The triptych was originally utilized in early Christian art because the panels could be hinged, stored, and transported – a compact Holy Trinity that could be relocated in times of grief or turmoil. It seems sacrilegious that holy bodies and sacred scenes could be covered up and moved like a box full of bric-a-brac on its way to the thrift store. However, it could be that the images contained by triptych altarpieces were simply too beautiful to gaze upon for long periods of time. Beauty could turn into terror, hence the need to make it easy to dismantle. The triptych, it could be said, represents an anxious fascination, which at any moment and without warning closed and put away.

Cindy Sherman’s triptychs do not offer us that respite; we must stare into their depths without pause. The artist has only just begun to show her work in this manner, and one might reasonably wonder why. Sherman herself would probably mention the new printing technologies that she has enjoyed using of late (some of which are so high-tech that details are still being sorted out as Sherman prints them). The dye sublimation process is printed on metal, rather than paper, which gives the photographs a glamorous luminosity and an unforgiving penchant for detail. This technique, when combined with Sherman’s use of Photoshopped backgrounds, engenders a feeling that Sherman’s characters are sitting atop their materials, that is, their photographic supports. These photographs become more akin, in this way, to sculptures. That are reminiscent of the flamboyant oil on panel compositions of the Mannerists, particularly the swirling artifice of Jacopo Pontormo’s The Deposition from the Cross (c. 1525-1530).

Sherman’s new work is both precious and mundane, polished and distressed, ubiquitous and unique, historical and contemporary. Though Sherman has certainly paid homage to holy imagery before, especially in her History Portraits (1988-90), it would be worthwhile to consider her relationship to spiritual themes and a career-long hope for the resurrection of the body and the photographic print from irreversible decay. Aging has been a consistent theme for Sherman, and in her newest show at Metro Pictures, it became a talking point for many critics. As Betsy Berne notes in the catalog accompanying the exhibition, “[Sherman’s characters] are definitely women of a certain age who refuse to disappear into a mythological background. All of them, even the goofy ones among them, seem to be saying ‘fuck you’ with your...high-minded probing analysis behind why we are who you think we are.” Wouldn’t it be so delicious, however, to disappear into the mythological background, to go beyond age and see what lies at the very deathbed of representation? To melt away and leak through the streets away from theory and art history and fashion toward some heavenly storm drain that could take you away for good. To finally close the altarpiece’s threesome as you tire from staring at its contents, or, conversely to allow yourself to be fully subsumed by them?

It seems that the more likely kin of Sherman is in fact Edgar Allan Poe. The power of Sherman’s red-lava eye, indeed the power of the entire triptych arrests our vision. “I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture - a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold.” Rarely does Sherman’s work muse us feel gleeful, and when it does, it is always accompanied by a memento mori. When I see her work, I’m always reminded of the inscription on Masaccio’s tomb: “What You Are I Once Was; What I am You Will Be.” The eye of Sherman’s camera is the locus of vision, but also of lust and difference; it is perhaps even a portal to our future. Our psyches tumble into Sherman’s world without our consent, and our own vision becomes entangled with hers, as if we are both praying before the same god. “A simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye. It was open - wide, wide open - and I grew furious as I gazed upon it.” It is no mistake, moreover, that Poe’s madman stuffs his victim’s heart under the floor, as if it were a holy relic in an altarpiece that might one day be attributed to some unsung saint. However, Sherman does not hide the terror of the photographs; she does not need to undergo a lengthy psychosexual guilt enacted by the sound of a beating heart. She presents her triptychs open-faced and unhinged, as if to not even give us the fleeting blessing of stowing them under the floorboards for a short time. But why would we? They are too beautiful.
Cindy Sherman

Untitled #559, 2015

dye sublimation metal print

47 1/2 x 104 7/8 x 2 inches (overall)
120.7 x 266.4 x 5.1 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures
Cindy Sherman
Untitled #561, 2015
dye sublimation metal print
45 1/2 x 110 5/8 x 2 inches (overall)
115.6 x 281 x 5.1 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures
Cindy Sherman

Untitled #563, 2015
dye sublimation metal print
38 5/8 x 110 3/4 x 2 inches (overall)
98.1 x 281.3 x 5.1 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures