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# The Many Faces of Cy DeCosse: A Retrospective Exhibition

**Minneapolis, MN—June 1, 2019**—The Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD) is pleased to present the retrospective exhibition *The Many Faces of Cy DeCosse*, which traces the highly successful advertising, publishing, and photography career of Cyrille “Cy” DeCosse '52. His numerous creative enterprises, which have evolved over more than six decades, demonstrate a keen talent for recognizing significant technological and cultural shifts at the intersection of art, design, and media.

## **The Many Faces of Cy DeCosse: A Retrospective Exhibition**

July 26 – September 22, 2019

### **Opening reception**

Friday, July 26, 6:00–9:00 p.m.

### **Artist Discussion with Weisman Art Museum Director and Chief Curator Lyndel King**

Thursday, September 12, 1:00 p.m., Auditorium 150

Born in North Dakota in 1929 and raised in Minnesota, DeCosse graduated from the Minneapolis School of Art (later renamed the Minneapolis College of Art and Design) and began his first job as a junior art director in the 1950s as photography was replacing illustration and becoming the language of advertising. To better understand photography, DeCosse bought his first camera, turned the coal cellar in his basement into a darkroom, and began photographing everything around him. In 1954 he won a Fulbright scholarship to help set up an advertising program at the Istituto d'Arte di Porta Romana in Florence. There, in addition to teaching advertising, he studied with Renzo Maggini, a gifted teacher who provided DeCosse's only formal photographic instruction.

Returning to Minnesota, DeCosse resumed his advertising career at Campbell-Mithun, where he produced award-winning work for fourteen years. DeCosse formed his own firm in 1969, ideating and creating package design, print advertisements, and television commercials for such clients as General Mills, Proctor & Gamble, Heublein, and Conagra. DeCosse's unique philosophical approach to food photography became a sought-after expertise by companies, including photographing for cookbooks, which then expanded into book publishing. Beginning in 1978, Cy DeCosse Incorporated specialized in highly photographic “how-to” books on microwave cooking, Singer sewing, Black & Decker home repair, hunting and fishing, and many others. At its height, the firm grew to more than 200 employees and saw its books printed in seventeen different languages and sold in fifty-four countries around the world.

With the sale of the company in 1994, DeCosse had time to rededicate himself to photography, finding new potential in older methods of photographic printing such as platinum, photogravure, and gum dichromate. DeCosse had already begun exploring the process of platinum printing and spent two years experimenting and perfecting this alternative technique. Keith Taylor, an accomplished photographer and platinum printer from London, joined the studio in 1996 and in 2001 the two of them began the revival of the gum dichromate technique, a process that produces a color print of extraordinary depth and richness. Given the highly painterly look of these one-of-a-kind prints, it is not surprising that DeCosse, who started out a painter, worked in watercolor, and had hand-painted the backdrops for many of his close-up



*Queen of the Night*, 1998, platinum print

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still life photographs, was emboldened to teach himself the little-utilized painting technique of egg tempera. This newest creative undertaking began in 2017, and DeCosse, now approaching age ninety, is working to perfect it, teaching himself along the way.

**ABOUT THE EXHIBITION**

Over a hundred objects assembled for this exhibition chart the artistic and entrepreneurial ambitions and achievements of Cy DeCosse while providing unique insights into historical shifts in the overlapping fields of advertising, marketing, book publishing, and photography from the 1950s to the present. The exhibition includes examples of print advertisements, storyboards, package designs, and television commercials from DeCosse's earliest ad agency years through the founding of Cy DeCosse, Inc. The company's shift in focus to book publishing is represented by examples of their popular book series, which were sold as subscription books, a growing sales model in the 1970s and 80s. Photographs, awards, and even a check from Jimmy and Rosalind Carter for the purchase of one the first microwave cook books on the market attest to the phenomenal success of the company. Visitors to the show can also learn the story behind the company logo—an owl—and the company slogan *Non paga dormire*—"It doesn't pay to sleep."

DeCosse's accomplishments as a fine art photographer occupy the largest footprint of the exhibition. His love of working up-close and intimately, which suited his art directing so well for decades, developed in tandem with his philosophy on photography. Whether it be the platinum prints featured in his earliest exhibition *Images of Florence* (1993), his innovative *Off the Wall* series (1998), the sensuous and chromatic fruit and flower still lifes (2002–2008), or his celebrated portfolio and ongoing series *The Midnight Garden* (2012–present), DeCosse has dedicated himself to finding the "hidden life in everyday objects" with superlative skill and care. The difficult, multiple steps required to produce these platinum-palladium, three-color gum dichromate, and polymer photogravure prints defy the quick, instant gratification of standard digital photography. And at the same time, the fruits, flowers, garden gates, and other objects convey a sense of timelessness—photographed without specificity in terms of time and place. They exist outside of the contemporary moment, which adds to their uniqueness and beauty.

