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REVIEWS JUN. 24, 2011

Richard T. Walker

SANTA MONICA,
at Christopher Grimes

by Leah Ollma



A charming absurdity trickles through Richard T. Walker's videos, though what registers most strongly is the work's earnestness, its quiet urgency and the vitality of its questions. Since the mid-2000s, the British-born, San Francisco-based artist has been trying to sort out his relationship with nature, a particularly vexed and lopsided attachment owing to his-or at least his on-screen persona's-wholesale adoption of the pathetic fallacy. In numerous short videos and multichannel installations, Walker appears alone, from behind, confessing his love to the landscape and striving to turn his monologue into a dialogue. Inescapably human in his need to be needed, he pleads for nature to fulfill his expectations: "Please be how, how I desire you," he sings in a 2010 piece. Nature, complete in itself, fails to answer back, return his affections or reassure him.

A recent exhibition at Christopher Grimes presented work from 2011. In *the speed and eagerness of meaning*, a three-channel video projected on contiguous walls, Walker shifts his focus explicitly inward, onto the process of perception. Through a tape recording he plays as he stands overlooking a dramatic desert expanse and the voiceover that follows, he reflects on the way pure sensory response quickly gives way to the mind's reflexive habit of naming, categorizing and interpreting. There is comfort in recognizing the forms one sees and ordering the familiar parts into a coherent whole, but "you mourn a little for what you have lost, for you could never again acquire the not knowing that so beautifully placed you in the center of it all." Walker follows his verbal musings with a gentle, folksy chant, a serenade to the wilderness. He strums a guitar in one

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sequence, beats a drum in another and vocalizes into a microphone connected to a portable amp, all the separate lines joining into lovely, continuous song and drawing the 10-minute piece to a close. Three related photographs accompanied the installation and completed the show.

Walker is a 21st-century Romantic, a solitary rambler in the British tradition, a one-man band and a homespun phenomenologist. His work is utterly endearing, but also provocative and telling. It addresses the limitations of thought and language in mediating experience, and lays bare the simultaneous, contradictory impulses—humility and entitlement—that humans typically have toward nature. Walker suffuses his work with awe, while illustrating, with wistful humor, that the encounter with beauty is about more than reverence. It's a complex personal and cultural negotiation that also entails vulnerability, compromise and loss.

Photo: Richard T. Walker: the speed and eagerness of meaning, 2011, 3-channel video, approx. 10 minutes; at Christopher Grimes.

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by Wendy Vogel

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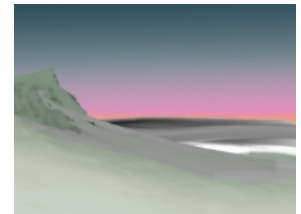


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