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IN MEMORIAM

SARAH CHARLESWORTH, 1947- 2013

by Ben Handzo Jul 17, 2013

Handzo, a former editor of BOMBlog and a protégé of the recently passed Sarah Charlesworth, remembers his mentor.



Sarah Charlesworth, Figures, 1983-1984, Cibachrome with Lacquered wood Frame.

My mentor Sarah

If we are lucky, we get a couple of mentors who shape and disrupt our views during the course of our career. I'm lucky to have had Sarah Charlesworth as one of mine. Many can, will, and have spoken about Sarah as an artist and about her incredibly important contributions to the field. Sarah was an equally important teacher for many of the reasons she was a great artist.

Photography and photographers must embrace technology

Sarah's work embraced and explored the importance of tools and technology in the making of photography. She turned those tools in on themselves, and reflected on the role that technology and media played in our changing society.

Sarah was never afraid of pushing students to improve the technical part of their practice, or encouraging students to explore issues beyond the technical. She taught us that our work would be great not when it erased the role that technology played in its creation, but when it embraced that relationship and used it to rise to a higher level.

Sarah separated herself from other teachers by guiding us through a nuanced discussion of the role technology played in our work. In leading critique, Sarah found a rare balance between focusing exclusively on technical decisions and ignoring

them in favor of a purely "conceptual" critique. In doing so, she brought to life the magical and unique role that photography has as a technological art form.

Art has to make an argument

Sarah was a generous and kind critic of her students' work. And she was patient to a point. Anyone who could not find the intellectual argument they were making was pushed relentlessly to keep searching. Her sense of when to push, when to prod, when to simply love someone, was deep and fine-tuned.

Belief

I was lucky enough to TA for Sarah the year after I graduated from SVA. In that class, we had a difficult student who was resisting engaging with what he was expressing in his work. Sarah turned cartwheels trying to break through his wall, some weeks pursuing him doggedly around tangled bends of logic, other weeks allowing silence to force him to think aloud. She poured an unbelievable amount of energy into this one student, despite what appeared to be raw unwillingness on his part to participate in the conversation, and at the end of each class she and I would re-hash what if anything she could possibly do to bring him along.

It was this deep and abiding belief in her students that made Sarah an amazing mentor. All of us who were lucky enough to be her students grew and changed immeasurably because of our relationships with her. Sarah managed to guide and influence this change in me in a way that felt deeply personal and, somehow, self-driven.

Friendship and Love

After I graduated from SVA, Sarah had my thesis critique group over for dinner. One of our classmates was from New Orleans, and Sarah summoned him early so that he could stir the roux (he was the only one who could be trusted). There was some magic in the room that night—the kind that only happens in intergenerational gatherings. We ate, we drank (a lot) and we danced (after our classmate figured out how to wire his iPod directly to the stereo).

Sarah was an amazing mentor because she loved each of her students deeply. You knew that anything she said about you or your work was coming from that place, and so she could say anything. We don't get that many mentors, and we don't get to be truly loved by that many people.