

Recent Photographs

Ben Lifson

In accounting for the tense emotional atmosphere informing much of Robert Walker's photography, consider first the picture of the man in brown trousers, plaid shirt, and light gray jacket, walking nervously behind a dark-green chain-link fence, beneath a dark-red basketball backboard. All around the edges of this picture, in the signs, letters, graffiti, brick-work, and two-by-fours, is a world created entirely by the idiom of black-and-white photography; the center, however, belongs to color.

With a picture like this (and it has many counterparts in this exhibition) Walker proclaims the dilemma that fascinates him and gives his work a sense of persistent, unresolved inquiry. For it dramatizes the situation of all photographers who work in color in a medium so long dominated by the traditions of black-and-white, and meets head-on the questions they all must face but which most avoid: How do black-and-white and color differ? Where do they join? What makes them both photographic? In this exhibition, Walker gives us some carefully considered, provisional answers.

Color photography, Walker proposes, is not simply photography **in** color, nor **about** color. Rather, it is in and about **colors**, specific colors observed in specific things, and producing specific emotional impact. Events in these pictures which would be incidental details in black-and-white become delightful surprises in color – the way a white shopping bag becomes violet when reflected in a dark-blue window; the way a woman's shiny silver eye-shadow unites with her dark-brown skin to make her white face look painted. In a chaotic city street, full of traffic signs, painted stripes, and enormous machines, a little dog becomes a hero of the scene, its graceful protagonist, because he wears a purple sweater; in black-and-white he would have been next to invisible. In another photograph, a souvenir vendor sells "test-tube babies". Although the image works structurally like a black-and-white picture, only the pink plastic of the souvenirs and the hospital-green identifying the vendor's bizarre get-up as a surgeon's costume, give the photograph its savagely comic meaning,

Photographing in color also means considering the behavior of colors on the two-dimensional surfaces of the photographs themselves. When Walker puts an orange basket-ball backboard against a flat blue sky, or photographs a multi-faceted, multi-colored sphere against a cloudy sky, he draws on the effects of pure color, flattens the observed space of his pictures, and confuses our sense of near and far – we don't know where those objects actually sit. But Walker also knows that in **photography**, this sort of thing is only effect unless it contributes to the picture's meaning. A yellow hard-hat against a blue-black interior brings a small worker up to the foreground, locates him on the same plane as a much nearer pedestrian, and thus turns an ordinary construction site into an urban fantasy inhabited by pygmies and giants. In Walker's color photography, **photography** is always the key word.

But this raises problems too. Black-and-white photographers know their medium's descriptive powers are mixed blessings. Photographic description gives the photographer's fictional world credibility, but the camera can often describe too much and too well, deadening a picture's form. With color's heightened realism, this dilemma is even more severe. Yet, the formal strategies of black-and-white often become too blatant in color, overwhelming description, and thus deadening the appearance of factuality on which the fiction depends. The color photographer has to discover new forms to lead him through this maze.

Hemmed in by the traditions of black-and-white, the artist who elects this undertaking must be resourceful. Walker's eye is alert, and has identified several strategies for the picturing of color vision. In Times Square, a jumble of faces, billboards, posters, and junk in a derelict fire-alarm box becomes an arrangement of color and information that speaks of the city's rich and fantastic diversity and converts Lee Friedlander's linear, black-and-white mosaic style into something closer to a colored tapestry. On the street, Walker glances into a tinted window of a bus, spots a man in a brown leather coat, and constructs a picture based on an almost imperceptible flow of brown-into-gold-into-green-into-yellow, a visionary fragment of a romantic city that black-and-white would reduce to a work-a-day exercise in pattern and contrast. And out of a motel whose corrugated green-plastic sun-roof has been broken by a storm, Walker weaves a fabric of light and shadow, geometry and random shapes, greens, tans, whites, and blues, that operate on its own terms and thus looks as if the photographer had painted the world according to his own fantasies rather than simply observed it with a camera.

In other words, Walker has learned to organize his photographs **around** colors rather than settling for organization **of** color, and thus preserves photography's sense of faithfulness to the world, and transmutes the traditions of its earlier monochromatic idiom. In his best work, he renews that idiom, giving more than provisional solutions to the dilemma of color.

Consider, in this light, the photograph of the crowd at the fire. True, it works on principles of black-and-white: echoing gestures, bold graphic divisions of the frame, rapid transitions in scale, and beautiful drawing of hands, heads, profiles, and clouds. But look closely at the small rust-colored ring on the blond woman's finger, for it provides a form of organization not available to the photographer working in black-and-white. That small node of color draws itself reddish hues scattered throughout the rest of the image – the woman's lips; her coat; the orange building; the dark orange flames; various skin tones – and thus locates colors not only in the described space and objects of the scene, but on the surface of the print, and in Walker's perception of the inner action of colors. In other words, it brings the world of the photograph, which is based on observation, to the condition of vision. And Walker shows us how color photography (without imitating painting, graphic design, or black-and-white photography) can turn the world into a pure visual spectacle of the photographer's **making**, without sacrificing the purity of photographic description. Like the best of Walker's other pictures, it establishes the foundation for stronger color photography yet to come.

Ben Lifson is photography critic for *The Village Voice* in New York.

Essay for exhibitions at the:

Canadian Cultural Centre, Brussels, Belgium, 1980

Fotogalerie Pennings, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, 1981