

# The New York Times

## Review: 'Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld' Studies Perceptions Shaped by Photography

By ROBERTA SMITH - JUNE 25, 2015



"Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld" at the New Museum features 10 series of images made by the artist between 1978 and 2012, including "Maps," from the "Objects of Desire" collection.

Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

In 1990, when Sarah Charlesworth characterized her interest in photography as "an engagement with a problem rather than a medium," she spoke for many photo-based artists. Called the Pictures Generation, they were born around 1950 and emerged in the late 1970s and early '80s, standing on the shoulders of the Conceptualists, and for them, photography was very much a "problem." It sold products, objectified women, glorified men, mythologized nations and rarely told the truth. The Pictures artists were less focused on taking photographs than on making them — through appropriation, distortion and rephotography — to expose the medium's many manipulations, fictions and tricks.

By the time Ms. Charlesworth died 23 years later — of an aneurysm at 66 — her 1990 summation wasn't quite so accurate. Of all the Pictures artists, many of whom were women, few remained as staunchly loyal to photography as she. No one explored its history, formal possibilities and very mechanisms with such a determined, even obsessive, drive, nor did anyone make color so abstract and implacable.



Images from Sarah Charlesworth's "Stills" (1980) series.  
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A kind of investigatory passion for all aspects of photography suffuses "Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld," the trim, handsome survey that glides through five galleries at the New Museum. Organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the museum's artistic director, and Margot Norton, its associate curator, it traces a transformative exploration of a medium, covering 10 series of images made between 1978 and 2012, albeit some with only a few. You can almost feel the forthright Ms. Charlesworth moving briskly from one series to the next, formulating for each a distinct subject, scale, printing method, frame and, usually, a big, ambitious title.

Her "Modern History" series includes "Arc of Total Eclipse, February 26, 1979," which is emblematic of a 22-year-old artist living in New York who already knew the leading Conceptualists through Douglas Huebler, her college art professor and also a Conceptualist. The series consists of actual-size photo-based prints of the front pages of 29 American and Canadian newspapers featuring pictures of a total eclipse that occurred on the date of the title. The pages are pure white — a perennial favorite of Ms. Charlesworth's — having been stripped of everything but their nameplates and photographs. They chart how one event registered with 29 sets of newspaper editors and art directors in terms of size, choice and prominence of image (or images), giving us a small study of human variability. It uses one of the premier strategies of Conceptual Art — nothing but the facts, sorted — but achieves a new level of visual fascination and glamour.

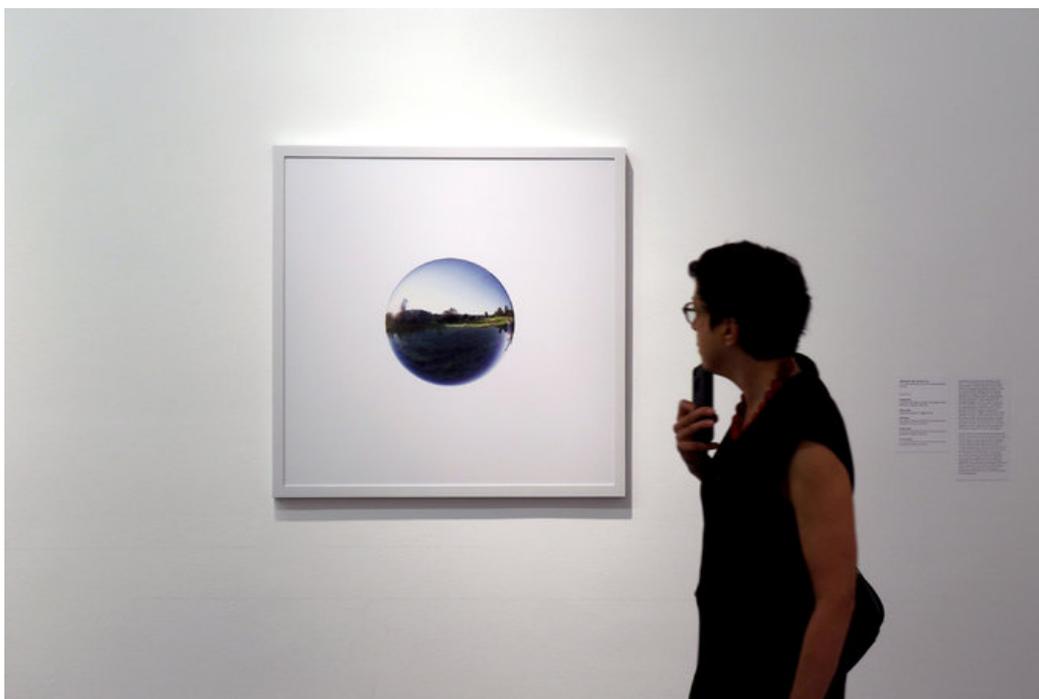
Ms. Charlesworth had a sense of precision, beauty and mystery all her own, and an eye for clean design that made her images look modern, even if the objects in them were not. Her best pieces have a tendency to appear perfect but simple and then to open inward, spurring you to think through the image and its meanings and effect on you.

