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Peering through History:

an interview with Sarah Charlesworth

by Anne Morgan

Sarah Charlesworth began her widely recognized body of photograpnic work with a 1977-1979 series titled "Modern History." In this series and her subsequent "Stills" (1980), "Tabula Rasa" (1981), "In-Photography" (1981-1982), and "Objects of Desire" (1983-1988), she implemented a deconstructive approach using an ever-growing archive of largely appropriated images. Her next series, "Academy of Secrets" (1989) and "Renaissance Paintings and Drawings" (1991), are more personal. While building on her previous work, the last two series, "Natural Magic" (1992-1993) and "Doubleworld" (1995), are staged. In the following interview, Charlesworth discusses these two most recent series in depth.

The first major retrospective of Sarah Charlesworth opened at SITE Santa Fe November 1, 1997. Co-curated by Louis Grachos, director and curator of SITE Santa Fe, and Susan Fisher Sterling, curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C., the exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue published by SITE Santa Fe with an introduction by Grachos and essays by Sterling, Lisa Phillips, and Dave Hickey. The retrospective will be at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego from March 23 to June 13, 1998, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. from July 9 through September 27, 1998, at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art from November 20, 1998 through January 24, 1999, and at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University in Waltham Massachusetts from March 25 through May 30, 1999.

Anne Morgan: Let's start with *The Five Senses.*

Sarah Charlesworth: The perspective in *The Five Senses* is utterly impossible; everything had to be turned askew even to approximate it. There's no one point of view where you could maintain that set of planar relationships. Each object has its own perspective. How could this glass of wine be towering over this loaf of bread which is the same size as a person?

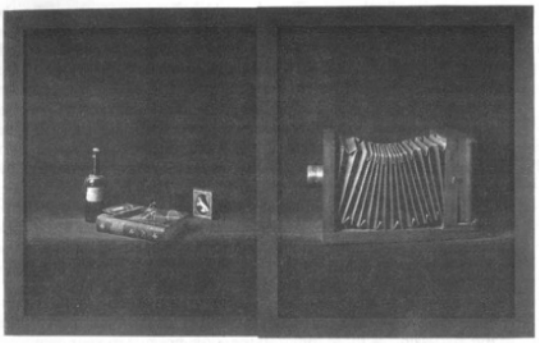
AM: What about the deck of cards, are they Tarot cards?

SC: They are playing cards, a symbolic element like the rest of the objects in *The Five Senses.* This work is based on an actual painting, but the genre is consistent over a long period—particularly in Dutch Still Life. The cards probably represent the "frivolity" of games; the mandolin represents the auditory sense and so on. But I don't really expect viewers to know anything about the history of still life; what was of interest was the physical world and how it's negotiated through the visual sense.

AM: How did that come about?

SC: I began to realize the extreme truth of the fact that the form or the method limits, to a certain extent, and allows and encourages specific meanings. There were things that I could say in the studio works that I couldn't say in the appropriations, and there were things that I could say in the appropriations that I couldn't say in the studio constructions, and I was frustrated, because I wanted it all. I never realized before this body of work how true it is that there are very specific potentials and limitations to any approach or any medium, and what I am capable of exploring or saying with appropriated photographs is very distinctly different from what I am capable of saying using real objects. So that is one of the deep negotiations that was

Top to bottom: Untitled (Voyeur), *1995, Cibachrome, 51" x 41";* The Five Senses. *1995, Cibachrome, 51" x 62" (photos courtesy of Jay Gorney Modern Art).*



Left to right: Still Life With Camera, *1995, Cibachrome, 50" x 80";* Homage to Nature, *1995, Cibachrome, 51 1/4"x 41 1/4" (photos courtesy of Jay Gorney Modern Art).*

going on, and it was curious to me, after many years of collecting images and negotiating meaning with slips of paper, to be lugging back to the studio all kinds of objects and antiques and things, and then trying to get them to "say," or trying to understand what their saying potential was. It was a very peculiar work process for me. The pieces don't show the struggle, but there's a substance to them, I think.

