

"If It Hasn't Been One of Color": An Interview With Roy DeCarava

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**"IF IT HASN'T BEEN ONE OF COLOR"**  
*An Interview with Roy DeCarava*

*By Ivor Miller*

*The following interview took place at the home of Roy DeCarava in Brooklyn, NY, on November 6, 1988.*

MILLER: You have been recognized by your students and others as the creator of a black aesthetic in photography. Is this true, and what is a black aesthetic?

DECARAVA: There is a black aesthetic—it comes out of a cultural history.

Blacks brought with them part of their history and philosophical ideas. In Africa there was always an emphasis on the spiritual, the mythic. Art was a facet of communication with the gods, a part of everyday life. I think that Africans brought some of those ideas and memories with them and handed them down. This creates a different attitude toward life than a European's. The black aesthetic is about communication. It is both an intuitive sense and a conscious choice. A matter of being understood, and being heard. Even if it was to say, "I'm hurt, I'm hurting, I hate this," or "I hate you." It's still a form of relating and of content. The way things are going now [among white artists] the sky's the limit, you can do what you please. In fact, the trend today in art is to be responsible to the process. To be dispassionate and objective. To use the process itself as the message.

My feeling is that the black artist looks at the same world in a different way than a Euro-American artist. He has a different agenda.

MILLER: How would you describe that agenda?

DECARAVA: That agenda, at a minimum, is survival as an American. It is freedom, it is a humanitarian art that serves the needs of people.

The white artist pursues an art that is not particularly relevant, in the sense that it deals with matters of form, matters of tonality, matters of shape. It refers only to itself.

The black artist has difficulty with that because these ideals are not important enough to him. He grapples with staying alive, with feeling alien in a society that barely tolerates him. It is very difficult for him to think in just formal terms, he is thinking more in terms of integrated ideas about humanity, about communicating to others. His concerns are about justice. For their own survival, I think black artists have a great deal of faith in communication.

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We Americans are living in a state of the unreal because we are denying the reality of our lives, in all things we say and do. We talk one way and act another. We talk about talk. We talk about things that don't need talk and we are silent about things that we should talk about. We do what we don't believe, we feel but we don't act. We see and we remain silent.

Let's put it, the black aesthetic, this way. Being black, and the experiences of being black have given black people a more realistic appraisal of life than white people. Because of their illusions, I think that white people can be very childlike in some ways. I've observed this many times. Yet I've never had a problem in relating to white people, even though sometimes I've been very outspoken, and feel pretty certain that I have been close to them. I am not sure that it works the other way around.

In order for blacks to survive, we have to know where the holes are, or we'll fall in. We have to know where the fire is. We have to know where the enemy is. We have to know him, because we have to deal with him. This is not a game, but an obligation for survival in a society that thinks of us as a problem. Blacks can't afford to make a mistake in misjudging a situation, because when we do, we suffer.

MILLER: Is part of a black aesthetic awareness of community?

DECARAVA: Absolutely. There is a sense in the work that the needs of the individual have to be somehow answered. It is true that many black artists are now working in a formalistic European tradition. Abstract, minimalist, whatever the current trend is. But I dare say that those working in these traditions are having difficulty doing it. I don't think they do it well, with exceptions, of course. Other things seem to get in the way: the need to express social perceptions in a personal way, a desire to reach out and say something, to speak the truth.

MILLER: How would you compare your notion of community survival with that of Walker Evans and other Farm Security Administration photographers who seemed concerned with community survival?

DECARAVA: They were concerned too, but it was an issue of the time. Photography was just coming into its own. It was also a time of economic scarcity, people were hungry. When you're hungry it's very hard to be aesthetic. It's very hard to set aside time and money for materials, hard to think about "loftier" ideas. But to me there is no loftier idea than man itself, nature, and the relationship between the two. But that's another thing.

MILLER: But I see this as central to your work.

DECARAVA: Yes, this is central to my work. But as for the FSA, it just so happens that at that time documentation became important. They did it because they were *told* to. It was part of the government's desire to obtain information. I strongly suggest that they wouldn't have paid so much attention to blacks and the poor if it hadn't

been essential to the job. The FSA was a government survey, designed to promote legislation and shape public opinion.

