

Indiana, Gary, "Sarah Charlesworth at the Clocktower", ART IN AMERICA, September 1984, 206-207.



Sarah Charlesworth: *Figures*, 1983, cibachromes, 2 panels, 40 by 60 inches overall; at The Clocktower.

Sarah Charlesworth at the Clocktower

Sarah Charlesworth's pictures register fast but need a long take. Hers is a bemused, skeptical, stubborn intelligence, at work on received images, blowing them up and chopping them down, slicing them out of their media contexts. Charlesworth is a master semiotician of visual clichés-in-the-making. She understands the rhetoric of the fashion image and the subvocal chatter of ad art. She's particularly expert at rescuing the photograph from "photography." Her new pictures isolate single forms and figures against glossy, solid, black and red backgrounds. The flat frontality parodies the hyperbole of media spectacle, while the images themselves deliberately fail to satisfy the rule of hermetic closure governing media image-making. For *Blonde* we get a crescent of hairdo; *The Bride* is an upright, empty wedding dress with a bridal bouquet in its glove; *The T-Shirt*, molded around a hunky torso and a full erection, is still just the T-shirt. *Black Woman*, on a white background, features the running, smiling *National Geographic* African normally presented as an ethnographic pretext to show tits in a family magazine, but she is here cropped free of the visual trim that says "Africa" and centrally planted on something that can only say "white." Charlesworth

does such witty, simple things to her otherwise obvious images that the sting of her work often feels like a kind of cordiality.

Charlesworth reads photographs the way one reads a novel. When she pulls open an image, she makes a breathing space for herself in the seamless and overdetermination of pictures that already exist and have taken on too many functions. The novel reader construes his or her own imaginative story from a set of given codes. Charlesworth focuses on the images she selects an obsessive attention that defeats their meaning and reveals their microstructure of signification. She then rebuilds the image, unlocking the programmed codes and introducing fresh space for the viewer. *Pueblo Vase*, *Japanese House* and *Stone Tablet* are reconstituted as whole images but are really collage sections sutured by a background. *Rietveld Chair* reorchestrates the super-rationalized, dancing De Stijl design in beautifully blocked imaginary space, with square colored gels anchoring its linear interstices.

There were also four completely surprising photographs of Scottish tartan designs, *Wallace*, *Dress McPherson*, *Balmoral* and *Dress McLeod*. The "untouched" presentation of these fabric designs is in the spirit of Charlesworth's whimsical, sly method of sometimes leaving found images to their own devices, but placed in physical situations that vex them with a burden of unwanted meaning: just putting these photos in a gallery effects a semantic collage. Charlesworth's recent *Wedge* pamphlet "A Lover's Tale" knitted a story together from unrelated, uncaptioned film stills; the tartan designs grouped in this show elaborate the fact of design as a photographic subject. They also remind us that Charlesworth has as extraordinary a sense for "straight" photography as she does for dissecting the ideology of the camera as exemplary witness and mechanical sage.