THE NEW YORKER 100

"SARAH CHARLESWORTH: DOUBLE WORLD"

By Vince Aletti

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"Bird Woman" (1986), from Charlesworth's opulent but restrained series "Objects of Desire." Courtesy Estate of Sarah Charlesworth and MacCarone Gallery

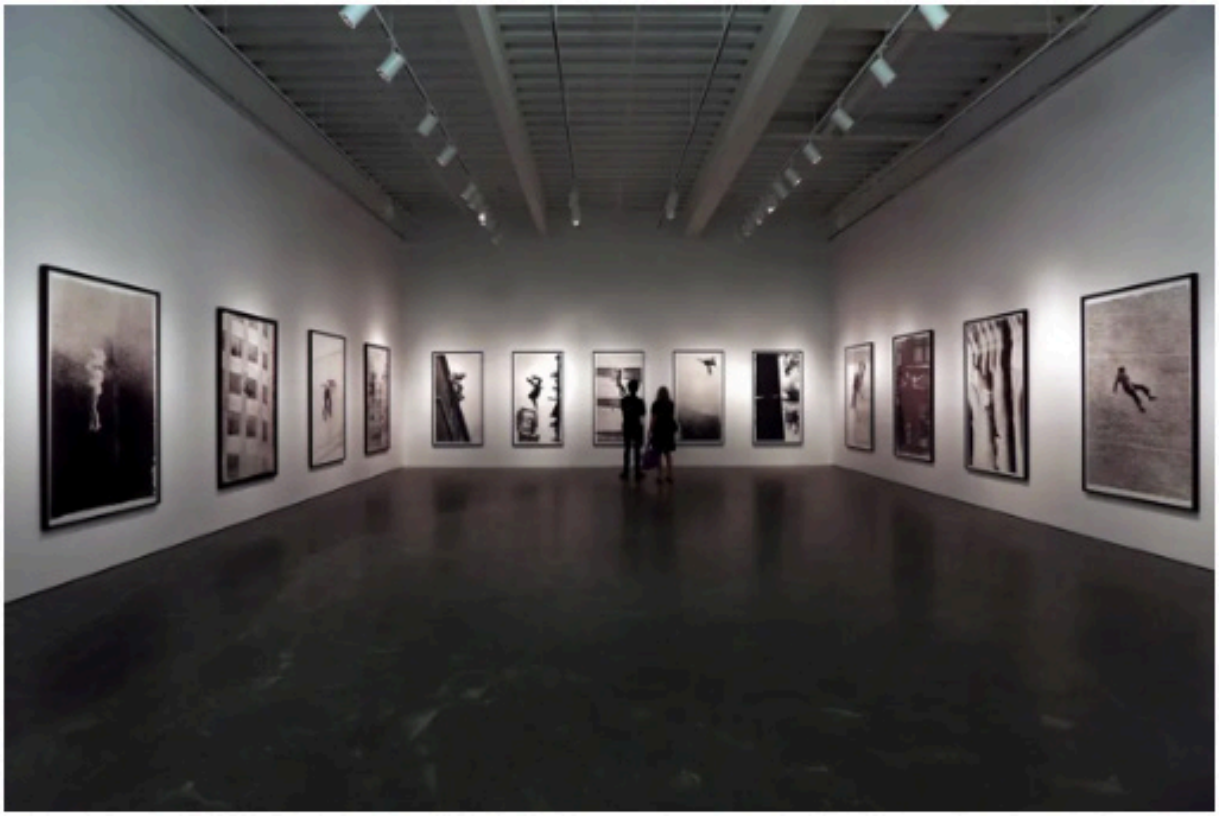
Sarah Charlesworth never liked the label "appropriation artist," despite the fact that her most important work involved images found in magazines and newspapers. The term entered the lexicon in the seventies, to describe New York's Pictures Generation, which included Charlesworth and such peers as Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Richard Prince, but it couldn't begin to acknowledge those artists' subtlety, depth, or audacity. Charlesworth, who died of an aneurysm in 2013, at the age of sixty-six, proposed a more brazen description of her process: "I think of myself as a robber," she told an interviewer. "I plunder and pillage on paper. . . . I possess these things and give them my own meaning." In the New Museum's concise and elegant exhibition "Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld," the curators Massimiliano Gioni and Margot Norton wisely avoid trying to pin down anything as elusive as "meaning" in thirty-five years' worth of work. Instead, they emphasize a through line of haunting ambiguity.