MILLER: On the other hand you have someone like P.H. Polk who was photographing poor black communities on his own.

DECARAVA: He did this because he was black and he felt that he should do it. Polk was a very important photographer. He did some very wonderful things, consistently.

MILLER: Would you comment on your use of lighting, which is so striking in your work?

DECARAVA: I do the things I do because they have value for me. I think light is a wonderful phenomenon, for instance. If you think about it, light is the source of life. The sun is *the* light that makes all things possible. I accept light as it exists around me. It wasn't that I set out to get a quality of lighting. My whole attitude toward photography is based on a positive attitude toward life. There are certain prerequisites for life and for its continuation. Since I enjoy being alive I am sensitive to those things that help me be alive and that keep me from being sick. If something adds to me, enriches me, makes me healthy, I use it. If it's something that diminishes me, that takes away from me, I don't use it. It sounds simplistic, but everyday we make decisions that are either good or bad for us, and we know it.

MILLER: Would you expand on some of these decisions?

DECARAVA: For example, I don't try to alter light, which is why I never use flash. I hate it with a passion because it obliterates what I saw.

When I fall in love with something I see, when something interests me it interests me in the context of the light that it's in. So why should I try to change the light and what I see, to get this "perfect" information laden print? I don't care about that. The reason why my photographs are so dark is that I take photographs everywhere, light or not. If I can see it, I will take a picture of it. If it's dark, so be it.

I take things as I find them because that's the way I am and that's the way I like them. When I went to a jazz club it wasn't lit up like a T.V. studio. It was dark. I accept that.

MILLER: Is an awareness of darkness part of the black aesthetic?

DECARAVA: I don't think so. There may be some black photographers who think in that one to one relationship, but I don't.

My subject matter dictates how I print. When my subjects are dark, I have to be concerned about showing that. I tend to work toward a softer tonality. Not only for practical reasons, but because I like soft tones. I am not a contrasty printer. A lot of photographers like this sharp, brilliant, aggressive kind of printing. But I do not. I

don't think that there is a relationship between darkness and black photographers.

Part of my philosophy is that I'm not worried whether it's easy to see or not. I'm very concerned about people looking at my work, make no mistake, but I'm not concerned about whether they see it at the expense of what I originally felt. Whether a photograph came out dark or not is not important. The issue is, did it say what I wanted to say? Many times it comes out dark because I like the full tonality. The soft tonality reveals more. Contrasty prints cut down on many intervening tones, and you lose a lot because of that.

MILLER: In what other ways does your philosophy affect your process?

DECARAVA: What happens is that the subject is reinterpreted through my printing. It is my particular view. The print is my attitude toward the object. The picture has something of me. The question is, "how much of me is there in the photograph?" And I try to get as much of myself as possible in it, because that's what it is about. It's not really about the object as much as it is my attitude toward the object. Sometimes this means I must work contrary to the rules of photography. For instance, I have printed a photograph that was taken in broad daylight, with sunlight streaming down, and it now looks like it is night. I did that because that's the way it worked for me. It didn't work the other way. I kept printing it over and over, darker and darker, and the next thing you know, I had a night scene.

MILLER: So you alter the light only in the dark room?

DECARAVA: I alter not so much the light, but the image. Whatever is necessary for me to express the feelings I have, I do, for instance this hallway [in photograph].<sup>1</sup> If I were to print it lighter, it would be more factual, you would get more information. But the photograph isn't so much about the hallway, it was more about the light, and the kind of claustrophobic sense that one had in walking in a hallway like that.

Some of my students in the '60s thought that the darker tones were part of a black aesthetic, but I think that is a little simplistic. Some thought black skin was beautiful, therefore black images were beautiful also. It was a rebellion against the idea that black was bad, and white was good. In a way, that is part of the black aesthetic, a conscious defiance of the detrimental dominant values of society.

MILLER: In what ways are you defying the dominant values of society?

