Roy DeCarava: "Thru Black Eyes"

by A. D. Coleman

Rising in a high, fluid arc of melody, the piercing cry of a soprano sax skirls and soars through the spacious gallery, echoing off the white, sun-warmed walls. An almost unbearable passion — more simultaneous ecstasy and anguish than most of us allow ourselves in a lifetime — surges through the horn, filling the room with its energy.

In one shadowed corner of the gallery, the creator of this music — John Coltrane, dead (so very much too soon) these three years — leans brooding against a wall between sets, hunches his huge form over his instruments, and then, drained utterly in the ugly pre-dawn city grayness, rests his head on a luncheonette table. These images are only photographs, of course; but in them, for anyone blessed with the memory of having seen him perform, Coltrane is alive. The music, as well as the man, can be felt in them.

Other famous faces dot the walls: Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Langston Hughes. But unfamiliar faces outnumber them by far: children, young men and women, adults, the old, caught in all kinds of activity — laboring, playing, at home, on the streets. Just people, involved in the process of living, unusual only in that most of them are black and have been brilliantly photographed — as the exhibit's title makes explicit — "Thru Black Eyes."

Those three small words define the show perfectly. As they imply, the people portrayed therein have not been seen as specimens, symbols, or social phenomena, but as distinct, unique human beings — a rare and momentous achievement. And, as the title also suggests (through an apropos, probably intentional, pun), these images were made by an artist who has fought a long, punishing battle for creative survival — and who has, at great cost, won.

In a peculiarly American perversion, our society delights in taking credit for the success of artists who manage to overcome the endless obstacles we place in their path. It may be gratifying to think of ourselves as an aesthetic boot-camp, and in some

instances not entirely inaccurate; most often, though, all that is accomplished by this enforced hurdling of nonsensical barriers is the dissipation of creative energy, the frustration of wasted time. For black artists, needless to say, these problems are so compounded that superhuman efforts are required merely to retain enough sanity to go on.

I state this deliberately and bluntly, to forestall anyone (myself, white as I am, included) from rationalizing himself into the mistaken belief that the triumph of this exhibit belongs to anyone save the man who made it — Roy DeCarava. This was his show, his alone; and, quiet as it may be kept, I do not think that Edward Spriggs — executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, where "Thru Black Eyes" was mounted — exaggerated too much when he called it "one of the most important photo shows of our time."

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It's a three-flight walk up to the heavy metal door bearing the name DeCarava in thin, elegant letters. If the light is right in the dim hallway, you can just make out the word "photographer" beneath the name, painted over but still faintly visible. Inside the studio there is space, light, and order.

Row on row of carefully labelled boxes of prints line the shelves, along with books, magazines, and records. The furnishings are sparse: a neatly made bed, several chairs. A saxophone rests on its stand, gleaming in the noon light which streams into the front room from windows which look out on Sixth Avenue in the upper 30s, near the heart of the garment district in midtown Manhattan.

The studio's tenant must be numbered among the eminent contemporary photographers. One of that handful of men who have been awarded Guggenheim Fellowships for photography, he is represented in the permanent collections of many institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Chicago Art Institute, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He ran one of the first exclusively photographic galleries in the city, and organized a workshop which, though currently defunct, continues to be highly influential. He has participated in numerous important group exhibitions, including

"The Photographer's Eye," "Always the Young Stranger," and Steichen's "Family of Man." (Steichen, incidentally, is a particular admirer of his.)

In collaboration with a renowned American writer, he produced a book that won two awards, received critical plaudits from the *New York Times Book Review* and sold out its first edition. Additionally, as his superb one-man show proved, he is capable of sustaining an exhibit almost 200 prints long — which, in my book at least, places him in the ranks of the master photographers.

Yet Roy DeCarava is almost as unknown to the outside world as are the men who push racks of clothing through the streets below his windows. His name is hardly recommended for dropping; it rings no bells with most people. While it is tempting to call him a "photographer's photographer," that would be evading the issue, since only a small number of photographers are aware of his work.

