

Color is Power



Robert Walker

Magdalena Ignaczak talks to Robert Walker

What were your beginnings? Did you start with photography or with painting?

I originally studied painting at university in the 60s. This was a period when the American color-field painters were in fashion, artists like Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski. At school I painted in the style of the hard-edged abstractionists. In the 70s during the Viet Nam war, there was a dramatic cultural revolt against “Art for Art’s Sake”. The politically neutral abstractionists were considered reactionary, producing elitist consumer products, thereby reaffirming bourgeois culture. A new ‘anti-object’ work evolved, putting the creative process ahead of a finished art product. I got completely caught up in this revolutionary fervor and lost interest in painting.

In the early 70’s the 3M company introduced the first color-copying machine and I began to experiment with photomontage. By chance I found several boxes of photos which had been discarded by an advertising studio. They were pictures of furniture displayed in various settings – living rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms, etc. Simultaneously, a friend gave me a deck of pornographic playing cards he found in the trash of after the occupant of a rooming house had died. I found humorous similarities when I juxtaposed the playing cards with the advertising photographs and reproduced them on the color-copier. The strange effect of the copy created a new hybrid image by changing the context. The pictures lost their original identity and function, giving a new perspective on two traditional genres of photography. I worked with this ‘found’ or appropriated imagery for a couple of years.

In 1975, the American photographer Lee Friedlander came to Montreal to give a workshop on street photography. I registered for the course “as a lark” rather than out of any deep interest. As the workshop progressed I became more fascinated and involved. I was amazed that someone could create images from the “real world” which were unique in form and content and bear witness to “life” at the same time. It occurred to me that if I was going to take ‘straight’ photography more seriously, I should immediately switch to color. I intuitively felt that the language of the black+white image was quickly being used up – the creative possibilities exhausted. I have never taken any black & white pictures since that time.

Why does your color photography seem to be strongly influenced by painting, mainly in a matter of color? Do you consider photography to be a kind of contemporary painting?

When I started to photograph seriously in color there were no models to emulate. Most color photography at that time was commercial where the color was harsh and obviously contrived, or on the other hand, it was in the style of National Geographic magazine, where the formal properties of the color are not considered. They were black+white pictures taken with color film. There were only a few color ‘art photographers’ I was aware of at the time, such as Stephen Shore with his large format street scenes. William Eggleston’s “Guide” had just been published by the Museum of Modern Art, and Joel Meyerowitz had an interesting selection of 35mm street pictures published by Aperture magazine. Other than that, you were on your own.

If my work has an affinity with painting, it is probably because I compose the pictures with an abstract sensibility, When I choose my subject to be photographed, while composing I forget about the literal elements and think about only balancing the color and form. I think if I learned anything from my early days of painting, it was to be able to look at the entire picture plane as an abstraction and not to be seduced by dramatic subject matter.

Are there any special artists: photographers or painters, any artistic trends that could be named as an inspiration? Were there any associations between your pictures and American street photographers? Or maybe everything you do is based on your own ideas?

Nothing I do is based on my own ideas. I have gleaned and stolen from everywhere. When it's synthesized and regurgitated, it becomes your "own" idea. I still enjoy the formally rigorous abstract pictures that infatuated me in my youth – people like Ellsworth Kelly, Larry Poons, and Frank Stella. I also like the abrupt juxtapositions of pop imagery and textures in the early work of James Rosenquist, the subliminal psychological montages of Robert Rauschenberg, and the gothic tableaux of Edward Kienholz. I could go on and on. There are artists I like but have no direct influence on my work and artists I hate who have influenced me very much.

In terms of photography I would like to think of my work as an extension of the great tradition of street photography but only history will be the judge of that. Eugene Atget has to be considered the 'father' of us all. Cartier-Bresson, André Kertész, Bill Brandt, and Brassai established the tradition firmly in Europe. After the war, the Americans took up the flame of both painting and photography. Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, during the 50s and 60s. The seventies brought a constellation of young color photographers such as Joel Sternfeld, Michael Bishop, Len Jenschel, to name a few. Ironically, I feel the situation for color street photography now is in the same position as it was for black & white photography in the 70s when I started. The grammar and syntax of the medium are quickly being used up. It's difficult to take a picture, or use compositional strategies and devices that are unique. All pictures will soon resemble other pictures. Also, with the introduction of digital technology with the manipulative possibilities, the credibility of any image becomes suspect.

I observed a kind of formal relationship between your photography and Super Realism. Is this formal similarity only a coincidence?

