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Sarah Charlesworth

NEW YORK,
at Maccarone

by Courtney Fiske

Sarah Charlesworth:
Figures, 1983-84,
Cibachrome with
lacquered wood frame,
2 panels, 42 by 32
inches each; at
Maccarone.



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Sarah Charlesworth's series "Objects of Desire" (1983-86) takes reality as something bracketed by quotation marks: a fiction, according to postmodernist critic Craig Owens, produced and sustained by its representation as image. The series finds its titular objects—an S&M harness, a chiffon scarf, a shock of blond hair, among other things—suspended in monochrome fields of syrupy, synthetic reds, blues, blacks, yellows and greens. Each image is a fragment from a book or a magazine that Charlesworth rephotographed and produced as a Cibachrome print. Immured in lacquered wood frames, the photographs, like the objects they enframe, enact strategies of seduction, such as high gloss and graphic punch. Part color study, part iconographic deconstruction, the series accentuates lushness and visual pleasure, offsetting the emotional remove that attends its successive acts of appropriation.

Consider the diptych *Figures* (1983-84): on the left, a slinky gown of the sort that starlets don in old Hollywood films; on the right, a satin bondage suit. Both appear in lustrous shades of silver. The first is vertical against black, the second, supine atop red. In each, the female body is made present through its absence: the gown's wearer, in languorous contrapposto, has been excised; the bodysuit's occupant, bowed in fetal position, is concealed. Absent flesh, the two forms appear sculptural, an effect heightened by their monochrome coloring and adjoined frames, one of which projects from the wall in slightly higher relief than the other. The photograph here is, emphatically, an object, an opaque entity that lacks both an interior and a beyond.

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Language was Charlesworth's initial medium: together with her then-partner Joseph Kosuth, she headed the unrepentantly left-wing journal *The Fox* for its two-year run in the mid-1970s. Fittingly, then, discourse—psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and otherwise—emerges as the series' subterranean ground. Though text appears only once, the series' logic is essentially discursive and defined by operations of metonymy and metaphor.

In *Bowl and Column* (1986, another diptych), two artifacts from antiquity, a shallow bowl and an Ionic column, float in ultramarine fields. The pairing sets off a relay of absences, as comparison runs from the objects portrayed (bowl, column) to parts of the body (womb, phallus), which substitute for missing wholes (woman, man). The result recalls the absences that structure both desire, as in Lacan's definition of desire as lack, and representation, as in Freud's suggestion that the psychic basis of representation inheres in loss. Incompletion here yields a sort of endlessness. Closure is impossible, both because desire hinges on its inability to be satisfied and because signification is subject to an essential vacuity: the emptiness of the sign whose meaning attains through its difference from other signs.

In *Fear of Nothing* (1988), studies of gender, sexuality and semiotics cede to an exploration of modernism's ur-convention, the monochrome. The diptych juxtaposes a Roman mask, poised atop a light blue ground, with a solid black field. The photographs appear as squares (all of the others are rectangles)—a nod to modernism's inaugural monochrome, Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), and its subsequent permutations in the square compositions of Josef Albers, Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin. Their pairing highlights modernism's essential iconoclasm—its retreat from the image into abstraction—at the same time that it positions the monochrome as an icon, a fetish to be alternately feared and revered.

There's a surreality to Charlesworth's undertaking: objects levitate; bodies decompose; color obviates space. It's as if, she suggests, reality must be made strange—collaged, excerpted, rephotographed—so that it can be encountered again as a representation: a string of pale copies, hollowed out and rendered in halftone.

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