

TIME

Ruddy Roye is TIME's Pick for Instagram Photographer of 2016

By: Olivier Laurent



Robert Scott was standing in a cotton field. The 20-year-old laborer from the Shack Up Inn, a southern-style bed-and-breakfast spot with historical roots to the cotton industry, had his hands raised above his head in protest of police violence against black men and women. When Radcliffe “Ruddy” Roye approached him to take his picture, outside Clarksdale, Miss., the Brooklyn-based photographer asked him about Eric Garner and Michael Brown. “It’s messed up but it’s nothing new,” Scott answered. “It is something that has been going on since the beginning of time. It will never get better, it will only get worse. It has to play itself out. We as black people just need to prepare ourselves for anything.”

For many, Roye (@ruddyroye) has become the photographer most closely associated with that struggle. As a black photographer who has spent the last few years shining a light on the difficulties of other black men, women and children across America, he brings to his work an unwavering determination that can border on activism. In fact, his Instagram profile is clear about his aim: he’s a humanist; an activist. A photographer with a conscience.

Yet, when asked how he defines himself, his answer is unexpected: “Honestly? I define myself as a dad,” he tells TIME. “I think being a dad has taught me how to be empathetic, compassionate. It has taught me a lot more about patience than anything else could have. It has taught me to see the world in dualities.”

This vision of the world, of the people who surround him, is what sets Roye’s Instagram account apart and landed him the title of TIME’s Instagram Photographer of 2016. His feed, populated with more than 4,000 portraits, tells the stories of people in all of their glory, in all of their afflictions.

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Roye first joined Instagram because, he says, “I wanted to open my veins. I felt like I was hurting and I wanted to talk about my hurt.” He realized that the best way to do that was through other people’s stories. “So I started to look for stories that were my stories. It was easy to just sit down with somebody and talk about them being disenfranchised or being unable to feed their family. I found those stories to be real. They were my stories.”

Roye’s Instagram became a space where he could shine a light on a section of his community – one that he felt was hurting. For example, he says, “there’s this guy around the corner every day. I would pass him every day. How come I’m the only one seeing him? So I started to use Instagram as a place where everybody would see him. This was a window where these folks would no longer be invisible.”

For the past four years, Roye has continuously photographed black people in and around his neighborhood and across America, each time with the stated goal of making people rethink their views and society-wide prejudices. “Before anything, before language, we see,” he says. “And if I can make you think about a particular subject matter before you even start to talk about it, then that’s my aim. My aim is to change your thought process.”

In the service of that goal, Roye has crisscrossed America from his neighborhood of Bedford–Stuyvesant in Brooklyn to Dallas, Baton Rouge, Chicago and Minneapolis.

Take for example his work in Baton Rouge in the days following the death of Alton Sterling. “When I go to a place that I’m unfamiliar with, my job is not to bring with me what I feel about the shooting or the fact that I know Baton Rouge has gun-toting gangsters,” he says. “I go there with a clean slate. I go there and show you what I see. Do I see a gangster or do I see a human? I would say that seven times out of 10, you see the kid, you see the man, you see the father. I concentrate on that – until the gangster appears. But I do not bring any external perceptions.”

To further counter these long-established perceptions, Roye’s images are always accompanied by comprehensive captions that convey the voices of his subjects. “The most important thing my father told me is that you always introduce yourself. So when I go up to somebody on the street, I’ve always found it pertinent to say: ‘My name is Ruddy, what’s your name? What do you do? Why are you here? How did you get here.’”

For Roye, it’s about empathy. It’s about connecting with his subjects in a photographic industry in which, too many times, photographers are told that they should always put distance between themselves and their subjects. “We’re told that if there’s a disconnect then we can be impartial,” he says. “I’m not trying to be impartial. A huge part of every story I do is a piece of me. A piece of me that was disenfranchised, neglected, abandoned.”

That’s why, he says, he wants his colleagues to pay more attention to the images they’re putting out into the world.

Earlier this year, Roye drew industry attention at a National Geographic seminar when he publicly questioned the photographer Lauren Greenfield about her work, *Girl Culture*, which investigates women’s relationships with their bodies. At the end of her presentation, Roye asked Greenfield why there were so few black women represented in her book. [It contains only three pictures of black women out of 107 images.] Roye’s goal wasn’t to shame Greenfield, he says. Instead he wants to challenge his colleagues to pay more attention to how they’re representing their subjects. “I’m not saying that I don’t trust other folks,” he says. “I’m not saying that people can’t take the image. But just be conscious. Give me context. Understand the history, then show me something differently.”

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It's not to say that Roye thinks he's a better photographer. For example, since Donald Trump's prediction-defying election, the photographer has been reassessing the work he's done this year. "I think I failed," he says, referring to his lack of focus on the struggles of people who chose the Republican candidate over Hillary Clinton. "There were enough signs to say, 'What about what's going on in Wisconsin? What about what's going on in Pennsylvania?' And I didn't do some stories there. I didn't visit. I didn't listen. That's something I want to change in these upcoming four years."

Maybe, through that work, Roye will shed his black photographer label – one that has stuck to him so closely that even his own 11-year-old son defines him as such. "I asked him the other day, 'What does your father do?' And he said that I'm a black photographer that photographs black people. I go, 'You realize that I photograph other people too.' But he goes, 'No... you make us beautiful.'"

Until somebody else comes and grabs that title, "I don't mind being that one," he says. "I embrace it with honor."