Most of those who recognize his name do so with raised eyebrows and a strange expression — as though the photographic world were a frontier town, and they had just heard tell of some trouble-making lawman hellbent on a showdown with the local gunslingers. Not only do such words as "difficult" and "intransigent" crop up continually in the ensuing discussions; at times, incredibly, there is even a faint aura of danger, much like that which hangs over the marked man in a gangster flick.

All of which is curious indeed, because Roy DeCarava does little more than tell the truth as he sees it and insist on his rights as an artist and as a man. It would be even curiouser — incomprehensible, in fact — were he not black.

Though unacknowledged and unmentionable — photographers, after all, pride themselves on belonging to a hip, pace-setting profession — there is as much de facto segregation in the photographic field as in any other. Less blatant, perhaps, because it is less an act of commission (it's hard to stop a man from taking pictures) than of omission (it's easy to prevent him from making a living at it), discrimination is nevertheless common practice. Excepting Gordon Parks, the industry's carefully selected token Negro and the only one yet permitted to reach the top, the facts speak eloquently for themselves.

Aside from those employed by the black press, only a handful of black photographers have been able to earn a living as photojournalists. Despite the dramatic increase in coverage of black-oriented material and news events over the past decade, this situation has not noticeably improved. Ironically, the assignments for these stories have almost invariably gone to white photographers. Intent as we are on preserving our distorted vision of black reality, we have insured that it reaches us only after filtration through white eyes.

Similarly, blacks have been unable to break into fashion and/or advertising photography. Indeed, until a few years ago there was segregation on both ends of the lens: the models, as well as the photographers, were exclusively white. That could hardly have escaped the discerning eyes of the fashion and advertising photographers: but, though it was certainly within their power to do so, I don't recall the top men in the field banding together and refusing to shoot a racially unbalanced session. Nor, for that matter, have the leading models exerted any corresponding pressure for integration of the studios. A tacit form of racism is still, conveniently, being overlooked.

The same bias prevails in the area of creative photography. Not many "pure" photographers, black or white, are able to support themselves through their art, so the criteria are different. But the clues are there: the established galleries do not exhibit the prints of many non-whites, while museums have for the most part ignored them completely. Thus, the black artist is cut off from his potential public and from his peers, forced to work in a vacuum and go unnoticed.

Under these circumstances, it is little short of amazing that a black photographic aesthetic has evolved and that a black school of photographers can be identified. Both of these developments can be attributed directly to Roy DeCarava, who has bucked the system and worked towards these goals for over 20 years.

DeCarava's contribution to modern photography is two-fold, and both facets merit consideration in depth. First, he is — as photographer James Hinton wrote in the exhibit brochure — "the first black man who chose by intent to document the black and human experience in America, and he has never wavered from that commitment. He was the

first to devote serious attention to the black aesthetic, as it relates to photography and the black experience in America."

Consequently, DeCarava's body of work, taken as a whole, provides what is undoubtedly the most thorough and profound record we have of black life over the last two decades, invaluable precisely because it was made from within the black culture rather than from without. His unswerving dedication to this task has made him the spiritual father of all black photographers. To quote Hinton, "For those of us who knew his work at first hand, he set a unique example. His influence today extends throughout the field."

Much of that influence can be traced back to the Kamoinge Workshop, which DeCarava founded and ran from 1963 through 1966. Organized by him at the request of numerous black photographers, Kamoinge (the word, Kikuyu in origin, translates roughly as "group effort") was, according to DeCarava, "an attempt to develop a conscious awareness of being black, in order to say things about ourselves as black people that only we could say. A black man," he continues, "sees the world through black eyes, and it's this blackness that shapes his world. The black man — and, of course, this means the black photographer too — tends to see the world in a more truthful, realistic way; he must, to survive. And, because of the immediacy of the medium, this is very important."