DECARAVA: By staying alive, by being myself and speaking my truths. I get a little angry, for example, with some of my friends who insist that I listen to classical music because it is *really* music, or that I listen to opera because it is *the* truth. I say this is simply a European perception. There are other perceptions in the world about music. I happen to find opera very simplistic. I find classical music very rigid, needing almost a slave and master relationship to make music. The conductor is the master, the musicians are the tools with which he forges someone else's music; they do what he wants them to do.

To me, the idea of jazz, the right and the need of the individual to express his uniqueness, which is what jazz, and even folk music is about, is also music. I resent the idea that classical music is the only music and that therefore I am suspect, I'm not quite civilized, if I don't embrace it.

MILLER: How would you describe your themes of jazz visualization?

DECARAVA: I worked with Coltrane and Dolphy the same way I work with everything. I respect what I'm looking at. I do not intrude. I stay back, and I wait until something happens. And then I take my picture, and then I wait again. I do not get up in front of people and poke my camera in their faces. I sit back and keep as quiet and invisible as I can, and I wait. Because I know something is going to happen. I know that it's beautiful. It's just a question of my timing and my ability to be open enough to see what is there. I do this with everything. I don't brush the lint off. I don't move around for a better view.

MILLER: How does this connect with your concept of "sound visualization" in photography?

DECARAVA: I respect the people and the music. I listen to it. I photograph musicians as people, not as musicians. I don't feel it's necessary to photograph them while playing. What I respond to is their *commitment* to what they do. The intensity that they bring to life at that moment. This is something that I admire in people, and of course all people do it. Humans have the facility to bring concentration and direction to something they care about. It is one of the most wonderful things to experience; when people become so focused on a particular task that they become one with something other than themselves. It is this identification with something beyond the self that to me is one of the positive things about being human. The musician expresses this in one of the most visual ways. It's almost a shame to take a picture because it is so easy! There is so much intensity and involvement that it is hard *not* to photograph it well.

MILLER: So a theme in your work is "listening."

DECARAVA: Absolutely. Seeing in the same way that one listens. To listen means to concentrate and focus on something that you are listening to. Seeing is the same thing. And waiting. Time is more important than all of that. Time and patience and the knowledge that something is there, and will happen. If you think it's not going to happen, then you won't wait. How many people think about that? I don't know . . . I do.

If I were to photograph a painter, I wouldn't just show him at the canvas, there would be moments when he would step back, and this "thing" would come over his face, which would be so beautiful and remarkable. The transformation of the face by a thought, an idea, or an attitude. That's what I admire. And I tend to photograph those things that I admire, that I care about. To carry it further, it's not just the transformation but my idea of that transformation that I try to photograph.

MILLER: You are dealing with another concept of time.

DECARAVA: We are dealing with very fundamental things. Light, life, society, etc. Well, the same thing with time. What is time? Yesterday, today, tomorrow. Time is energy, movement, and involves repetition. In the "Haynes, Jones and Benjamin" photograph,<sup>2</sup> the quality of movement comes from the repetition of forms, shapes, diagonals, not from the fact that three men are walking. The photograph moves—because the elements move through repetition and direction and become pieces of time.

MILLER: Would you describe your work in terms of the "documentation of a community" versus the avenue you choose to present your perception of the world?

DECARAVA: A lot of people have identified me as a documentary photographer, because documentation uses a straight, honest approach. Well, I do have that straight approach, I do try to be honest, that is, basically true to myself and to the subject, but I'm not a documentarian, I never have been. I think of myself as poetic, a maker of visions, dreams, and a few nightmares.

In this country, skin color is the madness. There are many other madnesses, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, anti-people. This is reflected to some degree in my work in a symbolic way. It's in my subway stair photo with the black man and white man. They aren't fighting, but are worlds apart.<sup>3</sup> There's also the picture of the white man behind the door of the train.<sup>4</sup> One could spend a life just dealing with this, and some people have complained that my work goes in too many different directions. But I insist on being as full and complete as I am.

MILLER: Does "black photographer," a label you are often given, versus "photographer" or "American photographer" disturb you? Why?

DECARAVA: Yes, it is annoying. It is also very stifling. But I've learned to live with it, because it is the nature of the society, and as I've said, the society is insane in its preoccupation with unreality. I will never get credit, I think, for my ability as a photographer. I'm black first, which puts me in another category. I don't know how many times I've been called "one of the great black photographers," but that's not as good as a plain white photographer.

