

Manhattan Arts

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Pablo Picasso, "Seated Woman", 1938.
Collection Beyeler, Basel.
Copyright 1996 Estate of Pablo Picasso/
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"Representation and Transformation" at MoMA,
April 28-September 17.



Roy DeCarava

By Donna Cameron

"You profit from a negative and make it positive," photographer **Roy DeCarava** says. "Beauty is in being alive."

"**Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective**," the largest survey of DeCarava's photographs to date, continues through May 7 at the MoMA, 11 W. 53rd St. The show was organized by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator of Photography, MoMA, who views DeCarava's sensuous images as an indispensable contribution to the rich American tradition of the past fifty years.

Born in Harlem in 1919, DeCarava was trained as a painter and printmaker. He turned to photography in the 1940s and his work has been included in MoMA's Photo Galleries since their inception in 1964. His *oeuvre* spans six decades: groundbreaking photos of everyday life in Harlem; the civil rights protests of the 1960s; and recent lyrical studies of nature. It includes vital jazz portraits of Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, and others. "I personally have a great affinity for the jazz idiom," he says.

In the following exclusive interview with DeCarava, now Distinguished Professor of Art at CUNY's Hunter College, he prioritized his belief in the individual.

DC Did your experiences growing up in a survival environment bring you an inner solidarity?

RD I guess each individual comes into this world with a unique set of things which they can't control -- I had to develop a kind of attitude that was just my own. But, the pieces, were, in place.

DC Looking back, do you feel that walking through your days with a camera is a music in itself, a kind of quiet song?

RD Yes, when you're doing it well, it's a song. When you're not, it becomes an embarrassment. I try to find in the subject a resonance, and it's more important for me to express my concerns about the subject rather than simply illustrate the subject -- to go beyond likeness to express my feeling about it.

DC So you free your expression?

RD Exactly. The subject arouses a response. It is then the response that is important to the work. I don't capture it, I bring something to it that can only be connected to it through my mind. I'm looking for a universal beauty, a truth that exists in everything. If we can show this kind of common beauty, or common vitality that exists in everyone, that's all to the good."

DC Of your jazz portraits, "John Coltrane" strikes me. What of it's sequentiality?

RD I took so many pictures of Trane, and one right after the other for the (1982) Jazz show I had, "The Sounds I Saw." I had 29 photographs of Coltrane in one room. Everybody walked in amazed, and one person said it was like being in a cathedral!

DC What advice would you offer to people who are just embarking on their creative journeys?

RD They should think for themselves. Don't expect to find the answers somewhere else. You have to be honest: believe in yourself. And I don't mean be a crazy egotist. I mean believe in your right to be what you are.



Roy DeCarava, "Bill and Son", gelatin-silver print.

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