Memoir

# The Dream of Rudy Robinson

*For every success story in photography, there are a dozen about the struggle to survive.*

*By Russell Hart*

THOMAS P. LANG

I can picture the day I met Rudy Robinson. I was freelancing in the photography studio at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and he had come in to show his portfolio. He was aggressive, a fast talker, and he convinced the head of the department to let him take the photographs for a catalog of 19th-century American neoclassical sculpture. It was a strange thought: a garrulous, streetwise black man out of Roxbury trying to do justice to the rarefied expressions of blue-blood society. Rudy was given his own studio at the far end of the museum's catacombs, and it quickly became a shrine to the improvisatory skill that four decades of privation had taught—littered with found and scrounged hardware.

In Rudy's presence, the character of the museum's work spaces changed. The climate-controlled main studio—where artwork leaned peaceably against the walls, waiting to be photographed—suddenly became animated. Running into Rudy in the film processing darkroom was sensory overload: blue notes blaring from his omnipresent radio, nitrogen burst buzzing, and the humid air rife with a mixture of Rudy's cologne and sweat. He moved through the place like a hurricane, leaving hardware in his wake and water on the floor where he shook his 8 × 10 negatives dry in the excitement to print them. You always knew where Rudy had been, let alone where he was.

In the grand scheme of things photographic, Rudy was an unknown. He struggled to make a living at photography, but it was the medium's creative potential, the possibility of expressing or preserving some part of himself with his camera, that really motivated him. Whether he was photographing a statue or a living subject, he brought an intensity to his work that I've rarely seen the likes of. Yet it never came easy for him. Every picture was an effort, and toward the end, an effort more monumental than most of us could imagine.

Rudy's energy made him an exhausting person to be with. Sometimes he was a clown—the kind who is well aware of the effect of his buffoonery. Other times he was intensely serious. One minute he'd be going head to head with a curator over some aesthetic point, the next he would be on his knees at the feet of the department head in a gesture of mock supplication, begging his forgiveness for some photographic transgression. He had no compunction about making a ruckus in the museum's hallowed halls, but his disrespect was jocular. He was oblivious to the museum's professional hierarchy, at one point asking the curator of American Decorative Arts to bumper-push his car to a service station in a snowstorm after he'd burned his clutch out somewhere in Roxbury. Later, Rudy and that curator, Jonathan Fairbanks, developed a

*Robinson photographing the bronze Indian in front of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts: He shot sculpture as if it were a block of stone, cutting back the light bit by bit.*

close relationship while working on the sculpture catalog. At one point, Rudy was calling him "Dad."

Fairbanks was apparently very happy with Rudy's photographs, and curators can be as hard to please as any art director. Tom Lang, now the department's supervising photographer, speculates that Rudy's success might have had something to do with his unique way of working. "It was as if he was sculpting the things himself," Lang remembers. "He was using hot lights, sometimes as many as 12 or 13, and he would start subtracting as if he were working with a block of stone. Just by using gobos, and masking, things like that, he cut the light back to what he wanted."

Lang, like many of Rudy's friends and acquaintances, thinks he probably couldn't read. He never looked up telephone numbers, always calling information. He had to be shown how to operate the museum's button-activated door locks because he couldn't make sense of the numerical keypad. Instead of using a lightmeter, he seemed to determine his exposures with a mix of in-

*Rudy moved through the darkroom like a hurricane, leaving hardware in his wake.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUDY ROBINSON

*From the European photos: A member of the House of Lords, London (above), and a prisoner at Wormwood Scrubs, London (opposite page).*

tuition and experience. One of my strongest recollections of Rudy is that he was always pumping me for information, for the specifics of this or that photographic technique. I'm sure I unthinkingly referred him to a book more than once.

Tom Lang was woken on numerous occasions by late-night calls from Rudy's darkroom and would have to talk the photographer through printing problems. Rudy would also call Lang at odd hours and ask to borrow lighting equipment. Invariably he needed it immediately. "I have a deal going," he would offer mysteriously. Lang would leave the lights under a bush on his front lawn, and in the morning they'd be gone.

Rudy had his own studio at Northeastern University, where he was part of a minority artists in residence program. It looked like a photographic survivalist's hideaway, its shelves groaning with boxes of outdated printing paper. I was there once when Rudy was giving his young son, Atiba, darkroom lessons, and I remember being astonished that in the face of this paper abundance he was making the boy print on 4×5 sheets neatly cut down from 8×10 and stored in a 4×5 sheet-film box crudely labeled "Atiba's paper." I suspect Rudy's idea was to teach his son not to take material things for granted.

