



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

**SARAH CHARLESWORTH, International with Monument; "Disinformation: The Manufacture of Consent," the Alternative Museum:**

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As opposed to Sarah Charlesworth's earlier work, which explored the thematic terrain of passion and desire, her recent subject is what we loosely describe as "nature." Lush green and black backgrounds support photographed images, all taken from geographic or travel-and-leisure magazines, of varied plant, animal, or ethnological scenes: an owl, snakes, or a lamb crowned with flowers as if for some village festival are examples of Charlesworth's purposefully reduced motifs. Coexisting with these are a Gauguinesque island woman, a seated Buddha sculpture, and other images that imply a kind of peaceful communion with nature. These decontextualized motifs are rendered in sharp detail; their scientific veracity contrasts with glistening laminated surfaces bounded by lacquered frames. The centering of the images gives them an emblematic quality, through a formal strategy that shifts attention from their visual attributes to the specific roles that they convey.

In these works Charlesworth appears to address less the forms of nature than the notion of the natural. The devices by which she focuses on the image suggest a primeval or prelapsarian origin, while her reiteration of those devices suggests that the images are repetitions of the same. What seems to be at issue here is

our collective fantasy of a primitive origin, one that is seductive by virtue of its unattainability. We return to the figure of nature not only in reverie but in the carefully crafted particulars of urban life, in which advertising, magazines, and film, to cite only a few organs of the media, produce endlessly desirable fictions of unity. And Charlesworth seems to suggest both the multiplicity of this fabrication and its centrality to modern civilization: the myth of nature, as produced by culture, serves not only to heal division but to advance development, providing the sense of otherness necessary to the edifice of scientific society.

Charlesworth, then, seems to hint at a political dimension running through these mass-media images, one that undercuts the supposed neutrality with which we romanticize our distant past. But in an important manner, she also nods at the complicity of photography in this process. For inasmuch as the shimmering surfaces of these works suggest mirrors, or a specifically specular brilliance, they point to photography's narcissistic potential, its ability to provide framed and coherent images to sustain the self's quest for unity. Underlying these works, then, is a correspondence between our impossible search for origins and the medium's profferings of satisfaction, one that makes this exhibition a significant photographic event.