Morimura and Sherman: *To My Little Sister: For Cindy Sherman* and *Untitled #96*

Japanese photographer Yasumasa Morimura has often been reduced to being the "Japanese Cindy Sherman," but his work extends far beyond a simple imitator of Sherman. Born in Osaka in 1951, Morimura was raised in a working-class family and later studied at Kyoto City University of Arts, after which he began a successful career first as an assistant photographer then as an artist in his own right. While like Sherman, Morimura works with disguised self-portraits and appropriates popular images, Morimura extends his themes to discuss ideas of East-West relationships, gender norms, and identity. The playful nature of his work at times even seems to blur the lines between self-representation and cultural critique. In this paper, I will argue that Morimura not only subverts the western canon, but his use of the photographic blind spot and creating an absence of himself in the works results in a new, uniquely Japanese image. By appropriating western images, Morimura takes advantage of the opposing natures of orientalism and occidentalism which, in conjunction with other tools, including humor and absurdity, creates multifaceted, subversive works.

Morimura's art has a two-fold classification beyond appropriation photography; it is a response to orientalist traditions and as a reaction to the lack of Asian representation in the art historical canon. Morimura's photographic responses to the West put him in a relatively small and newer niche of the art world classified by Norman Bryson as Occidentalist art, meanwhile there have been centuries of orientalist art. For Bryson, Morimura is masterful artist who is able to completely recontextualize artworks and place the western viewer in an unfamiliar state of experiencing art as "an Islamic viewer might experience looking at the imaginary Orient of

Ingres or Delacroix or Gérôme."[1] In Said's work *Orientalism,* he claims that there could not be such a realized conception as Occidentalism due to the power structures inherent in a traditional East-West viewing. Further, he says, "he relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony,"[2] therefore Morimura's art is inherently subversive because he turns Western traditions on their heads and presents them in a way that is accessible to a non-Western viewer. When looking at his recreation of Manet's *Olympia,* which he titles *Portrait (Futago)* (fig. 1), Morimura chooses elements of himself to westernize, such as the blond wig, and other elements to put into an Asian context. These include the black cat which is not a money box but rather a welcoming symbol found in Japanese restaurants, and the formal kimono work by the maid-turned-madam. In this image it is the clearest that Morimura portrays what the West may feel like to an Easterner through the appropriation of Western art.

Another of the tools Morimura utilizes is that of challenging what beauty can be through a certain level of humor and absurdity. As we have established, Murmur knows when to change certain details in the works he appropriates in order to achieve that Occidentalist subversion, but he also works to reorient the viewer through letting the masquerade dissipate. In several of his works, Morimura makes no effort to hide his masculine body, even though he may wear a dress or a wig, such as with *Portrait (Futago)*. The clash of genders and identity is in Morimura's terms, commotion. He defines commotion as occurring when two elements meet; such as east and west, male and female, and as he discussed in an interview for Artnet, that meeting place and

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[1] Norman Bryson, "Yasumasa Morimura: Mother (Judith II)," Artforum, January, 1994, 11

[2] Edward Said, Orientalism, New York: Random House Publishing, 1979, 50

moment of confusion is his idea of beauty.[3] The images he creates are not meant to be straightforward and literal, rather there is a gray area that emerges in his portrayal of different identities. Further blurring gender lines with this "commotion," Morimura states in the same interview that he does not engage in cross-dressing which does have a large precedent in Japanese culture. This commotion is best exemplified in *Doublannage (Marcel)* (figure 2), in which Morimura appropriates Man Ray's photograph *Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy.* In this work, Morimura plays with gender in a similar, but more obvious, manner than Duchamp and Ray. Instead of concealing the fact that he is holding feminine hands as Duchamp does in his image, Morimura reveals the illusion and makes it a part of the composition. As proposed by Brandes, this lack of closure in Morimura's image lends itself to a level of destabilization for the viewer.[4] The layers of illusion, beauty, and commotion that Morimura utilizes invite the viewer to reflect further on the image; his are not works that are completely understood with a quick glance.

Turning to the idea of the artistic and the cultural blind spot, Jacques Derrida explains the artistic blind spot as the space between a subject and its representation at the moment of creation. According to Derrida, in Manet's painting Olympia, the artist could not simultaneously look at the model and the canvas, creating an artistic blind spot. However, with photography, there is no moment of looking away from the subject as the photographer sees through the lens as they shoot. Nevertheless, a photographic self-portrait has an artificial blind spot, as the photographer cannot see themselves at the moment of creating the image. Joonsung Yoon argues that, due to

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[3] Yasumasa Morimura, "Beauty is Commotion," interview by Kay Itoi, Artnet, May 2005

[4] Kerstin Brandes, "Morimura/Duchamp: Image Recycling and Parody," *Paragraph* 26, no 1/2 (2003): 56.

the nature of Morimura's work, there is firstly the technical nature of the artistic blind spot as he cannot see himself shooting the image, and secondly the cultural blind spot of self-representation as non-Asian women in his Daughter of Art History series.[5] Given that Yasumasa Morimura creates self-portraits that do not reveal the nature of his ego, he is in a unique position to use his own likeness to create powerful works that allow the viewer to become disoriented.

