

Thomas Roma's Neighborhood

by Bret Senft

Come Sunday is an extraordinary exploration of an aspect of American "inwardness" by a distinguished photographer—one of our very best—whose moral sensibility informs his brilliantly suggestive, lyrical and knowing visual narrative.

—Dr. Robert Coles,
Editor, Doubletake magazine
Center for Documentary Studies
at Duke University

It's a spring afternoon in Thomas Roma's household, a narrow three-story home overlooking six lanes of the Prospect Expressway in southern Park Slope, Brooklyn, a neighborhood of small houses and smaller backyards (with weatherbeaten toolsheds, proud but sagging clotheslines). On the dining table: roasted vegetables, mozzarella, semolina bread. In the kitchen is his wife Anna, 33. Playing on the floor is their four-year-old son, Giancarlo. Ready for food, their two large poodles gather at the table's edge.

This has been a busy year for Roma. In his late 40s, the photographer finds himself having his work shown everywhere at once. Three of his long-term projects have just been published as books: *Found in Brooklyn* (a limited retrospective of his Brooklyn images shot from 1973 to 1990), *Sunset Park* (images of teenagers in and around a public pool in a Brooklyn neighborhood) and *Come Sunday* (services at African-American Christian churches, including African and Caribbean congregations, throughout Brooklyn). The last book was accompanied by a ten-week exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art this spring with funding from CameraWorks. Three other books are due in the next three years. And this year, New York's Howard Greenberg Gallery began representing his work.

The fanfare follows more than two decades spent roaming Brooklyn streets, acting as a latter-day Eugene Atget or a working-class Walker Evans. Born in Brooklyn in 1950, Roma says he lived in 17 neighborhoods in the borough before he bought his family's current home in 1977 for \$14,500. Here he dug out a full basement and made a third floor, installing a workshop and darkroom. Clearly, Brooklyn is Roma's terrain. But if you ask him why he has devoted so much of his photographic career close to home, he'll tell you it's less a question of Why Brooklyn? than Why *not* Brooklyn? "I know photographers who get a thrill out of traveling. The truth is, I like to be home. So my question is: What *doesn't* Brooklyn have? All right, we don't have a river, but we have a great waterfront. And almost every significant wave of immigration came to Brooklyn. So I don't have to go far to photograph an Ecuadorian or Haitian or Irishman . . . and it keeps changing. Who knew that five years ago the Nigerians would be coming here, or the Russians



© THOMAS ROMA

An image from *Sunset Park*, one of three books Roma has published this year.

ten years ago? So, things keep changing; there's a lot to do."

Though he admits he has a sentimental attachment to his hometown, he says he has never been interested in documenting the sociology of the place. To explain what he is looking for in documenting Brooklyn, Roma goes back to his earliest inspirations as a fledgling photographer: the work of photographer and MoMA curator John Szarkowski. In 1970, he read Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye*. From that book, he says, "I fell in love with the idea of being a photographer. Maybe without that book I wouldn't have become one." In 1973, he read Szarkowski's *Looking At Photographs* (100 images from MoMA, each accompanied by a few cogent paragraphs from the curator). "It was like an instruction manual. You read it and you knew photographs meant something, in and of themselves." As a result, he says, "In my work, I'm trying to impart meaning from the picture itself, to present an experience for the viewer. A picture can only show you what something looks like photographed, not what something looks like in reality, or what it was in the reality of the moment. It's an abstraction."

Because his mind is on abstraction, he says, "I don't think there's anything I want to say about Brooklyn in my work, just as I don't think there's anything to say about 'church' in [*Come Sunday*]. I believe each picture is discrete—they each mean something. And taken together, they add up to something new. My fear is that someone will look at the pictures and draw a conclusion"—about Brooklyn, or whatever his subject—"and that's just not so. There's no conclusion to be drawn about Brooklyn or the people in Brooklyn from looking at these pictures. They stand on their own, as abstracted images from real life."

Though he did not originally plan to be a photographer, Roma has been involved in photography in some way almost his whole adult life. When he left school after the tenth grade, he started working as a trader on the floor of the American Stock Exchange at age 17. But at 19, a near-fatal car accident led to a long convalescence and he took up photography as a hobby. He returned to Wall Street and took evening photography classes. He quit the Street for good after 18 months, but before he left he had a Nikon and a Leica camera. Soon he was working as a darkroom technician at Pratt Institute, where he had a chance to study the art photography books and technical manuals in the school's library.

