

Diane Smyth interviews Robert Walker

Why do you do street photography?

At university during the sixties I studied painting. This was a time when the American so-called post-painterly abstractionists were fashionable so we painted with rollers and masking tape rather than brushes and palette knives. I tended toward the use of bright primary colours, pure reds, electric blues and acid greens. Later, I drifted towards conceptual art using the first colour copier machine, appropriating advertising images, pornography, Chinese propaganda, kitsch postcards, etc.

In 1975, Lee Friedlander came to town to give a workshop on black + white street photography. I decided to take the workshop out of curiosity rather than any keen interest. He came for a weekend, showed slides of his work and gave an assignment. I decided to take the assignment very seriously and worked hard at it all week. When he returned the next weekend to view the prints and give a critique, to my surprise he was very encouraging. This process went on for a few more weekends.

When the workshop was over I was left with much to think about. I found his work so compelling, the fact that he could transform the most mundane picture of suburban or middle America into something quite exotic. I knew immediately that I could never come close to matching the complexity and virtuosity of his work so I decided then and there to switch to colour where I could begin with a clean slate. There were no colour photographers to emulate. *William Eggleston's Guide* had just been published by the Museum of Modern Art and I had seen a portfolio of Joel Meyerowitz in *Aperture* magazine and Stephen Shore in Swiss *Camera*. In retrospect, I think this lack of mentors may have been a blessing.

What camera do you use?

I've never been interested in cameras or camera gear. I've used a Leica and a Canon. I always shot Kodachrome film because of the colour quality and durability but I foresaw the demise of film and switched to digital about five years ago. I now use a Sony.

Do you hide your camera or are you quite open?

Shooting on Times Square I am quite open because I am there with ten thousand other tourist photographers. In the old days when Times Square wasn't so antiseptic, I've been grabbed by the scruff of the neck and thrown against the wall by someone obviously engaged in some illicit activity. I have developed a trick I often use when working in close quarters. After I have taken the shot and I remove the camera from my eye, if I immediately look at something close by rather than the subject, they assume their eyes were playing tricks on them and I was pointing the camera elsewhere. If that doesn't work, I wear a pair of good sneakers for a fast get-a-way.

Why did you do so much street photography in New York?

I lived in New York for ten years adjacent to Times Square so it was obviously convenient. It is also one of the most dynamic cities in the world where everything is crunched together with lots of disparate poetical visual relationships.

Why did you choose to work with such bright colours?

As I mentioned previously, I chose to work with bright primary colours when I painted. I think this is my personal colour palette. I think everyone has a personal colour palette which they never discover

because it takes work to find it out. If you go to a museum and look at the paintings from a distance, you can often tell the painter just by his/her colour palette even before you can see the literal subject of the painting.

To achieve this palette in photography, I usually work on bright sunny days when the colour is dazzling. When I photograph on cloudy days the results usually don't interest me.

You seem fascinated with the advertising and the sheer clutter of street scenes in New York, could you say a bit more about that?

I've always been interested in the collage pictures of Robert Rauschenberg and the bill board pop paintings of James Rosenquest where he carves up the ads he once used to paint as a commercial artist and reassembles them in an abrupt and ironic manner in his art work. In a sense, I feel I am taking this process full circle in photographing Times Square through the lens of pop painting – a reversal of **Art** inspired by **Life**. Because of the height of the bill boards, all hint of a horizon line disappears and I can compose my pictures as if on a blank flat canvas. Part of the challenge is to try to impose an order on this extremely chaotic situation. Beyond the compositional aspects, Times Square symbolizes the epicenter of a capitalist system gone mad, encouraging more and more consumption as the planet races towards environmental disaster.

Are the laws on photographing in public in New York restrictive or quite open? Are you ever stopped by security guards or by the police, and what do you do?

The laws in New York are quite open about photographing in public places. I heard the photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia just won a court battle over this. In Quebec however, it is more difficult to photograph a person and publish the picture without a release. In Montreal I was photographing the colourful tanks of an oil refinery and was arrested by security guards and threatened with being charged with trespassing unless I turn over the film. I complied and was released.

Do you have a favorite area or time of the day in which to work?

If I am working in Times Square, because of the tall canyons of steel, I have to follow the sun throughout the day as it streaks between the buildings giving short windows of opportunity before the shade returns. In other places, I always enjoy a late afternoon sun that can light up a subject in a very theatrical manner.

What makes a good street photograph? And what makes a good street photographer?

I guess the same thing that makes any good work of art – a perfect balance between form and content. For me personally, the great street photograph has to have that a small pictorial epiphany, a thing that is particular to the street photograph - something that happened in a millisecond - was photographed in a millisecond and will never happen again - and was captured with grace.

I think the reason New York has been so conducive to good street photography over the last hundred years is that the energy and intensity of the city keep you in the here and now. In most other places, one spends time reminiscing about the past or trying to imagine the future. This New York state of mind is more like that of a predatory animal, ready to pounce on the nearest prey. I think this makes for a good street photographer.

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