AM: It's obvious they're not just still lifes; a wonderful quirky quality is immediately apparent, and then one begins questioning why.

SC: There were several different trains of thought going on simultaneously in the "Doubleworld" series, one being that perception is organized by the instruments of perception, and in any society, obviously the way we can conceive of the world is organized by things like printing presses and cameras and paint brushes and computers, and the societal view of the world is to a large extent dependent on those instruments by which its vision is articulated. Being in the wane of the age of photography, I was trying to talk about the age in which the world became organized through photography. It's like the 22nd century looking back on the 21st century looking back on the 20th century looking back on the 19th century looking back on the 18th century. So there's this kind of chicken and the egg thing going on where the pieces are situated in a clear present that is read through the technology of Cibachrome photographs and studio lighting. On the other hand, I'm looking back on the era of photography when the still camera is structuring a very heavy worldview which is kind of clunky, and yet it's the beginning of the world that we have lived in—the world of doubling and reproduction and images that has become more and more abstracted. But in the 19th century it's a very laden, very slow-moving, very stiff way of articulating the world that, in a sense, is transitioning out of the model of painting as it becomes something different.

I'm also very interested in the question of what is time—what is this thing we call the past? How is it knowable, and is it actually knowable, and is it possible to transcend it for a moment, and if so, how? It is impossible, but that desire to do this is a little way of sneaking a peek at the past. It's a many-sided assault, a way of seeing a 20th century worldview in the making. All these pieces don't really say that they are supposed to be in the past—you make that association because of the drapes and the iconography. But they are simultaneously located in the present, so there's a bridge effect or negotiation between the present and past in all of them: Here's the antique, now where did it come from and can we peek through the telescope and see that other dimension which is time? Can I climb through this window that is a specific organization of known objects, such as in *The Five Senses*? It is so specific that it connotes something three centuries old. A lot of what I learned through this working process is that the past is a kind of hypothesis. It's structured by anthropologists and archaeologists in one way, and by art historians in another way, and by social historians in another way, and this is a way that an artist is using the art-making process to hypothesize the past as a reality. So the only vehicles that I have to ride are the iconography and the recognizability of those objects as antiques.

AM: Though you're dealing with history, there's no sense of nostalgia or yearning for the past in these works.

SC: Oh, not at all. There's even an edge of criticism. All the works talk about a fetishism of vision. In *An Homage to Nature*, there's a critical joke about what culture has done to nature by fetishizing it, removing it from its own organic life and enculturating it—that poor little pine tree struggling to survive as an object of nature. I'm talking about the roots of a culture that has alienated us from nature and has a hypocritical relationship to it. Certainly the voyeurism in *Still Life with Camera* is suspect, but it's not pointing a finger at either the camera or the poser for the camera, but rather articulating a kind of reciprocity between subject and object in which the desire to reproduce in photographic form, the desire to record with the camera, the desire to be recorded, the narcissistic or performance aspect, are reciprocal.

AM: Voyeurism seems involved in *Untitled (Voyeur)*, even though you don't show what's at the other end of the telescope.

SC: I think a lot of the pieces are dealing with the fetishism of vision or scopophilia. We frequently call that a male desire, the desire to sneak a look. But to be in the position of voyeur is a deeply engrained, common human trait. I don't think that it's that men desire to look through the telescope at women, but that people in general desire to look, to have a peek. *Untitled (Voyeur)* articulates that desire: the way the curtain is hung completely parallel with the picture plane, so that there is no way to see what is on the other side of the curtain. But the telescope suggests that a whole world, or something or other, exists on the other side. It toys with that dual perception that we maintain—the picture is an illusionistic plane. We know that, and we know that we can't look on the other side of the curtain that is hiding the plane, but at the same time we keep wanting to peek in the telescope and see what is on the other side. That piece talks about that side of desire, and about this paradoxical relationship that we have with images; they're both objects and illusionistic spaces that we enter and fantasize into and project beyond.

