

ARTFORUM

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ROBERT WALKER, Bertha Urdang Gallery; MERLE STEIR, P.S. 122:

About ROBERT WALKER's photographs I have nothing to say. I've said most of it already, in my review of Helen Levitt (*Artforum*, May, 1980). Walker's color work is a lot like Levitt's, and at its best, just as good. One of the best among the several dozen images in his recent show was a photograph of a woman on a city street next to some trash bags. The woman is shrouded in a shadow which takes on an eerie resemblance to the translucent, smoky, polyurethane bags. This is just the sort of photograph Levitt might make. It's made with an eye for the high comedy which reality constantly creates, dissolves and creates anew before our eyes, but which most of us never see. We aren't quick enough, or aren't wild enough inside.

The pleasures of most color photography I see are narcotic. The pictures lull the viewer with a rich visual luxury, with dream world colors that hang heavy in the air like the scent of some tropical flower. Walker's street photography is not that sort. His pictures are a stimulant. The colors vibrate in disconcerting ways. There are mysteries to be solved in these pictures—mysteries of scale and peculiar detail. The current argument over whether color photographs are going to last seems to me silly because the pictures are seldom interesting enough to make us sorry if they don't. They will have faded away as art years before the issue of whether they will fade as chemistry has been settled. Like Levitt's, Walker's are among those rare color photographs that make us hope color photography will endure after all.

That Walker's imagery looks similar to Levitt's doesn't mean that he's been imitating her, nor does the fact that MERLE STEIR uses some of the techniques associated with I.D. mean he is aware of that institution's photography program. I doubt that Steir, who is primarily a sculptor, has had much photographic education of any sort. Certainly the camera he uses, a Kodak Instamatic, doesn't require much. Nonetheless, one of the things I like about Steir's work is the way it resonates within the history of photography, sounding sympathetic chords with all sorts of different photographic techniques and intentions.

All of Steir's pictures which appeared in the group show at P.S. 122 are of

dance events and have been composed from cut-outs of Instamatic prints taken at different moments during the performance. The result is an image which circumscribes time as well as space, showing us the dancer in a number of places simultaneously. This sort of thing was a convention of the Victorian panorama, which Steir's pictures resemble somewhat. And yet they are also unlike old-fashioned panoramas. Pieced together in irregular, intricate shapes, they are more like those computer-generated composites that the Mariner spacecraft sent back from Mars—a decidedly 20th-century visual form rather than a 19th-century curiosity. The avant-garde nature of the dance recitals Steir photographs and their barren settings make this futuristic form seem appropriate too.

One gets from these photographs a certain impression of alchemy. They convert Instamatic dross into high-grade imagery. The poor, uneven quality of Instamatic prints, which is ordinarily their drawback, here becomes an asset. The unevenness betrays otherwise invisible seams in Steir's splicing. The Fotomat printing is thus made to complicate the image and enrich its ambiguity. Steir has made it generally hard to tell whether any given splice was necessary or arbitrary—whether it was mere joinery, or esthetic choice. The puzzle is pleasing. It is almost impossible to translate a dance into a still medium. Even Norman McLaren's *Pas de Deux*, which has the advantage of being a motion picture, doesn't succeed completely. Steir has done a credible job without the movie camera. He has invented a form commensurate to a very difficult content. On this basis alone, his photo composites might be preferred to the kind of thing Callahan tried in his collages, where form and content remain so disproportionate, so unresolved.

—COLIN L. WESTERBECK, JR.

ROBERT WALKER Recent Photographs



Central Park, New York City, 1979

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