Talking art
With Marilyn Walker. By Matt Carter

Marilyn Walker is a photographer, a teacher, and a passionate researcher. Through her work as an associate professor of anthropology at Mount Allison University, Walker has found herself in many parts of the world, researching societies and cultures in some of the world's most remote locations. For her, the photos she takes aren't only a way of advancing her own studies but also a way of communicating with her students.

"I studied photography at Sheridan College and Ryerson, but have integrated photography with my other visual arts work and with anthropology rather than as a specific specialty," says Walker. "My main focus has been traditional knowledge and traditional lifestyles particularly looking at the role of shamans in traditional culture." Walker appreciates the strong visual presence shamans hold within the communities she studies, and holds particular fascination for the intricacies and artistic merits of the garments they wear.

"Visually, a shaman's dress is very, very, beautiful looking and full of very interesting bright colours. They use mirrors on their dresses and bits of metal to create a ringing sound when they're dancing. The dress represents a connection with the spirit world," says Walker. "On the shaman's dress you will see objects that have been handed down through the shaman lineage, or objects given to them by the clients, or by the spirit world." For the past eight years, Walker has been accumulating an incredible amount of photographs from her journeys to Canada's Arctic, Alaska, Siberia, Mongolia, and South East Asia. The body of her work is being compiled into a database at the university for use by future researchers.

"It's a way of returning some of this information back to the communities I've worked with over the years. They'll be able to use that database as an archive and also draw on that material for educational use in their communities or their schools." In addition to her photo adventures abroad, Walker has also been busy collecting photographs for a book she plans to publish on the wild plants found in eastern Canada. For Walker, photographing plants has brought her closer to her environment and given her a stronger appreciation of her surroundings.

"By photographing plants or landscapes over a long period of time you develop a different connection with the subjects of your study. You come to know plants in a very different way. They're part of their environment but there's also something metaphysical going on. Plants have a presence and are sentient beings just like humans are. They have a way of connecting with you on different levels." Walker feels this connection is what attracts us to keep plants in our homes and offices. Although she realizes the limits photography has on the true experience of her subjects, she does her best to convey her own experience and vision, through the lens of her camera.