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Is She or Isn’t She A Leonardo?

Is Beauty in the Brain of the Beholder?

How Man Ray Hid His Identity

Urs Fischer ▪ David Hockney ▪ Van Gogh
Recording ‘The Sweet Flypaper of Life’

Remembering Roy DeCarava  BY BARBARA POLLACK

Roy DeCarava, one of the leading photographers of the 20th century and the foremost African American photographer of his generation, died at the age of 89. Known for coaxing the details of Harlem life from velvety shadows and smoked-filled rooms shot in available light, DeCarava had a career marked by personal breakthroughs and notable firsts.

“At the heart of DeCarava’s photography is an aesthetic of patient contemplation,” wrote curator Peter Galassi at the time of the photographer’s 1996 retrospective at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. “He loves the luxurious subtlety of photography’s infinitely divisible scale of grays, and it pleases him when viewers feel obliged to pause and peer closely into the dense but articulate shadows of his pictures.” This contemplative mood, whether focused on a little girl in a white gown on a barren street in Graduation (1949) or on jazz diva Billie Holiday in his signature 1957 portrait, distinguished his work from photojournalism and street photography, with social issues ever present but never overtly dominant in his pictures.

Born in Harlem in 1919 to a single mother, DeCarava was one of only two black students at Chelsea Vocational High School. After graduating, he enrolled at the prestigious Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. He left after two years to attend the Harlem Community Art Center, where he trained as a painter and printmaker. He worked for the Works Progress Administration before entering the U.S. Army during World War II. DeCarava had his first show of silk-screen prints in 1947, but by then he was already turning his attention to photography, which he found to be a more immediate medium.

The young photographer found a mentor in Edward Steichen, then curator of photography at MoMA, who encouraged him to apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship. DeCarava became the first African American to win the award, in 1952. With the grant, he began photographing the streets, subways, and people of Harlem. His series was published in 1955 in the book The Sweet Flypaper of Life, a best-selling collaboration with poet Langston Hughes. Several of the prints were included in Steichen’s groundbreaking “The Family of Man” exhibition at MoMA the same year.

Fighting for photography to gain greater recognition, in 1955 DeCarava opened A Photographer’s Gallery, a space he ran from his uptown Manhattan apartment for two years. He also worked to increase opportunities for African American photographers. While supporting himself as a photojournalist for Sports Illustrated, he joined the Committee to End Discrimination Against Black Photographers. In 1964 he became the founding director of the Kamoinge Workshop, a Harlem collective that supported and promoted work by black photographers. By the late ’60s, DeCarava had moved into academia, first teaching at Cooper Union and then, starting in 1975, at Hunter College, where he remained for more than 20 years.

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