I got the idea for *Untitled (Voyeur)* from a computer game, from the idea of an electronic culture having a different exchange of information or exchange of images. In "Myst" there are different worlds and eras, and you can move back and forth between them. There is a room that I call the Renaissance Room; it's very hard to get to, but it's the room I love most of all the places in this cyberworld. It's a room from a bygone era, and from the window there's a telescope peering out. The minute I realized how much I wanted to look through that telescope, I knew what I wanted to do with the photograph.

AM: I was intrigued by the doubling in *Doubleworld*—the images of the twins doubled, and the legs on the pieces doubled.

SC: *Doubleworld* is, on a philosophical level, talking about the urge to replicate or clone, which is also at the root of photography and of still life painting. It was a piece that I had been interested in doing as a collage piece before I started doing the studio work. I thought, "Oh yes, all I have to do is get a great model of stereopticon," and then I realized that all the steropticons looked so cheesy. Finally, I found the perfect stereopticon in

an antique store, but there was only one of them. So I began to research whether it was possible to use a computer to double this stereopticon. I didn't; there is no computer manipulation in any of these pieces. So I rented the stereopticon and sketched out how I would have done it on the computer so as not to have just a duplicate, but the slight difference between the left and the right that you would find in a stereopticon image. And that reminded me that you can use double exposure to create this form of doubling. So that piece is actually a double exposure, and the stereopticon slide is a fake I made myself of a 19th century photo I found of two women dressed exactly alike.

AM: How do you feel about working in the studio versus your collaged appropriated images?

SC: It's funny, I have a great deal of ambivalence that stems from what I was saying before. There are literally things I love about it and things that drive me crazy about it. My content was forever being limited by the cost of things, or physical size—I could only make meaning out of things that I could physically bring to the studio or physically manipulate—so the still life form became an obvious form with which to discuss the past. The reason the still life has been a dominant form art historically is the same reason it's working for me; it has to do with scale and relationships and what I can do with them. This is different from what I can do with the appropriated photographs, where I can bring together very disparate elements in order to signify.

physical reality. So there was an inherent, shall we say, contradiction between what the photograph was attesting to and what one's normal perceptions were. That work was talking about photography in a very indirect but continous way, so that a piece like *Proof by Telekinesis*, in which there are all these bent spoons attesting to the proof that telekinesis exists, was making fun of the logic that photographs are used as evidence. The joke of the piece highlights aspects of perception and the way in which perception is culturally codified. That's not dissimilar to the voyeur piece. That's not about magic, but it's about the desire to peer through the picture plane and see what's on the other side. They're all philosophical riddles, in a way. They're all trying to understand what it is we take for granted about the world we perceive, and what it is we can learn about our perceptions—that what is deeply entrenched or rhetorical is itself negotiable and up for questioning. There's a lot of games with rhetoric going on in all these pieces, as well as in the collage pieces.

AM: Looking at the issues of representation in the '80s, do you see a shift in the discussion of those topics in the '90s, not just in your own work, but in general?

SC: I didn't think of this work in the beginning as having to do with issues of representation, though it does. I was actually thinking about being at the end of a century, and at the end of a millennium, and marking the passing of a whole worldview in which we grew up and were educated. We are beginning to feel the advent of a new way of looking and

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But what was interesting and enchanting about working in the studio was that I could actually be working with real things that had come directly from the past. I could actually try to wring from these objects something of their story; a three-dimensional quality, a step right into the problem quality that was specific to the experience. It allowed me to create meanings over and above that which has already existed. And so, in a piece like *Homage to Nature*, I'd say, "Oh, a bell jar would be an appropriate way of encapsulating the relationship with Nature," and then I could create the image from scratch. I wouldn't have to wait until I could find a pine tree in a bell jar.

But even though the potential for making meaning was different on one level, it wasn't all that different on another level. In collage work, I'm always collecting objects and trying different combinations, putting them here and putting them there—which is exactly what I ended up doing with these objects.

AM: Do you see a relationship between "Natural Magic" and "Doubleworld"?

