

Issue 154 April 2013 

## In Focus: Julia Sherman

FOCUS

Cultural anthropology via impersonation, pageantry and apprenticeship



Farewell Miss America, 2012, c-type print, 46 x 69 cm

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Julia Sherman has worked with nuns, weavers, orthodox Jewish wig-makers, and cobblers to make her art. She sifts through and gathers information with the thoroughness of a cultural anthropologist, immersing herself in collaboration, correspondence and lengthy apprenticeship. Her work reminds me of the behaviour of a close friend who disappears for weeks at a time when she discovers an unusual phenomenon that appeals to her. ('She's inside of it,' her boyfriend will report.) Sherman's practice is sustained by a similar sense of wilful dedication.

Consider, for example, her recent show at Recess Activities in New York, which revisited the culture around the Miss America Pageant in the 1960s. Titled 'Here She Comes' (2012–13), the body of work probed not only the conventional pageant, but the surrounding protest-pageants, such as Miss Black America, Miss Indian America and a drag Miss America, all of which were launched between 1953 and 1968 to challenge the pageant's regressive sexism, racism and heteronormativity. Re-imagining these events nearly 50 years later, Sherman walks the line between social critique, historical document and satire (starting with the double entendre of the title). Among other things, Sherman photographed Judith Nash (née Ford) – Miss America 1969 – re-enacting her original trampoline talent performance (*Judi's Still Got it – Miss America 1969, Pike Position*, 2012); created a series entitled 'Fan Drawings' (2012) which depicts key figures who refused to participate in Sherman's project, such as Thomasine Hill and Saundra Williams (1968's Miss Indian America and Miss Black America, respectively); and filmed Flawless Sabrina – the now aged performer who founded and presented the drag version of the pageant – eerily re-delivering Miss America 1968's farewell speech (*Farewell Miss America 1968 Re-Enacted by Flawless Sabrina – Founder of Miss [Drag] America Pageant*, 2012). The earnestness of Sherman's curiosity, matched with her willingness to muddy a research-based practice with her own desires and interventions, is compelling and enviable. To borrow the phrase from my friend's boyfriend: Sherman is inside of it.

Another body of the artist's work, 'Lucy Becomes a Sculptress' (2013) was recently shown at SculptureCenter, New York, as a part of the group exhibition 'Double Life'. It was prompted by a very different depiction of televised femininity from roughly the same time period: the *I Love Lucy Show*, which ran from 1951 to 1957. The project, comprising two videos and four photographs, was inspired by an episode from the show's final season in which Lucy (played by Lucille Ball) tasks herself with becoming a fine artist in three weeks. Conned into buying 20 kilos of clay by a salesman who claims she has the 'hands of an artist', Lucy sets out to prove her creative mastery. Her talent is to be judged by a prominent art critic, whose authority alone will decide her worthiness. To mask her failure as a 'real' artist, Lucy covers her own head in clay and poses as the sculpture. ('This is excellent, Ricardo! Just excellent [...] You're married to a genius,' the critic proclaims, before attempting to buy the work that is her head).

Building on Ball's three-tiered self-impersonation (first playing a version of herself for television, then assuming the identity of an 'artist' and, finally, substituting her body for the ceramic object itself), Sherman made a video of herself as Lucy the Sculptress, her own head poking through a hole in the table. The original audience laugh track roars over Sherman's four-minute attempt to hold still under the slick weight of the clay while enduring

tedious direction from a disembodied male voice behind the camera. Entitled *I'm Not Doing This For Me, I'm Doing This For the Future of Our Child*, Sherman's video captures, even exaggerates, the farce and hopelessness of Ball's version. All at once, and through multiple layers of self-substituting performance, Sherman manifests Lucy's imminent failure to win the validation she desires. In addition to the video, Sherman includes photographs she has taken of her reconstructions of Lucy's 'failed' art objects. But this artist is at her best when she exposes the desperate attempts at self-composure by the subjects that so beguile and engage her. After all, she is searching for the same thing that they are.

Indeed, by choosing exclusively feminine models, Sherman disrupts our expectation of how research can function as collaboration, projection and impersonation. But the artist does something else, which is arguably even more complicated: through her interest in characters dependent on outside approval, Sherman surfaces her own meta-anxiety to be validated through her parallel performances as both an artist and a woman.

*Julia Sherman lives in New York, USA. Recent exhibitions include the solo show 'Here She Comes' at Recess Activities, New York, in 2012, and the group exhibition 'Double Life' at SculptureCenter, New York, earlier this year.*

**Carmen Winant**

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