He got himself a 5 x 7 camera, but found it too cumbersome. He took the back off an old 6 x 9 press camera, went to the engineering machine shop at Pratt and built his own streamlined, handheld version. He taught a view camera class at Pratt. Meanwhile he spent his free time combing Brooklyn, photographing its yards, houses, street life—always exteriors, in black and white.

These early photographs earned him a \$3,600 New York State grant. He spent time visiting every opening at galleries and museums, meeting people, establishing relationships. He met Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander (whose daughter, Anna, would become Roma's wife) and others. He lived off the grant for a year; then, after receiving numerous requests for his custom-built cameras, he decided to borrow \$5,000 to make his camera-building hobby into a business. Roma assembled the cameras himself in a machine shop. He built 55 cameras, first for friends (Friedlander purchased No. 3), then for other photographers (Larry Fink, Steven Shore, Henry Wessel, Jr.). There were two models: a 6 x 9 and 6 x 7, with interchangeable lenses and viewfinders.

But he went broke. Why? Roma says before he made the camera, he would ask potential customers why they wanted it. "And if I didn't think it was an appropriate usage, I wouldn't sell it to them," he says. "Completely crazy!" He managed to pay back the loan little by little.

He started two other businesses over the years—first a small factory under the Brooklyn Bridge, manufacturing ignition wire sets for foreign cars, then a health food store he opened with his mother—but he always kept photographing, using the flexible hours at the store, for example, to wander Brooklyn with his camera.

Then came his first Guggenheim Fellowship, to photograph in Sicily. His prints from the trip were eventually featured in MoMA's "New Photographers 3" show in 1987.

Roma had first approached MoMA in 1977 and Szarkowski purchased an image for the permanent collection. The museum has since acquired numerous images and Szarkowski

organized the exhibit of "Come Sunday" images.

In 1983, Roma began teaching in earnest, first as a *guest lecturer*, then part-time instructor in the Yale graduate program, then at Cooper Union and the School of Visual Arts. In the late Eighties, he briefly returned to manufacturing cameras out of his backyard machine shop, making 31 cameras of different formats with interchangeable lenses; Gilles Peress, Josef Koudelka, Raghubir Singh have owned and used Roma cameras. More recently, he has been busy designing an all new photography department for the graduate arts school at Columbia University, which has never before had a photo program.

Roma is one of two founding photographers of *Doubletake*, the magazine launched from The Center for Documentary Studies last year. The magazine printed his *Sunset Park* as a work-in-progress in Summer 1995 and his *Come Sunday* images in Winter 1996. W.W. Norton published *Found In Brooklyn* with The Center for Documentary Studies.

Sunset Park, published by the Smithsonian Press in June, part of their series "Photographers at Work," features 36 images from a three-year project begun in 1993 of African-American, white and Latino teenagers at the public pool in the eponymous neighborhood.

He felt the Smithsonian series would prove a good venue for the work, "so I created a mock-up that looked exactly like their books. I xeroxed their graphics, made a cover—all that. So when [producer Connie Sullivan, who packages the series] saw it, what could she say? There it was."

He shot the *Come Sunday* images during the same period. Roma visited services at African-American churches throughout Brooklyn and documented the often day-long spiritual celebrations. But the project began differently, more from sorrow than jubilant ritual: His wife had had three miscarriages and an ectopic pregnancy. Roma: "I was floundering around and thinking about my work and spiritual things. And . . . I pray. And praying is basically asking for something. I thought, 'St. Francis went around begging for stones to build God's church. He did God's work. I thought, 'Well, I'll do something myself.'"

He received a second Guggenheim Fellowship for "God's Work," the original title of the project which was originally intended to document the exteriors of churches in The Borough of Churches. Then Yousef Hawkins, a black teenager, was killed in the predominantly white neighborhood of Bensonhurst. Roma traveled to the largely black neighborhoods of East New York and Bedford-Stuyvesant to photograph the churches there, his peace offering to a divided Brooklyn. "I just realized that, at some point, we have a moral obligation to be one community. And if you don't live your values—what is your life?" When a pastor emerged from one of the churches, Roma explained the project and he was invited in to photograph a Sunday service. "I have to

say, it was a revelation to me. Since I don't use flash, I never *thought* of going to the services." Roma needed an extensive flash unit—so he built one: 45 pounds of batteries, powering a single-unit light tree (two different models, with four or five lights; Roma estimates the hardware alone at \$7,000), the directional lamps casting light evenly across cavernous churches, basement rooms, storefront congregations. The diverse skin tones register clearly: congregants in prayer, singing, praising God in services often lasting six, seven, eight hours.

