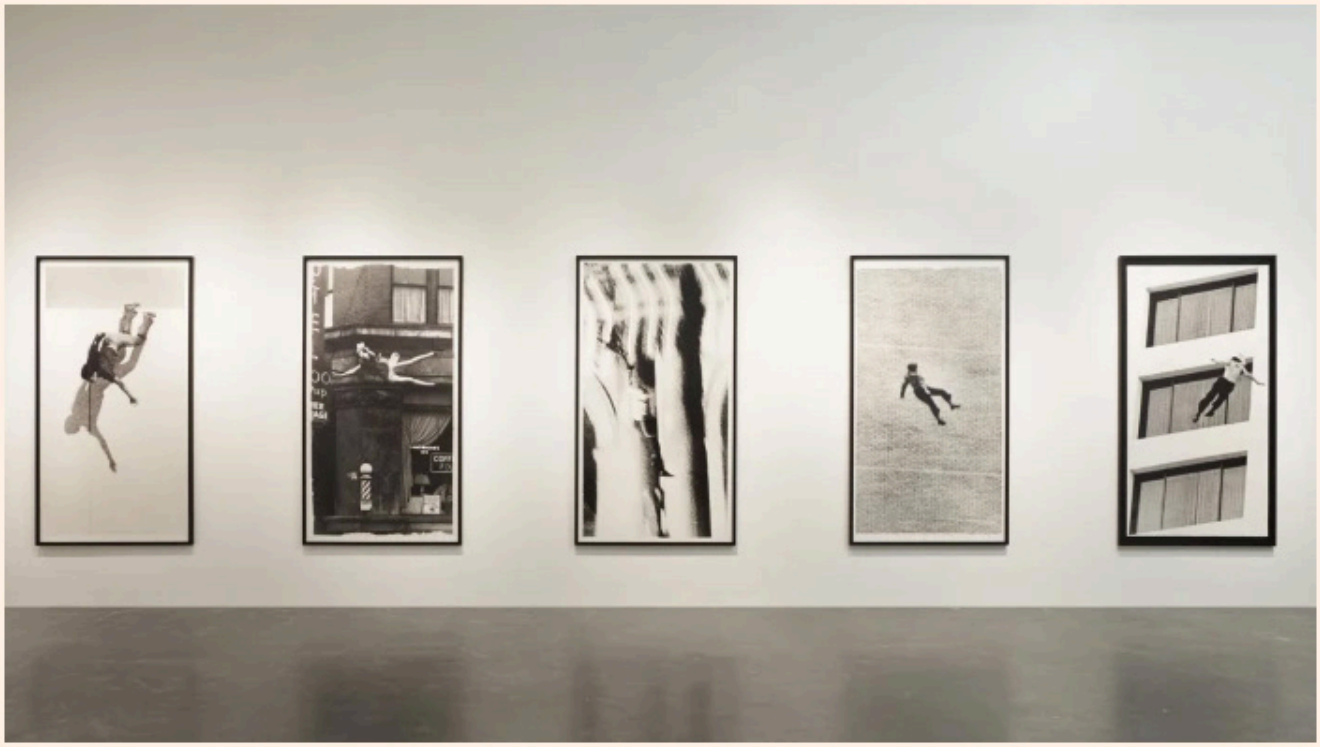
FINANCIAL TIMES

Sarah Charlesworth/Albert Oehlen, New Museum, New York

Charlesworth's harrowing images of suicides overshadow Oehlen's anti-consumerist critiques



Images from Sarah Charlesworth's 'Stills' series at New Museum, New York. Photo: Benoit Pailley © Benoit Pailley

The New Museum's elevator opens on to a haunted gallery where 14 people are plunging to their deaths. In 1980 the American artist Sarah Charlesworth trawled newswires and library archives for images of suicides or of people leaping to escape horrific fates. A man in a business suit spread-eagles, Icarus-like, far above a city of towers, railways and a smoky waterfront. His fingers, silhouetted against the light, grasp for purchase in the thin bright air.

In another picture, taken closer to the earth, a woman in a billowing dress stretches out horizontally, as if she were leaping on to a bed. The street that rushes towards her is full of depressingly prosaic details: a man who has yet to see her tumble by sits in the window of a coffee shop advertising 10-cent sandwiches and exhorting passers-by to "Give Till It Hurts Hitler". It looks as though the falling woman might land on a barbershop pole.

