

Preface

Too often the true measure of artists' greatness is recognized not in their lifetimes but becomes manifest through their aesthetic afterlives, in the work of subsequent generations. While this is true of the late photographer Roy DeCarava (1919–2009), relative anonymity came also with that rare gift, the respect of one's peers. Fellow photographer Edward Steichen included DeCarava's work in a seminal MoMA exhibition as early as 1955. Beloved and brilliant poet Langston Hughes provided the text for DeCarava's classic volume, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, first published that same year. Among extensive professional accolades, he received a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1952—the first awarded to an African-American artist for photography—and in 2006 the National Medal of Arts, the United States' highest honor granted to artists.

Today DeCarava ranks without question among the great American modernists of the post-World War II era, recognized especially for his masterful printing innovations in silver gelatin photography. By combining technical precision with engrossing intimacy, he created a distinctive visual vocabulary that transformed the subject matter he captured—notably in, but vitally well beyond, New York City.

Evidence of DeCarava's definitive influence is seen (and felt) in the creative work of others active in film, photography, and across the visual arts who consistently acknowledge him as a major source of inspiration. His impact is crucially cross-generational, for even younger image-makers working today attest to his importance. Astonishingly, such was the power of DeCarava's words and approach to art-making that one student, after hearing him speak, vowed to follow in the photographer's footsteps although he hadn't yet seen one of DeCarava's riveting silver gelatin prints.

A trained painter and printmaker, DeCarava initially used his camera to capture photographic studies for his paintings. Soon he realized that the camera had superseded the paintbrush and the printing plate, becoming his primary artistic instrument. Earning a reputation as a serious person of integrity, DeCarava worked quietly but persistently for decades. He was known by those in the arts, particularly in New York, where he expressed complete dedication to his practice by deepening his rich oeuvre rather than seeking wider renown, meaning the general public was largely unaware of his work.

In making photographs, as in life, DeCarava was patient. Possessing both a peerless self-awareness and acute observational skills, he knew intuitively when to wait and when to open the camera's shutter. In the dark room, he availed himself of these same attributes, moving with steady assurance to hand-develop his prints so as to allow the full range of

what he called his “infinite palette of gray tonalities”—often realized at the deepest end of the spectrum—to emerge slowly and fully. I'm reminded of Thelonious Monk's advice as a bandleader: “Just because you're not a drummer, doesn't mean that you don't have to keep time.” With DeCarava, timing was everything—until the precise second when it was nothing. The photographic results of his process transcend each of the moments in which they were created, preserved for us here in the evolving present as if beyond temporal confines.

Looking at the images included here, I see that this artist was never creating mere documents. Rather he was composing works of art with light, shadow, and an unapologetic love of silver gelatin's immersive tonalities—from the brightest rays of light to a scintillating obsidian darkness. He engaged these tones to articulate a shared human identity and community, all while broadly evoking his aesthetic principles. The way he kept time, through his photographic lens and mind's eye, made him distinctly of his time; but simultaneously he was also ahead of his time and undeniably the originator of timeless works.

Though I never had the pleasure of meeting Roy DeCarava, I have shared the distinct privilege of viewing his works up close and of displaying them in museum presentations. This publication—anticipated for more than twenty years—allows new audiences access to his stunning vision. On the following pages, the start of something uniquely beautiful and generative for all of us takes place, confirming that artists can and do impart otherwise unexpressed insights, which offer fresh pathways to perception, thought, feeling, and future creative acts. May we now receive DeCarava's unique wisdom right on time for a new generation.

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