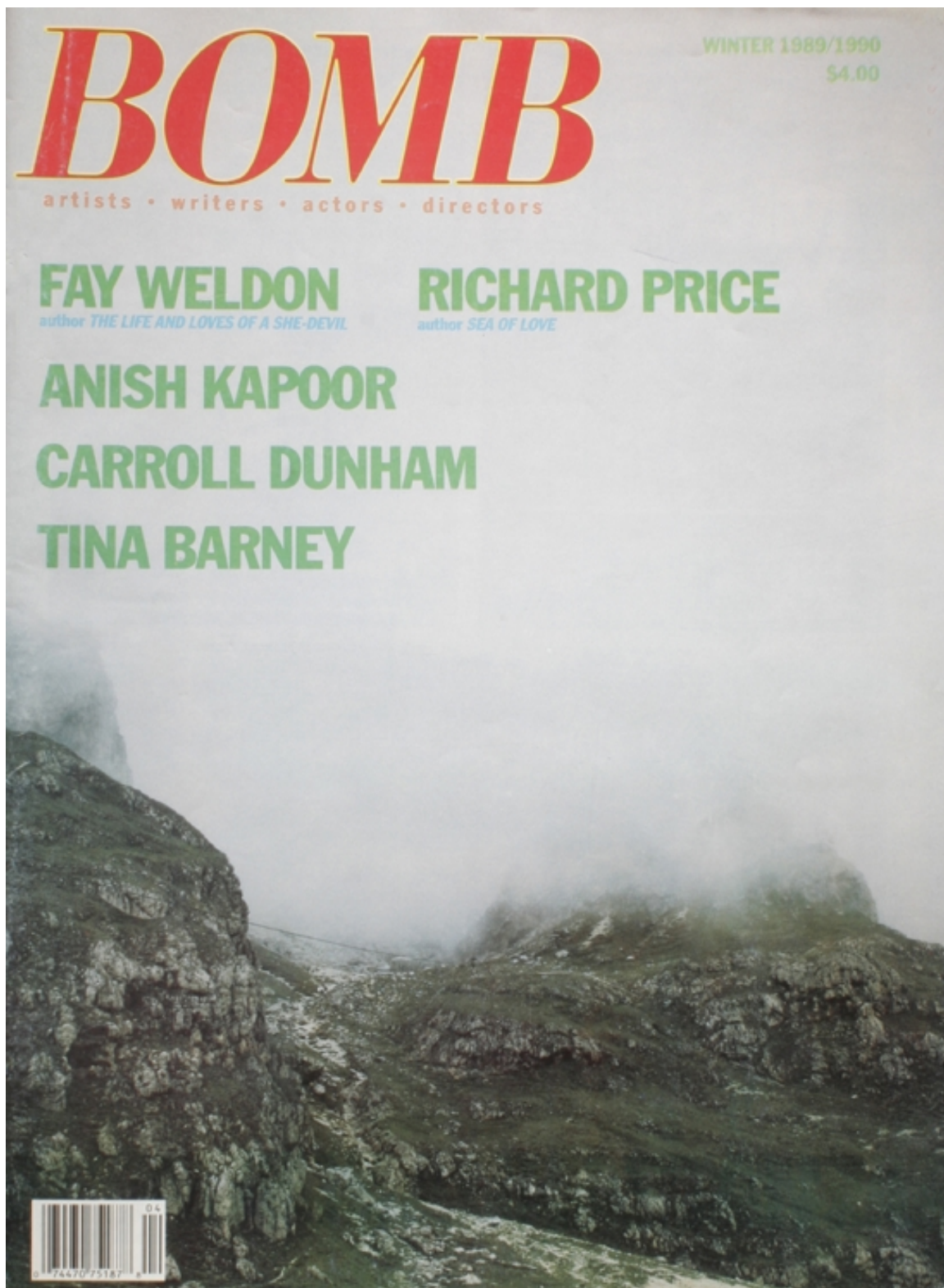


Sussler, Betsy, "Sarah Charlesworth", BOMB MAGAZINE, Winter 1990.



