

An abstract painting featuring three faces rendered in a monochromatic palette of earthy browns, greys, and blacks. The faces are partially obscured by thick, vertical brushstrokes that create a sense of depth and texture. The central face is the most prominent, with its features softened by the surrounding paint. To its right, another face is visible, and to the left, a third face is partially shown. The overall effect is one of a complex, layered composition that invites the viewer to discern the individual identities within the abstract forms.

Donald E. Camp

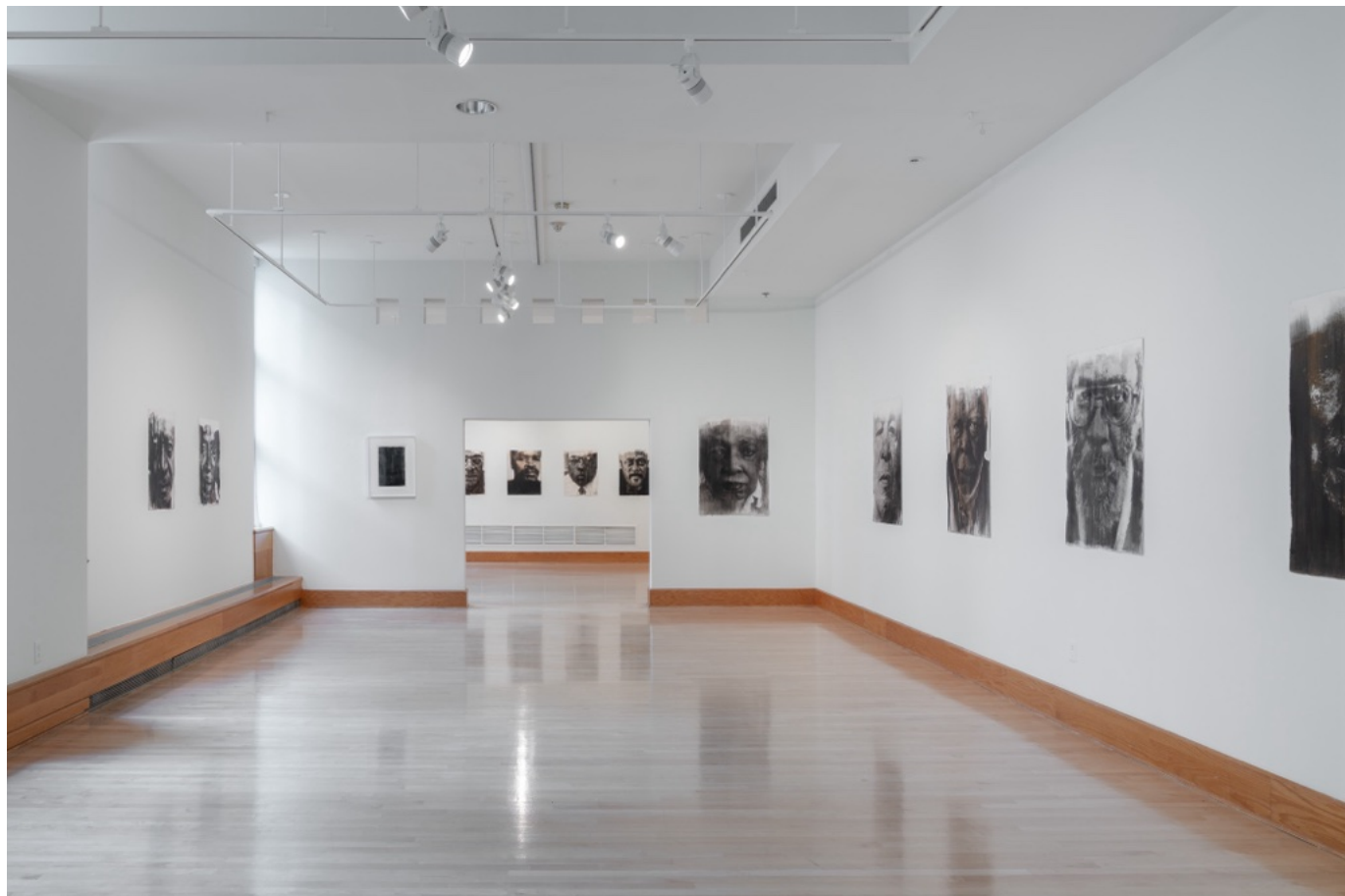
Faces



Donald E. Camp: Faces

March 5 – April 6, 2025

List Gallery, Swarthmore College



*Milk, Earth, Mirrors, Voids:
The Photographs of Donald E. Camp*

Tess Wei
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“There’s New Orleans mud in there,” remembered Donald E. Camp while describing the pigments used to create *Woman Who Cooks – Chef Leah Chase* (2006, opposite). Although this large-scale monoprint depicts the face of the late, New Orleans culinary legend, it is far from a typical portrait. The surface of the image appears rough and gritty, and Chase’s face is composed of expressive brushstrokes made from multiple layers of photographic emulsion on cotton rag paper. The resulting image appears both emergent and weathered, improvisational and measured. This hauntingly tactile yet incomplete image is one of the large- and medium-scale photographic monoprints presented in Camp’s solo exhibition *Donald E. Camp: Faces*.

Camp began taking photographs of human faces more than thirty years ago. His career-long series, *Dust Shaped Hearts*, includes hundreds of portraits of significant figures in his life, including writers, judges, musicians, artists, and family members. The surfaces of the portraits are raw and variegated due to Camp’s complex printing technique, a non-silver process in which casein, a milk protein, is used to bind raw earth pigments to the paper. The resulting images offer representations of subjects that are simultaneously intense and elusive. In *Brother Who Taught Me to*

See – Mr. Herbert Camp (2006, page 3), elements that first appear with piercing clarity—the solidity of his brother’s gaze, the distinct hairs of his mustache, and the high tonal contrast between the earth pigments and paper—dissipate as one confirms that the entire image is made of discrete brushstrokes, chemical stains, and dust.

In this way, Camp announces his hand in the making of such photographs, establishing the individual’s presence then allowing the images to disperse, slide, or explode into purposefully crude marks. He also mines the formal and metaphorical potential of his process. For example, while developing *Brother Who Taught Me to See*, Camp poured bleach onto the bottom-right corner of the analog negative before using it during three different light exposures. When asked about this decision, Camp’s explanation is twofold. First, the use of bleach introduces a nondescript, blurred space necessary to balance the composition. Second, the gradual destruction of the negative offered a metaphor for his brother’s battle with cancer, “I needed to destroy the negative in the same way the cancer was eating my brother.” The photograph was created in the last month of Herbert’s life.

