

Roy DeCarava: Photographs from the Collection, January 11, 2002-March 31, 2002

For over fifty years Roy DeCarava (American, b. 1919) has photographed people and places in his home of New York. His luxurious use of the dark tonal range is legendary, as is the compassion with which he captures his subjects. His photographs reflect issues that are as deeply personal as they are social. For the richness of experience his images suggest and the expressiveness of his printing style, one critic has justly described DeCarava as a "poet of light."

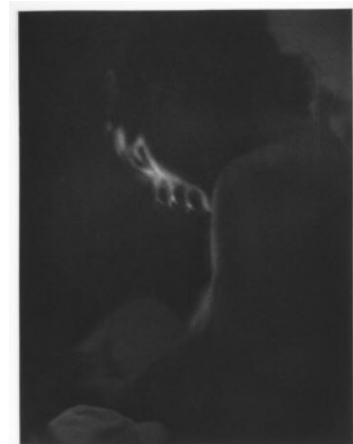
DeCarava received recognition for his photography early. In 1952, just a few years after abandoning painting and printmaking for photography, he became the first African-American photographer to win a prestigious fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. The award gave him an opportunity to work full time photographing the people of Harlem in a broad range of daily activities. The poet, Langston Hughes, was so impressed that he selected 140 of the images and wrote an accompanying text so they could be published. The resulting book, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955, was a huge success immediately selling out the first edition of 25,000 copies.

Nearly a decade later, DeCarava completed a design for a more ambitious, large-format book that was to include 204 photographs accompanied by his own poetry. Titled *The Sound I Saw*, the volume intersperses photographs of jazz musicians with scenes from everyday life. In 2001, this sumptuous book was finally published as DeCarava proposed it in 1964.

The exhibition complements The RISD Museum's annual Langston Hughes poetry reading which this year celebrates the 100th anniversary of Hughes's birth.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009
Untitled, 1973
Photogravure
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.5



RISD MUSEUM

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009
Untitled, 1963
Photogravure
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.7

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009
*Billie at Braddocks (Billie Holiday), New York, 1952, Roy
DeCarava: Twelve Photogravures, 1990, 1952*
Photogravure
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.8



Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009
Untitled, 1979
Photogravure
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.9

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009
Untitled, 1950
Photogravure
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.6

RISD MUSEUM

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009

Untitled, 1956

Photogravure

Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.10



Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009

Untitled, 1978

Photogravure

Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.4

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009

Untitled, 1978

Photogravure

Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.3

RISD MUSEUM

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009
Couple Dancing, New York, 1956
Photogravure
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1990.019.2



Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009
Untitled, 1956
Gelatin silver print
Walter H. Kimball Fund 1990.020

"The photograph was taken at a dance of a social club at the 11th St. Manor at Fifth Avenue... It's about these two dancers who represent a terrible torment for me in that I feel a great ambiguity about the image because of them. It's because they are in some ways distorted characters. What they actually are is two black male dancers who dance in the manner of an older generation of black vaudeville performers. The problem comes because their figures remind me so much of the real life experience of blacks in their need to put themselves in an awkward position before the man, for the man; to demean themselves in order to survive, to get along. In a way, these figures seem to epitomize that reality. And yet there is something in the figures not about that; something in the figures that is very creative, that is very real and very black in the finest sense of the word. So there is this duality, this ambiguity in the photograph that I find very hard to live with.... I have to say that even though it jars some of my sensibilities and it reminds me of things I would rather not be reminded of, it is still a good picture. In fact, it is good just because of those things and in spite of those things. The picture works." (Roy DeCarava, 1981)



RISD MUSEUM

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009

Hallway, 1953

Gelatin silver print

Jesse H. Metcalf Fund 84.222.2

"It's about a hallway that I know I must have experienced as a child. Not just one hallway; it was all the hallways that I grew up in. They were poor, poor tenements, badly lit, narrow and confining; hallways that had something to do with the economics of building for poor people. When I saw this particular hallway I went home on the subway and got my camera and tripod, which I rarely use. The ambience, the light in this hallway was so personal, so individual that any other kind of light would not have worked. It just brought back all those things that I had experienced as a child in those hallways. It was frightening, it was scary, it was spooky, as we would say when we were kids. And it was depressing. And yet, here I am an adult, years and ages and ages later, looking at the same hallway and finding it beautiful." (Roy DeCarava, 1981)



Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009

Five Men, 1964, 1964

Gelatin silver print

Jesse H. Metcalf Fund 84.222.1

"The motivation at that moment was my political understanding of the treatment of black people and their response to injustice. This moment occurred during a memorial service for the children killed in a church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1964. The photograph shows men coming out of the service at a church in Harlem. I was aware of all this, and I wanted to make a picture, to commemorate that day. I wasn't there at the bombing, I wasn't in the church, but I knew what it was and I wanted to make a picture that dealt with it. The [five] men were coming out of the church with faces so serious and so intense, and the image was made." (Roy DeCarava, 1990)

