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DIFFERENT VIEWS AROUND THE WORLD

THOMAS ROMA IN NEW YORK

By Eleonora Milner October 16, 2015

Thomas Roma has taught photography since 1983 at Yale, Fordham, Cooper Union, and The School of Visual Arts. In 1996, he became the founding Director of the Photography Program at Columbia University School of the Arts where he is a Professor of Art. Besides the experience at Columbia University, Roma is a brilliant raconteur and a fascinating philosopher of photography, a “Walt Whitman of our times”.



He is a two-time recipient of Guggenheim Fellowships (1982 and 1991) and received a New York State Council for the Arts Fellowship in 1973. His work is in numerous collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal.

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In the Vale of Cashmere is the latest project in Roma's continuing documentation of local cultures in Brooklyn, including African-American, Latino, Jewish, and Italian communities and institutions. Roma selects every project based on a profound personal connection with his subjects.



The exhibition will present 75 black and white portraits and landscapes photographed in a secluded section of Prospect Park where black gay men cruise for sexual partners.

The project was created as a memorial to Carl Spinella, one of Roma's closest friends, who died in Tom's arms of AIDS in 1992. Roma first met Spinella in 1974; a year later they were roommates living on Dean Street in Brooklyn. Spinella had been instrumental in bringing Roma to his native Sicily in 1978 so that Roma could discover his ancestral roots. (These images were later published as the book *Sicilian Passage*). Their bond was so close that Tom often would drive Spinella to the Vale of Cashmere and sometimes pick him up at the drop-off site, an act of faith in a time before cell phones, when who knows what could happen in the woods. It was to these woods that Roma returned alone. In 2008,

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after years of wandering the Vale camera-less, Roma decided to bring his camera to the Vale. Over the course of two years of weekly visits, he approached the men there, introducing himself and explaining why he was taking pictures. Nine out of ten times Roma's request to make a portrait was declined; it was from that tenth ask that these pictures come. The book, that will be published by powerHouse Books in conjunction with the exhibition, is accompanied by an essay by G. Winston James, a Jamaican-born poet, short fiction writer, essayist and editor, himself a frequenter of the Vale. Roma's work brings us into a secret world, giving us the opportunity to consider the individual with sensitivity and respect while also engaging in a larger discussion of race, gender, sexuality, and class in an increasingly gentrified New York. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Director of African American Research at Harvard University, has said of Roma's work: "These brilliant photographs, capturing the dialectic between desire and disappointment, anxiety and comfort, ultimately remind us of our own continuous rites of passage as human beings. Roma's photographs are truly saving graces."