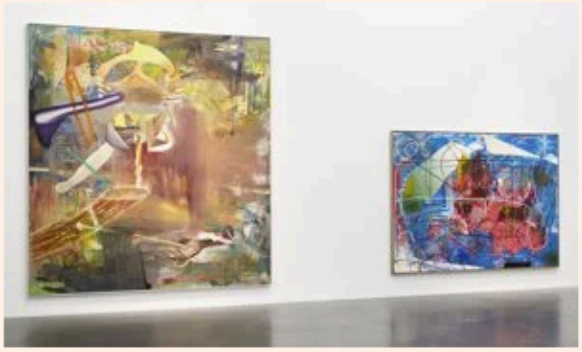
A third photo is full of graceful mystery: a shrouded figure of indeterminate sex hovers vertically between light and dark, as if plunging bare-feet-first into a liquid netherworld. Charlesworth's series "Stills" is the centrepiece of her first retrospective at the New Museum, *Doubleworld*, and it makes for a harrowing introduction. Obscene, voyeuristic and yet serenely beautiful, this suicide suite overshadows the rest of a career that lasted another 30 years until her death in 2013.

All sorts of questions frame these shots. Who are these people? Did they regret their final decision in the moments before they suffered its consequence? Did some passer-by with a camera happen upon a scene of mayhem and have the presence of mind to snap? Or was a reporter dispatched to the scene of a disaster foretold? Charlesworth gives no answers. Her titles tell us where the events took place (Madrid, Texas, Ankara) and provide an occasional, perhaps fictitious, name. By cropping, rephotographing, and enlarging the images to the human-sized scale of just over six feet high, she turns each unfortunate into a mythical creature in her own pantheon, absorbing their identities into hers.

Charlesworth was one of the lesser-known members of the so-called Pictures Generation, a loosely aligned movement that included Sherrie Levine, Laurie Simmons, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman and others who blended pop art's delight in found objects with the conceptualists' affection for ideas. Her "Stills" take a cue from Andy Warhol's "Death and Disasters" of the 1960s. He too drew upon press photos of car accidents, suicides and other tragedies, most of them too bloody for publication.

Warhol based his many versions of the electric chair used to execute Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for treason in 1953 on an utterly bland and matter-of-fact archival photo that he borrowed from the New York Public Library (and never returned). His ingenious use of the silkscreen process caused the stationary chair to take on the appearance of movement, as if it were quivering with noxious energy. We tend to think of Warhol as the master of deadpan, emotionally absent artistry. Who knew he was a closet expressionist? Charlesworth's prints have the same quality of veiled despair. The enlarged images almost vaporise, charged with the scene's galvanic intensity. They became even more disturbing after September 11 2001, when Richard Drew's AP photo of a man falling head first from the World Trade Center entered the visual lexicon of US history.

After "Stills", Charlesworth retreated to colourful but cold analyses of inanimate things. She turned to "Objects of Desire" (1983-88), rephotographing appropriated images against backdrops of saturated colour. A black leather harness floats against a red ground; a white satin gown from the 1930s models itself against a black backdrop, its wearer's face and body erased. A unicorn gambols across green glossy emptiness. These disembodied artefacts, displayed as if in an imaginary museum of bric-a-brac, were intended partly as instruction. These are the shiny things we seek, the expensive illusions we gather; look how empty they are. But Charlesworth didn't translate that austere lesson into a seductive artistic experience. The result feels preachy and cold.



Albert Oehlen's 'DJ Techno' (2001) and 'Streithelfer' (1997) at New Museum, New York. Courtesy of Galerie Max Hetzler and Gagosian Gallery © Courtesy of Galerie Max Hetzler and Gagosian Gallery

A similar anti-consumerist bitterness pervades the work of the 60-year-old German artist Albert Oehlen in the New Museum's concurrent show, *Home and Garden*. At first and second — and perhaps even third — glance, Oehlen's canvases seem wildly encrusted with paint, smears and streaks that suggest Willem de Kooning having a tantrum. Oehlen's colours are glaring, his lines violent, his self-restraint apparently nil. We seem to be in the presence of a man fuelled by high-octane emotion, the kind that leads some people to take a drastic step.

But Oehlen, like Charlesworth, mixes heat with a cool, methodical sensibility — or rather, layers one on top of the other. He often starts not with a blank canvas but with an undercoat of prefabricated images. In the 1990s, he drew pictures with crude software on a computer, then reproduced them, pixel by boxy pixel, in oil and partly covered them with organic swirls. More recently, he has painted over mint-condition advertisements, letting their garish come-ons radiate through his even more lurid abstractions.

These palimpsests of the commercial and the expressive have a critique to sell, of course — a profound resignation that capitalism undergirds every aspect of life, making it impossible to imagine any other form of existence, according to a catalogue essay by Mark Godfrey. But Oehlen doesn't actually plumb sociocultural truths so much as wallow in giddy glibness. Where Charlesworth's "Stills" took a good close look at horror and turned its residue into art, Oehlen's paintings offer only vague intimations of depth while remaining firmly glued to the surface.

'Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld', until September 20; 'Albert Oehlen: Home and Garden' until September 13, newmuseum.org