In the midst of the *Come Sunday* project, Roma developed bacterial pneumonia. Though coughing up blood, "and feeling my own mortality," he missed only one Sunday service—and he returned the following week, feverish and fatigued, against doctor's orders. But at home during his ten-day rest, he pulled "every contact sheet from the first day and I went through them thinking, 'There has to be something of my life here.' But I have to make it small, modest. Not 85 or 100 images." In summer 1993, he sent a mock-up to *Doubletake*, to editor Alex Harris, "and it went like this: I said, 'You know writers. Look at the pictures and see if you can think of anyone who would write about it for a book.' Then I dropped to my knees and prayed to God that [*Doubletake* editor and author] Bob Coles would write the accompanying essay."

Coles did. From his text: "Right off, in the first or introductory photograph, this alert, knowing, keen-eyed instructor puts his cards on the table. He is going to give us a glimpse of a particular world—one that is modest and unpretentious, a world of clotheslines and towels hanging outside in search of the sun . . . the homes, of all shapes and sizes, the streets, the parked cars, the fences, the religious artifacts . . . This poet of the camera, this localist poet, this poet, in [William Carlos] Williams' phrase, 'with bare hands,' walks, stalks his hometown, keeps us resolutely outside those homes, garages, stores, schools and yet, so doing, brings us up close indeed."

Published by MoMA and Abrams, the book features 87 images and no captions. The only text besides Coles' introduction is an accompanying essay by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. There are also dustjacket blurbs from Cornel West and Coles.

"My purpose in all photo books is to make them small enough to hold in your hand," says Roma. "With the MoMA book, the sky was the limit, but we kept making mock-ups and scaling it back. I'm not interested in making coffeetable books. No one makes books of literature where you have to lay it on a coffeetable." He cites the pocket-sized *Sweet Flypaper Of Life*, written by Langston Hughes for Roy DeCarava's images, as "the perfect-sized book. A lot of photographers see their prints big, at 11 x 14, and they want their books to look like that. I'm interested in a book being a book, not a poorer version of a print on the wall." Other precedents cited: Helen Levitt's original *A Way Of Seeing*;

Walker Evans, *American Photographs*; Robert Frank, *The Americans*. "They were accessible, affordable. And that's what I've tried to do with these monographs."

Roma's three future projects in the works include *Island* (working title), featuring images of Sicily, Roma's only other photo locale, with text by Nobel-Prize winning Sicilian poet Salvatore Quasimodo. He is assembling a mock-up for *Coney Island: B, F, And D* (working title), images of riders in and around the elevated trains to Coney Island. "I was interested in doing something on the El trains, the light blasting through the windows," he explains. He is also working on a book of portraits of senior citizens with *Doubletake* photographer Alex Harris and text to be written by Dr. Coles. "They're all pretty much done, with publishers ready to go. It's just a question of finishing them up." *Coney Island* and the book on aging are both due from W.W. Norton/*Doubletake*. *Island* is in negotiation with David R. Godine, Publisher, in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

But the mood in the Roma household—celebratory in light of the concurrent book projects, the new position at Columbia University and the major exhibit—were brutally dimmed when Roma's wife, Anna, seven months pregnant, gave birth prematurely. Roma was in Verona, Italy, overseeing the press run of *Found In Brooklyn*. "I scrambled to get out of there, got home on a Sunday and the baby died Monday—two weeks before the (*Come Sunday*) opening," he said later in a solemn phone interview. He added quietly: "It's been pretty tough around here, but somehow we're trying to move on."

Over coffee with Roma and John Szarkowski at the New York Hilton, down the block from MoMA, the 75-year-old Szarkowski asks, "When was the last time you saw anything on religion?" Looking relaxed in a checked sportscoat and knit tie, his brown felt hat on the table, he answers his question, "It was that creep up in Boston—what was his name? F. Holland Day [who in 1898, cast himself in a portrait series depicting The Seven Last Words of Christ]. But that's what interested me about these photographs—the varieties of human aspiration, human experience, human need." Having written the primers on the meaning of photographs—the images resonating with their own significance, apart from the original context of the event—Szarkowski notes that *Come Sunday* is "about a certain spiritual ambition that doesn't have anything to do with newsworthiness."

"The beauty of these photographs is in their surfaces," he says, "the flesh; real bodies wearing real clothes; where you can see the Formica, the old wood paneling. You have to describe the atmosphere in such detail, the experience of the picture has to be physically seductive, to be good to look at, to determine what it means." Asked whether Providence played a role in the East New York pastor inviting Roma into his church, Szarkowski downs his coffee and looks towards Roma. "Yes," he says and pauses. "But Providence happens to *working* photographers. You have to be out there, doing it." ●