

KEITH DE LELLIS  
GALLERY

FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

I first met with Beuford Smith in the early 2010s. At that meeting in his Brooklyn Heights Victorian townhouse, I bought his pictures liberally; he was a natural-born artist/photographer with an eye that made his photographs a pleasure to look at. You could say without question that he was fluent in the language of photography. It's unlikely Beuford was ever without his camera, his most potent means of communication. Photography was his métier, and he served a multitude of roles within it: group organizer, curator, publisher, educator, editor, and one-man picture agency, and he excelled at all of them. His practice seemed limitless, mining the depths of reality and truth while equally adept at abstract-figural photography, which, in my opinion, is some of his best work. His most inspired and original pictures are filled with mystery and joy, and are a perfect counterpoint to his decisive moments taken on the streets of Brooklyn, Harlem, Coney Island, Times Square, and wherever his inner-city wanderings took him.

On April 4, 1968, the unimaginable collided with the seemingly inevitable when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. One can imagine a young Beuford Smith, an African American who was part of the Great Migration to the North, struck by the history and emotions of the moment. He grabbed his camera and set out for the streets of Harlem to memorialize and process the profound sadness he was experiencing by capturing the sights, sounds, and electric energy in the air on that sad day. The resulting set of 9 humble yet powerful images that Beuford chose to represent that day in American history stands as the only cohesive set of photographs produced by an African American photographer of a community and country on the first day of mourning for the great civil rights leader.

Beuford was, for me, a central figure in a larger project to acquire and exhibit work by the underappreciated African American photography community, active beginning in the 1960s in local New York neighborhoods and across America and beyond. Beuford was central to this movement, a kind of lynchpin crucial for such an undertaking. His role in organizing the black photography collective Kamoinge and publishing the Black Photographers Annual positioned him as someone of immense importance to me to facilitate this endeavor. Discovering the Annual was a revelation for me and one of Beuford's greatest contributions to the history and culture of African American Art Photography in the 20th century.

Some of my first exhibitions of African American artists included, in addition to Beuford, the work of Anthony Barboza, Mikki Ferrill, Shawn Walker, Chester Higgins Jr., Leroy Henderson, Chuck Stewart, and Al Smith. We later exhibited works by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Coreen Simpson, Ozier Muhammad, and Ming Smith. Museums were eager to acquire works by these artists, including the National Gallery of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Art Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Carnegie Museum of Art and others too numerous to mention.

Beuford Smith was easy to be friends with; he had a winning personality and was a loyal and thoughtful partner in the exhibitions we presented. He was generous with his knowledge and contacts, happy to assist in any way to promote his colleagues and fellow artists. The timing of expanding the galleries program to include minority artists that had been somewhat marginalized and were now fresh to the market was fortuitous. Meeting all these wonderful and gifted visionaries was a gift in itself, and I will always be grateful to Beuford for enabling me to do so.

-Keith de Lellis, January 2026