



CHESS WITH UNCLE EL

October 17, 2025

Breaking News

*"I used to come up here and I already knew
that-
one day, somehow somewhere...
I'm going to be in New York."*

I knew many idle people, lost in their thoughts and a grand heritage: paupers, jockeys, chess players, and beggars. These individuals have so much to say, if only someone would approach them. I decided to sit beside a chess player whose humble face suggested honesty; so, I shook his hand and conversation began. From the outset, I felt the discussion could turn somewhat philosophical and engaging. I had a similar experience in my freshman year and remembered how friendly ordinary people could be, and I was right! We could converse for hours. Time was aplenty.

Uncle El shared with me that he has always been a free, spontaneous person, following his heart's desires. He dreamt of one day being in New York, immersed in the vibrant energy of the city; soaking its youth. Uncle El ultimately fell in love with the dynamic atmosphere that he had never experienced in Florida. He declared that you either love New York or you don't; there's no middle ground.

"Chess is a beautiful game. Chess is life. Chess is New York."

Even if someone has never played chess, I believe most people have a basic understanding of what each piece represents. There are pawns and rooks, knights, and bishops, kings and queens. Among them, the pawn is of the lowest value. Uncle El explained all of this to me, although I was already familiar with most of it. Or was I? He described the pawn as a representation of the common man in this world--even on the chessboard! The pawn moves in a straight line along its path, but it constantly faces obstacles from the opposing side. This is similar to real life, where the common man often encounters challenges and can become vulnerable when those obstacles hit and affect them. For instance, when a common man approaches another from the opposite side, their interaction will determine the direction of their lives. The other person might be an enemy, an ally, or a source of temptation. And still, the pawn is a crucial factor in the game. Uncle El believes that we often meet the same people in different environments, highlighting how interconnected we all are. It's as if someone is controlling every move on this board and in our world. Are the codes of our lives already set even as we play the game anew every time?



Uncle El could talk for hours. This particular conversation was only ten minutes long, but it greatly impacts a curious mind. People who have traveled the world and gained knowledge understand this well. Experienced players often compare life to a game of chess, immersed in their thoughts on the chessboard and nothing else. Chess becomes a reigning metaphor for the way the whole cosmos works. It comes from practical wisdom.

I must admit I was unaware of the possibilities that a chess player could embody. We have so little understanding of what is happening around us when we are focused on our lives. A chess player could represent a wise man, a joker, and a fool all at once. Is he a seer of sorts? Their directness and confidence in their opinions never cease to amaze me.

EVERYDAYNESS & PEOPLE



*James Van Der Zee (American, 1886–1983) Marcus Garvey with George O. Marke and Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou, 1924 Gelatin silver print, 5 1/16 x 7 1/8 in.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*



*William Eggleston (American, b. 1939) Sumner, Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in Background, c. 1969
Dye transfer print, 8 x 12 in. MoM*

In a way, my own work is inspired by the works of James Van Der Zee and William Eggleston. Both adopt a documentary style that highlights the mundane aspects of life. James Van Der Zee offers viewers space to appreciate people's individuality, while William Eggleston focuses on saturated colors in his photographs. Furthermore, Eggleston often features everyday objects, making the mundane compelling by exploring its relationship with the individual. Van Der Zee primarily represented Black artists and the people of Harlem in his work.

In combining themes of individuality, representation and objects, I find myself trying to grapple with such questions: How can one express individuality through an object placed in society? Does an object validate the owner's individuality?

I chose to depict ways of the chess player from Union Square. This image serves as a journey of rediscovery through the game of chess. The objects in focus are the chess pieces, the chessboard, and Uncle El. What is Uncle El's relationship with chess, and ultimately, with himself? What does a place in the world mean? In his interview, he mentions that the chess pieces symbolize life itself; each move can represent an obstacle or a pathway. Reading practical wisdom as cosmic metaphor is a significant way of trying to make sense of the contingent world. Continuing to playing chess with himself every single day is an endeavour that comes from within the man. Chess is mind and body combined. Every sinew is alert, yet laidback. The chess match reflects his life. His experiences in New York opens him up to far larger questions.