VOGUE

Artsplainer: Decoding Sarah Charlesworth's *Patricia Cawlings, Los Angeles* at New York's New Museum

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Sarah Charlesworth, *Patricia Cawlings, Los Angeles*, from the "Stills" series, 1980. Black-and-white mural print, 78 x 42 in (198.1 x 106.6 cm). Photo: Courtesy of the Estate of Sarah Charlesworth and Maccarone Gallery, New York

The Manhattan- and Connecticut-based photographer Sarah Charlesworth was a friend and contemporary of famous members of the Pictures Generation like **Cindy Sherman** and **Laurie Simmons**, but unlike them, she never became a household name.

A just-opened retrospective at the New Museum, her first major exhibition in New York City, could change that. Charlesworth, who died two years ago at 66 from an aneurism, was a "pioneer in photographic appropriation," says **Margot Norton**, an associate curator who co-organized the show. "She was one of the first to really look at photographs as this alternate lexicon that we are absorbed with on a daily basis. And of course I think her work really reverberates with the pervasiveness of images in social media."

The show's title, "Doubleworld," is a reference to Charlesworth's 1995 series of the same name, and to a specific image from that series: a still life of two antique stereoscopic viewing devices each holding a doubled photo of two women standing next to each other. The title also illustrates Charlesworth's notion that photography is an increasingly ubiquitous "alternate universe" that we interact with every day.

It's a theme that pervades her diverse body of work, made over nearly four decades. Charlesworth first became known for her "Modern History" series, in which she traced the language of news events by photographing the front pages of newspapers and removing everything other than the masthead and the images. Later, in her "Objects of Desire" series, she repurposed images of objects and rephotographed them against richly saturated monochromatic backgrounds, playing with the sleek visual lexicon of advertising and fashion magazines.

But the masterpieces of the show, says Norton, belong to Charlesworth's "Stills" series, which she first showed in 1980, and then revisited with six more images in 2012, near the end of her career. Norton calls these a bridge between "Modern History"— "more in tune with what was happening in conceptual art in the seventies"—and "Objects of Desire."

For "Stills," Charlesworth combed through the archives at the New York Public Library looking for newspaper images of figures suspended in midair, people who had deliberately jumped or accidentally fallen off buildings. She cropped the images, mounted them on boards, and rephotographed them, blowing them up to a slightly larger-than-life six and a half feet tall. "She's taken a very small clipping and brought it to human scale so the viewer is able to enter the image," says Norton.

The titles of the pieces include only the most basic information, sometimes the name of the falling person, sometimes the location—as in *Patricia Cawlings, Los Angeles* above. It's just enough context to spark our curiosity, but not enough to tell us what happens next. The effect is that the viewer is stuck in the moment of the fall, forced to really *look*.

In a 1980 interview in *Cover* Magazine with Betsy Sussler, Charlesworth put it like this: "One of the things that fascinated me was the tension inherent in the image, the contradiction between the desire for information that completes the 'story' and the experience of an incomplete moment. One knows there's a human history which exists outside the image, and yet as photographs they are complete. They are static. They never fucking fall."

Here, Margot Norton on Sarah Charlesworth's *Patricia Cawlings, Los Angeles* and the rest of the artist's "Stills" series.



Sarah Charlesworth Photo: Anthony Barboza/Getty Images

How does this series about people connect to Charlesworth's later preoccupation with photographing objects?

They're people, but they're also *still*, as the title suggests. They're frozen in this specific moment between whatever caused them to jump or to fall off of the building, and whatever might happen after. She was isolating a specific moment, which she would later carry out with the "Objects of Desire" series.

And she's treating the photo like an object in and of itself.

Yes, of course. You know, the edges of all of those images are cut out, so they show what the original source is, the grainy texture of the newspaper paper. And because they're blown up, too, you can really see the grain. There's this abstract quality to the images.

Do we know anything about Patricia Cawlings?

What the title tells us. That's all. But that information really does not give any clues as to why has this person fallen off a building. The viewer is really left to ponder the story, not only the reasons why this person has fallen, but also the relationship between the photographed and photographer. Was this photographer a journalist on assignment? Were they placed outside this building to take this image? Or was this a passerby who happened to capture this? How was this image taken pre-iPhone? And also, how did Sarah find this image? What were the circumstances?

Charlesworth first created this series pre-Internet. But now I could google Patricia Cawlings, Los Angeles and probably find something.

You know, I haven't done that, but I've thought about it. I totally have. In 1980, you'd have to go to the library and do some digging. Now it takes a lot less effort to do that same thing. It is interesting because Charlesworth gives you just that small amount of information where if you wanted to find out about it you could. But I think just that small amount of information does make the viewer identify with the person in the image, and also with what the circumstances might have been, without giving away what has happened before or after the snap of the camera's shutter.

When these were first displayed in 1980, was there any backlash to the idea of making art out of someone's personal tragedy?

It's funny because there was a lot of criticism about her later work, the "Objects of Desire" series, but there wasn't that much criticism about this series. I think the emotional intensity of their content is something that's very special. The work that she was known for before was "Modern History," which also dealt with specific events. But with these the emotional poignancy is really heightened.

It's hard not to see September 11 when we look at these, even though they were created well before that. When my editor and I were looking at the images, we also thought about the opening credits for *Mad Men*.

Obviously when she reprinted them in 2012, Sarah knew how these images had taken on a different significance in light of the terrorist attacks of September 11. The image of *The Falling Man*, that was a really widely disseminated image. Something that Sarah spoke about throughout her career was how images take on a different significance in light of events that have happened since then. And also the way that images are disseminated in the media, how they almost become ingrained in our consciousness without us knowing it. They shape the way we see. These images, which beforehand didn't have anything to do with a terrorist attack, there was this way the whole series she made previously had shifted. It's fascinating how each person relates to these images in a different way dependent on their own personal experiences of this. And I think that September 11 is something that everyone can relate to.

Can you describe the experience of standing in front of these? What does it *feel* like?
When you're looking at a newspaper clipping surrounded by text, there's a remove. [Here] you identify differently with the person that you see in the image because they are so large. You're confronted by them. Especially when you see these together, there's this feeling of falling, a visceral response. But they're also such objects themselves. They're large, but they're just slightly taller than human scale. They do have this relationship with the body that I think was very intentional.

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What do you see in this image of Patricia Cawlings in particular?
This one is very clear. You really can see her. In some of them, they're falling so fast that the camera can't really [make out] the individual. Or they're abstracted because it's taken from so far away. To me this one also really seems stuck; she looks like she's falling, but there's also a stillness to her. The photograph cheats her out of that falling experience. She could be somehow flying or leaping from building to building. There's such a heaviness when you see them together in the room. Then, when you look more, there's a hopefulness that emerges.

It's also interesting that she's seeing her shadow, a representation of herself doing that act. It's not just the camera seeing; there's also this doubling with the shadow on the building.

So . . . Doubleworld?
Yeah, definitely!

This interview has been condensed and edited.