

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Unleashing Dogs' Inner Spirits in Photographs of Their Shadows

Thomas Roma's shadow portraits of dogs touch on something deeper than just the cuteness of frolicking pets.

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Over the past two years, photographer Thomas Roma spent countless mornings running around Dyker Beach Dog Run in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, holding an eight-foot-long pole attached to a camera. This contraption, which he'd rigged using supplies from Home Depot, allowed him to photograph the shadows of dogs from a bird's-eye view.

"I looked like some kind of crackpot," Roma told Hyperallergic. "Everyone at the dog park knew me because I was the maniac running around with the big yellow pole, chasing their dogs."

This "crackpot" behavior produced some very expressive photographs: shots of the unleashed dogs' shadows bring to mind cave paintings, noirish Nosferatus, and 19th-century-style silhouette portraiture. Roma cites his former colleague, the artist Kara Walker, who's best known for her cut-paper silhouettes, as "a great inspiration."

The series title, Plato's Dogs, refers to the shadows projected on the walls in the philosopher's "Allegory of the Cave." The project, now a book published by PowerHouse, started as a playful exercise during walks with Tino, a standard poodle "who's more than a dog to me," Roma says. "He's a friend." The photographer was winding down his previous series, In the Vale of Cashmere, which documents Prospect Park's hidden world of gay cruising. After printing the first batch of

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photos of dogs leaping and playing in the dusty run, he found they touched on something deeper than just the cuteness of frolicking pets: some shadow portraits seemed to reveal the dogs' inner wild animals, while others seemed like outlines of their essential spirits.

In Jungian psychology, the shadow is the instinctive, irrational, unconscious aspect of the personality, both "a reservoir for darkness" and "the seat of creativity." That characterization works as a visual metaphor in Plato's Dogs: "Dogs are a creation of humans — bred for herding, sheep-hunting, sitting in our laps — but lurking inside, there there's still this other wild thing," Roma says. "The shadows, being such primitive drawings, make us aware that they're also related to the wolf and the coyote."

Pets and shadows aren't exactly unique photo subjects: everyone on the internet is an amateur pet photographer, and every moody teenager with a camera has taken a picture of a shadow. But part of what's so striking about Plato's Dogs is how, by combining these two exhausted subjects, it makes both seem new again. It's a reminder of the basic visual power that made them become clichéd in the first place.

Roma does also spend plenty of time photographing Tino's physical form, not just his shadow — "There's a satisfaction in looking at an animal," he says — and is a big fan of the internet's pet photography craze — "I think it's the greatest thing the world." If you want to go photograph a shadow and post it on Instagram, he won't be snobby about it. "I like everything about internet photography," he continues.

"I think it's good news for everyone — that people feel this visual language is something they don't have to be shy about. They don't have to have some expert to tell them whether something is good or not."