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SUSAN INGLETT

Sarah Charlesworth

by Betsy Sussler

BOMB 30/Winter 1990, ART

(Interview, Photography)



c.1989 Gilles Donze

Sarah Charlesworth's latest series, *Academy of Secrets* deploys symbolically charged imagery: the heart, the antler, the lotus, the womb—floating them on colors that visually drench the psyche. Charlesworth comes from the cool, body politic of Conceptual Art. From her early *Modern History* series which delves into the public imagery of newspapers, to her *Stills*, bodies photographed in mid-air; to *Objects of Desire*, metaphoric and frequently minimal juxtapositions of image fragments culled from photographs and books—abstracted, exposed, the shape of an idea is central, discovered. It has given her isolation of history, chance and desire pristine formality.

The new work suggests that knowledge not only comes from the given world but is lodged deep, hidden within us. We discussed *The Academy of Secrets* in her studio: diffused light, long tables, file cabinets and diagrams of pelvises and prehistoric skulls... a quiet empty place, to think.

Betsy Sussler Do your photographs conjure emotional upheaval?

Sarah Charlesworth Yes.

BS Are they magic charms?

SC I abstract objects that socially, carry a strong emotional charge or symbolic significance. I've abstracted them from the context in which we normally confront them, a fish out of a natural history magazine or a heart out of an anatomy magazine and recreated another context which is within my work. In *The Academy of Secrets*, I've tried to confront an emotion in myself and used these image-objects to create a complex, emotional field resembling a visual dream or a feeling. I'm trying, almost to cast into imagery a specific feeling. It's not necessarily resolved in any structurally, easily, interpretable form. It is much more personal. I'm exploring a level of unconscious engagement in language, a covert symbology. There's a level on which this involves a personal as well as a societal confrontation. In other words, I think that a symbolism is attached to particular images, becomes marked in the unconscious. To exorcise it, to rearrange it, to reshape it, to make it my own, involves unearthing it, describing it, deploying it inform, and *then* rearranging it. In each individual piece, I'm going for a different kind of emotional psychic chord.

BS The red diptych of the antlers and the heart?

SC Let me finish, because you asked about magic.

I believe the human psyche is capable of higher levels of perception, of understanding and of being which are approachable through confrontation with one's self and through confrontation with society, in this case, through its visual language. The whole concept of magic totally fascinates me. I think of it as a continuum with psychic lucidity and in different pieces, I'm approaching different aspects of the psyche. In *Subtle Body*, I borrowed from Tantric meditation, the progression of ascendent symbols along the body center, equaling seven centers in the body. Then I turned around and replaced them with symbols that are personally significant to me, that reflect my understanding of a physical, psychic elevation.

BS The Egyptian alchemists had formulas to make straw into body, lead into gold, water into blood, your title, *Academy of Secrets*...

SC That's what the secrets in the title refers to. The secrets of higher, esoteric knowledge that are hidden beneath the common level of organized religion and mass culture. I'm talking about very esoteric knowledge which could come from any society or historical period in regard to alchemy. I view each art work, in a sense, as the alchemist might understand the transformation of matter, into something animate with psychic essence. Making an art work involves the transformation of matter, paper and materials into a process of animation or psychic elevation of material stuff. *Animation*, like *The Subtle Body*, suggests a human body through the placement of different elements, in this case eight rather than seven because I give you two choices of brains—the right and left. Ascending

from the most base matter, the clay pot at the bottom and then the fish, the sperm, the heart, the river. The two brains are the Indian magic wand in the shape of the crane and the clock, the logical, right brain. And then scarf at the top for the opening and the psyche. In a sense, the matter becomes more ethereal as you move up the swirling column.



Sarah Charlesworth, *Subtle Body*, 1989, Laminated Cibachrome with lacquered frame. 78×57". Photo courtesy of Jay Gorney Gallery.

BS But the urn is also the place where one puts the ashes of a body.

SC That's true. This piece is designed so you can read it going up or down. In evolutionary theory, it's the amphibious history of human development. You move from a fish to a clock within the same body, from animal nature to a logical brain.

BS The images are placed in a structure that is invisible. What is it actually?

SC Well... secrets. They're supposed to resemble the contents of the unconscious. They come bubbling up and seem to be random but hidden underneath is not only a complex order but, perhaps, several overlapping orders. I'm likening, in a metaphorical sense, the psychic body, the mind, the unconscious, to the physical body, which is how one experiences one's psyche. I'm using the physical body as a metaphor, a psychic body for the mind's unconsciousness.

BS Why a pitcher and a river for the throat?

