

# The Washington Post

## SLEIGHT-OF-LENS

By Jo Ann Lewis August 10, 1998

Like most of Sarah Charlesworth's early works, the first photographs in her retrospective at the National Museum of Women in the Arts were snatched from newspapers and magazines.

Six feet tall, they are grainy blowups of wire-service photos showing people plunging to their deaths from tall buildings, frozen in midair by the photojournalist's lens. Mesmerized, we stare in wonder: Have they jumped to end their lives? Or to save themselves from an inferno? No answers are given. Instead, these eerily captionless images are left to speak for themselves. Which they memorably do.

They also remind us that photographs don't always tell the whole story, or even a true one. This is Charlesworth's central artistic mission: to shatter the myth of photographic "truth" and examine the storytelling magic inherent in photography.

By the mid-'80s, she'd mastered the art of visual seduction and was producing objects of irresistible allure. This we see in a series of ever larger, sleeker and more gorgeously colored laminated Cibachrome photographs, all packaged in matching, lusciously lacquered frames. She called them "Objects of Desire." Which indeed they are.

Even before you look at the images within them, you've been seduced.

But doping out the content is a more complex matter. In this lengthy series, Charlesworth starts with fragments of color photographs snipped from glossy magazines and then rephotographs them against richly colored backgrounds. She then laminates, frames and juxtaposes these new "pictures" (often framing them together, side by side) in ways that provoke thought. By altering their context, she hopes to unmask the various subtexts and subterfuges by which such photographs induce longing and desire in their viewers -- for everything from sex to material things to an unspoiled natural world.

She raises questions by posing visual conundrums. For instance: The body of a (now headless) Hollywood icon -- a slinky femme fatale wrapped in a tight silver gown -- is shown next to a wrapped bondage figure, hinting broadly at their mutual imprisonment. In a less subtle variation, a bridal gown cut out to look like clothing for a paper doll is juxtaposed with a harness. Charlesworth often addresses the subject of stereotypical gender representation, but, mercifully, she does so with poetry, not polemics.

As a poetic image-maker, she also deals with issues as fragile as faith and belief. One of the most moving photo-objects in the "Objects of Desire" series is a pink lotus blossom seemingly levitating over an ancient bronze bowl. It is true faith expressed through a photographic lie.

Charlesworth's work assumes a lot about the visual literacy of her audience, and their ability to "read" her images. She is often obscure: "Fear of Nothing," for instance, juxtaposes a blank black photograph with that of an ancient Roman "horror vacui" mask, something most of us didn't know existed. But in this case, the fearful expression on the carved stone mask is enough to carry the message.

If one image seems altogether indecipherable, move on to the next: There are 60 works in the retrospective.

Some viewers may have to wait until the work from the '90s, when Charlesworth finally relaxes and lets her wit come to the fore. In a photograph from the series called "Renaissance Paintings and Drawings," she separates a Madonna and child, creating an image of contemporary anxiety out of an Old Master painting with a very different intent.

But most important, in recent years Charlesworth has finally begun to make (and take) her own photographs, launching a wonderful new series titled "Natural Magic," in which magic tricks are used as a metaphor for artistic transformation.

Assuming the role of photographer-magician, she starts performing sleight of hand with her own studio camera. She makes women levitate, creates a candle with seven flames, produces fire from her own white glove -- all without benefit of computers. In the most recent series, she makes new photographs look like 19th-century still-life paintings.

They are among the most confident and powerful statements she has made.

She winds up this series by alluding to her earlier self in a truly magical photograph of playing cards flying through the air, frozen in place like the falling bodies in "Stills." It is called "Control and Abandon," which pretty much describes the arc her work has taken over a 20-year career.

A painter since childhood, Charlesworth studied art history at Barnard and worked as a self-taught commercial photographer for several years before she fell in with a group of conceptualists, including Joseph Kosuth, in the late '60s. They came to believe that in art, it is the idea that is paramount, not the commodified object.

By the mid-'80s, Charlesworth had moved on to become a postmodernist pioneer, philosophically aligned with contemporaries like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and other women similarly concerned with how photographs affect and manipulate contemporary consciousness.

Today, at 52, she is widely collected -- not surprising, since she is dealing with the manipulation of images -- by Hollywood film moguls.

"Sarah Charlesworth: A Retrospective," her first comprehensive museum survey, was organized by SITE Santa Fe and curated with Susan Fisher Sterling of the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Freedom Forum and others, it will travel to the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art and the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University after it closes here Sept. 27. An appropriately elegant and glossy illustrated catalogue has been published.

Sarah Charlesworth: A Retrospective will continue at the National Museum of Women in the Arts through Sept. 27. Hours are Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. The museum is at New York Avenue and 13th Street NW, one block north of Metro Center. Suggested donation: \$3 for adults and \$2 for students and seniors. A fully illustrated catalogue is available in the museum shop. CAPTION: "Figure," left, "Trial by Fire" and "Birdwoman," in the Sarah Charlesworth retrospective at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. CAPTION: Charlesworth raises questions by posing visual conundrums with juxtaposed images, as in "Rider."