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Sarah Charlesworth's Retrospective Gives You Double Vision

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Sarah Charlesworth, Bowland Column; Images courtesy of The New Museum, 2015

Sarah Charlesworth's career can be broadly situated alongside the Pictures Generation, a cohort of artists who came of age in the Seventies and began to work within the newly circulating visual language of mass media. For many, Charlesworth among them, the photograph became a device rather than a tool, and images were used self-referentially to upend photographic conventions pervading the ever-expanding worlds of film, television and print. Through the appropriation and altering of pre-existing "pictures", artists sought to disrupt the political, sexual and social hierarchies that these modes of distribution enforced.



Sarah Charlesworth, April 19, 20, 21, 1978, installation view; Images courtesy of The New Museum, 2015

"Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld", now on view at the New Museum, does the supreme job of articulating this early conceptual legacy, while expanding on her oeuvre, giving an inclusive look at her unyielding dedication to photography beyond the boundaries of newspapers and magazines. Curated by New Museum Artistic Director Massimiliano Gioni and Associate Director Margot Norten, the exhibition is organised into five rooms, each space presenting a cohesive and distinctly styled body of work that outlines the evolution of a practice that begins in the late Seventies and continues until 2012, just a year before the artist's untimely death.

These 14 grainy black and white gelatin silver prints are of a particularly evocative nature within the context of New York City, a curatorial move that candidly sets the tone for the remainder of the exhibition. It is one that lays forth an idea that Charlesworth continually explores: the image may be made with the camera's lens but it is created in the mind of the viewer.

Moreover, it is the artist who truly dictates what we see and how we see it. Charlesworth's practice is a series of strong edits and a continual act of reduction. This is seen most clearly in her earlier, and much celebrated, series of front page newspaper alterations "Modern History" (1978-79), and later in works such as "Objects of Desire" (1983-1988), where the artist meticulously cuts out individual objects: a man's face made up to look like Geisha, a black harness, a sculptural bust, among others, and re-photographs them floating centred within the frame, upon boldly hued backgrounds. Unlike "Stills", with its explicit narrative and relation to movement, "Objects of Desire" is intentionally opaque in its presentation of object, time and place. This requires the viewer to conjure their own impulses, their own fetishisms, all within Charlesworth's carefully nuanced and predetermined set of of socio-cultural meanings.



Sarah Charlesworth, Red Mask; Images courtesy of The New Museum, 2015

"Doubleworld" continues on into Charleswoth's use of the studio still life as a possible site for image manipulation and control. Relying less on found images and more on pattern, symmetry and controlled light, Charlesworth's work edges into a highly meditative abstraction. The question at stake becomes less about the power structures that these images propagate and more about the photograph itself, its ability to represent, and its essential characteristic that runs throughout: the artificial doubling of our world into its own.

Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld is on show at The New Museum**, New York until 20 September 2015**

Text by Devon Caranicas