The show's opening gallery is a gripping introduction to this tendency. The space is lined with grainy grisaille images, gelatin silver prints about the size of large doors or windows. It takes a moment to start seeing the falling body in each of these nearly abstract fields of dark and light. When you do, your brain freezes a bit.



"Figure Drawings" (1988/2008).  
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Collectively titled "Stills," these works were made in 1980 — years before Sept. 11 — using published photographs, enlarged and reworked to be atmospheric and indistinct. Do they depict people at the end of their psychic ropes and ready to die? Or are their subjects leaping from burning buildings, trying to live? Did any of them survive? Who could take a picture like this? Who would? Looking at them feels taboo, like an invasion of privacy. Their factuality doesn't disguise their extreme emotionality. Few human gestures are more fraught, desperate or often final than these.



An image from the "Available Light" series.  
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

In several cases, the long, narrow image feels like motion itself: You almost expect the body to move, or to appear more than once in a series of frames. Yet the size, proportion and texture of the images also evoke painting. And the enlarged bodies, each in its own horrific posture of free fall, approach our own size. The space around them is usually immense, a void into which you could almost jump.

Ms. Charlesworth, who considered her work to be as much like painting as like photography, would not allow as much space in her images again. Hereafter, the photograph as flat object, as physical entity, dominates, and never more than in the show's next gallery.



“Gold” and “Lotus Bowl” from the “Objects of Desire” (1983-88) series.  
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

With the “Objects of Desire” series (1983-88), which follows the “Stills,” the show abruptly shifts from the metaphysical to the physical. Here one or a few objects are isolated on fields of saturated color so bright and glossy that they resemble lacquer, and perfectly match their lacquered frames. They are Cibachrome prints of appropriated images photographed against bright, laminated monochrome backgrounds. Seductive, repellent, otherworldly, these works picture things that are often fetishized: the female body, exotic animals or religious objects. “Lotus Bowl,” for example, shows a gold ritual vessel on a bright green ground. An image of a real lotus flower floats above it, reminding us of art’s grounding in nature, and also contrasting solidity with fading, soul-like fragility.

The most successful “Objects of Desire” pieces tackle the obsession with objects from other cultures, with the two-panel “Maps” being a high-voltage case in point. On one panel, the yellow-on-black stripes of a highway’s center line are seen up close and from above, like a Pop Art abstract painting. On the other, an orange ancient bowl is also seen from above on a bright highway-stripe yellow background. The bowl’s motifs suggest a horizon line, a blazing sun and a time long before hardtop roads. The work’s visual strengths keep the mind going with possible interpretations, both graphic and spatial.



"Still Life With Camera" (1995).  
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

The next two galleries show Ms. Charlesworth in a relative holding pattern in the 1990s. She cut images from photographs of Renaissance paintings, assembling them into little morality plays concerning gender that again use the monochrome grounds, but matte and restrained. In "Figure Drawings" (1988/2008), she covers a wall with tiny black-on-white images of bodies — from a dancing Shiva to a giant statue of Lenin — as if indexing both the variety and constancy of the human form throughout time.



"Bull", from the "Objects of Desire" (1983-88) series.  
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

And with the “Doubleworld” series (1995), she eases into arranging and photographing actual objects, initially from the history of optics. In “Still Life With Camera,” a 19th-century wet-plate camera is pointed at a fittingly antique bottle of wine, a leather-bound book and an amulet-like photograph of a female nude, crisply suggesting the continuity of male pleasure. In “Untitled (Voyeur),” a shiny gold telescope pokes suggestively — if simplistically — between the folds of heavy red curtains.

In the last dozen years of her life, Ms. Charlesworth continued to make photographs about photography while giving her penchant for almost breathtaking beauty fuller expression. “Camera Work,” from her “Work in Progress” (2009) series, is a Calumet view camera shown twice — upright and inverted, positive and negative — a stark abstraction based on a picture-taking apparatus. Beauty of an especially philosophical sort reigns in the “0+1” series (2000), which shows white objects of desire against white grounds — for example, a bough of orchids, a Buddha — creating a very modern vanitas about the world melting away.

And in her last series, “Available Light” (2012), Ms. Charlesworth’s attachment to beauty, optics and the elucidation of photography come completely into real space, where the reflections and refractions of natural light do the talking. These studio setups seamlessly merge past and present while light acts upon various glass objects and art materials. In “Carnival Ball,” an almost frivolous sense of elegance, perfectly executed, is belied by sheer simplicity. A glass sphere sits in a cut-glass goblet in front of a swath of wallpaper whose broad blue and white stripes are seen through them, first bulging like a hot-air balloon and then contracting into tiny bars.

In this new, unexpectedly final blossoming of her unfailing precision, Ms. Charlesworth’s art is softer but no less rigorous and still a source of eye-opening experiences. It is as if she were saying: “I’ve done almost nothing. See for yourself.”