

A FACE IN THE CROWD:

By Melissa Bellini

"I got into photography by accident," said Thomas Roma, a new addition to CLC's Arts department as an instructor of photography. "I got into a serious car accident and became a photographer." Roma spoke literally about his career; a car accident, in which he fractured his skull, left him seriously ill and convalescent for a long period of time. It was during this time that Roma cultivated an interest in the art of photography.

In 1967, Roma was working as a trading clerk on the floor of the American Stock Exchange on Wall Street, when one day he got into a car accident which would change his life forever. "Since I had the fractured skull and a blood clot that they could not operate on, all I could do was wait and see if I would be o.k. When they let me out of the hospital I was told not to move around too much, it was winter and very slippery outside. I sat home and did nothing."

Roma's older brother changed his recuperation into a self-tutorial in photography with one visit to him with a 35mm camera. "I asked him if he could get me a camera too," said Roma, "and sure enough, he came back the next week with the very same camera and he sold it to me for \$35." As soon as he was allowed out of his house, Roma began his research of the art. "My mom would drive me to the library, I read every single word I could about photography and I read all kinds of magazines."

Ironically enough, the camera Roma had bought from his brother, his source of inspiration, turned out to be broken. "Years later, when I asked my brother about it he said, 'I didn't think you were going to make it,'" said Roma. He is able to laugh about it now, "Very early on I got involved in photography by accident and very early on I realized that people weren't going to have much faith—funny don't you think?"

From his reading, Roma found a few photographers he admired, "but some of them were from a very long time ago, so it was very difficult to emulate them because the subject matter was gone." It was not until Roma spotted some reviews of Walker Evans' book entitled, *The Animals*, that he enrolled in a photography school. "I went there for about four weeks of a six month course—it was stupid," Roma remarked.

From there Roma went to the Educational Alliance and things started to unfold, "everyone worked and worked very hard and that was exciting; one day in 1971 I walked into work (on Wall Street) and I didn't want to do it anymore...I decided to go off on my own and become a photographer."

THOMAS ROMA



Photos by Luis Costa

He began as a darkroom technician at Pratt Institute, which he soon quit when he received a New York State Council CAPS Grant in order to dedicate himself to taking pictures.

Roma's love of photography has led him in many directions, "basically, you have to love what you're doing and find ways to support that thing, you have to find ways to keep doing it." That's just what Roma did. He used the money from his grant to manufacture his own camera; Roma was awarded another grant for the pictures he had taken with the camera. "Then every one wanted a camera," said Roma, and in 1974 he founded "Siciliano Camera Works," in which he designed and manufactured limited edition professional 6x9 cm cameras.

Roma, a self-taught artist, bases the majority of his work on things he desires. It is for

this reason that his work concentrates on his childhood neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and the countryside of Sicily. In 1982, Roma was awarded the John Simon Memorial Foundation Fellowship and with that he made numerous trips to Sicily.

"My mom's family is from Sicily," said Roma, "but that's not exactly why I go there; it's not like roots or anything. It's more like trying to find another place in the world to photograph that would be different and accessible."

Roma has been influenced by religious art, primarily in painting. "One of the reasons I go to Sicily is because it's close to some idea I have of a Biblical landscape," Roma stated. "I really wanted to go to the Holy Land. I have a book called *The Earthly Footsteps of the Man from*

Galilee and thought that would be great," Roma continued, "but of all reports I have, Israel and the surrounding area is either modern, desert or ruins. I'm not interested in ruins. I'm interested in 'now', ultra modern doesn't interest me either."

For Roma, it's all about fantasies and things close to the heart. "I photograph things I desire, so one of the reasons to be an artist is to be constantly with those things you most desire. Maybe it's a very romantic idea, but it's been sustaining for me."

His limited edition book, *Brooklyn Gardens*, done in 1980, is comprised of black and white photographs of faces of Brooklyn homes and yards arranged from Spring to Fall. This work is yet another example of Roma's philosophy of staying close to things dear, "These pictures of one and two family homes are places that I really did desire, but art fails as therapy. Since I always lived with my mother in apartments—we moved thirteen times since I was born—we never had a home. So these are pictures of things that are wonderful to me."

Roma is motivated to photograph in Sicily because his family "perpetuated this myth of being Sicilian people living in America. Sicily is a place where I can photograph shepherds, a place where I can find easy Christian symbols."

Another of Roma's works, *Sirius Studies*, named after the dog star, is just that—a limited edition book containing twenty one pictures of dogs.

Roma has taught photography in numerous schools including Yale School of Art, The School of Visual Arts, Pratt Institute and The Adult Education Program at United Cerebral Palsy. His work has been exhibited in New York and Brooklyn as well as at various universities, namely the Museum of Modern Art, the Daniel Wolf Gallery, the Southwest Gallery and the Brooklyn Museum, California State College, Wellesley College and Harvard University.

Roma's most recent exhibition began October 13th in Chicago. It is entitled "Domestic Architecture," which is comprised of 2x3 ft. photographs of facades of buildings in Brooklyn taken over the past fifteen years. These pictures were taken by Roma's personally designed camera.

For anyone who can't make it to Chicago, there will be a display of Roma's work, along with the work of Larry Fink, on the Plaza at CLC. These photographs are taken primarily from Roma's 1987 Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called "New Photography III," which is mostly Sicilian landscapes and domestic family scenes.