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Thomas Roma's Beautiful Photos of a
Brooklyn Gay Cruising Ground

By Matthew Leifheit October 29, 2015



Despite having had exhibitions at both the Museum of Modern Art and the International Center of Photography and being the founding Director of Columbia University's photography program, Thomas Roma has never had a solo exhibition in a gallery in New York. That will change tonight, with the opening of Steven Kasher Gallery's *In the Vale of Cashmere*, a show of black-and-white pictures taken in an area of Prospect Park called the Vale of Cashmere between 2008 and 2011. The area of the park is secluded, most easily accessible through a hole in a fence, and it's known in Brooklyn as a cruising ground for gay men.

Built as a playground for society children in the late 19th century, the Vale has been neglected, and is overgrown with foliage and the kind of giant, mutant weeds that can

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only grow from urban soil. Although a group is raising money to renovate the Vale, it has survived much of the constant cycle of renewal in New York unscathed, so much so that wandering into it might give anyone the cinematic feeling of stepping back in time. This naturally anachronistic quality, amplified by black-and-white photography and the dappled light that comes through the leaves just before the sun sets, play into the still, silent gravity of Roma's photographs.

"These pictures are about a sort of transience," Roma told me over hot tea that smelled like smoke at the house where he and his wife Anna raised their son Giancarlo, located in an area of Brooklyn between the park and Greenwood Cemetery. "We know that light. You know that directional light is going to be gone. You know it because you're alive, you've been in the world, not because you're a photographer."

With his family at the table, we talked about the light, we talked about photography, we talked about doing things that you're not good at in order to grow as an artist and as a human being. We talked about dutifully going into the park three to four days a week, making these pictures for over three years, about making yourself vulnerable to other people as an act of love. At one point, he recounted the most beautiful story of photographing a man in the Vale as night began to set in. ("I know a place where there's still a little light," the man told him. "Come with me.")

But we also talked about the highly political nature of the subject matter, and what it means for a seemingly heterosexual, white artist to make this kind of work in 2015. These are mostly the parts of the conversation I have included here, because I don't think anyone will deny that the Vale of Cashmere's portraits are gorgeous and its landscapes lyrical. I do think people might question Thomas Roma's motivations, though, or wonder if he should be the person to take these pictures. The key, in my estimation, is that his subjects look powerful.

He began by telling me about his process.

Thomas Roma: I thought it would take a few months maybe, but it was three and a half years. I maybe only photographed six or seven people in the first couple of months. I was mostly doing landscapes. It never got easier. I was there all the time, I was someone that was seen.

I'm trying to be part of a performance. I'm performing. I'm taking the picture. I'm not the only one in the performance. If there's a building, I most likely didn't build it. I didn't choose the wardrobe for the people in the picture, whether they're walking down the street or in the Vale of Cashmere. I want to be affected by all of it, as a photographer. Not as a citizen or a human being, not as a good person—I want to be a photographer,

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and I want to make decisions while I'm there as a photographer. The exposures for all the portraits are between one and six seconds in the Vale. It was only the second time I used a tripod in all the years, but I wanted the tripod because it was part of my costume. I wanted to be seen not as someone lurking who could turn quickly and take a picture, but someone who is standing behind a camera. I have a camera in front of me, I'd walk along, fold the legs, put it over my shoulder, walk along, open it up, take another picture of a tree, or a scene. Because mostly what I did was make landscapes. I'm not opposed to taking bad pictures, even if I know ahead of time it will be bad, just to hear the sound of the shutter. 'Cause it's maddening not to take a picture.



It does seem like a place where it would be hard to get people to agree to have their picture taken. It seems like seclusion would be a major reason for going there.

What you're saying is logical, and I'm not sure logic has anything to do with it. Let's put it this way—why are people going there? We could make a list. But let's start with number one on the list: People are going there because they want to meet someone. A boring way of saying it would be, they want to meet someone like-minded. But they're looking for affection, for affirmation. It's about a need in their life. That's the reason they go

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there. And to the extent that I have anything to do with that in my role as an old white photographer standing there with my camera on a tripod, if someone can see that I'm part of that number-one reason, there might be a possibility where it would make sense. They're not going there to be secluded, you could lock yourself up in a closet and be secluded. You could hide out in a crowd. People are not going there to hide, they're going there to meet. So, would you be surprised to go there and meet me? I'm sure surprise was part of the element. But many of the people that I ended up photographing saw me from far away, looped around, and finally decided it was OK to walk right by me, if I'm taking pictures of a tree or something. And I talk to people.



Why did you start going there with a camera in the first place? It was while your son Giancarlo was at baseball practice?

Well, the long history is, in 1974 I lived in a furnished room on Dean Street in Brooklyn. And the other men in this building that was cooperatively owned, rented out the furnished room to me. And the rest of the men in this building were gay men. And immediately I was immersed in that culture. They were all my friends, but one of them, he's the one who took me to Sicily in the first place, his name is Carl Spinella—Italian-

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American guy, a bit older—he and I were very very very close. He and I would go to this spot. He didn't have a car, so he would get me to drive him and drop him off near one of the holes in the fence on the Flatbush Avenue extension, and sometimes even pick him up. He would bring guys he met there home. So that's the story how I first knew about it, but from the outside.

