

REMEMBERING

Sarah Charlesworth (1947-2013)

by Charles Traub and Matthew C. Lange

A week or so before she died, I had lunch with her in her Connecticut retreat. It was a perfect June day. Sarah was moved easily as she prepared a remarkable Italian meal for four of us, including two Italians. Undaunted, and unwilling to accept any help (even in setting the table which was perfectly appointed), did she go about preparing an epicurean feast. In the course of such, we discussed art, Italy, politics, flowers, and edible grasses. The range of topics was eclectic but serious, including a long discussion of a recent film and its subject, Hannah Arendt. All of this took place in a perfectly restored but modest colonial house surrounded by a sizable lawn with budding flora that seemed casually-put but whose existence was considered in every possible way. Sarah was illuminated in white jeans, a blue denim jacket, and flowing blond hair. She reigned in a magnanimous fashion in the castle of her dreams.



Sarah Charlesworth. Photo:
Adam Ryder.

This is how I shall best and always remember her. I knew her as a friend and colleague for 24 years. She was a remarkable advisor and a great teacher. Despite the fact that she did not see herself as a photographer but rather one who made art with photography, I held her in great esteem as the former because she was such a fine photographer—able to capture on film the essence of an object or the visual accounting of a conceptualization. She did so with finesse, technical agility, and aesthetic precision. In her work were serious conundrums that challenged the viewer's assumptions of what a representation should be. Sarah's issues were political; they demanded attention and they were of great ethical import. It is for this fact that she was a great artist. We will be talking more about her art as time passes and it will be well remembered but I—and those who knew her as friends, colleagues, and students—will remember *her*.

—Charles Traub

The sudden passing of Sarah Charlesworth on June 26 was a profound loss to the countless family members, friends, colleagues, and students that were lucky enough to have known her.

As I sit down to contemplate Sarah's absence, I find that the notion remains entirely incomprehensible to me. Sarah's presence remained with nearly everyone she encountered. And it may be some time before my mind (and I am guessing the minds of many others) will be able to fully understand the idea that she is no longer able to contribute her wisdom and consideration to our lives and work. For the time being, I am only able to think of everything that she brought into this world.



Sarah Charlesworth, "Candle," 2012. Fuji Crystal Archive Print, mounted and laminated with lacquer frame, 41 × 32". Courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery and Sarah Charlesworth Studio.

First, Sarah is survived by her son, Nick Poe, and her daughter, Lucy Poe; they are two individuals who have clearly used the thoughtfulness and care that they learned from Sarah and their father, Amos Poe, to forge their own distinct paths in life. She is also remembered by the endless list of friends and artists who benefited from the knowledge and generosity that she brought to every conversation she was ever a part of. Many of these individuals are former students who met Sarah throughout her many years of teaching at the School of Visual Arts, Rhode Island School of Design, and most recently Princeton University. Her approach to teaching always seemed to be a direct corollary to the deliberation she applied in creating her own impressive body of work, from which future generations will undoubtedly continue to learn and grow.

Throughout a career that spanned 40 years, Sarah produced over 20 distinct series, and employed at least as many photographic processes and conventions. She was constantly testing new approaches to image making, and had been experimenting with new techniques within days of her passing. The fact that her work still resonates as strongly as it does, and in so many different ways, is evidence of its lasting effect. I have spent long periods of time looking at, and thinking about (and, as her assistant, helping her to create and share) this work. Though I am impressed by nearly all of it for different reasons, there is one piece that I cannot help but dwell on in recent days.

The piece I am thinking of is entitled *Fear of Nothing*. It consists of two framed photographs that hang side by side: a Roman mask depicted in the right panel casts an indeterminate gaze onto the empty black field that constitutes the left panel. It is a piece that was always important to Sarah when reflecting on her own artistic development, and it served as a constant example for students that were struggling to find their ground. The two ambiguous images leave us wondering whether we should tremble at the sight of the incomprehensible void or never flinch at anything at all.

Though I've given it a great deal of thought, I am still unable to draw a conclusion either way. And I am still not certain if Sarah ever had a determinate answer. But I do know that Sarah Charlesworth taught me a great deal about confronting my fear of nothing.

—Matthew C. Lange