Charlesworth made her strongest impact in the eighties, in several series that arranged cutout, blown-up photographs on monochrome backgrounds. One of those series, "Objects of Desire" (1983-1988), has a room to itself at the museum. Quietly powerful, opulent but restrained, the big, glossy pictures in super-saturated colors are at once serene and disturbing. The subjects, all stripped of context, include an S & M harness, a lotus flower, a woman in a burka, and a rubber-sheathed bondage figure. They suggest rituals both sacred and sexual—an intricate web of free-floating associations that seems to connect everything else in the show, no matter how apparently unrelated.

Charlesworth had a gift for paring a picture down to its essence. In her sprawling, forty-part "Figure Drawings" (1988/2008), Shiva, Lenin, Elvis, Jesus Christ, and a high-stepping Avedon model appear as black-and-white silhouettes—it's an encyclopedia of icons and attitudes. Several other series deconstruct the media, in one case removing everything except for the mastheads and photographs of solar eclipses from the front pages of twenty-nine newspapers published on February 26, 1979. "I'm trying to let the image reveal its own nature," Charlesworth once said of her work. "In the process, it reveals mine."

The show's greatest revelation may be the little-seen 1980 series "Stills." Fourteen grainy black-and-white photographs clipped from newspapers and enlarged to six and a half feet high portray bodies falling through space—suicides, slips, desperate leaps. They ring a room at the museum like windows on hell, echoing Andy Warhol's "Death and Disasters" series and, far more uncannily, anticipating the indelible 2001 image of a man falling from the World Trade Center, in which one figure stood in for many. In their ambiguity, the "Stills" are at once horrifying and exhilarating, both plummeting and flying. Throughout her career, Charlesworth sought to strike a balance between what she described as "desire and alienation." The New Museum exhibition succeeds by keeping viewers off balance and on guard. ♦

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Images from Sarah Charlesworth's "Stills" (1980) series. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A kind of investigatory passion for all aspects of photography suffuses "Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld," the trim, handsome survey that glides through five galleries at the New Museum. Organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the museum's artistic director, and Margot Norton, its associate curator, it traces a transformative exploration of a medium, covering 10 series of images made between 1978 and 2012, albeit some with only a few. You can almost feel the forthright Ms. Charlesworth moving briskly from one series to the next, formulating for each a distinct subject, scale, printing method, frame and, usually, a big, ambitious title.

