

The advent of photographers interested in a fresh approach to colour artistic photography was one of the most interesting phenomena of the art of the 1970s. In actual fact, attempts to use colour can be found throughout the history of photography (hand-coloured daguerreotypes and visiting cards, and coloured resins, might be mentioned as examples here) but colour was not really treated seriously until after the last war. Even then, with a few exceptions such as Eliot Porter or Ernst Haas, colour photography remained secondary to traditional black and white. The reason for this was obvious – it was simply unclear how to avoid merely taking black and white photographs in colour or how to how to express colour in a purely photographic way. One of the photographers who attempted to resolve these issues was Robert Walker.

Walker's photography, beginning in Montreal and continuing thereafter in Manhattan, was influenced by two trends in contemporary American photography. The first was the so-called street photography that, in America, began with the work of Robert Frank and was perfected by Gary Winogrand. Walker took a great deal from this tradition both in his choice and selection of subjects and in the use of the photographic processes themselves. However one looks at his photographs, one sees a huge picture in which, as if reflected in a shattered mirror, there are various fragments of New York streets, events encountered there and people, captured quickly but thoughtfully. The other influence that meant a great deal to Walker came from photographer concerned with colour – most notably, William Eggleston and Joel Meyerowitz. Skilful use of colour fascinated Walker who, at the beginning of his career, was also a painter. At the same time he was also aware of the new direction in which photography was heading. He carried features from both the above trends into his own photography.

Colour is fundamental and crucial to Walker's photography and everything else is subordinate to it: objects, situations, events and even people. "People are only incidental to my photography", Walker says. "They mean nothing more to me than shadows or post-boxes." He makes use of elements rather than of objects, using them as carriers of colour through which he can achieve the appropriate figural construction and the required tension. Colour, useful in portraying conceived ideas rather than in recording even the most interesting visual events, is used by the photographer to organize his picture.

However, there are certain dangers inherent in the attitude. The attractiveness of the colour used does not automatically make the picture it is used for equally attractive from a visual or photographic point of view. The treatment of colour solely as a building block for a unidimensional picture draws photography dangerously close to painting (for example, geometric abstracts) and the desire to use colour in order to create a photographic picture around it perhaps erases the differences between colour photography and black and white.

Walker, it seems, is aware of the dangers that exist here. His photography, therefore, is an incessant battle to steer clear of such extremes while developing the area between them – and in which he continues to work – as far as possible. His best works are numbered amongst those achievements of contemporary photography that epitomize developments in this area and, in so doing, lay the foundation for the further growth of color photography.

Ryszard Bobrowski

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