

REVIEW

Formal beauty in a webcam world

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Robert Walker
at the Drabinsky Gallery
122 Scollard St., Toronto; 416-324-5766

Montreal-based photographer Robert Walker's exhibition, his first in Toronto, is titled *Town & Country*. This is no doubt because the lower gallery at Drabinsky is filled with Walker's urban photographs - culled principally from his two books, *New York Inside Out* (with a preface by William S. Burroughs, no less) from 1984 and his more recent *Color Is Power* from 2002, while the upper gallery is ablaze with his photographs of flowers.

Walker clearly dotes on colour - on saturated, chromatically intense colour. He mentions in the preface to *Color Is Power* that he remains loyal to the pictorial richness of Kodachrome film, noting in an acerbic aside, that "as emulsions give way to pixels, I wonder if digitalization is synonymous with desensitization?" He also mentions that, while living in New York (1978-88), he fell under the spell of the hard, clangy colour of the great pre-pop and pop artists - such as James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein. As a consequence, Walker's New York photos are as shrill, pungent and angular as traffic, the bracing equivalent in colour to noise.

By contrast, the flower photographs - while still hotly coloured, or at least made up of floral hot spots of brilliant colour nestled into softer, lambent fields - are as flat as wallpaper. This is a considerable accomplishment. It's probably too late in cultural time to photograph a naturalistic flower in a naturalistic context (meadow or vase). It's all been done and overdone. But Walker's flat, flag-like flowers are all his own: raucously lovely (like signs of flowers rather than the real thing) and - as a result - rapturously new.