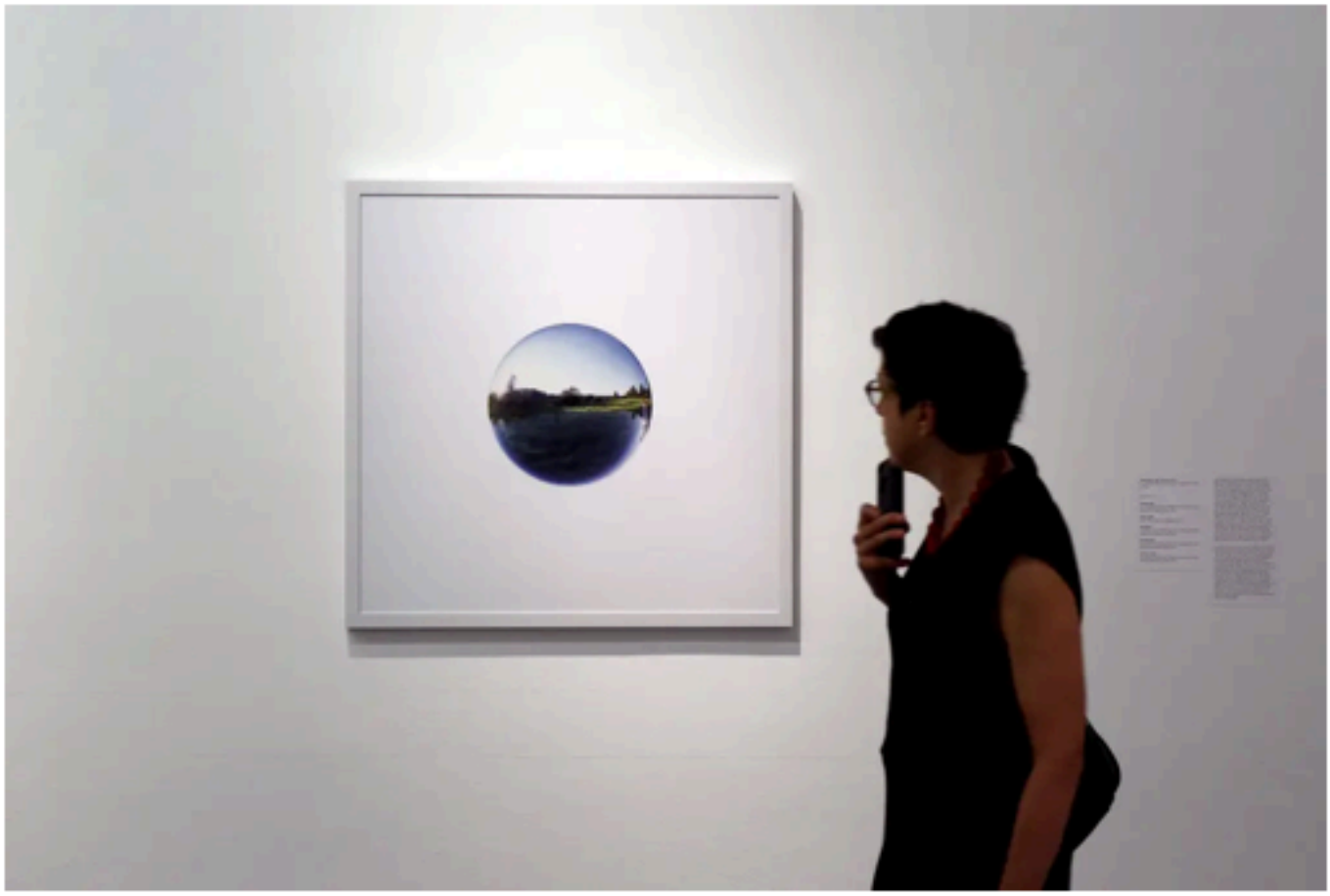
Her "Modern History" series includes "Arc of Total Eclipse, February 26, 1979," which is emblematic of a 22-year-old artist living in New York who already knew the leading Conceptualists through Douglas Huebler, her college art professor and also a Conceptualist. The series consists of actual-size photo-based prints of the front pages of 29 American and Canadian newspapers featuring pictures of a total eclipse that occurred on the date of the title. The pages are pure white — a perennial favorite of Ms. Charlesworth's — having been stripped of everything but their nameplates and photographs. They chart how one event registered with 29 sets of newspaper editors and art directors in terms of size, choice and prominence of image (or images), giving us a small study of human variability. It uses one of the premier strategies of Conceptual Art — nothing but the facts, sorted — but achieves a new level of visual fascination and glamour.



"Figure Drawings" (1988/2008). Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Ms. Charlesworth had a sense of precision, beauty and mystery all her own, and an eye for clean design that made her images look modern, even if the objects in them were not. Her best pieces have a tendency to appear perfect but simple and then to open inward, spurring you to think through the image and its meanings and effect on you.

The show's opening gallery is a gripping introduction to this tendency. The space is lined with grainy grisaille images, gelatin silver prints about the size of large doors or windows. It takes a moment to start seeing the falling body in each of these nearly abstract fields of dark and light. When you do, your brain freezes a bit.



An image from the "Available Light" series. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Collectively titled “Stills,” these works were made in 1980 — years before Sept. 11 — using published photographs, enlarged and reworked to be atmospheric and indistinct. Do they depict people at the end of their psychic ropes and ready to die? Or are their subjects leaping from burning buildings, trying to live? Did any of them survive? Who could take a picture like this? Who would? Looking at them feels taboo, like an invasion of privacy. Their factuality doesn’t disguise their extreme emotionality. Few human gestures are more fraught, desperate or often final than these.