He is not involved in the planned revival of Kamoinge. "It was a very fruitful experience for me," he explains, "but I've done what I could: I don't think there's anything I could add at this stage of my life." The workshop's impact has continued to be felt since its demise, not only directly — in the work of such former members as Lou Draper, Beuford Smith, and Ray Francis — but also at one remove from the group itself.

As James Hinton (another former member) pointed out in a telephone conversation, "The younger black photographers have been influenced by Roy without knowing it, through the few black photographers who do know his work. Black photographers — and black subjects — used to be afraid to be black. Roy broke that down, and he was doing that in the late '40s and early '50s — 20 years ahead of his

time."

The second part of his contribution, inherent in his work, is an approach to the medium, to the act of photography, that makes his images extraordinarily compelling.

We are accustomed to defining maturity in a photographer as the ability to confront honestly and express clearly his own deepest feelings. This is a valid standard, as far as it goes (though there are precious few who meet it: too often, in its guise, we are offered pictures which, by pleasing the eye and titillating the intellect, camouflage their failure to affect the heart.) Beyond the self-knowledge which introspection brings, however, there is an even higher level of photographic maturity: the ability to use that self-knowledge for the purpose of confronting honestly and expressing the deepest emotions of others.

For any photographer whose primary subject is people, this is treacherous ground to tread. Pitfalls abound: sentimentality is one, formlessness another — and, even if these are avoided, success is never guaranteed. Yet, eschewing sentiment, and without in the least sacrificing formal considerations, Roy DeCarava has charged all his images with the emotional gestalt of the moment in which the camera seized them.

If this sounds somewhat reminiscent of the "decisive moment," that is not accidental: Cartier-Bresson was DeCarava's greatest initial influence (though, like many others, DeCarava finds in the French photographer's later work a decided falling-off in quality). But DeCarava does not share Cartier-Bresson's detachment: his personal involvement in the moment — best described as subjective objectivity — produces pictures in which self and subject are perfectly merged. Because it is purely visual, this effect is difficult to describe (though such words as love, soul, and compassion — especially compassion — come to mind), but it results in unutterably moving photographs.

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that DeCarava should have elected to work within the boundaries of the realistic tradition, unquestionably the ideal framework for his vision. However, it is not only surprising but grimly ironic to hear the curator of a leading photographic collection dismiss him — regretfully, it should be noted in all

fairness — as being, "after all, rather old-fashioned." That DeCarava has remained true to his vision, even at the price of being bypassed by the waves of fashion, is one of his greatest victories.

For, far from stagnating, his work has become richer and more passionate. Straightforward and ungimmicked as always, his style has acquired a flowing tenderness rare in any medium. His formal sense is sure but deceptively simple: only as an afterthought does the viewer realize the strength of his compositions. His prints, unusually sensitive to subtle tonal gradations, are never harsh or exaggerated, filled instead with the delicate interplay of dark and light.

One is conscious of him not as a photographer but as a perceiver, focusing himself on the world, forcing the viewer to experience it with him, up to the hilt. Discipline and freedom, eloquence and understatement, in exactly the right proportions — the hallmarks of the consummate artist.

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> "You should be able to look at me and see my work. You should be able to look at my work and see me." — Roy DeCarava

Portraits of him — even one he took himself — fail to capture the controlled intensity of his presence. In them, his eyes seem vaguely troubled, and there is a guarded quality, as though he did not entirely trust the instrument to which he has devoted his life. In person, what appears at first to be an impossibility — the absence of bitterness — is in fact something more dynamic, the presence of an internalized anger that must daily be reconquered.

"I am bitter," he said quietly, "but that's a safety valve, a self-indulgence. Either you believe that life in all its manifold horrors is basically and essentially good, or you don't." A pause. "What I try to say in my work is that I believe in life. I can't create out of bitterness. It undermines my creativity."

