

**Exhibition: Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld****On View: August 20–November 26, 2017****Location: Art of the Americas Building, Level 2**

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(Los Angeles—July 19, 2017) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld*, the artist's first full-scale museum exhibition in Los Angeles. Sarah Charlesworth (1947–2013) was a highly influential artist whose work examined the role that photographic images play in contemporary culture. Charlesworth aligned closely with a group of artists in the 1980s known as the Pictures Generation, which included Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and Laurie Simmons, among others. First identified by curator Douglas Crimp in his 1977 exhibition *Pictures*, at Artists Space in New York, these artists were concerned with how contemporary life is mediated and governed by pictures, specifically experienced through newspapers and magazines, on television, and in film. Over her 40-year career, Charlesworth explored representation and symbolism, first through re-photographing and collaging found images, and later through creating stylized arrangements for the camera.

*Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld* features photographs from 10 bodies of work—approximately 70 photographs in total—made between 1977 and 2012, including her earliest works (Modern History series) and her final photographs (Available Light series), with important examples in between, including her 1980s series, Objects of Desire. Invested with a rare precision and dedication, Charlesworth produced a body of work that continues to inspire contemporary artists and viewers who are surrounded by an increasingly image-saturated culture.

The Los Angeles presentation of *Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld* is curated by Rebecca Morse, associate curator of the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department.

The exhibition was organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art where it was on view from June 24 through September 20, 2015.

“LACMA is honored to present the first Los Angeles exhibition of this influential artist,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “As an important member of the Pictures Generation, Sarah Charlesworth explored and questioned contemporary life through visual imagery, and her approach is particularly relevant in understanding our current image-oriented culture.”

“As the visual landscape has shifted and image-based social media platforms rely on photographs to behave as a primary language—often in place of written and spoken methods of communication—Charlesworth’s work is extremely pertinent in decoding the roles that images play as forms of representation, as icons, and as symbols,” said Rebecca Morse, exhibition curator.

### **Exhibition Organization and Highlights**

The first gallery pairs one of Charlesworth’s earliest works, *Tabula Rasa (1981)* with her series **O+1 (2000)**. Charlesworth’s early interest in examining originality is evident in her silkscreen prints in *Tabula Rasa*, in which she rephotographed an 1826 image—of a table set outdoors for a simple meal—by French photographer Nicéphore Niépce, acknowledged as the inventor of photography and an early pioneer of the medium. The original version of the image had long been missing, so Charlesworth photographed a paper copy, creating an extended thesis on individuality and creativity—two ideas at the heart of her early rephotographic work. The works in the *O+1* series test the threshold of visual perception. White sculptural objects—a Buddha, a monkey, and a lattice screen—are set against a white background, and the scene is flooded with bright light so that only the finest edge reveals the form. Charlesworth was continuously interested in emptying out the picture plane, challenging our expectations of photographic representation. Rather than seeing sharp, distinct objects, viewers are presented with quiet and subtle images that demand focused attention.

Also in the first gallery is the **Neverland** series (2002). For this series, Charlesworth photographed objects, either alone or in groups, on fields of color. In many instances, as in *Tree* and *Nike*, the object and its background are the same color, creating an uncanny visual effect—they seem inextricably linked, as if one originated from the other. In other works from the same series, such as *Pipe* the

background color is lighter than the object, which creates an isolated, floating image. In *Neverland*, Charlesworth demonstrates how to create a symbol by isolating an object from its context. She thought of the series as a “mental landscape” and mused on how a viewer might travel through the installation of photographs thinking, “Oh, it’s the icon of a tree, it’s the essence of tree, it’s the symbol of tree, it’s the symbol of nature.”

**Figure Drawings (1988/2008)**, features an installation of 40 framed images of the human figure. Drawing from found images—mostly iconic statuary ranging from ancient to contemporary—these figures are shown gesturing, marching, dancing, and fighting. Installed from floor to ceiling, they represent a cosmology of the human form. The work was conceived of in 1988 but not realized until 2008 when it was displayed at a gallery show in New York. Many of the figures in this work echo iconography from her earlier series, such as the Buddha from *Objects of Desire* (1983–89) and *O+1* (2000), as well as the figure of Shiva, which resurfaces again in Charlesworth’s last series, *Available Light* (2012). The recurrence of these symbols underscores Charlesworth’s overarching engagement with the ways in which images reinforce power structures tied to gender, politics, and spirituality, as indexed in this installation.