The symbolic importance of Camp’s materials and methods is present in all of his works. He discovers resonant symbols and associations through a call-and-response darkroom ritual and the metaphorical reality of using *milk* (casein) and *earth* (pigments) to create images of humans. Sometimes, even Camp is surprised by what emerges, unplanned, due to the sensitive nature of the chemical process. *Earth – Robert Big Elk* (2012, page 9) offers one such example. Here, the face of the Omaha Nation wisdom keeper entirely fills the picture plane and is symmetrically divided,





6 *Woman Who Gathers* – Chef Leah Chase, 2006/printed 2008
raw earth pigment and casein monoprnt on paper, 41 x 29 inches

on a vertical axis, into light and shadow. Despite Camp's intentional lighting, there are distinct white dots scattered throughout the darker portions. He did not plan these marks, explaining instead, "the spots just happened—they remind me of the universe." He interprets them as stars or galactic apparitions that appear from the darkroom process and align perfectly with Robert Big Elk's expansive knowledge as an Omaha elder.

Camp finds profound meaning in such magical occurrences in his photographs, wherein the biographical and formal seem to converge. To varying degrees, Camp's own values and life history are always present in his photographs. One of his early nonfigurative silver-gelatin prints, *The Gate* (1987–88, page 8), makes direct reference to The Bahá'í Faith, the religion he converted to in adulthood. What first appears as a dark, abstracted field, slowly reveals itself to be an image of a door divided into four uneven quadrants and made up of subtly shifting black tones. There is no indication as to where this door leads, and that is the point. For Camp, the door offers a symbolic reference to core tenets in Bahá'í Faith: all people are equal and will find unity—and all are welcome and can enter.*

Camp's artistic journey and directive have always been deeply spiritual in this way. Camp began his representations of faces, collectively titled *Dust Shaped Hearts*, as a call to arms against the dissemination of negative stereotypes commonly published in the media, particularly headshots and cartoon caricatures of Black men. As such, a significant number of his early photographs portray the vital importance, intimacy, and vulnerability of Black men. The name of the series derives from the poet Robert E. Hayden's *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, a collection of poetry that deftly

explores the complexity of the Black experience in America. To a large extent, Camp's photographic impulse came from a simple yet profound directive: he needed to see himself reflected in the world as both tender and resilient.