Rudy often brought Atiba to the museum, another of his challenges to its airless order. One Monday Atiba was sighted gallivanting through the unguarded galleries while Rudy was shooting installation views. When officials complained, Rudy solved the problem by turning a Plexiglas display case on its top and depositing a delighted Atiba inside.

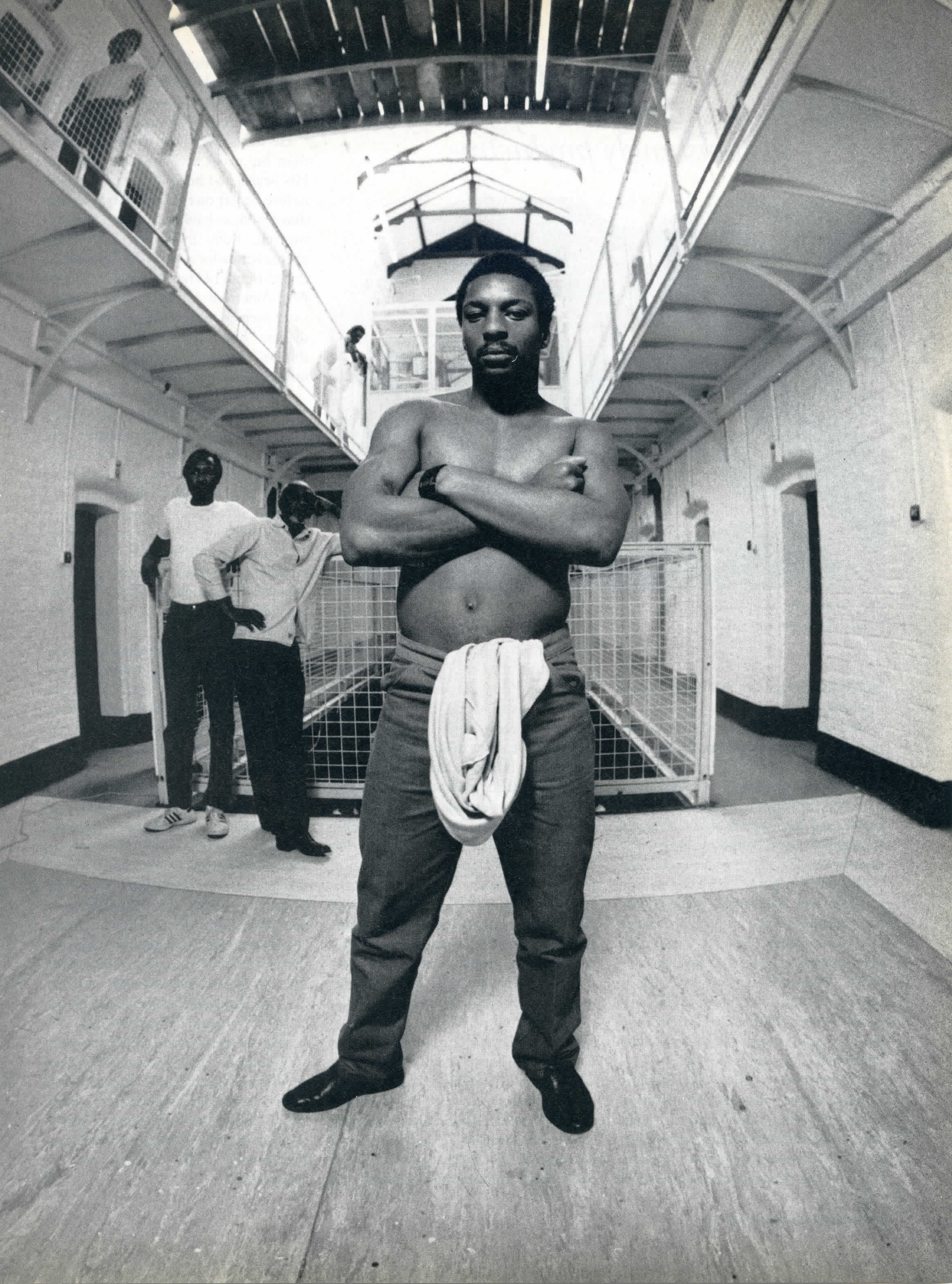
Rudy clearly adored the boy. Barry Gaither, the director of Boston's Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists and Rudy's friend and artistic champion, says that in Atiba Rudy saw the future that he had never been able to make for himself. "He lived that future through his son," Gaither explains. But when Rudy's marriage fell apart in late 1982, his wife got custody of the boy. Rudy was devastated.

Part of the problem was that Rudy couldn't keep a job. After about two years, he was eased out of the museum. I was amazed he lasted as long as he did—that some staid curator hadn't already taken offense at his antic style. So was Barry Gaither, who occasionally gave Rudy freelance work—and fired him three times himself.

