

Roy DeCarava

Curated by Sherry Turner DeCarava

Light Break

September 5–October 26, 2019
533 West 19th Street, New York

Press preview: Thursday, September 5, 10 AM
Opening reception: Thursday, September 5, 6–8 PM



Roy DeCarava, *Curved branch*, 1994.
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the sound i saw

September 5–October 26, 2019
34 East 69th Street, New York

Opening reception: Thursday, September 5, 5–7 PM

David Zwirner is pleased to present concurrent exhibitions of photographs by Roy DeCarava at two of its New York gallery locations: 533 West 19th Street and 34 East 69th Street. Curated by art historian Sherry Turner DeCarava, this will be the gallery's first presentation since announcing exclusive representation of the Estate of Roy DeCarava in 2018, and the first opportunity to view a major grouping of the artist's work in New York since his 1996 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art.

Over the course of six decades, DeCarava produced a singular collection of black-and-white photographs that combines formal acuity with an intimate and deeply human treatment of his subjects. His pioneering work privileged 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 draftsman, DeCarava began working with the camera in the mid-1940s, seeking an inclusive artistic statement for the culturally diverse uptown Manhattan neighborhood 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 gray values more akin to a painterly mode of expression. Relying on ambient light and a point of view that neither monumentalizes nor sentimentalizes his subjects, he was able to produce a highly original oeuvre that carries significant visual and emotional meaning.

On view at the gallery uptown will be a selection of photographs from *the sound i saw*, DeCarava's unwavering exploration of the relationship between the visual and the aural. Created between the mid-1940s and 1960 and first assembled as an artist book, it has never before been exhibited in its original form. This work delivers musicians, those known and unknown, including Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and others in their milieu, into a sound and a sense rarely seen in visual arts. These figures are glimpsed both mid-set and off-stage in moments of repose, emphasizing their status not as musical icons, but as people deeply engaged in the everyday process of living.

Presented in Chelsea, *Light Break* features a dynamic survey and range of images that underscores DeCarava's subtle mastery of tonal and spatial elements across a wide array of subject matter. Spanning the years 1948 to 2006, the photographs in the

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exhibition—including a number of images that have never been seen before—provide an introduction to the artist’s singular vision, particularly his ability to see with great sensitivity into people and to find a complexity of relationships that coincide with our lives.

As Sherry Turner DeCarava notes:

Light Break, the new exhibition of Roy DeCarava photographs, brings together more than one hundred prints in celebration of the centennial of his birth and of the prodigious achievement of his life’s work.

The pictures chosen from his archive, which spans a substantive sixty-two years in photography, also represent a decade of my looking at and reflecting on the increasingly spiritual arc of his oeuvre. He was dedicated to silver gelatin photography, with its unique capability for artistic expression and for its ability to carry an “infinite gray scale” to visual fruition.

Some of these photographs are known, while others have never been seen publicly or published, even as the early and later years of his career are beginning now to yield to fuller exploration.

Unseen but viscerally present in everything he produced was the meticulous nature of his darkroom process and his concern for the artistry of each individual image. This perhaps accounts for the seemingly inherent dialogue in which the photographs engage, in relationship to and in juxtaposition with one another. It’s as though he produced not just singular artistic comments but a family of images that stand together as a whole statement of enduring consequence.

In DeCarava’s work, light carries aesthetic qualities while its graphic energies equally face the rendering of trenchant social truths. The creative interplay he fostered between illumination and obscurity allows the viewer’s consciousness to emerge and align. The resulting effect is not unlike the meditative sounding that awakens the senses and transfers imminent information—calls to alert, to action, to contemplation.

These pictures reflect Roy’s determination to manifest each image as he understood it was meant to be in that instant. His fascination with the medium opened an exploration of profundity in landscapes both urban and natural, external and interior. The exhibition generates a welcome moment, inviting audiences into the inner sanctum of the artist’s creative labor to find meaning in DeCarava’s steadfast transmutation of his world into places of subtle beauty.

The exhibitions will be accompanied by a new catalogue entitled *Light Break*, with an essay by Sherry Turner DeCarava and preface by Zoé Whitley, as well as an expanded edition of DeCarava’s artist book *the sound i saw*, with new essays by Turner DeCarava and Radiclan Clytus, both copublished by First Print Press and David Zwirner Books.

Roy DeCarava (1919–2009) was born in New York’s Harlem neighborhood, and first studied art in the city’s public schools, including at Textile High School, from which he graduated with honors 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 Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Charles White, among others. Some of his earliest influences during this time included Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh and the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera 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 recognized 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.

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DeCarava's first solo exhibition of photography was held in 1950 at 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 compiled 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. Steichen also included DeCarava in a number of group exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, including *The Family of Man* (1955), which traveled 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.

DeCarava's photographs have been 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 traveled 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 traveled 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.

Currently, DeCarava's work is included in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which traveled from Tate Modern, London, to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, and the Brooklyn Museum, New York. It is on view through September 1, 2019, at The Broad, 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 (2005), the highest civilian honor 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; Fogg Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York; 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 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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