The thing that makes it so difficult to deal with is that it's insidious. It's a trap. They don't sit down and say, "Well, we want to keep the idea of black photography separate." It's just automatic. They simply don't think of blacks in the context of white society. They think of blacks as separate. I have so many friends, white photographers, who never think of me when it comes to describing American photography. Never once in all the group shows that I've been in have I ever been mentioned.

I had a friend who was one of the editors of a photography magazine. One of his jobs was to review photography books. Well, he talked about every photography book under the sun, and he never mentioned *Sweet Flypaper of Life*. Yet he was there at my book signing. He was the one who "loved" the book. He used to give it to his friends.

So I called him and asked, "How come you didn't mention *Sweet Flypaper*?" He said, "I never thought of it." Well this is a friend, this is not a racist. He is not insensitive. But the nature of his life and the society's attitudes, he simply accepts.

MILLER: Do you feel this attitude defines you as "special"?

DECARAVA: I am in a special place. All black people are in a special place. Like Ralph Ellison says sometimes we're invisible and sometimes we are in a very special place and very visible. But *never* are we in the right place, where we belong, which is with everybody else.

This bothers me very much, and I've gotten to the point where I refuse to show my work in group shows. I don't care who is in it because I know that's a waste of my time.

I do not intend to let the lack of recognition or the injustice of it hinder me or negate my work. I'm not going to let it keep me from working, I will not let it make me bitter or confused. I will continue working because I believe in my work, in myself, and those very ideals denied me.

When you fight, even though you may win, there is something lost in the process. What you have lost is the time and the energy that could have gone to more positive goals. I will not go away. I will not be quiet and I will not accept less. I will be heard.

MILLER: Would you speak about the absence of black photographers in the history books? Do you feel that racism is the sole reason for this?

DECARAVA: Racism is racism. One of the problems of racism is that you never know why it is, or you sometimes don't know if it's racism or if it's an accident, but you always do know the results. It's hard to conceive that those in power sit down and say, "let's do this, let's do that," outside of the Ku Klux Klan. Nevertheless we have all these manifestations of racism. How, or why, or is it accidental or blatant, is really not the point. The point is that it's there. It does things to white people as much as it does to black people. It cripples. Whites are involved in this mythology, and this unreality. And it diminishes them as much as it does us. Except with us it is more obvious and the effects are much more immediate and devastating. One of the things that makes racism so pernicious is that it can be faceless and guiltless. It is very hard to pin it down. Why is my work ignored? Do they sit around at night saying, "What are we *not* going to do for Roy DeCarava?" I don't know but I do feel like Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man."

MILLER: Racism in the U.S. must affect your sense of self and your work. Would you speak on this?

DECARAVA: I think that white Americans are under the illusion that they are superior. I'm not talking about superior to blacks. They feel they are superior *period*. I had an experience in Argentina with a white American who was arrested. He was furious! He was an *American*. He was indignant. They had no right to arrest him. We blacks

can't afford the luxury of assuming that we are special, and of becoming oblivious to our condition. When whites are discriminated against, the whole fire department comes out! Here again we have two sets of reality. When whites are confronted with prejudice they are surprised, bewildered, and don't understand it. When blacks experience prejudice they are not surprised and they *do* understand it.

A friend recently visited me from California. While driving through my neighborhood he leaned over and asked me, "How do you stand it here?" I replied, "Because I have to." It's that simple. He thought that I, like he, had a choice.

I don't think I'm being prejudiced in saying that whites have a false sense of reality, a very different reality than blacks. How many people really believe that cowboys were good, and Indians bad? How many people believe that this is the best of all possible worlds, that this is the greatest democracy? That this is the height of civilization? How many people believe in Ronald Reagan and his smiles? But people really believe those smiles. They believe in the firm handshake and the straight look in the eye. This insanity is dangerous and the results are so harmful. Insanity is the distortion of or the inability to perceive reality. White people do have a problem with reality and they do believe in their myths, yet they can still function because they make the world in their own image. When you are in power you not only make the rules, you change them.