The idea that photographs should offer a space for reflection is integral to Camp's artistic practice. With great dexterity, he navigates the potential of an image to both show and omit, to act as a mirror or a void. In this way, he communicates through agitated, brushed, scratched, and scrubbed surfaces, creating nuanced and visceral images that ultimately remain elusive. The success of his photographs lies in this intentional incompleteness: within subtle gaps, Camp implies the complex character of his subjects while imploring viewers to engage in deeper, more reflexive looking.

* The Gate is the translation from Arabic of The Báb, born Ali-Muhammad (1819–1850), one of the leading figures of The Bahá'í Faith.





In Conversation:
Donald E. Camp & Ron Tarver

Tarver: Why don't we just start off with: when did you pick up a camera and what drew you to photography?

Camp: I think the first time I held a camera in my hands was when I was about eight years old. My family moved to this new house, and in their basement there was this old camera, this old box camera—if you put film in it, I think it would have just leaked like crazy. But the thing that it did do, it would click. And I could look through the viewfinder. My older siblings were always interested in the arts, and they would always do strange things around the house. When they discovered that they could do photography, they could make a darkroom in the basement. And so they started processing film and everything, but I was eight years old; they wouldn't let me touch that stuff. But I could carry that little camera around and I could go *click*, and I would remember what I clicked at. So I think that was probably my first connection to photography.

Tarver: So I'm just curious, what did that click do to you? How did you respond to that click? Did you have a visceral reaction to the sound?

Camp: Well, not visceral, no, but it was something that went into my mind, and then, later on, I made a connection, probably as an adult, that I was interested in photography. I was interested in photographs much earlier, but it took me a long time to realize that it was photographs that I was looking at. I mean, that goes back to when I was about four or five years old. I was always looking at photographs. My father had an encyclopedia of animals, and I would look through that thing like crazy because it was a way of seeing these things that I didn't normally see, and I didn't think about them as photographs. I would also go through the newspaper looking at photographs. My mother would send me outside to play, you know, "Go get some sun." And I would take a little piece of the newspaper with me, hide under the porch, and go through the newspaper. Later on, I kind of realized that I was looking for photographs of Black people, you know, somebody that looked like me, because I realized there was this absence. I mean, I didn't realize it, but I kind of *felt* that it was this absence. And so I'm looking at the photographs, and there were no photographs of Black people or black men. And on the comic page there was this occasional buffoonery of a Black person in comical situations.

Tarver: So you have this image in the encyclopedia or in the newspaper—when did you make the connection that somebody actually did that for a living? That you could actually do this?

Camp: That didn't happen until, I think, when I was 19. I went into the service, and in the Air Force they actually had a darkroom that I could use. Up until then, I'd been looking through *Ebony Magazine*, and I'd sold *Jet Magazine* and *Ebony Magazine* in my father's barbershop. I knew the photographs were there, but didn't know people could make money that way. Then, somehow, when I was around 19, I realized that photography can be a profession.

I think that's because when I went into the Air Force, the military was the only place to go. I barely graduated school. And some of the story of that deals with Emmett Till—what I saw in the magazine in my father's barbershop that had Emmett Till's photograph in there. That, along with a few other things that happened to me when I was 12 years old, just destroyed me as a kid. Regarding Emmett Till: In 1955, when he was lynched I was working in my father's barbershop. I was just turning 15 years old. Emmett had just turned 14. I was a kid, trying to figure out what's right, what's wrong, and all I knew is that it could have happened to me. It became the question that I would ask of Black men in particular. When I was at the *Philadelphia Bulletin* photographing a Black man for any reason I would ask, "What did you do when you found out about Emmett Till?" When I photographed Muhammad Ali, I was shooting for *Ebony*. I asked him, "What did you do?" And he said, "So we got kids together and we just went out and broke car windows."

But see, he was a fighter. I went to sleep. I think it was through that evolution of things that I began to

realize the power—not just the beauty of photography—but the power of photography. It can wake people up. It can put people to sleep.

Tarver: Interesting. Let me just back up a little bit. Early on, did you show your photographs to anyone? Who were you looking at?