I don't know. Maybe this is an example of being influenced by something you don't like. There were a couple of galleries in New York that specialized in Super Realist work that I regularly frequented. These painters were always held in disdain by the avant-garde. I must confess I would always marvel at the technical virtuosity of these artists ability to render chrome and glass and other reflective surfaces. I have to admit some pictures of Richard Estes, Robert Cottingham and Ralph Goings still stick in my mind.

What is the meaning of color in photography? Do you take into consideration any symbolic values or is it just pure aesthetics?

The colour must function as an intrinsic element of the picture. It is impossible to consider the symbolic value of the colour in the heat of the moment because things are usually moving too fast. It is possible to create a mood by using colour with restraint, but usually formal concerns dominate the process and symbolic interpretation comes later.

The main theme of your photos is city life, both the visual and the social side. The coincidence of intense, vibrant colours in advertisements and billboards seem to be more dominant than people and the problems of everyday living from a sociological point of view.

Taking into account sociological questions is the same as the symbolic nature of the colour; there is no time to take these matters into account. The fact that I am photographing in an urban environment

guarantees there will be sociological content, it is a gratuitous bonus. When I leave the house with my camera I have no preconceived agenda, political or otherwise. My job is to return with an interesting colour picture. Of course I bring my life experience to what I choose to photograph, but the actual choice comes from the intuitive and sub-conscious.

Is there anything special that you are focusing on while you are wandering through a city? Do you prefer to photograph one place, one motif and observe changes (as it is in the case of New York) or to look for anything unique everywhere? What are your criteria?

For the past twenty years I have concentrated on photographing New York and during the last few years, have narrowed it down to Times Square. Times Square for me has become what Giverny was for Monet or Mont Saint-Victoire for Cézanne. It offers me the basic building blocks to construct pictures. Working there in the canyon-like streets eliminates the tyranny of the horizon line so I think of the entire picture plane as a flat surface. Social contrasts are offered on a silver platter. In terms of symbolism, it's all there; I never have to think about it. Times Square is a microcosm for the ills of the world, where people are constantly bombarded by aggressive commercial imagery, catching them in a seemingly perpetual *trompe l'oeil* of illusion and delusion. Licentious advertisements paper the walls evoking the sins of the flesh, while self-styled evangelists warn of the dire consequences of capitulating to these temptations. Superman miraculously appears out of the heavens to save the day. Roy Rodgers, a cowboy film star from the 40s hawks hamburgers and hotdogs in front of one of his restaurants like a carnival barker. A fake "Rocky" signs counterfeit autographs, while a test-tube baby vendor offers instant parenthood for two dollars. How to make sense of this cacophony of madness?

I also enjoy photographing in Warsaw which I visit a least twice a year, but that's another story!

There are many photographs in the exhibition taken in Poland. What is your relationship with Poland?

In 1979 I was working at the International Center of Photography in New York, curating an exhibition of the portrait photographer Philippe Halsman. At the same time, a large survey exhibition was being organized by the Center called **Fotographia Polska**. This occasion afforded me the opportunity to meet Ryszard Bobrowski, the co-ordinator of the exhibition, who in turn introduced me to Urszula Czartoryska, Curator of Photography at the Museum Sztuki in Lodz, and Jerzy Lewczynski, a member of the Union of Polish Art Photographers in Warsaw. In 1980, with the help of Mr. Bobrowski and Mr. Lewczynski, an exhibition of my work was organized to travel to the Union galleries in Warsaw, Katowice and Cracow. Good fortune shined on me a second time in 1980 when I met my future wife in Warsaw. Since that time, family matters have brought me to Poland at least once a year.

At the beginning, making color photographs in Poland was not easy. There was the normal atmospheric grayness that is typical of northern European countries, coupled with the grim architectural landscape reflective of the socialist period. In this situation, I was like 'a fish out of water'. I had to make a decision to either readjust my aesthetic bias for bright primary colors, or to leave my camera at home. I decided to take up the challenge and to concentrate on the palaces, gardens and parks of the past. The somber palette of these subjects seemed to go hand in hand with the romantic notion of a lost culture, the archaic remnants of a society possessed with both flair and elegance. I reacquainted myself with the work of the French photographer Eugène Atget, who was able to 'breath life' back into the streets of old Paris and the relics of the *ancien régime*. Over the years these trips to Poland have acted as a kind of therapy, in that I have had to "change gears", or slow down, to appreciate the subtleties of moss covered stone and foliage against the sky. Over the past two decades I have witnessed the transformation of Warsaw into a typical western capital, another cosmopolitan consumer paradise. These changes have

brought a 'fringe benefit' for me in that they have broadened my pictorial horizons. Now pictures taken in Centrum, Warsaw, are becoming indistinguishable from ones taken in Times Square. I am beginning to feel much more at home. God forbid!

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