MILLER: Would you talk more specifically about how the perception of reality is reflected in your work?

DECARAVA: I believe that human beings are capable of much more than we think we are. By the same token I think we should be more than we are. I'm one of those people who wants the world to be a better place. I want people to be better, and I want to try to be better, also. And this is central in my work. I don't think I've ever painted or photographed without this in my mind.

My work is not about these illusions. I am much more positive than that. My work is about what I consider to be essential things. The sun, time, patience, about caring enough to wait. About caring enough to photograph the things nobody else will photograph. My work is not about force, not about conquering.

There is a great competitive quality in American culture. Sports is an example. Sports are like games of war. They encourage combative and violent behavior. The aim is to conquer, to be the best, to win at all costs. Someone loses at the expense of somebody else. The enemy is conquered. All is right in the world.

Having worked at *Sports Illustrated*, I learned that the magnitude of the sports mentality in America is almost as strong as that of religion. This disturbs me, for if one were to utilize a portion of the energy, intelligence, effort, material that went into a year of sports activity in this country, we would solve every problem we ever had! Be it cancer, be it providing food and shelter. I went to one town where every male received a football at birth. I had to photograph a woman holding a newborn baby in one arm and a football in the other. Football from the cradle to the grave. When you multiply all the sports activities that take place in a year, you can recognize the challenge to religion.

MILLER: Your work seems to suggest a certain spirituality. Would you talk about this?

DECARAVA: My work is very spiritual. It is not about matter, matter is the tool by which I express my spirituality. I take the tangible to present the intangible. This is the spirit of man. This is the spirit of many, many, many things, many moments. This is what art is about. This is man's saving grace, that we can transcend our corporeal nature and become something else, something bigger than ourselves. That is what my work is about.

The spirits are alive and they talk to you. They guide you . . . they get after you! In a way it is more metaphysical than actual in our lifestyles. But it is real. There is a continuity and a sense of place in my work, where people belong within a context, where past, present, and future meet. And that's what I find so lacking in much of the present day art.

I do feel a sense of responsibility to be a certain kind of person to other people. It is important to be conscious that what one is, affects other people. I like to think that I set an example in some way, to others and to myself. I think I'm a pretty decent person, and I think I express that through my work. I would hope that if it helps somebody else to be decent then my work is successful. When I photograph something, it is a reflection of my values. I am saying, "I like this. I want to hold onto this. I want other people to see this." Why, because I want to hurt them? No, because I feel that somehow this might be good for them. I think art itself is a very positive human expression, even when it's done badly.

MILLER: Would you speak about the significant aspects of some of your photographs? You seem to have been influenced by African Art.

DECARAVA: Yes! I have often noticed in African sculpture the simplification and abstraction of form to the essence of something, and yet it still looks like a particular human being. I don't know how many times I've seen the real life images of these African masks—I see them all the time. It is a marvel that you can have on the one hand a stylized pure form, and yet it is so particular that it could be a portrait of an individual. This intrigues me. David's face reminded me of those masks.

I call this child David,<sup>5</sup> as part of the mythology of David and Goliath. He is David. He is black. He is a child. People don't have to know this to understand the picture. But he is hurt, he is puzzled, angry, but he doesn't know it. How could he know it? He is just a child. All he knows is that he is feeling pain and he reacts to it with suspicion and fear. He was as fearful of me as he would have been with anybody. I was just another thing that was confronting him. What interests me about him, aside from the sociological, was the aesthetic. I looked at his face and it looked like the most perfect African mask you ever saw. So strong and African.

MILLER: Is the father another example of an African mask?

DECARAVA: Yes, he looks like a Benin mask.<sup>6</sup>

MILLER: Your work is strikingly different from that of many contemporary European and American painters, who seem to conceive work on a larger than life scale. Would you comment on this?

DECARAVA: Much of the grandiose works are meant to overwhelm you. It's aggressive. It's good work, if you like aggression. But it is meant to take charge of you, meant to dominate you. To me this is not satisfactory. I do not want to dominate. I want people to come because they want to come, and to go because they want to go.