Camp: Once. They had a photo contest in the Air Force. And the first photograph that I entered was one I did of one of my brothers. But I watched them judge it. I watched them pick up my print, laugh at it, and throw it aside. The photographs they picked were standard stuff. I told myself, "I'm going to make them understand my photograph. They're going to understand why I did *that* photograph *that* way." And then, I set about learning. Learning imagery, learning photography. It was all self-taught. There were a few camera magazines that I would get—there was a lot of information about cameras, about technique. I started reading books on how to properly compose a photograph and all of those things.

I moved to France when I was 24 or 25. It was there that I really had an opportunity to just study art. I was able to go to Paris, for example, and walk and discover museums. The air base would get these passes to the Louvre and other museums. So I could go and say, "Give me four passes to the Louvre." The only reason I needed four was because that way I could go in, I could go out and get lunch, and then go back. I could do that two days out of a week. So

I did that for four or five months and just explored the Louvre. I took a 35 millimeter slide, punched the slide out so it just had the cardboard window or format, and that's how I would compose and re-compose compositions. So I could break down the composition into the golden rectangle to see what would work as a photograph.

At that time, I was really concerned about developing my eye for working with 35 millimeter film, because I thought that would be forever. My reading then turned to chemistry books. Photochemistry—that's my palette. And so I memorized formulas. I learned what every chemical would do, what every component of the chemistry would do. So there's a lot of empty clicking again because film was expensive. I guess, in a sense, I was training myself to be a camera as well as beginning to train myself to be a photographer.

I can still break down an image of what I'm seeing in black and white—that's what I practiced doing—blurring the image, so it broke down into mass. You just do that and then you learn to do it instinctively. You become a camera. Eventually, I came to the point where I was trying to figure out what to photograph. And I think that's always the issue: What is my content? What's important to me? What am I going to photograph? I never knew what my story was. And I had been searching for that.

I was lucky to be able to meet and spend about forty-five minutes with Ornette Coleman. The other jazz musicians really condemned what he was doing

with his plastic saxophone. And so he had come to Paris and I happened to meet the photographer who was doing some of his photo work in Paris. Ornette and I had a chance to sit down and talk for forty-five minutes or so. And my question to him was, "How do you do what you do?" Because his music was like no one else's music. His compositions were like no one else's compositions. I asked, "How do you do that?" "You do you," that was his response. "You do *you*." The problem is, I did not know who I was. It took me 20 years to find me.

The solution was to stop taking other people as examples of what to be in life. The photographing-me stopped making photographs like everybody else and I began making them the way I feel that they should be done. Both tasks are difficult, because you always have peer pressure. But you gotta stand up to it, right? People are going to think you are crazy or say, "We're gonna love you for this." Or: "We're gonna hate you for this." And it comes to a point where I do not care whether you love me or hate me. This is what I feel is right. This is what I am going to do. This is who I am.

Tarver: Beautiful. Now I'm going to shift gears and move forward a little bit. So you get out of the Air Force and you've built up all of this photographic knowledge. Then, how did you approach a newspaper?

Camp: When I was in Vietnam, I did a body of work there that I thought I would be able to use to get a



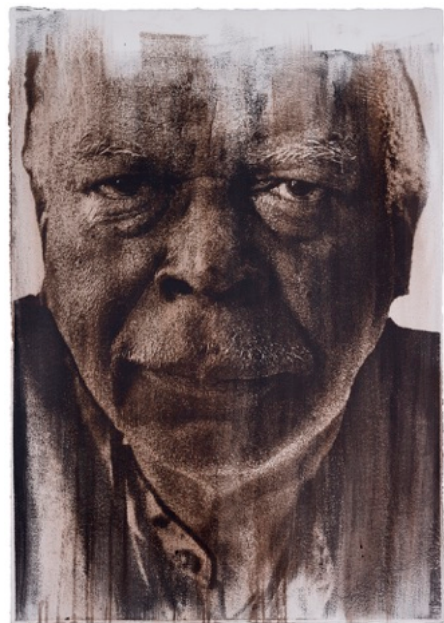
job. Philip Jones Griffiths, who was working with *Life* and *Magnum*, came through, and I happened to run into him when he visited Cam Ranh Bay. He said he would look at my work. He was tired when he got in, and I was coming from the photo lab, so I went about to say hello to him. I was taking photos of a Vietnam medic and I asked him if he would look at the work. He thought it was good and said, “Come to Saigon and talk with me.” So I went to see my commander. I told him about it and he arranged for a flight for me to go to Saigon and spend three days with Philip Jones Griffiths. Philip spent three days with me just talking about the ins and outs, which is how I ended up at the *Philadelphia Bulletin*.

