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ART BOOK

SARAH CHARLESWORTH: DOUBLEWORLD

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THE LATE SARAH CHARLESWORTH made powerful and desirable work about power and desire. Like her Pictures Generation allies, she rephotographed and repurposed mass-media images—of Buddha statues, figures from Renaissance paintings, hip-hop stars—taking advantage of the dense fields of pictorial meaning available everywhere. Charlesworth was neatly analytic in her approach, creating an oeuvre that can seem like an essay collection. This isn't to say her pictures are dry. Beneath the perfect surfaces lies a wild inquiry into the messiest of questions—above all, those about photos' potent contradictions: how they are deceptive and honest, universal and personal, alienating and beckoning.

She believed photography was the "dominant language" of our time, so she adopted it and continually addressed its conventions (she famously said it interested her as "a problem rather than a medium"). *Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld*, which accompanies a retrospective at the New Museum, surveys her forty-four-year career. As Hal Foster memorably puts it in one of the book's discerning essays, her art "looks great and hurts a little." Examined closely enough, every image world is a "doubleworld," as we discover in all her series—each one a sharp burst of distilled photographic thinking. In "Modern History," 1977-91, she presents newspaper front pages stripped of everything except the images and mastheads, revealing the structure of doctrine beneath the blandly forthright category of "current affairs." For her disquieting "Stills," 1980, she enlarged news photos of people plummeting from buildings, exploring the public consumption of private tragedy. And in the seminal "Objects of Desire," 1983-88, Charlesworth clipped and rephotographed iconographic pictures against a monochromatic background, making viewers consider civilization's stream-of-consciousness soliloquy one utterance at a time. Over the next two decades, she sought solutions to every problem of photography she encountered, adding elegant studio compositions to her practice in the '90s. It seems, at times, to have been a spiritual search, too. The serene, reverent still lifes and tableaux in her last series, "Available Light," 2012, are as much about capturing the luminous glow of her studio as any thorny quandary concerning the history of vision. *Half Bowl* (below) is one of the most striking images in her body of work; it is also the quietest. She always asked: What do pictures want, and what do we want from them? We still need to know, lost as we are in the unforgiving, ultra-seductive feed.