

# David Zwirner

New York London Paris Hong Kong

## Roy DeCarava *Selected Works*

14 January–19 February 2022  
24 Grafton Street, London



Roy DeCarava, *Two women, mannequin's hand*, 1952 © The Estate of Roy DeCarava.  
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David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of photographs by Roy DeCarava (1919–2009) at its London location. This will be the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in London in over thirty years and the first presentation of his photographs in the city since inclusion in Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* exhibition in 2017.

Over the course of six decades, DeCarava produced a singular collection of black-and-white silver gelatin photographs that combines formal acuity with an intimate and deeply human treatment of his subjects. His pioneering work privileges the aesthetic qualities of the medium, providing a counterpoint to the prevailing view of photography as mere chronicle or document and helping it to gain acceptance as an art form in its own right.

Having trained as a painter and draughtsman, DeCarava began working with the camera in the mid-1940s, seeking an inclusive artistic statement for the culturally diverse uptown Manhattan neighbourhood of his Harlem youth. Working without assistants and rejecting standard techniques of photographic manipulation, DeCarava honed his printing technique to produce rich tonal gradations, enabling him to explore a full spectrum of light- and dark-grey values more akin to a painterly mode of expression.

Relying on ambient light and a point of view that neither monumentalises nor renders sentimental his subjects, DeCarava was able to produce a highly original oeuvre that carries significant visual and emotional content. His work reveals transcendent values of the human figure and continues to evolve in the context of the everyday experience of social improvisations. Avoiding being an emblematic totem, the work is a sustained personal exploration of human ingenuity. The search for beauty within this

modern conundrum is the hallmark of his work, and achieving a vibrant and meditative voice, he remains a central beacon for contemporary artists.

Roy DeCarava (1919–2009) was born in New York, and first studied art in the city's public schools, including at Textile High School, from which he graduated with honours in 1938. He subsequently worked in the poster division of the Works Progress Administration, where he briefly made prints and paintings, prior to being admitted to The Cooper Union. DeCarava studied there until 1940, when he left to attend classes uptown at Harlem Community Art Center (1940–1942) and George Washington Carver Art School (1944–1945), where his elder professional contemporaries included Norman Lewis and Charles White, among others. Some of his earliest influences during this time included the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh and the Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

DeCarava first used a camera as a means of gathering visual information for his paintings; however, by the mid-1940s, he switched exclusively to photography as his primary means of artistic expression, admiring the medium's directness and flexibility. He worked with a handheld 35mm camera, which enabled him to move easily throughout the city, embodying a freedom not dissimilar to Henri Cartier-Bresson's model of the ambulatory observer, although with a more specific intention to understand his relationship to the subject. Unlike most photographers of his day, DeCarava developed and printed his own images himself, enabling him to create over time a distinct and enduring aesthetic approach. He was successful in his imagery from the beginning and his work has widely influenced that of contemporary artists today. He recognised early on that the process of making a photograph begins long before one even picks up the camera and is not complete until the image has been printed to its inner calling.

DeCarava's first solo exhibition of photography was held in 1950 at the Forty-Fourth Street Gallery in New York. Through this show, he met photographer Edward Steichen, at the time the director of The Museum of Modern Art's new department of photography, who purchased three images for the museum's collection. In 1952, with Steichen's support, DeCarava became the first African American photographer to win a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. The one-year grant enabled DeCarava to focus full time on photography and to complete a project that would eventually result in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a moving photo-poetic work in the urban setting of Harlem. DeCarava created a set of images from which the poet Langston Hughes chose 141 and adeptly supplied a fictive narration (from the voice of a Harlem resident), reflecting on life in that city-within-a-city. The book, widely considered a classic of photographic visual literature, went out of print several times and was reprinted by public demand, most recently in 2018 by First Print Press. Steichen also included DeCarava in a number of group exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, including *The Family of Man* (1955), which travelled internationally through 1965, resulting in more recognition of his work overseas.

Also in 1955, DeCarava opened A Photographer's Gallery on West 84th Street in Manhattan, the first gallery to focus exclusively on American fine art silver gelatin photography in the nation. He was able to present his own accumulating works in a solo context while also mounting twelve exhibitions over the course of its two-year existence that featured the early display of soon-to-be canonical American photographers and advancing the artistic consideration of the field.

Starting in 1968 DeCarava with his partner art historian Sherry Turner DeCarava established the DeCarava Archives to hold and preserve his art work for future generations. They also embarked on a project to encourage and support institutional exhibitions and this led to the photographs being the subject of numerous solo presentations, including those at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1969); Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln (1970); University of Massachusetts, Boston (1974); Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1975); Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (1976); Akron Art Institute, Ohio (1980); Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego (1986); and Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1987).

In 1983, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, presented *The Sound I Saw: The Jazz Photographs of Roy DeCarava*, which travelled to Hunter College Art Gallery, New York; Port Washington Public Library, Port Washington, New York; and Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York. A major retrospective of DeCarava's work was presented at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1996, and travelled to the Art Institute of Chicago; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Addison Gallery of American Art, The Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; Saint Louis Art Museum; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

From 2017 through 2019, DeCarava's work was included in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which travelled from Tate Modern, London, to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; Brooklyn Museum, New York; and The Broad, Los Angeles. In 2019, the artist's work was the subject of a solo presentation entitled *The Work of Art* at the Underground Museum, Los Angeles.

In 1975, DeCarava joined the faculty at Hunter College, New York, and was named Distinguished Professor of Art of the City University of New York in 1988. During his lifetime, he was the recipient of numerous awards, including a Master of Photography Award, International Center of Photography, New York (1998); a Gold Medal for Lifetime Achievement, The National Arts Club, New York (2001); and a National Medal of Arts (2006), the highest civilian honour awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts and presented by the President of the United States.

Work by DeCarava is held in numerous public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago; George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Minneapolis Institute of Art; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

David Zwirner announced the exclusive representation of the Estate of Roy DeCarava in 2018. In 2019, in New York, the gallery presented two critically lauded, concurrent exhibitions of the artist's photographs: *Light Break* and *the sound i saw*, both of which were accompanied by catalogues copublished by First Print Press and David Zwirner Books (*Light Break* features an essay by Sherry Turner DeCarava, director of The DeCarava Archives, and a preface by Zoé Whitley, director of the Chisenhale Gallery, London; *the sound i saw* includes essays by Sherry Turner DeCarava and filmmaker Radiclaní Clytus).

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