SC I'm using them as metaphors for expression. That's what the throat does. It passes liquid through the body or in terms of the energy of a human body, that's often where expression itself is blocked. For a model of free expression, a river serves perfectly well.

BS A river symbolizes a passage to another world.

SC It's certainly a transitional point. In the previous series, *Objects of Desire*, all the arrangements of elements are consciously constructed for intellectual reasons which I can explain and argue about. It's an intellectually engaged body of work. In the *Academy of Secrets*, I attempted to order and select in ways that didn't necessarily make any logical sense to me. Many of the ways in which the pieces seem to conjure the body had to do with trying to describe a feeling of very visceral, animate interiority, which is the way I felt at the time. I was pregnant.

BS Why the dyptich of stag's antlers and the heart? That was probably the most emotionally jarring, and moving piece. It pierced my heart.

SC It's the antlers of two warring stags interlocked, just the antlers. An architecture of aggression. The other panel is the structure of the vessels in the heart, an embrace architecture. An architecture of love and an architecture of war. Frequently the emotional power that a symbol carries is directly related to its morphology. In the case of the warring stag's antlers and the architecture of the chamber of the heart, the form itself carries an emotional charge. The embrace.

BS It is believed that the heart cannot lie. There is also the fear of revelation. I stand revealed.

SC That's how I feel about a lot of this work as a whole. I stand revealed. I'm confronting myself in public and there is a level of honesty about it.

BS The imagery floats on colors so dense and bright they singe your eyeballs. Evocative colors: blue for the womb; black for the father; red for the heart, for blood. The color is more emotional than the imagery.

SC The color and the imagery are meant to work together as a whole. All the formal choices, such as size, arrangement of the images and, certainly the color, have a psychic charge. The pieces are constructed to be the size of the human body: they are supposed to confront the body, to contact the emotional body of the viewer.



Sarah Charlesworth, *Unidentified Woman* Hotel Corona, Madrid, 1980, Photo blow up, 42×79". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Ara Arslanian. Photograph courtesy of Jay Gorney Gallery.

BS Tell me about doing the research for these.

SC You're using a writer's word, research.

BS You know what I mean.

SC It's a complicated process because I've been engaged in researching images, if you want to use that word, for so many years. Now I have a vast bank of images, picture files of just about anything you want. So if I think the piece, *The Temple of My Father* needs something more gooey, phallic-shaped, organic... I go over to the mushroom file for a black or purple mushroom. Frequently it comes from an idea, a kind of image to conjure some feeling. Other times, I'll run across an image that will trigger an idea. The funny thing is that it frequently takes place over a long period of time. I gather these things and they'll be brewing in the back of mind and it may be three or four years before I actually use an image that I've been saving. Like the clay votive fetishes of the hand, the eye, the breast and the ear in *Self-Portrait*, I had found them a long time ago but it wasn't until I found the urn and then, in the middle of the night, I said, "Wow, they fit together and they just describe how I feel."

BS *The Object of Desire* series were diptychs which rested upon one another. But it looked as if the images could shift and slip.

SC The first was the Marlene Deitrich figure reduced to a slinky evening

gown juxtaposed against the satin bondage suit. My choice of which image to advance and which to recede generally involved putting the most known, apparent image in the advancing panel and the image with the secondary or more hidden meaning in the receding panel. In *The Garden of Delight*, the figure with the penises sticking out of his head, helmet, belt and real penis is obviously an advancing figure and the little secret keyhole garden where he wants to project himself is the receding panel, the hidden—which seems to me, to make perfect formal sense.

BS The garden is paradise?

SC Obviously there's a metaphor here between the male's body and what I suppose could be a woman's body. It could be any kind of orifice but it's some place that he wants to go that's a little too tight for him to fit. But one sees through this opening something like paradise, a place that contains that which he searches for. It's a model of desire itself, it's not necessarily purely a metaphor for male sexuality. It's the unapproachable or difficult to approach desired place.

BS Implied in these juxtapositions is that what is hidden behind could slip forward and what is forward could slide behind. It's as if the unconscious, even though it's pushed back, is the controlling factor.

