

# The New York Times

## A PHOTOGRAPHER'S SEARCH FOR THE MAGIC IN EVERYDAY LIFE

By Maurice Berger, January 9, 2018



As a young man growing up in Harlem, Shawn Walker was shaped not just by what he saw at museums, but also what he heard in clubs. “I grew up as a jazz kid,” Mr. Walker, 77, said. “I heard all the avant-garde players, major influences like John Coltrane and Lee Morgan... Jazz takes something ordinary and changes it. Jazz was the background music to my life.”

These influences led him to see photography as more than just visual reporting. As a founding member of the Kamoinge Workshop, the influential black photo collective, he was inspired by his colleagues, especially Roy DeCarava. “Roy opened my eyes to photography as art,” recalled Mr. Walker. “I’ve always considered myself an artist. It’s not just talking about a social condition. I’m trying to approach it artistically.”

With a career spanning half a century, Mr. Walker is just now having his first retrospective in a show opening this week at New York’s Steven Kasher Gallery. The images reflect his belief that “photography has always been magic” for him, ever since his teenage years in Harlem, with his uncle, a photographer, being an early influence. He pursued his passion at Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, which had a photography program and darkroom.

Mr. Walker’s photographs are aesthetically rich, even as he documents the lives of regular people engaged in everyday activities and rituals. His images reveal the paradoxes and nuances in his subjects’ lives: a woman in a stylish hat asleep on

# STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

the steps of a Harlem tenement; the words, “Black Power,” scrawled across a run-down Romanesque style façade; children in Halloween masks standing in darkened and ominous doorways; a Batman logo, hovering apparition-like on a paint-splattered wall; the ramshackle door of a church marked with a cross; and regal women in evening gowns seated on parade floats.

Mr. Walker’s layered and complex images are influenced by a range of artists and photographers who, in addition to Mr. DeCarava, include Charles White, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Minor White. Above all, he sees himself as a latter-day surrealist, pushing the formal and conceptual boundaries of photography. “I’ve always been taken by Surrealism,” Mr. Walker said, fascinated by its penchant for teasing out the extraordinary in commonplace things and situations.

Mr. Walker refers to his photographs as “found images,” echoing the surrealist concept of the found object — a random artifact that inspires deeper aesthetic or cultural meaning. “I always wanted to make the distinction that I’m not creating images,” he said. “These are images that I find, that catch my eye, that I see something I’m interested in.”

Mr. Walker’s interest in Surrealism includes its popular manifestation in film noir, especially the raking shadows and histrionic lighting of the stylish Hollywood crime dramas of the 1940s and 1950s. His photographs resonate with these flourishes, transforming the cityscape into multifaceted and haunting pictures: a mysterious pointing hand, silhouetted against a light-dappled street; the face of a child in a metallic party hat, illuminated by an intense streak of light; the roof and turrets of a Harlem building encircled by dramatic sky; or dismembered mannequins in a Harlem store window, their lower torsos discreetly draped in rags.

Ultimately, there is also a political dimension to these photographs — exemplified by the image of the photographer’s ghost-like reflection in a shattered window, a play on the tension between black obscurity and presence in “Invisible Man,” Ralph Ellison’s epochal novel. “I always want to be recognized as a black photographer,” Mr. Walker said. “I am an African American first and a photographer second. I derive my creativity from an African aesthetic.” His photographs reflect this sentiment, examining everyday black life and exploring its culture with a depth rarely seen in mainstream art. It was extremely important, he said, to “have people see themselves photographed by their own kind.”

In these images, Mr. Walker liberates his subjects from stereotypes and invisibility, no more so than in his continuing “Parade” series. For 30 years, he has photographed ethnic parades, focusing on their cultural and ceremonial details, from clothing and costumes to marching bands and elaborate floats. In their inclusiveness and range, these photographs track the similarities and differences of public celebrations of identity across racial lines.

For Mr. Walker, who was a picture editor of the pioneering Black Photographer’s Annual from 1973 until 1980, photography can tell us much about the world in which we live and the ideals to which we aspire. “I look for truth within the image, for the multi-layers of existence, for the ironies that are our everyday lives,” he wrote in an artist’s statement. “I try to reflect on the positive aspects of my community and to see the relationship between various communities of color. My work reflects a black aesthetic, but tries to speak to everyone.”