

Double Tap: Ruddy Roye's Instagram Portraits Hit the Gallery

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The photographer Radcliffe "Ruddy" Roye walks down Halsey Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant toward a location where he wants to shoot. The yellow anti-gentrification graffiti that caught his eye earlier has been papered over. But something new has appeared in its place: a poster for an art show, featuring the image of a man who'd been killed in a drive-by shooting. Pasted on a corner façade, the poster creates a compelling backdrop.

Roye retreats to a nearby trash can. He raises his Leica Q, sets the focus and exposure. Then he scans the foot traffic coming down Tompkins Avenue. "I see my shot coming," he says.

First he photographs a woman with a strong stride pulling a cart of preschoolers, shooting as they pass. Then two men approach, one with an abundant hipster beard. Roye asks him to pose, directing him lightly. They chat — the man is new to the neighborhood, an aspiring DJ — and Roye gives him his card.

Strolling away, Roye sends the images to his phone and selects a few to edit. By afternoon, an image of the woman with her charges, the poster in the background, hits Instagram, where Roye, 46, has a quarter-million followers. He's added a long caption: "Talk without action is dead," it begins, followed by a meditation on gun violence and how quickly its victims

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are forgotten. A heartfelt discussion swiftly unfolds in the comments, with people sharing everything from policy ideas to personal memories of the corner the image depicts.

This is Roye's modus operandi: For the past few years, the bulk of his work has been the posed or candid portraits and annotations he posts on Instagram. Now a selection of these images appears in large format at Steven Kasher Gallery. About half were made in Bed-Stuy and have an intimate, local feel: A man in a quilted jacket carrying a hand drill stands before a (now demolished) mural of black heroes; an elderly woman gets help crossing the street amid a snowstorm. Others carry a more overt political charge. A black couple is shown at this year's pride parade in Manhattan; their joy has a poignant undercurrent, and Roye relays, in the caption, their sadness about the Orlando nightclub shooting. And the first image the visitor sees is of a woman on the street in Cleveland during the Republican National Convention, giving the Black Power salute. (The exhibition fittingly accompanies a simultaneous showing of Stephen Shames's photographs of the Black Panther Party.)



Roye, who grew up in Jamaica, started out as a reporter for local newspapers before teaching himself photography. He moved to New York in 2000 and spent time as a stringer for the Associated Press and USA Today, eventually getting admitted to the renowned black photography collective Kamoinge and traveling under its aegis to the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. The trip would be a turning point in his practice, the moment when it began to center on real interaction with his subjects.

Until then, he says, "I was always a silent observer. I would shoot and walk away." But working in New Orleans and Alabama with a 4x5 large-format camera, he lost that luxury. "I had to stand next to the camera and just talk to someone, look and wait for the image," he says. "That's where the part began where we're going to have a conversation."

Roye's Instagram epiphany, in 2012, came at a confluence. He'd been living in Bed-Stuy for a decade, watching gentrification worsen the marginalization of the poor, the homeless, the elderly. The death of Trayvon Martin was stoking

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

the movement to defend black lives. And Roye's freelance gigs had dried up, leaving him dependent on his spouse, a school administrator.

"I felt invisible as a black photographer, with black issues, walking around and seeing those issues not being addressed," he says. "I saw Instagram as potential to be the vehicle for a voice — not just my voice but the voice of Bed-Stuy, of Brooklyn, of black folk."

Roye picks collaborators, as he calls his posed subjects, with a predilection for those risking erasure: can collectors, panhandlers, addicts, brash neighborhood kids, people brushed aside by striver respectability. He chats with them and conveys some of the talk in his captions. But while he emphasizes these subjects, Roye's Instagram feed is best described as a wide-ranging mosaic of character studies, which includes non-black subjects as well as family and friends. Sometimes a special project takes over — for instance, a black-and-white series on the Jamaican dancehall scene, made last March in Kingston and Montego Bay.



The exhibit deftly translates Roye's work from the smartphone screen to the gallery space. Kasher says he selected the 22 images for their effectiveness in a large format (each is 35 by 35 inches) and strength at conveying what he calls Roye's "controlled anger." The subjects are often captured very close up, and the color palette is rich with saturated yellows and reds. In an inspired move, Roye's Instagram captions serve as wall text.

"Ruddy brings a righteous anger to issues...in his community or the world, but mixed with compassion," Kasher says. "That's a powerful and rare voice." The show is a tiny sample of Roye's archive, but the blown-up scale and pairing with Shames's Black Panthers images enable a powerful resonance that Instagram can't always deliver.

"You should be able to walk in the space and look at faces who are trying to say: This is what the struggle is," Roye says of the show. "But as much as we're struggling, we're also human. We have a purpose. We have a name. We have a title."