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CRAVE Profile | Thomas Roma: In the Vale of
Cashmere

By Miss Rosen October 21, 2015



With *In the Vale of Cashmere*, Thomas Roma brings us into a little known Eden, one that has been quietly thriving for decades in the New York underground. The Vale of Cashmere is a secluded section of Prospect Park where black gay men cruise for sexual partners. Roma's portraits of men set in an uncanny urban wooded landscape carry a history of New York and Brooklyn that predates and parallels the gay rights and civil rights movements.

A bard of Brooklyn, Roma is a poet-photographer who has been making profound images of the people of his native city since 1969. The founder and director of the photography program at Columbia, Roma works in a studio which he hand built in his Prospect Park

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South home, overseeing all aspects of production, from the development of the photographs to the design of his books.

In the Vale of Cashmere (powerHouse Books), Roma's fourteenth monograph, will release to time with his inaugural exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York, from October 29–December 19, 2015. This is Roma's first major New York exhibition of new photographs since his acclaimed solo exhibition Come Sunday at the Museum of Modern Art in 1996.

In the Vale of Cashmere 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,



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when who knows what could happen in the woods.

It was to these woods that Roma returned alone. In 2008, 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.



Roma observes, "The Vale is a place that Carl would go, but knowing that didn't make me look for it. I knew it existed, but I didn't think to photograph it until I stumbled upon something. Once I saw it—I saw what Carl saw, where men are standing, waiting, walking, encountering each other. That's what it was for me. I give people an opportunity to be part of the thing I am interested in. I always tell the truth, exactly who I am, what I am doing, want what I want from them."

Roma, who builds his own cameras, set himself up in the open, making himself highly visible in what is otherwise a discreet location. He observes, "I am seen often before I see anyone. I'm standing there with a rather large camera on a tripod. Often I would see

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someone two or three times as they were walking around. I was easy to avoid. Many times people were watching me as I photographed.”

A few of the men googled Roma right then and there, on their phones, checking his credentials and looking at his work. The most common question Roma heard was, “Why do you want to take my picture?” to which Roma answered, “Because you’re beautiful. Have you looked at yourself lately?”

Roma acknowledges being interested in men in an unapologetic way. He reveals, “These pictures look the way they do because that’s what those men wanted me to see. We were looking right at each other. The briefest encounter was twenty minutes. I explained what I was doing. They knew they would have to stand still because it was a long exposure. I know what went into taking the pictures and making them happen. People respond to honesty, even if it’s brutal. It makes you face the truth, maybe about yourself.”

In the Vale of Cashmere is a series of moments frozen, of comings and goings otherwise unknown, of quiet passions and personal drives that compel us to engage in the world. Roma observes, “You need a reason to get out of bed in them morning. I think making a connection is a reason to do that.” Indeed, there is an intensity and a passion that stirs below the surface. Still waters run deep in the work of Thomas Roma.