ROY DECARAVA: SELECTED WORKS

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, Mark Durden reflects upon a selection of images of Roy DeCarava presented at an exhibition at David Zwirner gallery in London 13 years after his death. What is remarkable about DeCarava's work is its multivalency, subtle and nuanced in response to the world around him, avoiding polemical or didactic stances. Aware of documentary's association with photographers who would picture Harlem from the outside, DeCarava declared: "I'm not a documentarian, I never have been. I think of myself as poetic, a maker of visions, dreams, and a few nightmares." In its poetic register, DeCarava's images possess a symbolic resonance, with implications of segregation and separation, as playing a part in the metaphorical representation of the people captured on his images.

Keywords: Photography; Representation; Race; Historical images.

Six figures in sunlight, 1985, Roy DeCarava. © The Estate of Roy DeCarava. All rights reserved. Courtesy David Zwirner

In an interview from 1990, Harlem-born Roy DeCarava said “the Black artist looks at the same world in a different way than a Euro-American artist.” He was making an important distinction from the formalist tendencies being pursued by artists at that time and how the Black artist had to “grapple with staying alive, with feeling alien in a society that barely tolerates him.” He could not think “just in formal terms, he is thinking more in terms of integrated ideas about humanity, about communicating to others.” This exhibition at David Zwirner is only DeCarava’s second London solo show and comes 13 years after his death. The first was at The Photographers’ Gallery in 1988 and marked 40 years of his photography. Beautifully presented, this exhibition of 66 hand-printed silver gelatin black and white prints, encompasses over half a century of work, from 1948 to 2004.

What is remarkable about the work on show is its multivalency, subtle and nuanced in response to the world around him. Never polemical or didactic. Aware of documentary’s association with photographers who would picture Harlem from the outside, DeCarava declared: “I'm not a documentarian, I never have been. I think of myself as poetic, a maker of visions, dreams, and a few nightmares.”

An available light photographer, DeCarava hated flash as it altered the light in which he perceived things. Printing was central to the expressive form of his work and he spoke of how his subjects were “reinterpreted” through printing. As the artist Carrie Mae Weems has pointed out, the zone system was constructed around making white people look best, a good print being based on white skin. That photography is based on ideas of whiteness would seem to be important

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in understanding DeCarava's printing technique. By printing softly and shifting the tonal range towards the gray and dark end of the scale, he counteracts this bias to whiteness in photography through his often sensuous and beautiful depictions of Black life.

His picture of an oppressive dark narrow corridor with little illumination, "Hallway, 1953", as he has said, was one of his first photographs to "break through a kind of literalness." It is about "all the hallways I grew up in." The brutalizing space is marked by class and race, testament to, as he put it, "the economics of buildings made for poor people." Much of his photography operates metaphorically. His pictures are literal and concrete in their specificity, in their description of the artist's immediate surroundings, in the way they are drawn from life in Harlem, but at the same time they are richly suggestive, lyrical and poetic.

Two women, mannequin's hand, 1952. Roy DeCarava. © The Estate of Roy DeCarava. All rights reserved. Courtesy David Zwirner.

In an early 1952 photograph "Two women, mannequin's hand, 1952" the menace of racism is suggested by the way the dummy's hand appears as a disruptive white claw that cuts between two Black women as they window gaze. We only see one of the women's faces and her portrait is beautifully delineated in profile. Her companion's head is turned away from us and we concentrate on the energy created by the folds of her headscarf and the detail of her hair blown by the wind, which has also upturned a corner of her scarf. Grace is a recurring quality in his depictions of African Americans. In its poetic register, the symbolic resonance of the mannequin's hand invites us to see the humdrum detail of the padlock and shuttered window on the storefront next to the couple,

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with implications of segregation and separation, as playing a part in the metaphorical drama of the picture.