I learned to be a good newspaper photographer, a good *Bulletin* newspaper photographer. Whatever I put in the rectangle to satisfy the editors, they eventually destroyed—that was the strange thing. They had to have their touch. And they were going to crop, no matter what I gave them. No matter how tightly I cropped in the camera, they had to crop a bit more. Toward the end of my career there, I was unable to make a photograph that looked compelling or resonant. The point was, if I didn’t care, I could have gone ahead and done the mundane stuff. Just the straight shots and go home. But I cared enough to try to make a photograph that had meaning.

Tarver: One of the things I wanted to ask you is, what is the difference between photojournalism and art?

Camp: I don’t think that there is a difference. To me, photojournalism is a form of art. And you either do it well or you don’t do it well. But then that has to do with my definition of “art.” Art is about what we do as human beings, whereas science is about what we know. But we can use science and turn it into art—we use science to make art. So to me the difference is, really: is it good art or is it bad art? What is this particular form? Is it fine art? Is it journalism? Is it newspaper photography? Is it portrait photography, sports photography? There are so many divisions. Do sports photographs belong in museums? Well, it depends on how you define the museum.

I quit photojournalism because of my daughter. She got tired of seeing me mope and complain. One day she said, “Why don’t you quit? That’s what you would tell us to do.” You have to be happy where you are or you have to do something about it. So I did something and I quit. And then what? I tried for a year to do freelance, and I found freelancing was worse than working for the newspaper. So I decided to leave photography and do something a lot more practical. So I went to Temple University. I found out there was such a thing as visual anthropology. I started to study that, but I didn’t feel like an anthropologist, and so I discovered that Temple had a really good art school. So I switched over to Tyler School of Art—I did my undergraduate and graduate work there. And that’s where I really began the transition to finding *me*. The graduate school—that’s where I could emphasize *photography*. I was working directly with Will Larson and a few others



folks. That’s where I came up with *Voids and Barriers*, which was my body of work done on mirrors with liquid light—a light sensitive photographic emulsion. It depended upon stop time versus real time, and that was probably my first step toward finding my own vision. This whole time I still wasn’t realizing that I wasn’t *me*. Ornette Coleman planted that seed and I thought about it

for a while, then I forgot about it. But when I went to art school, that seed came back, and it began to grow. I asked myself, “If you’re gonna do this, who are you?” That was the more difficult thing.

Tarver: So you discovered the photochemical process using casein and earth pigments, and then what led you to *Dust Shaped Hearts*?

Camp: In the early 1990s, some newspapers started talking about the extinction of the Black American male as a species—they said we were just going to “disappear.” So my response to it was that I was going to call on my photojournalism roots and record Black American men so that there’s some evidence 500 years from now that we existed. But I did not want to do straight photography, because I do know what the life of a photograph will be in 70 years or 80 years. Unless it’s really well preserved, it’s dead. And so, I started looking for other materials. I had an exhibition coming up at Sande Webster’s gallery and I wanted to fill it with this project. But I didn’t have any money, and there’s no way I could have had my images of Black men printed on the scale that I wanted.

So I had to find an alternative way of printing. This is when the books that I read and the chemical formulas that I had memorized came into play. Also, I had a recording by a musician, James Blood Ulmer, who did this piece called “Are You Glad to Be in America?” It’s a blues piece—jazz blues—

that he played with Ornette Coleman. And so I went to the fourth floor of my home, turned all the lights out. I had made a tape, and on it I had James Ulmer playing “Are You Glad to Be in America?” repeatedly. Basically, I locked myself in my dark room, lights out, put that on, and I listened to it and I said prayers about how to do this. The idea of light-sensitive casein emerged. So I figured that if I could do that with pigment or mud, it would work.

Tarver: One of the things you mentioned was scale. Why was it important that these prints were big?

Camp: It’s important that they are big. Yes. The artworks that I was seeing at the Louvre were big to me. The pieces in *Dust Shaped Hearts* had to have more presence than the standard photograph, because they’re not standard photographs. They’re, in a sense, paintings. They are also, in a sense, portraits, but they’re not portraits. I don’t correct it anymore, but I don’t like to have them called portraits. They are headshots.