Having established the tools that Morimura uses in his oeuvre, we can now turn towards the specificities of his work about Cindy Sherman. As discussed in relation to Orientalism and Occidentalism, Morimura shows the Western viewer the view of an Eastern one, and this inherently involves creating certain blindspots. Morimura's oeuvre is dominated by Western art historical references, but he manipulates them by infusing Japanese and Asian references. In the composition of *To My Little Sister, For Cindy Sherman* (figure 3), Morimura keeps the image almost exactly the same to Cindy Sherman's original composition. We see the main figure lie on a slight diagonal wearing an orange shirt and checkered skirt against a red tiled background while holding a small piece of paper. The image is instantly recognizable in its reference to Cindy Sherman, and it communicates the same themes despite, or perhaps due to the change of one small detail.

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #96* (figure 4) photograph appropriates the centerfold layout of magazines such as High Society and Playboy, but repurposes it for Artforum. By doing so, she offers a commentary on the traditional representation of women in the media and challenges the objectification of women's bodies. The photograph serves as a continuation of Sherman's long

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[5] Joonsung Yoon, "Seeing His Own Absence: Culture and Gender in Yasumasa Morimura's Photographic Self-Portraits," Journal of Visual Art Practice. 1. no. 3 (2002): 166

standing exploration of gender identity and the societal constructions of femininity. Like her other works, *Untitled #96* invites viewers to engage in a deeper reflection on the representation of women in art and popular culture, and to question the power dynamics at play in the creation and consumption of images.

Returning to Morimura, the small paper in the hand of the figure in *To My Little Sister. For Cindy Sherman* is the element which brings all of Sherman's themes to the forefront in Morimura's adaptation of the image. In his work, the flyer is visible and open, as opposed to Sherman's original composition, where she guards the paper. We are not necessarily meant to read it, but we can recognize it as the personal advertisement section of a newspaper. In Morimura's photograph, his hand is open and the paper can be read, albeit only if the viewer can read Japanese. This is the primary blind spot for Western viewers in Morimura's image and when clarified, even more connections to Sherman's photograph emerge. The flyer Morimura holds reads in part "love generation" and "we are accepting members now." According to Yoon, the Love Generation is a dating club and has clear ties to the sex industry[6]. Morimura brings that theme to the front with the flyer he holds, but only makes it accessible to a Japanese audience, or those familiar with the language and culture. Even if the centerfold layout reference is lost to the viewer, the flyer leaves little room for interpretation that this image is about commentating and subverting the role of women in the sex industry.

Building on the idea of subverting the role of women in media, Morimura makes a bold move not yet discussed, that is the role of the image as a self-portrait. Although his work is not a

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[6] Joonsung Yoon, "Seeing His Own Absence: Culture and Gender in Yasumasa Morimura's Photographic Self-Portraits," Journal of Visual Art Practice. 1. no. 3 (2002): 168.

self portrait in the sense that it reveals the personal nature of the artist, his physical likeness in the work carries its own significance. For centuries, the power dynamic of painting has been exemplified as, for the most part, a man depicting a woman. Even in photography, men have had the privilege of sitting behind the camera, away from the gaze and free to capture a woman's likeness. Morimura turns this tradition on its head, and he gives up his position of power to step in front of the lens and take the place of the female protagonist.[7] In this, he engages in a less common form of self-portraiture where he exemplifies everything that he is not. It is a negation of the self-portrait as it reveals who the artist is by depicting a twisted version of the self and forcing it into a new category. In other words, he depicts his own absence.[8] For Morimura, this new category is self-depiction as key figures from art history, ranging from the figures of *Olympia* to Cindy Sherman's similar masquerade. The figures are ones with which he does not share a cultural connection, but he chooses them to highlight the absence of Asian bodies within the Western art historical canon.

Even though Morimura's connection to Sherman includes complex themes such as underrepresentation and identity, they do have a certain artistic similarity that cannot go unnoted. We know that they work in the same medium, and critics have compared the two before, often reducing Morimura to a secondary, Japanese Sherman. Despite the manner in which critics and popular culture may minimize or simply ignore Morimura in regards to Sherman, Morimura's art

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[7] Ayelet Zohar, "An Exploration of the Scarcity of Asian Images in Morimura Yasumasa's Oeuvre, 1991–2010," Third Text 35 (2021): 6.

