

Roy DeCarava
the sound i saw

Curated by Ebony L. Haynes

September 19–October 31, 2026
606 N Western Avenue, Los Angeles



Roy DeCarava, *Jackie at the barricade*, c. 1956. © The Estate of Roy DeCarava. All rights reserved.

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of photographs by Roy DeCarava curated by Ebony L. Haynes, at the gallery's 606 N Western Avenue location in Los Angeles. On view is *the sound i saw*, DeCarava's unwavering exploration of the relationship between the visual and the aural created between the late 1940s and the 1960s. Bringing together more than 130 images, this is the largest presentation of this body of work since its inaugural exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, in 1983. Presented in an adjacent gallery at 616 N Western Avenue is a listening room inspired by the artist's work.

Over the course of his more than six-decade career, New-York-born-and-based DeCarava produced a singular oeuvre of black-and-white photographs of modern life that combine formal acuity with an intimate and deeply human treatment of his subject matter. DeCarava worked with a handheld 35mm camera, which enabled him to move easily throughout the city, allowing him to recognize and identify with his subjects. The artist's pioneering work privileged the aesthetic qualities of the medium, helping

it to gain acceptance as an art form in its own right. Unlike most photographers of his day, DeCarava developed and printed his own images, cultivating over time a distinct and enduring visual language defined by a rich tonal range that approaches a painterly form of expression.

Following the acclaim of the 1955 publication *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*—which featured DeCarava's photographs alongside an original text by poet Langston Hughes—the artist sought expanded ways to engage viewers. The combination of images and words in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* had helped to advance for the public DeCarava's concept of photography as uniquely suited to expressing a range of human emotion and experience and, confronted with a rapidly growing reserve of gelatin silver prints, he began to plan a new book. DeCarava's original maquette of *the sound i saw*, painstakingly assembled by hand in the early 1960s, included 300 images, which he augmented with a free-verse poem of his own. Arranged according to a visual rhythm, the images were paired with judiciously placed language, asserting the primacy of the photographic image as a powerful tool for communication.

This body of work juxtaposes images of everyday life in New York City—elegiac street corners, deliverymen working, children playing, riders waiting for the train—with images of jazz musicians. DeCarava was an aficionado of jazz, which he saw as a complementary art form to photography, and he often spent evenings haunting the city's jazz clubs, always with camera in hand. Many of the period's jazz greats—such as Miles Davis, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, and John Coltrane—are glimpsed both mid-set and off-stage in moments of repose, emphasizing their status not simply as musical icons, but as everyday people, workers trying to make a living. Taken together, DeCarava's highly nuanced prints redirect the viewer's attention to the sounds of life, offering—as he noted—"images for the head and for the heart."¹

Theorist and filmmaker Radiclan Clytus observes that, "As significant as *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is within DeCarava's oeuvre, *the sound i saw* is singularly noteworthy. Unencumbered by the intrusion of collaboration or an exhibition format that would restrict his editorial vision, it remains DeCarava's most complete photographic statement to date."²

In 1983, DeCarava presented 125 photographs from *the sound i saw* at the Studio Museum in Harlem—the first public display of this body of work in any capacity. In the exhibition's catalogue, which featured only a small portion of the images, curator C. Daniel Dawson noted that, despite the presence of myriad jazz images, "DeCarava does not consider this the definitive photographic statement on jazz. It is to him a much more personal endeavor.... It is an attempt to share with us his reflections on life and the process of living, using the jazz world and photography as his instruments."³

the sound i saw was eventually released as a monographic publication by Phaidon in 2001, and it was reissued posthumously in an expanded format by First Print Press and David Zwirner Books in 2019. The exhibition at David Zwirner Los Angeles includes numerous works that were on view at the original presentation at the Studio Museum in Harlem, many of which have not been exhibited since that show.

This marks only the fourth solo presentation of DeCarava's work in Los Angeles, following on the acclaimed 2019 exhibition *Roy DeCarava: The Work of Art* at The Underground Museum. In 1996, *Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective* was presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and prior to that the artist's work was featured at the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies in 1982.

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 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.

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.

From 2017 through 2019, DeCarava's work was 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; Brooklyn Museum, New York; and The Broad, Los Angeles. In 2019, the artist's work was the subject of a solo presentation entitled *The Work of Art* at The Underground Museum, 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 (2006), the highest civilian honor awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts and presented by the President of the United States.

David Zwirner announced its exclusive representation of The Estate of Roy DeCarava in 2018. In that same year, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, DeCarava's best-selling 1955 collaboration with the poet Langston Hughes, was reissued by First Print Press with worldwide distribution through David Zwirner Books, D.A.P., and Thames & Hudson. In 2019, in New York, the gallery presented two critically lauded, concurrent exhibitions of the artist's photographs: *Light Break* and *the sound i saw*, both of which were accompanied by catalogues copublished by First Print Press and David Zwirner Books (*Light Break* features an essay by Sherry Turner DeCarava, director of The DeCarava Archives, and a preface by Zoé Whitley, director of the Chisenhale Gallery, London; *the sound i saw* includes essays by Sherry Turner DeCarava and Radiclan Clytus). *Roy DeCarava: Selected Works* was on view at David Zwirner London in 2022. An exhibition of photographs by DeCarava curated by Ebony L. Haynes will open at David Zwirner's Los Angeles location in September 2026.

Work by DeCarava is held in numerous public collections including the Art Institute of Chicago; 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.

Notes

1. Roy DeCarava, *the sound i saw: improvisations on a jazz theme* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2001), n.p.
2. Radiclan Clytus, "Committed to the Image," in Roy DeCarava, *the sound i saw: improvisations on a jazz theme* (New York: First Print Press and David Zwirner Books, 2019), n.p.
3. C. Daniel Dawson, "The Sound I Saw: The Jazz Photographs of Roy DeCarava," in *The Sound I Saw: The Jazz Photographs of Roy DeCarava*. Exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1983), p. 11.

For all press inquiries, contact:

Elizabeth Gartner
egartner@davidzwirner.com

Julia Lukacher
jlukacher@davidzwirner.com