

Flash Art

ingenius. Charlesworth uses photographs from nature and travel magazines, she cuts them up to isolate individual characters (owl, tiger, goat, Buddha, snake girl, drummer boy), and she situates these figures on a pure, glossy green or black background. This montage/collage is then rephotographed, enlarged to 30 x 40 in., framed in lacquered wood (the same color as the background), and the final product is a series of like-sized, appropriated images.



Sarah Charlesworth, *Goat*, 1985.
Cibachrome print, 40 x 30".

Sarah Charlesworth International with Monument

The dictionary defines "appropriation" as the act of taking for oneself without consent, which amounts to little more than stealing. When artists appropriate they are sometimes slapped with a lawsuit for copyright infringement (Warhol and Salle). But lately, when images are pilfered from a preexistent stock and subsequently cast into the limelight of an artist's new creation, then the work is part of an aesthetic of appropriation; the act of stealing becomes an aesthetic criterion, and often a (dead) end in itself. Now, all these aesthetic, critical, and philosophical issues have been linked with the term of postmodernism in the visual arts, with the result that some artworks produced under the spell of such ideas are regrettably complicated and hopelessly unattractive.

Sarah Charlesworth's intentions can be understood within the context of deconstruction, whereas the work is wholly digestible as an integration of message and image. More simply put, these pictures are graceful and

The works represent "a culture you never see except in photographs," according to the artist. These dissociated people and animals embody mythicized nature and emblematic foreign culture. In *Goat*, a central, iconic photograph depicts a goat with its head turned, crowned with red flowers and a unicorn's horn. Its sullen and majestic expression conveys the appearance of stereotyped exotica, where animals symbolize unsullied nature and agricultural economies. In *Buddha*, a stone sculpture of a seated Buddha is spotlighted from underneath and a four-leaf clover is placed below. These two images suggest overused objects that have come to symbolize a foreign culture that one sees only in travel brochures.

This formulaic approach has its weak points. Whereas the animals are easily recognizable as representative of a nature many city dwellers will never encounter, the foreign peoples lack a symbolic presence. And pictures produced within the constraints of a formula will ultimately become tiresome and ineffectual. But for the moment Charlesworth's work manages to blend a stark, understated elegance of imagery with powerful thematic implications. It is precisely this combination that provides her work with a promise of continued interest and excellence.

Michael Kohn