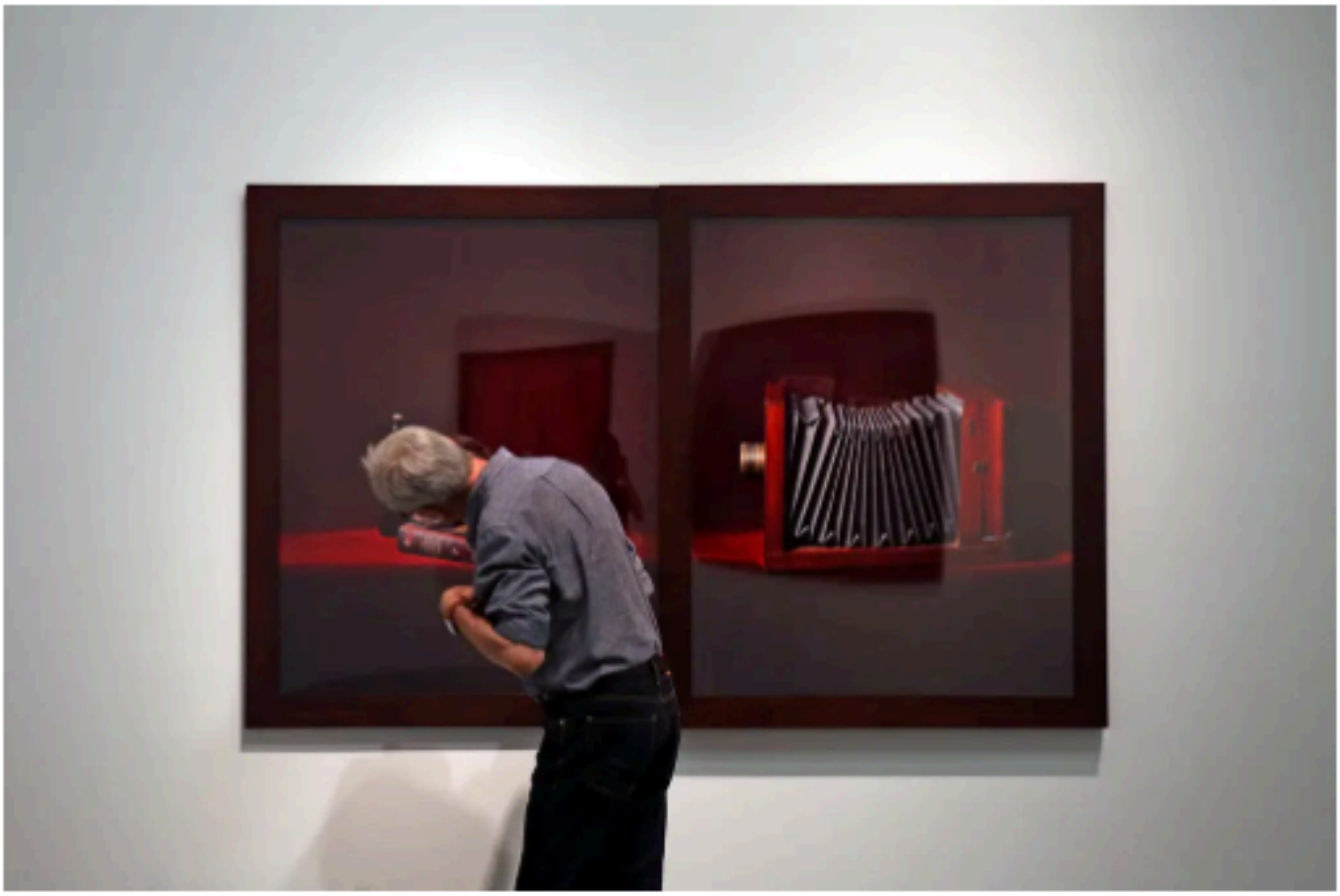
In several cases, the long, narrow image feels like motion itself: You almost expect the body to move, or to appear more than once in a series of frames. Yet the size, proportion and texture of the images also evoke painting. And the enlarged bodies, each in its own horrific posture of free fall, approach our own size. The space around them is usually immense, a void into which you could almost jump.



