

Exhibit looks at joyful church celebrations

The photos of
"Come Sunday"
by Thomas Roma
are at the
Museum of
Modern Art



MICHAEL
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THE ARTS

Every Sunday is as joyful as Easter in "Come Sunday," a show of 87 black and white photographs that opened during Holy Week, coincidentally or not, at the Museum of Modern Art.

To make them, photographer Thomas Roma visited black Christian storefront churches in Brooklyn (150 services in 52 churches). Of course, he could have found comparable material in any African-American urban enclave from Harlem to Los Angeles.

The faithful of "Come Sunday" are praying, preaching, witnessing, singing, weeping and atoning. They're speaking in tongues and "falling out," (the swooning that follows being slain in the spirit).

Neighborhood churches, often billed as "sanctified" or "holiness" churches, are invariably modest. God's house will be a small converted storefront or the ground-floor of an old rowhouse, simply decorated and furnished with a lectern and an upright piano or portable organ. Congregants sit on folding chairs generally but sometimes there may be wooden pews scavenged from some long-gone church.

Depending on the church and the occasion, preachers may be elaborately vested, robed in understatement or attired in streetclothes. The substantial women clad all in white that are found in many of the photographs are matrons. They look after those who become carried away with spiritual fervor. Somehow, they seem immune to the rampant spirituality around them.

The pictures are technically ravishing. But their aesthetic values — composition, clarity, texture and tone — don't assert themselves until after the image itself has registered.

Anyone who cannot fathom the full-bodied spiritual response customary in such churches will find the pictures mystifying.

And cynics will develop alternate explanations for the ecstatic responses of "Come Sunday," explanations that don't take faith into account.

No picture can fully transfer or communicate such an experience. Visual means can only suggest the theatrical aspects of the occasion, the power of the music, the singing, preaching and shouting.

But photographs have one advantage. They can be studied closely and savored.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., who wrote a catalog essay for "Come Sunday," is no longer a regular churchgoer. Today, when he goes "it is to experience a certain ritual regeneration, a spiritual renewal through a cultural symbolic crossroads of the arts and belief, of faith and performance."

But, years ago as a young man, he recalls he made a deal with God and God kept his end of the bargain:

"If He in His infinite goodness would just let my Momma come home from the hospital, I would give my life to Christ. He did, three days or so later; and so did I, for the next two years. I neither smoked nor danced, played cards nor attended movies; I didn't cuss, and Lord knows I didn't lust in my heart ... except when I couldn't help it"



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untitled photos are
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