[8] Joonsung Yoon, "Seeing His Own Absence: Culture and Gender in Yasumasa Morimura's Photographic Self-Portraits," Journal of Visual Art Practice. 1. no. 3 (2002): 168

and he himself speaks to the connection that he feels to her. In his homage to Sherman, Morimura chooses the title, *To My Little Sister: For Cindy Sherman.* He draws a familial connection between the two of them, and this sibling relationship implies the strong connection Morimura feels for Sherman. The first is an Asian cultural tradition where age plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, and as friendship grows, one may refer to a friend or closer acquaintance as brother or sister.[9] The affinity Morimura feels for Sherman is further exemplified in an interview about his work on Frida Khalo where he states, "I feel I cannot leave [Frida Khalo] alone. This might be similar to my feelings for Cindy Sherman. Only, Cindy and I are not necessarily comfortable making self-portraits. People think we enjoy the exposure, but we don't."[10] Morimura explicates his respect for Sherman and even speaks for her, and considering the centerfold image he chose to depict, it is clear that they are both thinking of the role women play in media and commercial photography.

Continuing the theme of familial connections within Morimura's oeuvre, we can look at the relationship between painting and photography. Photography was without a doubt the largest artistic overhaul of the 19th and 20th centuries, and its influence still has a large place in the art world today. When considering an artist such as Morimura who uses paintings as his primary reference, he can be seen as a descendent of painting bringing them into the modern era[11]. Considering again the *Daughter of Art History* series, we can again pull from East Asian

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[9] Joonsung Yoon, "Seeing His Own Absence: Culture and Gender in Yasumasa Morimura's Photographic Self-Portraits," Journal of Visual Art Practice. 1. no. 3 (2002): 167

[10] Yasumasa Morimura, "Beauty is Commotion," interview by Kay Itoi, Artnet, May 2005.

[11] Paul B. Franklin, "Orienting the Asian Male Body," in The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire, ed. by Deborah Bright (London: Routledge, 1998), 234.

traditions. Yoon draws the parallel that by choosing to refer to the series as the "daughter" of art history, Morimura feminizes his photography. In East Asian cultures specifically, the son is favored and cannot be compared against any ancestors. In this way painting as a tradition takes on the masculine role and photography could be considered the less privileged medium.[12] The feminization of his work is another aspect Morimura works with as a subversive element, in an interview for Artforum, Morimura explains these themes stating, "I was trying to leap across binaries of categorization—masculine and feminine, East and West—as well as ideas such as the feminization of the East, Asia becoming synonymous with woman, the feminine mystique."[13] The hyper feminization that we see in images such as *To My Little Sister: For Cindy Sherman* then take on another meaning because he leans into the identity of the sexualized woman, making it an allegory for the fetishization and feminization of the Asian male body.

To further showcase the efficacy of Morimura's appropriation of Sherman's work, we must compare it against another artist who claims to be making the same goal of recontextualizing and honoring her work. In 2014, actor James Franco attempted a recreation of the *Untitled Film Stills* series and had his homage shown at the Pace Gallery in New York City. While Sherman works to subvert popular visual traditions of women in film and media, and Morimura further subverts the centerfold layout in his image, Franco's homage turns into a parody, even though he takes it very seriously. Franco, For Vice Magazine says, "Cindy Sherman

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[12] Joonsung Yoon, "Seeing His Own Absence: Culture and Gender in Yasumasa Morimura's Photographic Self-Portraits," Journal of Visual Art Practice. 1. no. 3 (2002): 167-168

[13] Yasumasa Morimura, "Yasumasa Morimura: Yasumasa Morimura on the empty center of identity," interview by Hiji Nam, Artforum, October 2018.

is an artist who used cinema as a source of her work; she 'played' at being an actress. I am an actor who inserts himself into his work."[14] His images can however help us to see what artists like Sherman and Morimura do so well; by omitting key details such as lighting, composition, and careful attention to the small nuances of each image, Franco's homage falls flat. It is through the mastery of these elements that Sherman and Morimura are able to successfully recontextualize and subvert traditional narratives surrounding women and their representation in media.

Working with ideas of the blind spot, commotion, absurdity and appropriative art, Morimura allows the viewer to drop their guard and begin to understand his work more effectively than if they were a series of intense, highly academic works. In using themes from the Western canon, Morimura first presents something familiar such as with Manet, Duchamp, and Sherman, and then he twists our understanding of the original image. Above all, he showcases the lack of Asian bodies in art and forcibly, yet at times humorously, inserts himself into the Western art historical canon. More than just a Japanese version or imitator of Cindy Sherman, Yasumuasa Morimura joins her effort to subvert our ideas of who gets to step behind the canvas, or in this case the camera and represent women. By playing with ideas of gender and identity, Morimura opens the door to discussions about underrepresented communities in the contemporary art scene and he paves the way for more artists to challenge the Western canon.

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[14] Oscar Heliani, “James Franco Embodies Cindy Sherman,” Vice, January 12, 2014.

Figure 1. *Portrait Futago,* 1998

Figure 2. *Doublannage (Marcel),* 1988

Figure 3. *To My Little Sister: For Cindy Sherman,* 1998

Figure 4. *Untitled #96,* 1981

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