One of the things that happened when I was developing my process was that each face demanded its own solution. There is a strange thing that happens, and I don’t know what exactly it is. But at some point, each one requires its own solution. I have to determine the exposure time for each one. I can also vary the color from a warm black to cool black. There are even more variables to consider when working in analog rather than digital formats.

Tarver: You started off photographing your brothers, which gets us back to the whole thing about how your brothers are all artistic and that’s how you got the names of *Brother Who Taught Me to Sing*, *Brother Who Taught Me Nobility*—so talk a little bit about that.

Camp: The idea that we Black men were going to just kind of vanish, that we were going to go extinct, was so insulting that I wanted to establish the strength of the family—the strength of *a* family. I was so disappointed with newspapers—in the biases reinforced by newspapers. I knew where that idea that we were going to just disappear came from: it was suburban editors who had no idea of what an urban environment was like or what somebody was like outside of their very, very closed suburban environment. And so what I wanted to do was to establish the idea that the family is going to survive, and that we were the foundation of certain ideas, like loyalty. And, simple things, like *Brother Who Taught Me to Ride a Bicycle*. Those things became important to me. When you learn to ride a bicycle, that is really important. It is something you never forget. And I wanted to be able to play with the importance of being able to learn to play, to ride a bicycle, or sing. It also confirmed the idea that I was going to work with dust.

Many of these choices come from my life as Bahá’í. Robert Hayden, who is also Bahá’í, wrote one of his first poetry books, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*. And in that he wrote about the fragility of Black American hearts—how they were fragile just like the rest of the world. Just like every other human being on the

planet, we too are fragile. And I wanted to play on that. And especially since I was using dust.

Tarver: There is one last thing I want to ask you about, because I know your Bahá'í religion is very important to you and your spirituality. How does that factor into your photography?

Camp: There are certain parts of Bahá'í principles that are critical to what I do. One is the idea that there is no power in darkness. Darkness is merely the absence of light. As a photographer, that is critically important to me—I use black in my images.

This also goes back to the importance of newspapers as a mirror for society. The newspaper should have a responsibility for culture. It has a responsibility that is critical to survival. And that responsibility is to tell the truth, to be a mirror. The reporters also have a spiritual responsibility. But when that fails, it is really destructive to what we are as human beings.

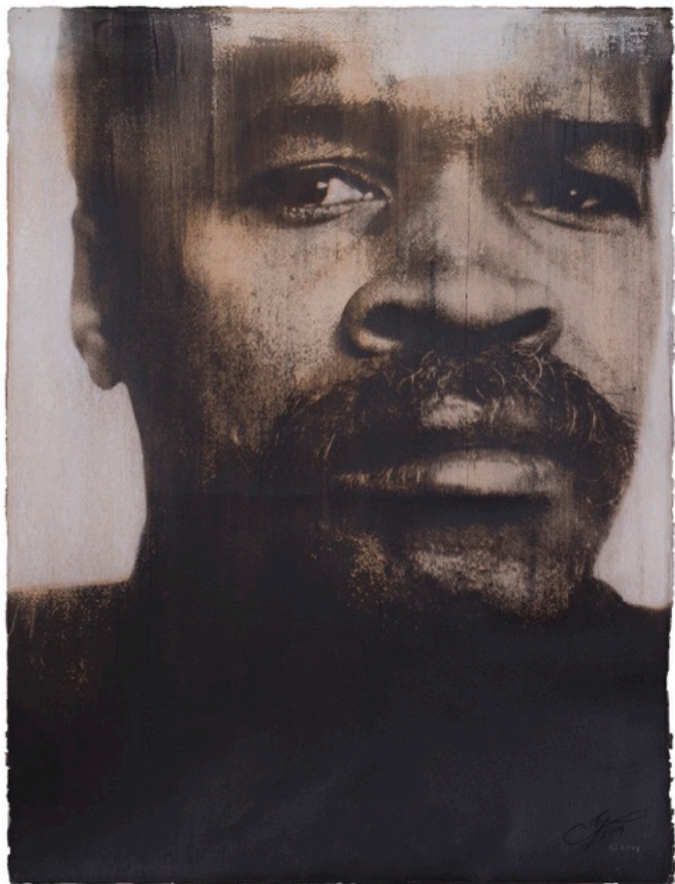
As an artist, I have a spiritual responsibility to humanity. Which is why I do people. Who I choose as the subject and what stories I tell are what's important.