The exhibition culminates with examples of DeCosse's luminous egg tempera paintings and a selection of his cartoons and caricatures, another talent much in evidence in his early advertising work, such as his hilarious *Mr. Bubbles* and *Malt-o-Meal* commercials. This playful side of DeCosse is just one more "face" of an artist who continues to make the ordinary, extraordinary.

**ABOUT THE MINNEAPOLIS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN**

Recognized nationally and internationally for its innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to visual arts education, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design is home to more than 700 students and offers professional certificates, bachelor of fine arts and bachelor of science degrees, and graduate degrees. The campus is located just south of downtown Minneapolis and is composed of eight buildings and three acres of lawn and gardens. And college facilities contain the latest in technology, with multiple studios and labs open 24 hours a day.

Founded in 1886, MCAD was one of the first colleges to offer the BFA degree. The college has earned the highest accreditation possible and has the highest four-year graduation rate of all Midwestern visual arts colleges. And the college was named a "Best Midwestern College" for six consecutive years by the Princeton Review and selected by *I.D.* magazine as one of the nation's top colleges for design education.

**MCAD GALLERY HOURS:**

Monday – Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.  
Saturday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.  
Sunday, noon to 5:00 p.m.

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“Gobbles Up Dirt,” hand drawn cell for Gold Seal Glass Wax Spray television commercial, 1965, magic marker and paint on plastic (the 60-second advertisement won a Clio award that year)



“Mr. Bubble,” package design for Gold Seal Company, 1961



“Munchums,” package design and newspaper ad for Pillsbury, 1966



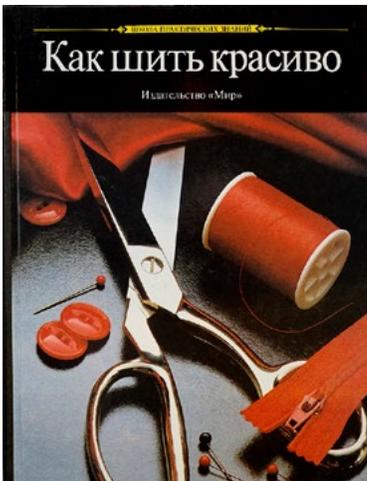
Cy DeCosse photographing Pringles for marketing campaign, c. 1969–1994



Singer sewing book, translated into Russian, 1990



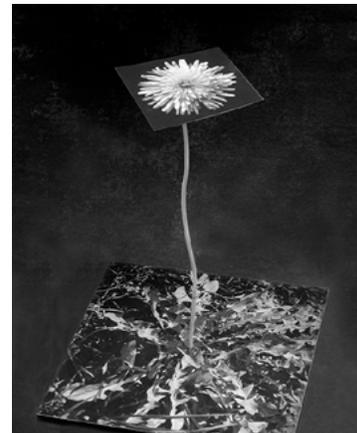
Cy DeCosse Incorporated, brochure highlighting published books, 1978–1994



Singer sewing book, translated into Russian, 1990



DeCosse, *Tuscan Lemons*, 1995, platinum print



*Dandelion*, from the series *Off the Wall*, 1998, platinum print

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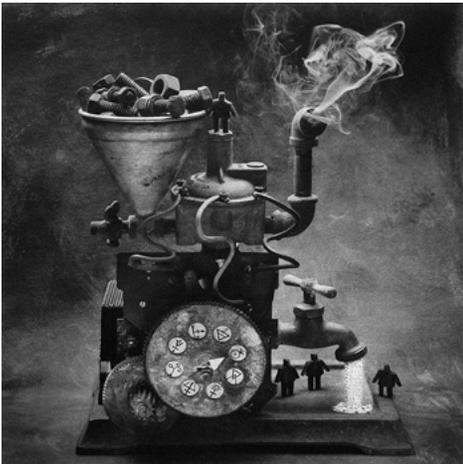
For high resolution images contact Ann Benrud at [abenrud@mcad.edu](mailto:abenrud@mcad.edu)



*Pear Triptych III*, 2004, gum dichromate print, 14 x 21 in.



*The Magician*, egg tempera, 2017–2019, Luis Fitch, 2015 Fellow



*Alchemist Machine*, 2007, photogravure

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