And then later, during Giancarlo's practices in the park, this would be 1997–98, I would take walks, and I'd walk through the Vale with a camera on my shoulder, and in some point in the early 2000s I decided I should do something because I kept going back, even without a camera. I kept thinking of Carl, and the Carl in Giancarlo is because of Carl Spinella. The book is dedicated to him. [Spinella died of AIDS in Tom's arms in 1992].

Giancarlo, you went along sometimes?

Giancarlo Roma: Yeah, I mean, this was interesting to me. I went three times, and remember each one very vividly.

This is while you were an African-American Studies major at Columbia?

Yeah, and my concentration within the major was black masculinity. The idea of the down-low, male sexuality and representation were very central to all the courses. So it was, you know, very real to not just read about it but see it in action.

Thomas: Look, no one cares about intentions. Intentions are just bullshit. The thing you produce is the measure of what your intentions are, you're supposed to be looking at what you're doing. I want to be responsible. It goes hand in hand that if I want a response from the viewer, I could photograph lamp poles, or... there are things that have absolutely no controversy attached to them.

At this point in time, it would be hard to think of something more potentially controversial than this to make, right? I mean, issues of race, gender, and sexual identity, power dynamics... This is a very charged thing to have made.

I had to give myself permission. I had wanted to be pre-approved to be worthy of being loved. I think people are going there to find love, that's what I think. That's what it's about. I don't think people are pushed to a margin, I don't think this is a last resort, the people that are there. If I was there it's because I wanted to be there. Did everyone want me there? No, of course not. One time a guy yelled at me, Why would I want my picture taken? and blah blah blah. And clearly I'd triggered something. But it was impossible for me to be frightened of him, because I don't believe he wanted to hurt me, I think he just wanted me to move away from him, so I did.

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Giancarlo: In my experience, the people who said yes were reacting from the same place, they just had a different reaction. They wanted to bare themselves. And in this place, and again this is my reading of it, they were really self-actualized, and they were a version of themselves that they couldn't be anywhere else or most other places. When they said no it was because they didn't want to share that with a person, and when they said yes they were so grateful that someone had maybe picked up about that fact about them and they got to bare it in their body language or something. But whatever their reaction was it came from the same place.



Thomas: I don't see the point to dwell on the obvious. No means no. But what you could dwell on is what we have in front of is, which is the yes. Because if no means no, yes means yes! And if you look at these pictures, you don't have to be a photographer to know that these people are aware they're being photographed. There's no flash, what you see pretty much translates into the collaboration that existed. So it's only charged externally to my effort. I don't feel I was doing anything controversial, because I was out and exposed, stating honestly to whoever would listen what I wanted. You should understand, as a photographer, some of the photographs are the result of talking for 45 minutes about Brooklyn, or family, jobs, everything else. At no point does anyone think

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I'm there for one day and not coming back. I told everyone I'd be there in the paths, if anyone ever had second thoughts, I'm there.

Did anyone ever come back and regret having posed for a portrait?

No no no.

How many pictures are in the book?

Anna knows this.

Anna Roma: Seventy-five portraits, seventy-eight landscapes.

What was your experience going along to photograph, Anna?

I didn't go along. I realized that it didn't make sense for me to come.

Giancarlo: There's no women!

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Anna: it was just the wrong energy. At this point in our relationship and our marriage, I had started to take it for granted that I was with him when he was photographing. So I kinda felt a little resentful at first, because he was there and I didn't get to see. When he'd come home I'd ask him for the full report. What did this guy look like, what was he wearing? Did it look like I was picturing it?

Giancarlo: Because even going is cinematic. That's why I remember it so vividly—each time going is like a story.

Anna: You know what though? I just made a connection. A big part of our courtship was in Sicily, because he was still photographing in Sicily at that time. I remember you used to make me stay in the car when you were photographing the shepherds. You remember that? They were like these beautiful young men out in the landscape.

Thomas: Well that was for a different reason—those guys were paying way too much attention to you.

Anna: Yeah, but it was a similar kind of reason.

Giancarlo: It changes the energy, I can understand that.

Thomas: You get to be alone in nature with a man, talk talk talk. You don't see the talking in the pictures, but you see the effect of the talking. When people are talking about their lives, their body language changes. Photography, I always say, the great medium of body language.

Look, you know, none of the reasons for anything we do, any piece of writing or any photo book, makes it better. The hope is it succeeds or fails to find an audience, based on what's in the book. I don't read a book constantly thinking about the author. Books I love I constantly relate to on my own. I think of myself, they're part of my life. Same thing when you look at a film—it becomes part of your cultural, psychological, political experience. You go out in the world after seeing a certain film, you see the world a little differently. Art is supposed to raise your consciousness, if only temporarily.

I'm trying to be invisible. You look at a photograph, you read a novel, you think about the author, until the author gives you permission to forget about them because they've written so well that the novelist disappears. I only want to disappear in those terms.

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In the Vale of Cashmere will be on view at Steven Kasher Gallery in NYC through December 19. A book of the work is available for preorder from powerHouse Books.