As we sat talking, at the tail end of September, "Thru Black Eyes" — his first one-man show in several years — was entering the third week of its run at the Studio

Museum. It had taken him only three days to assemble: "I knew what I wanted to include," he told me, "and I had the prints on hand. I always make up several as I go along — I hate printing old negatives."

Attendance was high, resulting in part from DeCarava's reputation and in part from the unanimous critical acclaim accorded the exhibit. While obviously pleased with the show and its reception, he was anxious that it be understood. "I wanted to show in the community," he said, explaining his acceptance of the Studio Museum's invitation: the Studio Museum, a nonprofit gallery/showcase for black artists, is located just off 125th Street on Fifth Avenue in Harlem.

"This is not a retrospective," he also insisted. "I'm not nearly finished — I'm not even ready for a summation." To emphasize the exhibit's non-retrospective nature, none of the pictures from *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* — published by Simon and Schuster in 1954 — were included.

Unready for a summation he may be, but Roy DeCarava has been at it for a long time. Born in New York City in 1919, he was brought up in Harlem, and began his creative life as a painter, studying at Cooper Union and elsewhere. "My mother always had a Brownie and took pictures all the time," he recalls, "but I never thought of it as a serious medium." However, like many other painters, he began taking pictures himself in lieu of making laborious sketches, and eventually gave up painting for good.

He gives two reasons for his switch to photography. First, "a black painter to be an artist had to join the white world or not function — had to accept the values of white culture, like emphasizing technique in painting rather than what the artist feels. Black people have a spiritualism, maybe because for so long they had nothing else." Second, he found himself devoting more and more time to photography.

He started to photograph seriously in the late '40s, and received his Guggenheim — the first ever awarded to a black artist — shortly thereafter, in 1952. The pictures that he took on his Guggenheim — all studies of life in Harlem at that period — became *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, to date the only collection of his work in book form. This slim volume (still available in a Hill and Wang 1967 reprint edition) — which Gilbert Millstein

described in the Times as "a delicate and lovely fiction-document" — was the brainchild of Langston Hughes, author of the tender, lyrical text.

"Nobody wanted the pictures," DeCarava remembers, "so I took them to Langston. I never said a word to him about those photographs; I just handed them over to him." Hughes assembled DeCarava's images into a visual narrative, a counterpoint to the bittersweet story he wrote to accompany them in the book.

As Millstein pointed out in his review of the end product, "Mr. DeCarava's photographs are peculiarly apposite, without being merely a collaborative effort. In this book, the story and the pictures are not so much dependent on each other as they are justifications of each other."

(Since then, the photographer has produced another book, *The Sound I Saw: Improvisations on a Jazz Theme*, but "nobody wanted that either. I did all the work — writing, editing, designing. It's been to all the publishers, but they all turned it down. They say it's too pretentious . . . ." Much larger and more complete than his first book, *The Sound I Saw* — which contains many of the pictures from "Thru Black Eyes" — is an exciting attempt to capture the spirit of jazz and its close relationship to the black experience, interweaving photographs and a long poem in free verse.)

Until 1958 he supported himself and his family by working as a commercial artist, shooting in his spare time. Then he decided to try freelancing: his two children were of age, and he was financially free.

But breaking into the field was next to impossible, because he was black. "It was a horrible experience. I had won a Guggenheim, I had published a book, I had run a gallery, but I couldn't get any assignments. It was a hand-to-mouth existence. Harry Belafonte gave me several jobs, and that helped to pull me through."

Even so, it is only recently that he has enjoyed any measure of financial security. (He has been under contract to *Sports Illustrated* for the past three years: this provides a stable income, and he enjoys the job: "I wouldn't want to work for anyone else right now." He also teaches a course in photography — beginner-level, one class a week — at Cooper Union, his alma mater.) Fame has, so far, eluded him — or vice-versa.

Yet it is to be hoped that "Thru Black Eyes" will mark a turning point in his career, and engender a greater public awareness of his talent. A tour de force despite itself, the show only hinted at the breadth of DeCarava's accomplishments.