**Objects of Desire** is Charlesworth’s longest running series (made from 1983 to 1989) and is the one for which she is best known. In this body of work, she made collages of found photographs (images of fetish objects, figures, statues, vessels, and architectural fragments clipped from fashion magazines, pornography, and archaeology textbooks) and rephotographed them against bright backgrounds of red, blue, green, yellow, and black. Here she explores representation and the way desire is communicated in mass media and popular culture through shape and color. In works such as *Figures*, she cut the clothing off the model to isolate the shape of the garment, a marker to express that person’s role in society. Also, by separating images from their original context, the objects portrayed in the photographs reveal how images could be precoded in our consciousness and influence individual attitudes toward material desire, sexuality, and power. For example, in *Red Mask*, what appears to be the delicate and alluring face of a Japanese geisha is actually the male actor Bando Tamasaburo V, who worked in the onnagata Kabuki theater tradition in which men portray women. This work reveals that the association a viewer summons to interpret an image may supersede the reality of what is depicted.

**Renaissance Paintings (1991)**, in the third gallery, features individual figures and objects from disparate Renaissance paintings that were isolated and rephotographed against monochrome backgrounds. Charlesworth looked specifically at the emotional thrust of the figures' gestures and placed them in spatial relationships to evoke new meanings. This series is not about Renaissance paintings themselves, said Charlesworth, but rather an acknowledgment that "we live in a world where Renaissance paintings exist." The works in this series were inspired by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, emphasizing representations of father, mother, and child. The religious iconography found in Renaissance paintings provides ample imagery and opportunity for probing familial relationships. Combining conceptual precision with spiritual and emotional intensity, this series allows for the reinterpretation of iconic paintings as open-ended narratives that evoke feelings of longing, loss, madness, and fear.

The series **Doubleworld (1995)**, from which the title of the show takes its name, is also in this gallery. In 1992, Charlesworth transitioned from collaging and rephotographing found images to creating stylized arrangements for the camera. In this series, she assembled still lifes of antique cameras, stereoscopic viewers, and telescopes—all optical instruments from the 19th century when photography was first invented. She simultaneously looked to the tradition of Dutch still life, which included fruits, flowers, and skulls and the dichotomy of abundance and decay. *Still Life with Camera* (1995) is arranged as a diptych with a mahogany frame dividing the composition. A box camera on the right is aimed at the group of objects on the left that includes a wine bottle, a leather-bound book, a pair of wire glasses, and a daguerreotype in an open case. A photograph of a photograph being taken accentuates Charlesworth's interest in doubling and, like the other works in *Doubleworld*, remind the viewer that photography is a distinct optical universe in which a world of images is separate from the physical world.

The next gallery presents **Stills (1980)**. For this series, Charlesworth compiled over 70 clippings of press photos that capture people falling or jumping off tall buildings. She then rephotographed these images and enlarged the photos (to over 6 feet tall), titling each with the name of the person and the location of the incident, if known. Here the images represent a fixed moment within a continuum, excluding whatever actions may have preceded and followed the snap of the camera's shutter. The incomplete narratives leave viewers to ponder the circumstances surrounding the images and consider possible motivations—whether a desperate act of suicide or an attempt to escape from danger. The uncertainty of these images reveals the

fundamental ambiguity of photographic reproduction. Charlesworth was among the first artists to embrace printing at this size, immersing the viewer in the image and breaking away from the tradition of the precious 8 × 10 black-and-white silver gelatin print convention of fine art photography.

**Available Light (2012)** is on view in the last gallery and is Charlesworth's final series. The body of work incorporates many of her techniques utilized over the course of her career. Relying solely on the available daylight from her studio window, Charlesworth photographed glass spheres, prisms, metal objects, and other reflective materials to produce luminous images with a subtle palette of whites, silvers, and blues. By placing a sheet of vellum over the window, Charlesworth evenly diffused the light and controlled its direction using a series of reflectors. She adhered segments of blue paper to the window to produce bands of blue light. In *Studio Wall (2012)*, Charlesworth's working process is on display; clippings of found images alongside printed photographs from the series have been pinned to the wall for further consideration, and a faint shadow of white cardboard as well as the tools used for cutting and pasting are visible, too. Charlesworth emphasizes that all images are constructed and even the "spontaneous" photograph is composed by the artist's hand, framing choices, and available light.

