

# BRUCE CHARLESWORTH

An Installation,  
Video,  
Photographs

October 17 to  
November 30, 1984



G A L L E R Y

4 0 0

College of Architecture, Art

and Urban Planning

The University of Illinois at Chicago

Chicago, Illinois 60607



Still from *Whong Adventures*, color videotape, 1984

**W**orking with photography, video, environmental constructions and carefully worded scripts, the artist Bruce Charlesworth defies categorization. This Mississippi resident creates ambiguous, disquieting but entertaining narratives which rely on late 1940s and 50s Hollywood film noir, Buster Keaton and Alfred Hitchcock, melodramatic detective novels and television situation comedies. Although many of Charlesworth's subjects and characters are borrowed from mass-media entertainment, his themes are very much those of the contemporary visual artist — irony, autobiography, composition, a complex and indirect structure of meaning and shifting relations between levels of reality.

The Gallery 400 exhibition presents a sampler of Bruce Charlesworth's recent work; in each piece, the artist's presence is crucial. *Massa Lou*, a 1983 installation, invokes the imminent eruption and ensuing terror caused by the Hawaiian volcano. Twelve black-and-white photographs from the *Trouble* series distill many of Charlesworth's themes into single charged images. As in all his work, the artist plays the hapless, anxious anti-hero; the radio, the television, the convertible roadster and the suburban house are recurring icons in this world-out-of-whack. Three videotapes gather the viewer into a universe in which surveillance, interrogation, imprisonment, natural disasters and changes of identity figure prominently.

When a student, Charlesworth was torn between acting and art. He ultimately opted for the latter, taking degrees in painting at the University of Northern Iowa and the University of Iowa. Filmmaking courses in graduate school helped keep his hand in the dramatic arts. Since moving to Mississippi in 1976, the artist has managed to reactivate a stage career of sorts by annexing acting to his art-production.

Following in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp, Charlesworth creates personae as a means of initiating a dialogue between the "truths" of art and the "realities" of life. While Duchamp and today's performance artists Eleanor Aron, Colene and others invent alter-egos in order to pose questions about the role of the artist vis-a-vis his or her work, society and matters of sexual identity, Charlesworth's characters embody the more basic, banal problem of simply living. In photo-narratives and video-performances, the artist plays the hapless everyman whose profession may be detective, escape artist or "crime suspect."

Cover:  
*Massa Lou*, a mixed-media  
environmental installation,  
1983.

Charlesworth's stories unfold disjointedly; a character is no sooner introduced than the action shifts abruptly in time or space. Yet even though vital information is always withheld and ambiguous and multiple interpretations are suggested, these are stories with one protagonist and a primary, dramatic storyline. A narrator, represented by written texts or as an off-camera interviewer, often enhances narrative coherence. The omissions enforce a condition of audience participation; the viewer makes assumptions about plot which vary from person to person and cannot be confirmed. Charlesworth's story-telling, then, leaves one uncertain but disoriented, bemused but terrified at the latent disaster which lurks beneath ordinary experience.

Photography with captions is the primary story-telling vehicle in Charlesworth's first mature works. The adventures of gambler detective Eddie Glaze (1976-79) unfold through a sequence of small, square-toned photographs. In this work and the thematically related *Special Correspondence*, 1980, Charlesworth fabricates fictions for the camera. The artist joins a diverse group including Cindy Sherman, Diane Meeks, Lucas Samaras, Mac Adams and William Wegman who reject the prescription that photography must confront existing visual facts. Charlesworth the photographer operates like a movie director, producer and editor — coaching actors, constructing sets and framing shots.

Video, a natural medium for narrative, became a central component in Charlesworth's art-making by 1980. *Jarvisland*, the 1981 work screened at the 1983 Whitney Biennial, is a "classic" videotape. Ostensibly about two decisions on a hostess's staircase, it is shot from one viewpoint and concerns the medium itself. Charlesworth's videotapes are carefully edited; like silent films, they often splice written texts between narrative segments. At the same time, they retain the immediacy and personal authenticity of performance art. Although he never acts except before his own camera, Charlesworth is essentially a performance artist.

*Projectile and Wrong Advertisess*, the artist's recent major works, each feature an environmental installation activated by a videotape shot in the space. What began as set-building for photographic fictions becomes a prominent expressive medium in its own right. Natural disasters and unexplained appearances, disappearances and changes of identity take place against a background of exaggerated normalcy. Featuring what the artist describes as "suburban-tropical decor" with a vaguely 1950s flavor, the installations effectively create this atmosphere. Rooms are highly simplified and painted in unusual hues of salmon, yellow, purple and green. Furnishing is reduced to a few over-sized,



brightly colored objects constructed by the artist. The result is somewhere between a stage-set and a remembered childhood home.