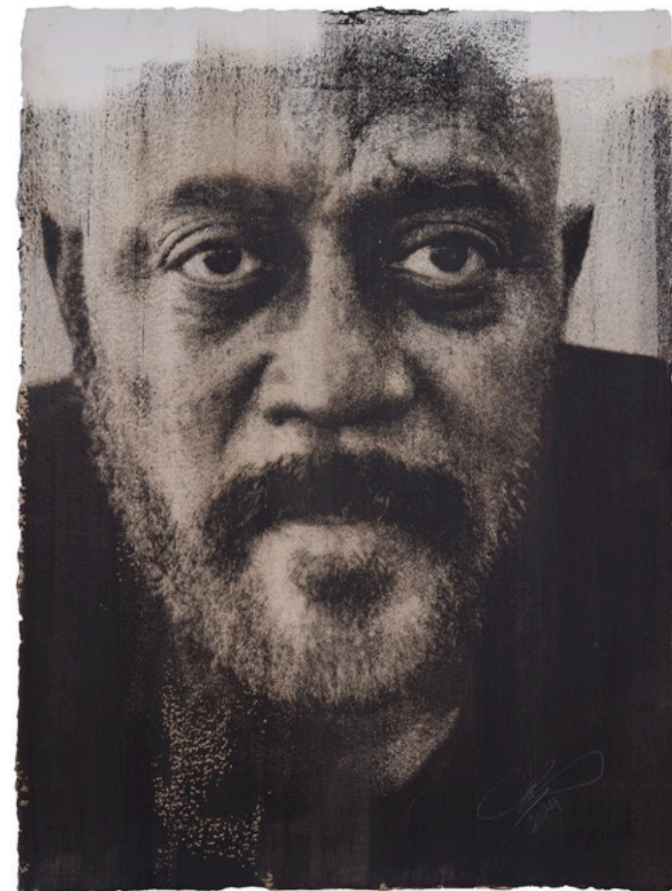
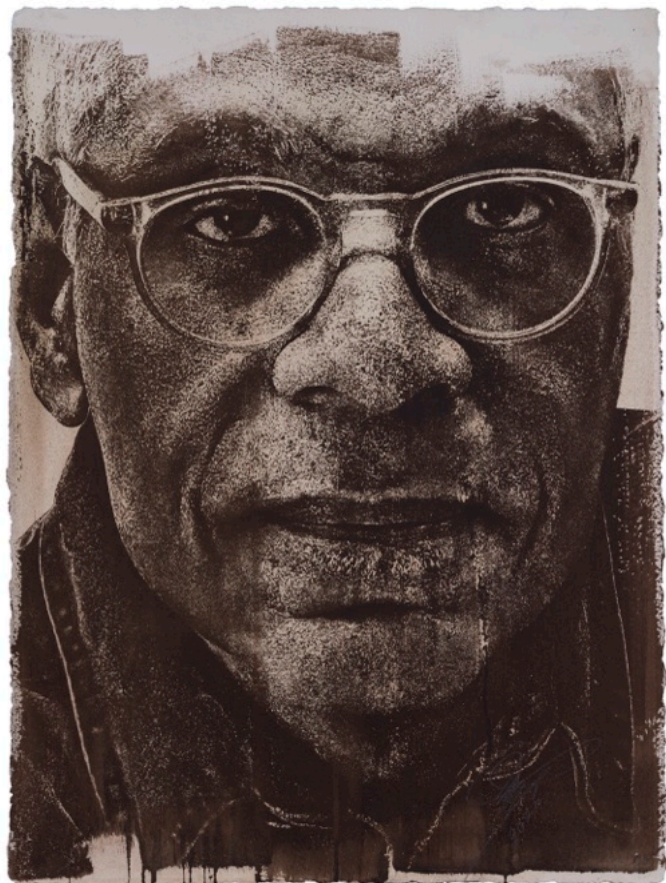
Ron Tarver is associate professor of Art at Swarthmore College. Prior to joining the faculty, he was a staff photojournalist at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* for 32 years, where he was part of a team that shared a Pulitzer Prize in 2012. He is the author of *The Long Ride Home: Black Cowboys in America*, which was published by George Thompson Publishing in 2024, and co-author of the book *We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans*, published by Harper Collins in 2005.

