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Ruddy Roye: When Living is a Protest @Steven Kasher

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JTF (just the facts): A total of 22 large scale color photographs, framed in black and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the back gallery space. All of the works are archival pigment prints on metallic paper, made between 2014 and 2016. Each print is sized 35×35 and available in an edition of 10. (Installation shots below.)

Comments/Context: Radcliffe “Ruddy” Roye exemplifies a 21st century version of the instinct Cornell Capa singled out in the late 1960s when he coined his famous term “concerned photographer”. Rooted in the techniques of documentary photography and photojournalism and energized by the newly found freedoms of small cameras, Capa’s idea of concerned photography brought a distinctly humanitarian perspective to the streets and war zones of the world at that time. In many ways, that engaged point of view built on two intertwined photographic traditions – an American humanism that started with Jacob Riis and ran through Lewis Hine, the New York Photo League, and the FSA photographers, and a French strain that included Cartier-Bresson, Kertész, Doisneau, Brassäi, and others. In both cases, we find photographers who brought consciously compassion and empathy into their pictures of extraordinary hardship and everyday struggle.

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That same spirit seems to course through the veins of Ruddy Roye. Self identified as “humanist/activist” and as a “photographer with a conscience” on his popular Instagram account (here), his pictures document contemporary moments in the African-American experience, often on the streets of his Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn. Leveraging the immediacy and reach of social media, he has built a passionate following with his consistently sensitive portraits that uncover the nuances and personalities of African-American life often overlooked by the mainstream media. Extensive text captions accompany the images (shown here on wall labels), giving his pictures a sense of real-world context and exposing many of his own personal emotions.

Roye is first and foremost a street photographer, and nearly all his portraits use the backdrop of nearby walls, murals, sidewalks, and front stoops as his setting. His approach is largely one of intense looking, where a single figure (or group) is centrally placed and given our full attention, an aesthetic device that allows him to tell small, single frame stories. His subjects come from all walks of life – children and shelter dwellers, day laborers and dapper gentlemen, protestors and immigrants, couples and families – and his pictures treat each with the same respect, dignity, and genuine interest.

Given the rigidity of his square formal frame, Roye is often drawn to ravishing color and the juxtaposition of foreground and background to enliven his compositions. The painted faces of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X peer over the shoulders of homeless men and construction workers, adding the long arm of history to their struggles, while American flags, crosses, and expressive graffiti set the tone for other portraits. It’s often a small gesture that makes the picture – a raised fist, a warily tender embrace, hands held with affection at Gay Pride, a proud graduation day pose, a community food delivery in the darkness of morning, or the supportive hold on an elderly elbow in a snowstorm. Each tells a story of connection, of being part of something larger. In between, a blast of acidic yellow, or lime green, or deep red shows Roye’s eye for powerful eye popping color, with silhouetted shadows and condensation fogged views offering additional ways for him to turn an overlooked bystander into an icon.

In addition to the durable messages of Roye’s artistic activism, his show is also an important photographic milestone – it is one of the first instances I can recall of an “Instagram photographer” making a fluid crossover to a mainstream white cube art gallery in Chelsea. What’s exciting is that the things that make Roye’s Instagram account compelling – the intimacy of the encounters he is documenting, the authenticity of his approach, and the pictures made with an eye for what will work on screen – all translate well when reformatted for large scale prints on white walls. His show is proof of the changing dynamics of emerging photography, and the democratic power of the Internet to validate solid photography wherever it is made.

While I don’t think Roye has yet met the impossibly high standard set by Roy DeCarava, Gordon Parks, and other talented African-American photographers who have spent their lives documenting the nuances of the black community, he is certainly channeling their collective spirit with promising early success. Roye’s work is crafted with a 21st century style of closeness that feels sensitively unadorned. He’s a visual storyteller fixated on compassionate, interested engagement with individuals, and his attention is forcing us to see beyond the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions to the options, choices, and personalities of real people.

Collector’s POV: The prints in this show are priced at \$3500 each. Roye’s work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.