Two recent and important theme shows have brought Charlesworth's art to national attention. *The Anxious Edge* (1982), curated by Lisa Lyons for the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and *The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse* (1983-84) at New York's New Museum both emphasized the fatalism and anxious intensity in artists' responses to our volatile times. Indeed, Charlesworth's characters operate as if disaster were imminent, or at least, as if anything could happen in lives they do not control. One never really learns why the escape artist in *Lost Dance Steps* (a 1982 video) is so paranoid but *Projectile's* survivalist clearly finds his worst fears realized in the devastation of his home. In *Mama Lou*, a natural disaster gives form to the nameless contemporary dread.

Charlesworth's work, however, is not morbid; his characters persevere courageously, if sometimes aimlessly. Their predicaments are conceived with humor and wit. Charlesworth's recent *Wrong Adventures: An Installation with Video* has a happy ending. As usual, the story is complex, multi-layered and subject to endless interpretation. Through the Hamlet-like protagonist, Charlesworth explores themes of authoritarianism, obsession, fear of intimacy and questions about how reality is perceived. Difficult predicaments are counterbalanced by the work's optimistic, science fiction tone. The lascivious jungle scenes which alternate with oppressive interior shots ultimately herald a sunrise mental future for Charlesworth's alter-ego.

Bruce Charlesworth does not avoid the complexities of modern life. His art is a serious effort to define meaning in highly personal terms; through art, personal meaning becomes universal.

Laurel Bradley

**Works in the Exhibition**

Twelve Untitled cibachrome photographs from the Trouble series, 16 x 16 inches, 1983.

**Maana Loa**, a mixed-media environmental installation, 1983

**Lost Dance Steps**, 3/4 inch color videotape, 21 minutes, 1982

**Surveillance**, 3/4 inch color videotape, 21 minutes, 1983

**Wrong Adventures**, 3/4 inch color videotape, 21 minutes, 1984



Untitled from the Trouble series, cibachrome print (original in color), 16 x 16 inches

Gallery 400 is at Peoria and Van Buren (500 West)  
Viewing hours 12 to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday  
and by appointment  
For further information call 996-6114 or 996-5611  
Closed November 22 to 24

Laurel Bradley, Gallery Director  
Richard R. Whitaker, Jr., Dean of the College of  
Architecture,  
Art and Urban Planning

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Designed by Christa Rager

**Bruce Charlesworth**

Born in Davenport, Iowa, 1950; B.A., University of Northern Iowa, 1972; M.A., University of Iowa; M.F.A., University of Iowa, 1975. Lives in Minneapolis.

**Selected Solo Exhibitions**

- 1984 **Wrong Adventures: An Installation with Video**, Capp Street Project, San Francisco, Ca.
- 1983 **Bruce Charlesworth: New Photographs**, Project Studios One (P.S.1), New York.
- 1982 **Lost Dance Steps**, Artists Space, N.Y.
- 1981 **Special Communicable**, Film in the Cities, St. Paul, Mn.
- 1980 **Eddie Glove**, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Mn.
- 1979 **Bruce Charlesworth**, Glen Hanson Gallery, Minneapolis, Mn.
- 1978 **Taxist**, South Hennepin Ave. at 11st St., Minneapolis, Mn.
- 1976 **Doris Day in Flames**, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Ia.

**Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 1984 **The Family of Man: 1956-63**, P.S.1, N.Y.  
**Sixty Cycles: Bruce Charlesworth and James Byrne**, Minnesota Museum of Art at Landmark Center, St. Paul, Mn.
- 1983 **Biennial Exhibition**, Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y., catalogue (video section).  
**Language, Drama, Source and Vision**, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, N.Y.  
**The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse**, The New Museum, N.Y.  
**Eight McKnight Artists**, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, Mn., and subsequent Minnesota tour, catalogue.
- 1982 **Eight Artists: the Anxious Edge**, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Mn., catalogue.  
**Bruce Charlesworth and Marlene Nordstrom**, The Tweed Museum, University of Minnesota, Duluth, Mn.
- 1981 **Persona**, The New Museum, N.Y., catalogue.  
**Five Emerging Artists**, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, Mn., catalogue.
- 1980 **Lively Stories**, Castelli Graphics, N.Y.  
**Instantané**, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France and subsequent French tour, catalogue.  
**Painting/Drawing**, Kable Gallery, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, Mn.
- 1979 **SX-70**, Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Arts, Buffalo, N.Y.  
**SX-70 Art**, Kennedy Gallery, Cambridge, Ma. and subsequent European, Canadian and American tours, catalogue.