SC: I'd rather speak of my work as a whole. I've always chosen to work in individual bodies of work. It may take me a year or more to complete each one; I change my approach and subject matter every two years, because by doing that I learn something new. My work has always had to do with issues having to do with photography, issues having to do with visual language and the organization of meaning through visual language. That is consistent from the very first newspaper pieces through "Doubleworld." Art history has frequently been a ground for these pieces, because it pertains to the cultural organization of vision. There's definitely a different game being played in each series—something of a philosophical hunt—because I'm out to discover something or out to uncover something. That, to a certain extent, directs what I'm capable of doing in the series. In the "Magic" series, I was talking about photography and illusionism—using magic as a metaphor for an open-mindedness or a going beyond the limits of rational thought and playing games with the rules of established meaning—so that the individual images contradicted what we know of

considering and interacting with the world in electronic culture, and I'm looking back and noting the passing of our own past, a familiar and very near past which is about to disappear altogether. Look at something like the allegory of the arts, for instance—let's just call it the 19th century Beaux Arts model of art—where there is a model of Painting and a model of Sculpture, and a model of Music, and then the little astral sphere that hints at Science. In my *Allegory of the Arts*, the joke is that this is a worn-out, dusty, dirty, old, exhausted allegory that uses a found composition from a 19th century photograph. That piece had to do with first locating the four objects that make up the composition—the statue of Diana, the old sheet music and the violin, the palette, and so on. Then I had to antique them, make them look old to situate them as something that exists in the past from the perspective of the present, and then to comment on this beaux-arts model of art as itself an antique. I had a great time just sweeping the closets and the corners, coming up with piles of dust and dirt to throw all over this allegory. There was so much labor invested in trashing this thing—making it look very old and very archaic and very much part of a bygone way of seeing—that it became clear that something about the formal strengths of these objects, the elegance of the statue of Diana and the violin and so on, is so dear that it keeps insisting on its validity.

On the one hand, *Allegory of the Arts* is so clearly an antique or bygone model of art, and on the other hand it keeps asserting itself as a model of grace or elegance. I don't think that's nostalgia; it has to do with a real cultural ambivalence that we have. I don't listen to much violin music, or look at classical sculpture, for that matter. Those Beaux-Art ideas of fine art were joyfully overthrown a hundred and fifty years ago, but they still exert this formal force. I suppose I could have composed this piece to look awkward and even deader, but part of my point is the peculiar relationship that we have with this lingering conception of art.

Levitating Woman, 1992-93, Cibachrome, 44 1/2" x 54 1/4" (photo courtesy of Jay Gorney Modern Art).

One of the reasons why it's frequently difficult to talk about this is the fact that the works themselves are trying to disturb or throw into question common ways of thinking or knowing about things—the actual experience of how we know time. I mean, the word "time" is taboo! The common ways of experiencing it through history in which the past is in the past and the present is in the present and the future is coming up—it's a very tightly organized system, and to disrupt that or to transgress that.... It's impossible to climb into the past, we all know that, and yet the work tries to note why and how is it impossible, and throw it up for grabs.

It's difficult to talk about it for the same reason it's difficult to make work about it—it's a philosophical question to know time differently from the way in which we ordinarily speak about it or know it. I found, for instance, Jonathan Crary's *The Techniques of the Observer* very interesting—he's a scholar and a theoretician, and he assumes a relationship with history that allows him to interpret meanings from given texts, and yet it all exists still within the realm of history and art history. To negotiate meanings about perception through images is a different kind of a project than a textual project. You don't have the voice of authority of a historian, you have the voice of a tinkerer or an explorer—or an artist. That's how I view the role of an artist, as a free-lance cultural explorer. It allows one to—deconstruct is not a good word, it's become too familiar, but to...

AM: Analyze?

I say with a great deal of reservation—a more democratic kind of exchange system than, say, a 19th or 18th century model of art or education, wherein the wealthier classes or the European culture are in control of models of reality that are situated in institutions from libraries to governments that are in control of culture.