Artists use many devices. Scale is one. If something is large you cannot ignore it, I don't care what it is. If you have a little flea, it's not important. If you magnify it a million times, it becomes a monster. It is still the same flea, but you are overwhelmed by the size. Almost everything in art today is large, in terms of scale. It is part of the aggressive psychology, the conquering mentality and the mentality of the marketplace. Conquering is one way of obtaining power. Buying and selling space is another.

MILLER: Would you say that the work of Gordon Parks embodies aspects of a black aesthetic?

DECARAVA: In a way, yes. Survival is an aspect of black life, but survival is not enough for me. Because some of us react to the same stimuli differently. I react by saying, "To hell with it, I'm going to be me." Some of us say, "I'm going to join it, that's how I will overcome it. I will be as much like that as I can, and then maybe it won't be so bad." Yet those people who choose to accommodate and assimilate are no better off than those who don't. In the final analysis they are discriminated against, and all they have to do is be in the wrong place at the right time, and they also will suffer the consequences as those who do not deny ourselves in order to survive.

MILLER: Carrie Weems (photographer, critic) compared your work with Robert Frank's to illuminate a black aesthetic, especially in terms of dark and light tonalities. Do you think this is a fair comparison? Why or why not?

DECARAVA: The difference between Frank and DeCarava has nothing to do with tonality. That is secondary. Frank saw the U.S. as a white person. If I had gone through the same towns side by side with Frank I would have seen something entirely different than he did. He is incapable of seeing what I see. But I can see what he saw. Because I have this duality, I am like a person with two languages. Most black people are. The reason his work was so well received was it showed just what the curators and critics wanted to see. He *was* critical of America. But only slightly critical. Not enough to upset the culture, just enough to show that his eyes were open. He reflected the surface quality of some aspects of American life, as opposed to a more fundamental perception.

Whereas there is no doubt that my work reflects life as it is in the black community. My work is critical of America's social values and the interpersonal relationships that grow out of those social values. Frank saw one America, I see another.

What is the central issue in human relationships in the U.S. if it hasn't been one of

color? It's always there. Whether it's been a black nanny who takes care of white children, or a black doctor and a white patient. Black and white, white or black. There is this fundamental relationship that has been a part of American life since its inception, and must still be addressed. Racism and bigotry are the fires in which freedom is being forged and black is the anvil upon which freedom is being shaped. Where is the justice in that?

MILLER: Is there anything else you'd like to add or clarify as we come to a closure?

DECARAVA: The question of a black aesthetic is a complicated one, and I don't really feel equipped to codify it. Certainly in the literary tradition there is a consciousness of reclaiming lost aspects of the culture. Part of this is based upon having a different agenda than the dominant culture. I think the dominant culture has a problem understanding and accepting this. For instance when they look for black artists, they expect to see the same work that white artists produce. And this can't be. I find that there is a difference even in the work of black artists that define themselves in terms of a formalistic European tradition. It's never quite as formal as they want it to be. There is always some other element that intrudes into the work and keeps it from being like its white counterpart.

The black aesthetic is something that grows from our culture, from our experience that makes us see differently, feel differently.

I feel very good about what I've accomplished, and that's what's important. Either you do or you don't. You either produce or you don't. You try to maintain yourself. It's about being free, in a sense, to be oneself. Doing what you do best, with what you have. You produce because you have to, and whatever comes, comes. You work and things fall into place. Talent, will, hard work, a lot of love, and a little luck are great friends. I wish some of my peers were as lucky.

#### Notes

1. Plate 26, Hallway, New York, 1953, *Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, ed. James Alinder (Carmel, CA: Friends of Photography, 1981).
2. Plate 31, Haynes, Jones, and Benjamin, New York, 1956, *Photographs*.
3. Plate 29, Subway Stairs, Two Men, New York, 1956, *Photographs*.
4. Plate 16, Man on Elevator, New York, 1952, *Photographs*.
5. Plate 19, David, New York, 1952, *Photographs*.
6. Plate 23, Joe and the Twins, New York, 1952, *Photographs*; Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955; rep. Hill and Wang, 1967), pp. 52–62; Howard University Press, 1984.