The exhibition concludes with Charlesworth's first series **Modern History (1979)**, in which she has rephotographed the front page of the newspaper with the text redacted. Here all communication is through the images and the comparison lies between the styles, needs, and requirements of the cities from which each of these newspapers is published. For this series, Charlesworth worked with found newspapers using a systematic method of removing text, which she called "unwriting," to produce works that explore the power of images in mass media. She focused on key news events and collected the front pages of newspapers from around the world to trace their coverage. By redacting the text but keeping the masthead, date, and photographs, a separate narrative emerged through size, placement, and angle. Installed serially, these works remind the viewer that news is shaped by its presentation and certain news stories are privileged as a result of economic, cultural, and political influences. For example, *The Arc of Total Eclipse February 26, 1979 (1979)* follows the northward path of an eclipse via its documentation on the front pages of local newspapers across the Pacific Northwest and into Canada. Charlesworth presents the photographs in geographical order—forming an arc that mimics the trajectory of the celestial occurrence—to show how the coverage of the eclipse varied according to a newspaper's location. Charlesworth was specifically

interested in the eclipse phenomenon; her photographs highlight an absence of light produced through a rarefied alignment of celestial bodies.

### **About the Artist**

Sarah Charlesworth was born in 1947 in East Orange, New Jersey. She received a BA from Barnard College in 1969 and lived and worked in New York and Connecticut. She has been the subject of solo exhibitions at a number of institutions, including a retrospective organized by SITE Santa Fe (1997), which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (1998); the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC (1998); and the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art (1999). Charlesworth's *Stills* series was presented in its entirety for the first time at the Art Institute of Chicago (2014). Her works have also been included in numerous group exhibitions, including, the 77th Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2014); *Shock of the News*, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (2012); *Signs of a Struggle: Photography in the Wake of Postmodernism*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2011); *September 11*, MoMA PS1, New York (2011); *Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010); *The Last Newspaper*, New Museum, New York (2010); *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2009); and *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2004). Charlesworth taught photography for many years at the School of the Visual Arts, New York; the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; and Princeton University, New Jersey. Charlesworth died in 2013.

### **Related Programming**

Monday, October 2, 7:30pm

Artist Talk: Laurie Simmons: "Sarah Charlesworth: The Story of Her Life"

Bing Theater; Free and open to the public

For more information, please visit [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)

### **Exhibition Publication**

*Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld* is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with contributions by Johanna Burton, Sarah Charlesworth, David Clarkson, Hal Foster, Barbara Kruger, Kate Linker, Margot Norton, Lisa Phillips, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and Sara VanDerBeek.

In addition, a newly published monograph *Sarah Charlesworth* published by DelMonico Books • Prestel and edited by Rochelle Steiner will be released on August 15. This richly illustrated book offers a historical perspective on Charlesworth's art and reflects extensive access to her archive, including notebooks, sketchbooks, diaries, studio logs, test prints, and many never-before-published images, revealing her thought processes over time and their articulation within and across her career. The book includes contributions from Eric Crosby, Mark Godfrey, Thomas Lawson, and Rebecca Morse.

### **Credit**

*Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld* is organized by the New Museum, New York, and made possible by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

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### **Image captions:**

[Left]: Sarah Charlesworth, *Tree*, from the Neverland series, 2002, dye destruction print, courtesy the Estate of Sarah Charlesworth and Maccarone New York/Los Angeles, © 2017 The Estate of Sarah Charlesworth

[Left Center]: Sarah Charlesworth, *Figures*, 1983, dye destruction prints, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, © 2017 The Estate of Sarah Charlesworth, digital image © 2017 Museum Associates/LACMA

[Right Center]: Sarah Charlesworth, *The Arc of Total Eclipse, February 26, 1979* (detail), from the Modern History series, 1979, printed 2010, 29 Fuji Crystal Archive prints, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, © 2017 The Estate of Sarah Charlesworth

[Right]: Sarah Charlesworth, *Half Bowl*, from the Available Light series, 2012, dye coupler print, courtesy the Estate of Sarah Charlesworth and Maccarone New York/Los Angeles, © 2017 The Estate of Sarah Charlesworth

### **About LACMA**

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes more than 130,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art; Latin American art,

ranging from masterpieces from the Ancient Americas to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement. LACMA is located in Hancock Park, 30 acres situated at the center of Los Angeles, which also contains the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Situated halfway between the ocean and downtown, LACMA is at the heart of Los Angeles.

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