

A Picture of Femininity:

People in the Sun and *Untitled Film Still #6*

As the quality and style of film increased throughout the 20th century so did the movement of feminism. Film has continued throughout the past century to portray unrealistic women, while also influencing different media of art. Edward Hopper and Cindy Sherman present their viewers with movie scenes similar to those of the 1950s. Edward Hopper's *People in the Sun*, from 1960, oil on canvas, features an idle scene of five figures relaxing. The people sit in a western environment, looking out at the mountains ahead, with a female prominently situated. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #6*, from 1977, displays a woman in an imagined scene from a movie. The lady appears to be dressed provocatively, and Sherman captures the photo in black and white to achieve a cinematic effect. Cindy Sherman and Edward Hopper both replicate film qualities in their art, though Sherman critiques the female stereotypes that Hopper welcomes.

People in the Sun achieves a cinematic air through its colors and poses. The orderly terrace contrasts the more wild environment of the West. The most variation lies in the left hand corner of the picture plane, where the figures crowd together. The majority of the image depicts grass, mountains, and sky, evenly distributed and harmonious. Hopper paints his figures contented yet somewhat bored of the site in front of them. Of the figures, the lady and her red scarf immediately draws the eye. She dresses like a movie star with her big, wide brimmed hat, shapely dress, and heels. Her dress accentuates her body while her hat sets her apart. The red lips, along with the scarf, stray from the otherwise cool palette of the environment. Hopper furthers this movie narrative by giving his figures "static poses", like they are frozen in a scene.

Hopper was originally inspired by sunbathers in New York City, but he places his setting in the West (Smithsonian). To create his image, Hopper reverted back to his own memory of well known destinations in the West and tried to portray “a scene that is strangely familiar but nowhere in particular” (Smithsonian). The painting reads as a scene from a movie, with a familiar type of actress, yet stems from no precise origin other than a greater cinematic influence.

Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still #6* works with a larger collection of photographs that converse with Hollywood’s portrayal of women. In *#6*, the ideal, beautiful woman gazes blankly away from the viewer, in a black and white photo. The lady does a bra, panties, and dressing gown while splayed out on her bed. The image centers directly on her body, while one hand guides the eye to her face, and the other to a mirror. She holds the mirror, signaling vanity, though Sherman turns this quick condescension into a question. Are people forcing the mirror onto the woman? Sherman presents the usual female character, but disrupts its usual acceptance. *#6* concludes the original 6 film stills which feature a blonde actress that Sherman aimed to characterize as a “trashy has-been” (Respini, 20). In designing her personas, she searched for “an ideal of beauty and femininity that belonged to [her] mother’s generation” (Respini, 21). In her own words, Sherman wanted the “most artificial looking kinds of women”. The woman’s face, caked with makeup, caters to this ideal. When the stills became physical pieces, Sherman printed them like publicity material for actual movies, to keep them looking “cheap and trashy”, and staying loyal to her inspiration (Respini, 21). Sherman believes that cinema conditions people, an idea quite apparent in her work (Respini). *Untitled Film Still #6*, gives the viewer a scene that so many are used to and desire, yet, with the woman's vacant eyes and limp limbs, it mocks what the final product actually achieves.

Though stylistically similar in both of their pieces, Hopper and Sherman diverge in meaning. Hopper and Sherman draw on vague memories, as if their forgotten scenes are just on the tips of the viewer's tongue. Hopper created an environment caught between “a real view and a movie set, as if...silently replaying a film” (Smithsonian). Sherman’s stills “were simulations, condensations of larger-than-life but fleeting performances” (Heiferman). They both captured a moment that seemed to exist, but couldn’t be traced. In *People in the Sun*, though, Hopper embraced the glamorous female of cinema. He used this character in most of his paintings as “a female “type”: a woman whose taut body is dressed in form-fitting clothes, whose sculpted features make her seem a little hardened, and who arouses erotic expectations that are seldom met” (Troyen, 177). Sherman then filled his cinematic “type” in her film stills, but the viewer isn’t comforted by her familiarity. Sherman’s woman holds a disturbing emptiness that no amount of makeup can hide. While Hopper swipes a bright red lipstick onto his leading lady, the gaping, painted mouth of Sherman’s woman unnerves. Hopper's artwork fortifies the character that Sherman questions.

The women in Edward Hopper and Cindy Sherman’s work look the same and play a similar movie role, but the background separates them. Hopper used his wife Josephine as a model for many of his paintings, but “in caricaturing her as a topknot with earrings and cuffs, he erased her” (Kane). Sherman instead placed herself in front of the camera, claiming this feminine image to probe the viewers and their ideas, amplifying her voice. *People in the Sun* and *Untitled Film Still #6* appear unrelated at first glance, but they both build off of movies and hold a dialogue between themselves.

Works Cited

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People in the Sun



Untitled Film Still #6