For a year after losing Atiba, Rudy was suicidal. Gaither stopped him from hurting himself a half-dozen times. Because Rudy had no place to stay and couldn't afford an apartment, Gaither found him a room in a halfway house run by friends.

By this time I was working less and less for the Museum of Fine Arts, but I ran into Rudy around Boston often. We would trade the usual freelancers' horror stories. He would ask me if I knew of any work. One of the mixed blessings of being a self-employed photographer is that when jobs are few and far between, you can do your own work, and Rudy was doing his. He was shooting a series of male nudes, taking his inspiration from the sumptuous statuary he had photographed at the museum: men whose bronze-black musculature he dramatized with hard light, causing their dark skin to merge into even darker shadows. And he was printing some group portraits he had taken on the stoops of his native Philadelphia. (He told me he grew up in the same project as Bill Cosby.) He was having some success at exhibiting his pictures, even selling a few to local museums and collectors. In 1985, he was included in a major show of Boston photographers at the city's Institute of Contemporary Art.

Keeping up the work wasn't easy. He had to finagle the materials. He came across a cache of unclaimed color replenisher and schemed to make it work as a developer so he could print in color. He struggled to make prints on his outdated paper, loading the developer with an antifoggant that slowed its action and forced him to use ridiculously long exposure times. I would occasionally give him chemistry I didn't need, and it



*Within the constraints of his short and difficult life, Rudy was astonishingly productive.*

*The photographs depict a middle-class lifestyle Rudy never knew.*

would disappear into the black hole of his studio.

Rudy had a particular dream of photographing black people in Europe. His interest grew out of an army stint in Germany in the early 1960s. The prospect of returning to Europe seemed remote until he learned about a locally sponsored photography contest, the grand prize for which was a trip to the Continent. Only one entry per person was allowed, but Rudy, ever the conniver, entered a second picture under an assumed name. His alias won, and he managed to talk his way into the prize. Though the trip was brief, Rudy came back with a number of fine pictures. He showed them to Gaither, who wrote a grant proposal so that Rudy might make another trip. The proposal was submitted to the Massachusetts Council for the Arts and Humanities, which offered to fund the project—but only on a reimbursement basis. Rudy still had to come up with the cash up front. So he convinced the curator of the Addison Gallery at Phillips Academy in Andover to loan him $15,000, which was deemed adequate for six more weeks of work. Rudy made the money last six months.

Before he left, Rudy described his plan to me. He intended to photograph European blacks in all walks of life. The pictures, some of which you see on these pages, constitute an August Sander-esque catalog. The subjects range from a prisoner in London's Wormwood Scrubs penitentiary to the director general of UNESCO in Paris. The pictures show black doctors and lawyers, black historians and civil rights activists, and the youngest chief inspector of Scotland Yard. They show an "undocumented" African in Frankfurt and an expatriate American black. They show families, and the "brown babies" of American GIs and German women. By and large the photographs depict a black world whose well-appointed rooms suggest a middle-class lifestyle. Anyone who knew Rudy can imagine just how he wended his way through the European black community. "I found the people that I photographed by word of mouth, referrals, meeting them on the street, whatever," he said. Gaither calls it "bogarting and cajoling."

He may have been driven by more than his usual artistic determination. His health had been deteriorating, and before he left on his second trip he was diagnosed as having cancer. Upon returning, Rudy immersed himself in preparations for a show of his work at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists. Gaither says the work seemed to slow the progress of the disease. But Rudy tired easily. Nonetheless, he managed to print almost 125 images for the exhibition.

The show opened in December of 1987. Afterward, without work to keep him motivated, Rudy became depressed. Two weeks after the show's opening, Barry Gaither got a call from Boston City Hospital, where Rudy had been admitted, and he went to visit. It was the last time he would see his friend. "He was very different," Gaither remembers. "It was as if he'd decided that enough was enough. He didn't have the combativeness that was so much his central trait."

Because he lacked health insurance, Rudy had been getting a minimum of treatment. He was released from the hospital—in spite of the protestations of Gaither, who said he was simply too weak to be on his own. Within a week, Rudy was dead.

I'd moved away from Boston before Rudy's final illness. It's still hard for me to imagine him anything but vigorous, ready to move on to another project or with good humor hustle another job. I don't know whether he felt he had completed his project, nor to what measure he fulfilled the dream that photography represented for him. But I do know that within the constraints of his short life, Rudy was astonishingly productive. He struggled to transcend his social and personal limitations, but ultimately, he was philosophical about his accomplishments. "Being black and not necessarily successful," he said in the interview for his long-awaited exhibition, "I don't think in terms of what I want to do; I think in terms of what my experiences will allow me to accomplish." ■