Black life is not framed sociologically but pictured tenderly and intimately—for example, the beautiful but sensitive picture of paternal love, "Bill and son, 1962", in which DeCarava pictures the child close up but from behind, focusing on the texture of the white bath towel and the father's hands as they hold and lift the child up to face him. The loving gaze of father to son is unpictured but not unimagined. Primarily an urban photographer, a few photographs offer respites of natural beauty—the dark tonal surface of the Hudson river from 1948 animated by twinkling lights and a close-up of the white feathers of a swan in a photograph from the 1990s. We move between different kinds of pictures in the arrangement of photographs in this show, and as a result each photograph maintains a certain autonomy. Attentive to the print, DeCarava's art photography was always made more for the wall than the printed page. Together with his wife, he set up and ran a photography gallery in Manhattan for a couple of years in the mid 1950s, showcasing his own and other artists' photographs in a context distinct from the illustrated magazines—a gallery "that values the single photograph on its merits alone, not how well it fits into a picture sequence."

DeCarava loved jazz and photographed many of its musicians in its heyday in New York. For him, jazz was about the freedom of individual expression as opposed to classical music in which the conductor is master. And he saw musicians as workers. In "Haynes, Jones and Benjamin, 1956", the musicians' movements as they walk off stage, one carrying his double bass, the other two in conversation, create their own musical rhythm, echoed and played out by the diagonal forms and shapes of the building's interior space.

In an early photograph, "Woman walking, 1950", a view looking down from a street window captures the elegance and grace of the woman's movement, the vitality of her presence a foil to the lifelessness and emptiness of so much of the rest of the photograph: the littered pavement, the expanse of brick road and the wiry bare tree branches that intrude from the picture's top corners.

"Man with two shovels, 1959", concentrates on physical labour through the prominent detail of a seated man's gnarled right hand that catches the light as he grips two shovels. His face and body are lost in the darkness of the subway and replaced by the form and shape made by the upright handles of the two shovels, defined by light from above. The worker is reduced to his instruments of labour.

In relation to the totality of his life's work this show offers only a small selection. But there are some notable and unfortunate omissions. The exhibition does not include any of DeCarava's remarkable photographs of protest and resistance, "Mississippi freedom marcher, Washington. D.C., 1963", for example, or his photograph, "Five men, 1964", of men leaving a memorial service in Harlem for the children that were killed by the Ku Klux Klan's bombing a church in Birmingham, Alabama. It also excludes some of his harsh and critical portrayals of white people on the street.

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An important thematic recurring in DeCarava's work concerns bifocality, a doubling of viewpoints which takes on particular significance and meaning in terms of race. In *Two men leaning on posts*, 1964, a close-up detail of a man's arm holding a post, frames our view of another man facing him from across the street. With their repeated stances and gestures they become united in their stand off. "Woman and man at entrance, 1972", makes sense as a later variant of an important early photograph, "Subway stairs, two men, 1954" (and another notable omission). In the subway photograph, the steps and perspective pull us down into the yawning void and gap between two stationary men, one white, the other Black, as they stand facing away from one another at either end of the bottom of the stairs, each awaiting their trains.

In the later street photograph, everything is played out in bright sunlight and at the front of a new-looking, corporate building. A young Black woman is pictured waiting beside its glass-doored entrance and beneath the large number 706. She is photographed just as she has turned her head to look to her right. The photograph pairs her with a young white male emerging into the light as he exits the building and is depicted just as he turns his body and head to look back into the darkness of the entrance. Looking away from each other, they are at the same time connected in this picture through the simultaneity of their actions and the light that illuminates them.

While many of the photographs invite us to luxuriate in the depths of darker tones and shadows, occasionally light can be in abundance. In his joyous picture of six people, presumably a family group, lit up by the sun, the whole tone of the print and picture serves to amplify and celebrate the moment photographed—camera movement and the blurring of the image accents the dancing lightness of the family as they run and skip away from us.

Skylight, 1965. Roy DeCarava. © The Estate of Roy DeCarava. All rights reserved. Courtesy David Zwirner

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In an otherwise deadening and dark enclosed view looking out over a rooftop at other drab buildings, a skylight, pictured in accordance with its function, provides a glimmer of light and life. It serves as a fitting emblem for DeCarava's essentially affirmative photography, which was always separate from the more distanced and discordant characteristics of other photography drawn from the city and the street, — though the nightmare of racism still marked his work. It was there in the threatening "ghost hand" (his words) of the mannequin in one of his earliest pictures, and also in one of his last with the looming menace of the two iron hooks of a broken swing, photographed against a lowering sky.

Installation view of Roy DeCarava Selected Works. © Anna Arca.

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