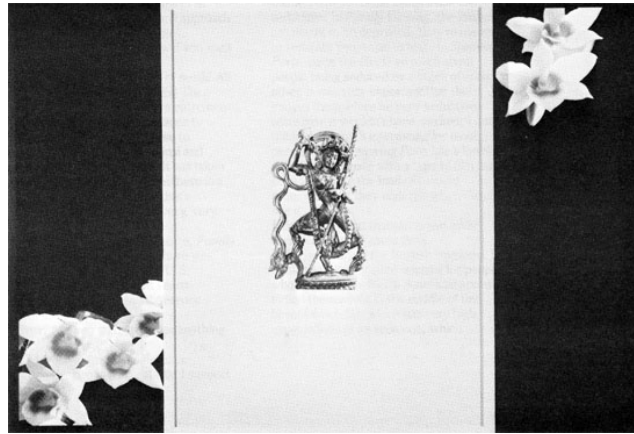
SC Definitely. And the viewer makes that slip happen. The arrangement of images is loaded in many different ways which allow for the condition of multiple interpretations. The viewer completes the act of interpretation. And I think that's very, very important. And it's something that I could be criticized for. It allows even contradictory interpretations. It doesn't resolve things. There is no closure in these.

BS It has been said that every generation reinterprets the past. It could also be said that every individual reinterprets the present.

SC Frequently, I take very loaded, for instance, very sexual symbols and abstract them and deploy them in a piece without attaching any gender significance per say to them. *The Bowl and the Column* has a golden bowl on the bottom of a brilliant blue rectangular field and a golden yellow column on the other field. It's the essence of what is thought to be a female symbol and a male symbol, and yet there's no female or male gender attached to the piece itself but what the viewer brings to it. You're confronted with a pure abstraction and you realize on a certain level where the symbolism begins and ends. A great deal of it's brought to the piece by the viewer.

BS Yes and no. Objects, images contain an ancient power. And it can evoke and elicit responses. You couldn't produce this work without knowing that.

SC Absolutely. But what I'm saying is frequently these loaded images or objects are used by me without my attaching a particular significance to them. In other words, what I'm doing is letting whatever power, whatever affect they have, work on its own.



Wisdom Through Initiation, 1989, laminated cibachrome with lacquered frame, Ed. of 4, 78×57". Photograph courtesy of Jay Gorney Gallery.

BS What response surprised you the most? Do you remember?

SC The *Falling* pieces in the *Stills* series, human figures suspended in mid-air. Again, the simple non-didactic presentation of visual material. Some people thought they were frightening because they read into them, the continuation of the narrative—that these are people jumping and are probably going to die. And certainly it's a dangerous or violent situation. But others saw them as very ethereal and beautiful, floating figures. And often, the emotional responses shift. Somebody would say, "They're really awful but come to think of it, they're really beautiful." That was the first time I realized that the same image could conjure extremely different contradictory emotional responses and I've found that to be consistently true in the 10 years since that work was done.

BS Those were moments plucked from a narrative—suicides, people escaping fires, accidents.... *The Academy of Secrets* construct ancient narratives.

SC I don't think of them as narratives. They're quite non-linear, more spatial, multi-dimensional constructions. There is an underlying geometry to the field which permits different kinds of formal arrangements of signifying elements—a geometrical syntax, actually. Even the choice of an order versus a seemingly disordered field is a formal choice which connotes a particular approach. I've been trying recently to work just on the borderline between the two, trying to allow hidden orders to emerge, in a way trying to disrupt the neat distinction between order and chaos, conscious and unconscious, found and made.

BS Why photography as a medium?

SC That's something that I've been asking myself recently because I don't think of myself as a photographer. I've engaged questions regarding photography's role in culture for 12 years now, but it is an engagement with a problem rather than a medium. The creative part of the work is just as much like painting or design as it is like photography. I'm not using a camera and it's not based on recording a given work but in creating or structuring a given world. I use images drawn from the culture because I'm interested in each piece being an interface between my personal subjectivity and a given world. A kind of langue and parole situation where I am speaking of the world through things of the world but via my own particular arrangement, construction of the world. In the early *Objects of Desire*, there is a much more deconstructive approach to visual language. Where I'm confronting a given world and trying to discover its architecture, its formal and political nature. Whereas in more recent work, I'm constructing a consciousness within the world. In a piece like the *Self-Portrait*, I'm literally projecting a visual image or psychic image of myself into the world. Rather than being a portrait in a traditional sense, it's a portrait of a state of mind which is particularly my own. I see myself as casting my world back into the given world. It's like a reformulation of language, a recreation of a new metaphor.

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