At the same time, there are aspects of electronic culture that I find disturbing and alienating. One of those is the obvious indirectness of our experience of culture—images can only be a certain scale and a certain flatness, and they no doubt lack that which we call aura, and they lack tactility. You can't touch electronic artworks in the same way you can touch three-dimensional artworks. For instance, while my works look back at what seems to be an archaic conception of art, a vision which indexes 17th to 19th century culture, in a broader sense they're talking about the waning of an even broader experience of art. In the future, I suspect that we'll be dealing a great deal more with information and with images in an indirect and virtual way. It's quicker, it's easier, it's more democratic, it's decentralized, it's more negotiable, it's more universally accessible, and yet it's totally inaccessible in another way—it's once removed; it's that thing that reproductions have been in our century.

AM: What do you see photography evolving into, then?

SC: I think it's completely clear that it is no longer going to have the relationship with truth or with reality that it has had for the last 150 years.

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SC: "Analyze" implies that there is an objective perspective for reading, whereas all my work attests to the active force of the observer or the looker. All these pieces are very clearly situated in the present, and all those clues to the present are as indicative of our known ways of seeing as the ones that are indicative of the past—the antique instruments, or the use of that mahogany brown color to conjure the 19th century. It's not analytical, because I'm not really analyzing the models. I'm more trying to experiment with the experiential dimension. I see myself as a subject of culture, and I see culture as a changing and mutable perspective, one that artists and writers and philosophers are in a position to continually renegotiate. I see history itself as something that is continually renegotiated from the perspective of the present, in the way that women and neglected social groups have been brought to the fore in a culture where we've grown up with Eurocentric perspectives. In the same way, one reconfigures the relationships; one sees now the relationship between the camera and the naked woman as a reciprocal relationship rather than just seeing the naked woman. I think that the emphasis on the currency of the project, the conceiving of culture, is a very strong factor in this work. I am pointing to something that's my heritage and also renegotiating my relationship to that past, as well as pointing to the present as an organized site of perception.

AM: I have a final question: As we approach the millennium and electronic culture, what do you think will happen?

SC: I think it would be foolish not to recognize that electronic technology is not only a new system for organizing and exchanging information, it clearly is the beginning of a new way of experiencing the world. I think there are aspects of the way in which electronic technology has entered into the culture that one can value. For instance, the interactive process itself is very interesting; it suggests perhaps a less hierarchical exchange of information and distribution of information. It's potentially—and this

For the last 20 years or so there's been a very strong critique of the representational authority of photography, and for the past 30 years many of us have worked to undermine the authority of photographs, pointing out its malleability and the need to understand them contextually. A photograph means something only when it's in a context, and a photograph can be misleading and used to support all kinds of fallacious arguments. But when photographs can no longer be considered documents in any sense, and they are so clearly objects of manipulation, they will bear a very different relationship with that which we call truth. I think that with truth—in the sense that we have been going for a hundred years away from the idea of scientific objectivity—the idea of objectivity itself is in question, and increasingly we must view the world as a question of situated perspective on events. Our cultural perceptions are framed by every aspect of our life experience—they're situated in a class view and a race view and a historical view.

Our culture as a whole has been deeply engaged in the problem of trying to determine how it is we come to recognize what we call truth, and what it is. Events are not as precise and concrete and clear as they have been in bygone dominant models of reality. But it disturbs me profoundly that the notion that there can *be* a truth is itself threatened. There needs to be some sort of counterbalance. We grew up with the idea of history being rewritten by whatever government or dominant worldview chose to rewrite things in its own interest; that evolved to the point that feminism and multiculturalism sprang history wide open for reinterpretaion. And yet you could come full circle, to the point where there is no sense of reality or responsibility—no sense of objective circumstance at all, ultimately. Electronic culture encourages that; text is not permanent, the sentence that was there can be obliterated and a new sentence replace it. We're in a very disturbing moment; we need to value many different points of view, but at the same time, we need to acknowledge objective conditions.

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Proof of Telekinesis, *1992-93, Cibachrome, 54 1/4" x 44 1/2"*
(photo courtesy of Jay Gorney Modern Art).