Tarver is the recipient of numerous fellowships and funding, including from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Independence Foundation, and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is collected by distinguished institutions, including the National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem.





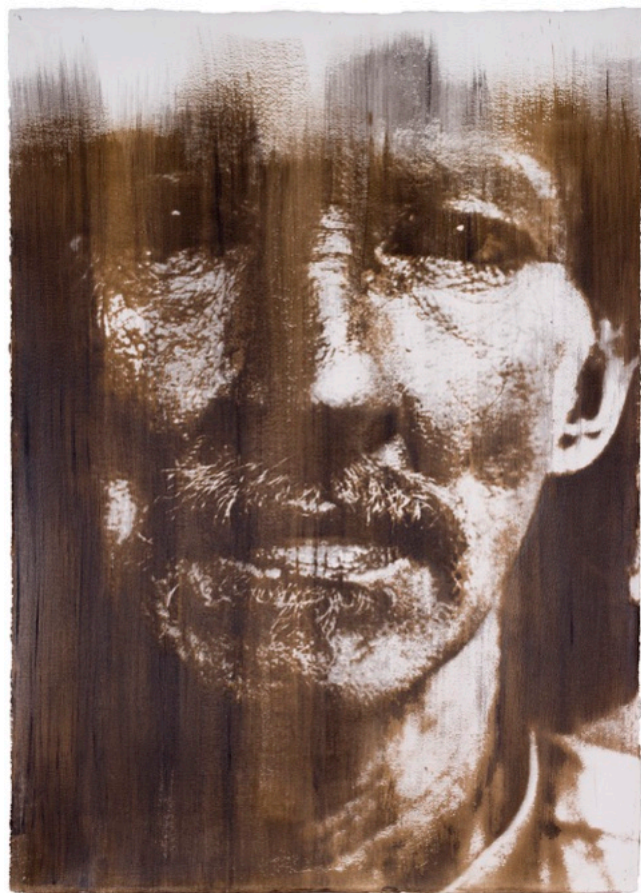




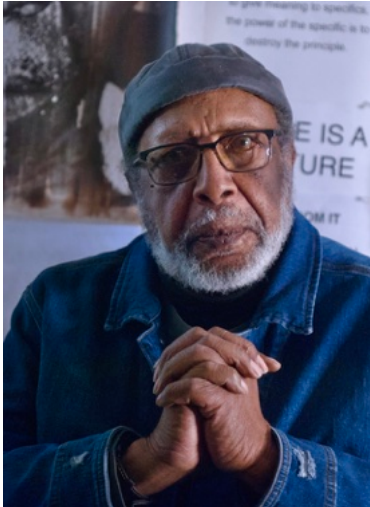












Donald E. Camp was born in Meadville, Pennsylvania in 1940 and is a veteran of the United States Air Force. He began his career in 1972 as a photojournalist for the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, and became a founding member of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists. After leaving photojournalism, he enrolled in Temple University’s Tyler School of Art, where he received a BFA in 1987 and an MFA in 1989.

Camp’s work has been exhibited and collected by distinguished institutions throughout Pennsylvania, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Michener Art Museum, The Philip and Muriel Berman Museum Of Art, and Haverford College. His works have also been exhibited at the Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia, PA, Delaware Contemporary in Wilmington, DE, the University of Michigan Museum of Art in Ann Arbor, MI, and the Philadelphia International Airport. He is Professor Emeritus at Ursinus College, where he was artist-in-residence for more than a decade. Camp is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards from distinguished organizations, including the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Camp currently lives and works in Philadelphia.

This catalog was published in conjunction with *Donald E. Camp: Faces* presented at the List Gallery, Swarthmore College March 5–April 6, 2025.

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Cover image: *Man Who Hears Music – Mr. Andre Raphael Smith* [detail], 1995, raw earth pigment and casein monoprint on paper, 30 x 22 inches

Back cover: *The Gate*, 1987–88, silver gelatin print, 16 x 20 inches

Inside front cover: *Man Who Hears Music – Mr. Andre Raphael Smith*, 1995, raw earth pigment and casein monoprint on paper, 30 x 22 inches

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It was an honor to curate *Donald E. Camp: Faces*. I have deeply admired his work for years; it has been a privilege to curate this show during the past nine months and spend significant time studying his photographs. I am grateful to Donald E. Camp for entrusting me with his work.

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— Tess Wei



List Gallery, Swarthmore College