

SARAH CHARLESWORTH: DOUBLEWORLD

New Museum - New York

By Keren Moscovitch



Sarah Charlesworth, *Buddha of Immeasurable Light*, from the "Objects of Desire" series, 1987, diptych, Cibachrome with lacquered wood frame, 62" x 42." Courtesy the Estate of Sarah Charlesworth and Maccarone Gallery, New York.

"Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld" at the New Museum in New York City is the influential artist's first major U.S. retrospective, sadly presented posthumously after her unexpected death in 2013. Charlesworth's legacy is rich in visual and critical material, narrative of mythic proportions and analysis of a philosophical caliber rarely encountered so vividly in the visual arts. A member of the legendary Pictures Generation, Charlesworth was an influential leader in a movement that explored photography as a mediator of public consciousness. Her work astutely deconstructs and recomposes appropriated imagery, and reinterprets a practice that is traditionally referred to as "photography" but that, in her hands, adopts meaning far beyond the realm of the camera. Charlesworth's oeuvre succeeds in being emotionally arresting and visually seductive without resorting to melodrama. She pushes at the edges of design, but retains a deep connection to the specificity of verbal language, making the work an aesthetic and conceptual feast.

Artistic director Massimiliano Gioni and associate curator Margot Norton made bold curatorial choices regarding the placement and sequencing of the work, greeting visitors at the exhibition's entrance with the disquieting "Stills" series, only later appeasing the palate with the candy-colored and Tiffany-hued richness of Charlesworth's more visually indulgent work. Despite its aesthetic Spartanism, "Stills" is clearly the most emotionally arresting grouping in the show. Standing at 78 inches tall, these images, culled from the press, of people jumping or falling from buildings, predate the September 11 attacks by decades and succeed in spawning the dread, fear and sorrow that accompany such tragic homages. One must appreciate how much the meaning of the work has changed over time, now that we have learned to identify such iconography with desperation and doom on a scale beyond that of individual existential catastrophe.

Charlesworth's work demonstrates how vision transforms objects into icons, especially through repetition, juxtaposition and design. Series such as "Objects of Desire" and "Modern History" probe the fetishism of iconography, highlighting the quasi-religious and mythic quality of objects. Compositions such as *Fear of Noth-*

ing and *Natural History* propose schisms between rationality and chaos, logic and the void, and expose the beauty that exists in humankind's encounter with the unknown.

The diptych *Buddha of Immeasurable Light* is an iconic image of Charlesworth's that deserves continued recognition for its ability to encapsulate the artist's lifelong confrontation with the beyond, and the paltry, yet bewitching representations offered by institutionalized spirituality. Employing one of her favorite devices, Charlesworth pairs two images that interrogate and challenge one another to construct a new narrative and a pressing set of questions. On the left sits a statue of a Buddha, solidly perched in a classic posture of meditation suggesting clarity and groundedness, yet floating on a deep blue ground resembling a light and wide open sky. On the right, darkness surrounds what appears to be a neatly cut circular hole in the ceiling of an unspecified chamber, a glimpse of blue sky reminiscent of that evoked by the Buddha. Borrowing from the language of advertising and commercial design, she provokes us with our own unquenchable thirst for products and their promises of wholeness. In this poetic pairing, Charlesworth seems to imply that the human experience is one of being trapped in a dark room, staring up at freedom from our prison-like existence and placing all our hopes of transcendence in a representation of our ideal selves.

"Doubleworld" reveals a prolific and sensitive practice in which creativity, critical rigor and spiritual inquiry convene in a lavish celebration of the human quest for meaning. As demonstrated by this comprehensive homage, Charlesworth's generous contribution to the history of art and consciousness cannot be overstated. ■

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Keren Moscovitch is an interdisciplinary artist, curator and scholar exploring the intersection of the sexual and the spiritual. She is based in New York City where she teaches at the School of Visual Arts. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad, and reviewed in publications such as Der Spiegel, The Huffington Post, Playboy, Policy Mic and New York Magazine.