BOMB

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INTERVIEW

Sarah Charlesworth by Betsy Sussler

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Sarah Charlesworth. © 1989 by Gilles Donze.

Sarah Charlesworth's latest series, Academy of Secrets deploys symbolically charged imagery: the heart, the antler, the lotus, the womb—floating them on colors that visually drench the psyche. Charlesworth comes from the cool, body politic of Conceptual Art. From her early Modern History series which delves into the public imagery of newspapers, to her Stills, bodies photographed in mid-air; to Objects of Desire, metaphoric and frequently minimal juxtapositions of image fragments culled from photographs and books—abstracted, exposed, the shape of an idea is central, discovered. It has given her isolation of history, chance and desire pristine formality.

The new work suggests that knowledge not only comes from the given world but is lodged deep, hidden within us. We discussed The Academy of Secrets in her studio: diffused light, long tables, file cabinets and diagrams of pelvises and prehistoric skulls . . . a quiet empty place, to think.

Betsy Sussler
Do your photographs conjure emotional upheaval?

Sarah Charlesworth
Yes.

BS
Are they magic charms?

SC
I abstract objects that socially, carry a strong emotional charge or symbolic significance. I've abstracted them from the context in which we normally confront them, a fish out of a natural history magazine or a heart out of an anatomy magazine and recreated another context which is within my work. In The Academy of Secrets, I've tried to confront an emotion in myself and used these image-objects to create a complex, emotional field resembling a visual dream or a feeling. I'm trying, almost to cast into imagery a specific feeling. It's not necessarily resolved in any structurally, easily, interpretable form. It is much more personal. I'm exploring a level of unconscious engagement in language, a covert symbology. There's a level on which this involves a personal as well as a societal confrontation. In other words, I think that a symbolism is attached to particular images, becomes marked in the unconscious. To exorcise it, to rearrange it, to reshape it, to make it my own, involves unearthing it, describing it, deploying it inform, and then rearranging it. In each individual piece, I'm going for a different kind of emotional psychic chord.

BS
The red diptych of the antlers and the heart?

SC
Let me finish, because you asked about magic.

I believe the human psyche is capable of higher levels of perception, of understanding and of being which are approachable through confrontation with one's self and through confrontation with society, in this case, through its visual language. The whole concept of magic totally fascinates me. I think of it as a continuum with psychic lucidity and in different pieces, I'm approaching different aspects of the psyche. In Subtle Body, I borrowed from Tantric meditation, the progression of ascendent symbols along the body center, equaling seven centers in the body. Then I turned around and replaced them with symbols that are personally significant to me, that reflect my understanding of a physical, psychic elevation.

BS
The Egyptian alchemists had formulas to make straw into body, lead into gold, water into blood, your title, Academy of Secrets . . .

SC
That's what the secrets in the title refers to. The secrets of higher, esoteric knowledge that are hidden beneath the common level of organized religion and mass culture. I'm talking about very esoteric knowledge which could come from any society or historical period in regard to alchemy. I view each art work, in a sense, as the alchemist might understand the transformation of matter, into something animate with psychic essence. Making an art work involves the transformation of matter, paper and materials into a process of animation or psychic elevation of material stuff. Animation, like The Subtle Body, suggests a human body through the placement of different elements, in this case eight rather than seven because I give you two choices of brains—the right and left. Ascending from the most base matter, the clay pot at the bottom and then the fish, the sperm, the heart, the river. The two brains are the Indian magic wand in the shape of the crane and the clock, the logical, right brain. And then scarf at the top for the opening and the psyche. In a sense, the matter becomes more ethereal as you move up the swirling column.