Though one would tend to assume that such a large collection of prints — roughly 180 — must represent the absolute cream of his visual crop, this is not the case. Indeed, according to a photographer who knows DeCarava's work well, "Roy could have put together 10 shows this size. Some of his strongest pictures are missing — things I kept expecting to see just never turned up. But that's the way Roy wanted it." Rather than a self-glorifying, virtuoso display, DeCarava chose instead to offer a carefully planned, thematically structured exploration of black life.

Sections were devoted to such subjects as family life, music, civil rights demonstrations, work, and the white world: the exhibit probed the ghetto's subsurface far more exhaustively than the Metropolitan Museum of Art's monumental disaster, *Harlem On My Mind*, from which DeCarava was conspicuous by his absence.

"Thru Black Eyes" more than justified DeCarava's "intransigent" insistence on an entire room for himself as the price for his participation in the Met's fiasco. No one, black or white, has photographed New York's black ghetto more truthfully or in greater detail over the past two decades, so it hardly seems out of line for him to have asked for one room — which, not altogether coincidentally, is exactly the space "Thru Black Eyes occupied."

But his conditions were not accepted, and — unlike Bruce Davidson, who at first made the same demand — DeCarava refused to compromise. Opening night of *Harlem On My Mind* found him on the picket line outside, dressed for the icy January weather and bearing an angry placard ("the foreigners reveal the real nitty-gritty"): no pictures of his graced the walls of the Met's galleries.[1]

And shortly thereafter, he stated the motives for his protest in these pages (May, 1969). His biting critique of the exhibit's technical flaws concluded with these words: "It

[1] Subsequent to publishing this profile I learned that Roy had been roped into joining that picket line, hadn't bothered to read the placard handed to him, and didn't realize what it said till a photo of him carrying it appeared in the *New York Post* the next day.

is evident from the physical makeup of the show that Schoener and company have no respect for or understanding of photography, or, for that matter, any of the other media that they employed." Then, exercising considerable restraint, he added, "I would also say that they have no great love for or understanding of Harlem, black people, or history."

Obviously, this sort of frankness has not endeared him to the photographic establishment, and he has ended up in a semi-exile which is only partially self-imposed. During his membership in ASMP (the American Society of Magazine Photographers), for instance, he formed a committee to combat discrimination in the field. But, as he notes, "doing something fundamental was a different question entirely." At one meeting of the organization, he rose to inform the assembled members that "there are two societies — one white, one black."

No one today would question that statement of fact, but he was denounced as a racist and promptly resigned. "They give you a promise like a carrot on a stick — and you wind up without any balls, grinning. No, I'm not loved by the white photographic community," he says wryly, "but I am loved by the black photographic community, and that's what really matters to me."

He recounts these and countless similar incidents reluctantly, though with calm objectivity; he would obviously much prefer to discuss his work. Yet his struggles are so intertwined with his imagery that it would be hypocritical of him to avoid mentioning them.

Always, though, he comes back to his art. "Photography is an intransigent medium," he believes, "and it's very hard to express yourself. After you get a certain technical facility — and from the very first I took 'good' pictures — you've got to get at what you feel." Describing his own approach, he says, "I want to reach people inside, way down — to give them a quiver in their stomach. I've reached a certain plateau at this point, where I can sense an even greater intensity in a situation than I'm able to get on film. That's what I've got to learn to capture, even if it takes the rest of my life."

It is little short of tragic that our prejudices should have deprived Roy DeCarava

of the wide audience he deserves, and deprived that audience of an artist with so much to reveal that they desperately need to know. As Edward Spriggs commented, in soft indignation, "Roy was way overdue for something like 'Thru Black Eyes.' He should have been exposed on this scale 15 years ago. He's 49, and this is the biggest show he's ever had."

It is high time for Roy DeCarava, black photographer, to begin receiving that recognition rightfully due him.

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