous. Mortensen didn't know what he was doing; Sherman does.

Her pictures are about wounded feminine vanity, disconcerted self-love. Her overdressed heroines are always alone and distressed. A young woman in lacy underwear presses her stomach in, worried about extra pounds; another, dressed in a nylon net peignoir, turns as she climbs the stairs, and her face tells us that the words reaching her from the dark living room below are harsh; a third woman, in cats-eye glasses, a sleeveless jersey, checked pedal pushers, ankle socks, and loafers, sits on a bed, stunned by the letter that lies on the bedspread. But no matter how grave or trivial the crisis, how rich or poor the heroine, the woman is always vain. The girl on the bed daintily, seductively, rests the toe of her loafer on the floor of her grungy loft; an escaping psychiatric patient crossing a stream lifts the hem of her hospital gown as if she were curtsying before a queen.

While they worry about conforming to conventional standards of dress, posture, and beauty (often those of the '50s), Sherman's heroines usually fail: here, the make-up is too heavy; there, clothes are ill-matched; elsewhere, the glasses are wrong for the face. This satirical edge (in largely sympathetic pictures) is sharpened by Sherman's style; unlike her heroines, she's rebellious. She rejects prettiness to explore awkward idioms, like the snapshot's roughness or the movie-still's stiffness. So far (she's only 26), her resourcefulness has been inexhaustible. Each picture considers a different way to render space, pit detail against mass, bring incongruous details into comic collision, or build to a climax; and despite the awkwardness of her visual sources, the structures of her pictures are as solid as they are unconventional—or as her observation of women is broad and precise. Hence the edge, the clash between her characters' incoherence and her own control.

If this were all, it would be enough from so young an artist. But Sherman's work takes on additional intellectual and moral

meaning when we learn that she is her own (and her only) actress. Her observation thus becomes imaginative identification with her characters, their vanity and vulnerability; her comedy, a form of self-awareness. Her complicity with her heroines is also a poignant admission that she—like all of us—has to construct a persona out of the fads of a mass society. Her insistent visual invention and sharp laughter suggest a willful effort to overcome the stereotypes she knows she lives, through protean improvisation, unsparing self-mockery, and generous, tender respect. And by photographing herself, she also strikes out against a traditional role of women in photography—and especially in Mortensen's: woman as willing servant, if not victim, of a male vision. Where Mortensen's work proposes submission, Sherman's offers a program for liberation.

Still, these pictures are deeply flawed by technical sloppiness, and the show is hurt by lack of careful editing—and these aren't the same as rebellion. Unintentional fuzziness quotes pictorialism, which is a conservative aesthetic; uncontrolled light creates false climaxes; and the eight pictures on view aren't the best of hers I've seen. Part of Sherman's task is to broaden the range of emotions and situations she explores, but her major effort now has to be with her craft, lest her own awkwardness mark her as an amateur and under-

mine her power; lest her meaning lie in her intentions but not in the work.

But as Colleen Kenyon's work at Foto Gallery demonstrates, slickness can be equally undermining. Kenyon also works in the directorial mode. But although the twin sisters who act for her are as cute as buttons (they wear camisole tops and freckles to great advantage) and play adorably with their whimsical toys—satin sheets, paper fans, balloons, blue meringue—they are little more than pin-up girls, flirtatious, pouty, and coy. Kenyon's hand-colored black-and-white prints imitate color photographs as skillfully and perfectly as Mortensen's prints imitate etchings, but this slick facility is, like models' cuteness, merely cosmetic; underneath, there's nothing. Neither the girls nor the prints have convincing emotional life or a visual style that's independent of cultural fad, to say nothing of the emotional range and specificity of Sherman-as-actress or the complex edge of Sherman-as-photographer. While Sherman's work explores the formulas the female body and soul are heir to in this society, Kenyon's work takes them as currency; nor can Kenyon see her way to a visual style that's any more liberated than the fashion photographs that deliver those formulas daily. Cindy Sherman's work may need smoothness, but not Kenyon's brand.