"Gold" and "Lotus Bowl" from the "Objects of Desire" (1983-88) series. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Ms. Charlesworth, who considered her work to be as much like painting as like photography, would not allow as much space in her images again. Hereafter, the photograph as flat object, as physical entity, dominates, and never more than in the show's next gallery.

With the “Objects of Desire” series (1983-88), which follows the “Stills,” the show abruptly shifts from the metaphysical to the physical. Here one or a few objects are isolated on fields of saturated color so bright and glossy that they resemble lacquer, and perfectly match their lacquered frames. They are Cibachrome prints of appropriated images photographed against bright, laminated monochrome backgrounds. Seductive, repellent, otherworldly, these works picture things that are often fetishized: the female body, exotic animals or religious objects. “Lotus Bowl,” for example, shows a gold ritual vessel on a bright green ground. An image of a real lotus flower floats above it, reminding us of art’s grounding in nature, and also contrasting solidity with fading, soul-like fragility.



"Still Life With Camera" (1995). Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

The most successful “Objects of Desire” pieces tackle the obsession with objects from other cultures, with the two-panel “Maps” being a high-voltage case in point. On one panel, the yellow-on-black stripes of a highway’s center line are seen up close and from above, like a Pop Art abstract painting. On the other, an orangey ancient bowl is also seen from above on a bright highway-stripe yellow background. The bowl’s motifs suggest a horizon line, a blazing sun and a time long before hardtop roads. The work’s visual strengths keep the mind going with possible interpretations, both graphic and spatial.

The next two galleries show Ms. Charlesworth in a relative holding pattern in the 1990s. She cut images from photographs of Renaissance paintings, assembling them into little morality plays concerning gender that again use the monochrome grounds, but matte and restrained. In “Figure Drawings” (1988/2008), she covers a wall with tiny black-on-white images of bodies — from a dancing Shiva to a giant statue of Lenin — as if indexing both the variety and constancy of the human form throughout time.



"Bull," from the "Objects of Desire" (1983-88) series. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

And with the "Doubleworld" series (1995), she eases into arranging and photographing actual objects, initially from the history of optics. In "Still Life With Camera," a 19th-century wet-plate camera is pointed at a fittingly antique bottle of wine, a leather-bound book and an amulet-like photograph of a female nude, crisply suggesting the continuity of male pleasure. In "Untitled (Voyeur)," a shiny gold telescope pokes suggestively — if simplistically — between the folds of heavy red curtains.

In the last dozen years of her life, Ms. Charlesworth continued to make photographs about photography while giving her penchant for almost breathtaking beauty fuller expression. “Camera Work,” from her “Work in Progress” (2009) series, is a Calumet view camera shown twice — upright and inverted, positive and negative — a stark abstraction based on a picture-taking apparatus. Beauty of an especially philosophical sort reigns in the “0+1” series (2000), which shows white objects of desire against white grounds — for example, a bough of orchids, a Buddha — creating a very modern vanitas about the world melting away.

And in her last series, “Available Light” (2012), Ms. Charlesworth’s attachment to beauty, optics and the elucidation of photography come completely into real space, where the reflections and refractions of natural light do the talking. These studio setups seamlessly merge past and present while light acts upon various glass objects and art materials. In “Carnival Ball,” an almost frivolous sense of elegance, perfectly executed, is belied by sheer simplicity. A glass sphere sits in a cut-glass goblet in front of a swath of wallpaper whose broad blue and white stripes are seen through them, first bulging like a hot-air balloon and then contracting into tiny bars.

In this new, unexpectedly final blossoming of her unfailing precision, Ms. Charlesworth’s art is softer but no less rigorous and still a source of eye-opening experiences. It is as if she were saying: “I’ve done almost nothing. See for yourself.”

A correction was made on June 26, 2015*: An earlier version of a picture caption with this review misidentified the artworks depicted. The images come from Sarah Charlesworth’s “Stills” series; not “Arc of Total Eclipse, February 26, 1979,” from Ms. Charlesworth’s “Modern History” series.*