

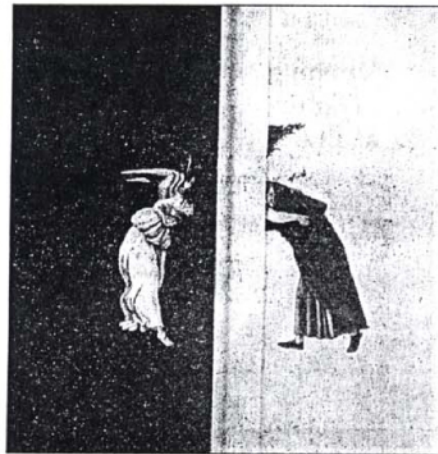
Silver, Joanne, "Magic Act", BOSTON HERALD, 9 April 1999, S5, S10.

# BOSTON Herald

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FRIDAY, APRIL 9, 1999 BOSTON HERALD S5

## Arts & Culture



**INTRIGUING:** At left, Sarah Charlesworth's 1980 silver print 'Unidentified Man, Unidentified Location' from her 'Stills' series; above, her 1991 'Separation,' which is composed of two panels of laminated Cibachrome prints with lacquered wooden frames.

## Magic act

Sarah  
Charlesworth's  
pieces  
challenge  
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and seduce  
the eye at  
the same time

**E**ven before she started taking pictures of magic tricks, Sarah Charlesworth was working her own sleight of hand in photography.

A lush red scarf, detached from the fashion shot where it first appeared, floats against a lacquer-black ground in her "Objects of Desire" series.

### Visual Arts JOANNE SILVER

ries. A 1979 eclipse travels across the Northwest via the front pages of 29 different newspapers, from which all other photos and text (except the mastheads) have been removed.

In "Denial" from her "Renaissance Painting and Drawings" series, figures from a painting by Raphael hover over a black hole, where the dead

Christ rested. By excerpting reproduced images, Charlesworth makes and unmakes icons that question centuries-old culture at the same time they pay homage to it.

If all the world resembled a stage in Shakespeare's day, today it's more

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## Artist takes aim at icons

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like a photograph. Or — in Charles-

worth's work — many photographs. Nearly every work from the nine series represented in her Rose Art Museum retrospective revolves around appropriated photographic images — and, just as significantly, around what is missing from those images.

For 20 years, the artist has created pictures that depend on pre-existing photographs for their meaning because, to her, the medium is at the very heart of contemporary society. Billboards, newspapers, magazines and now Web sites converse in the language of the camera. Family occasions are remembered in photographs. Places, historical monuments and people — famous and anonymous — have been codified in this visual shorthand. Photographs represent as universal a system as exists, a rich raw material for Charlesworth's creations.

But rather than state the obvious, the one-time painter searches out the oblique and elusive, pushing known images to the point where they turn unfamiliar. This retrospective, on view at Brandeis University through May 30, reveals a strong and adventurous artist. Despite the saturated colors and gorgeous sheen of many of her photographic reconfigurations, these pieces challenge the mind and seduce the eye at the same time.

The grainy black-and-white blowups Charlesworth calls "Stills" capture unidentified people jumping from tall buildings. These startling wire service shots include figures committing suicide and others leaping to avoid a fire — Charlesworth offers no further clarification. Thus the medium that is commonly associated with documenting truth is rendered powerless to answer

viewers' questions, even when displaying the human condition at its most graphically dramatic.

Individuals in the midst of tragedy would seem to have little in common with the sublime poetry of "Lotus Bowl" from the "Objects of Desire" series. In this mystical image set on a glossy green background, a pink blossom hovers above a golden bowl. The two items look as if they are levitating — not unlike the blue-sheathed woman in one of the "Natural Magic" pictures. The force propelling them is mysterious, just as it is for the levitating woman, or for the people jumping out of buildings.

As an artist, Charlesworth is both witness and magician, observing and creating scenes that have their own indecipherable power. In this light, the flaming white-gloved hands in another "Natural Magic" picture could be a kind of self-portrait.

"I'm trying to get at the fundamental shape of an idea," Charlesworth once said. "To articulate that shape, you have to pare off an awful lot of chaos or surrounding information." The artist has devised a number of ways of isolating what is essential — from whiting out whole sections of a newspaper page and snipping photographs out of context to selecting objects for their symbolic content.

When pregnant with her second child, Charlesworth turned from the external world to the vocabulary of the unconscious — terrain that had been mined earlier in the century. In one of the "Academy of Secrets" images that resulted, a round and ancient urn stands for the artist, surrounded by archaeological finds: an ear, a hand, an eye, a breast, a foot. To turn these fragments into something cohesive requires faith, life or, at the very least, art.