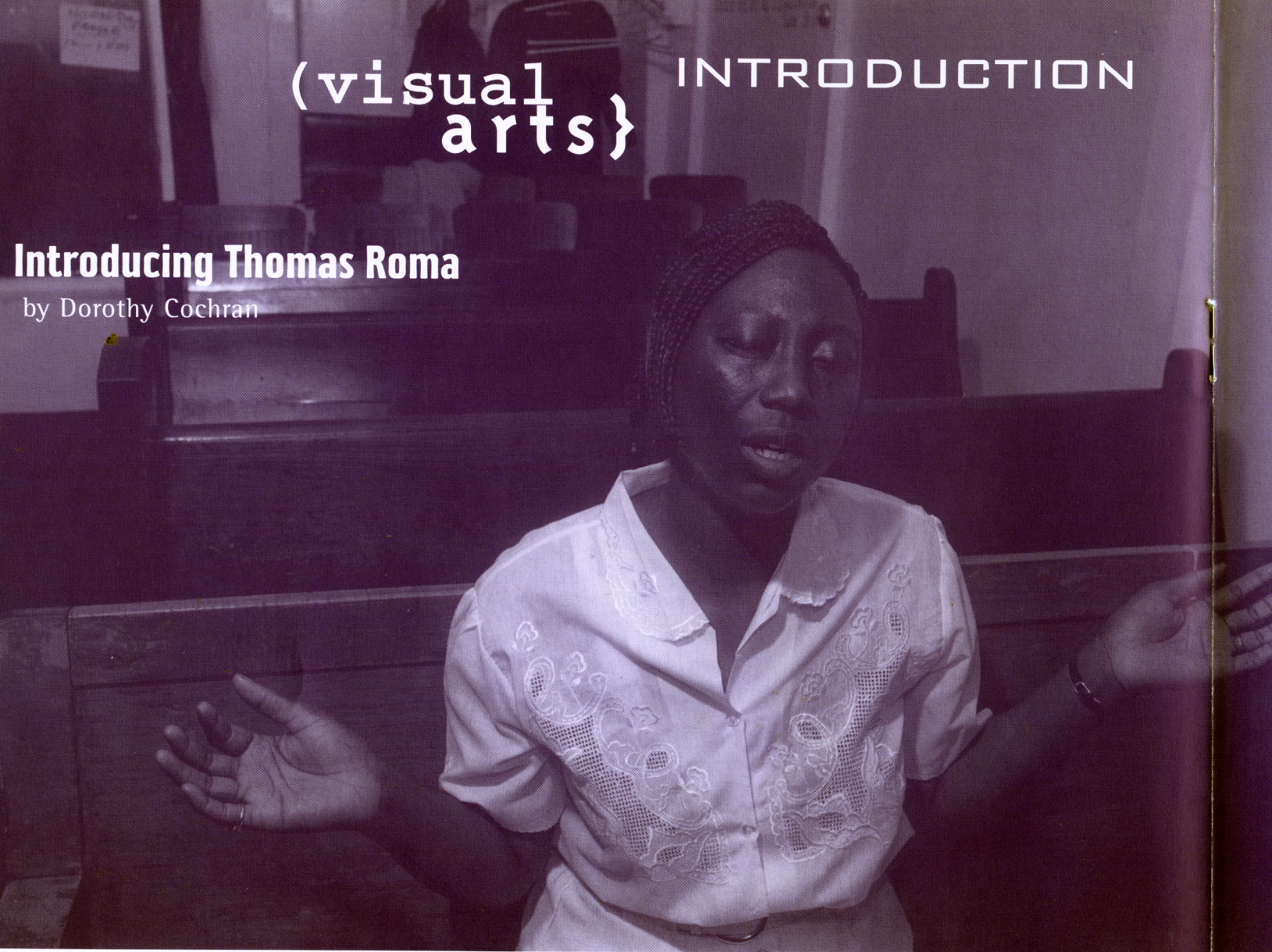


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INTRODUCTION

Introducing Thomas Roma

by Dorothy Cochran



Photograph by Thomas Roma

Entering the gates at 116th Street and Broadway, peering up to the left at Dodge, home of Columbia University's School of the Arts, I see new signage and a new attitude. Making a left through the doors into the basement level, I also observe several new doors and fresh paint. The biggest surprise, however, comes when passing through a set of these double doors to find the quiet hustle and bustle of a professional photography lab, part of the new LeRoy Neiman Center. In a small but welcoming office sits a youngish dark haired man of 47, engaged in intense conversation with a student. I ask where I can find Thomas Roma, the photography professor. With a big smile, an out-reached hand, and refreshing openness, he says, Hi ... I am Thomas Roma.

The metaphor of opening doors is well taken. Behind these heavy metal doors, Columbia's Visual Arts Division is welcoming in a new era of creative expression for its students. Associate Professor of Art Thomas Roma is helping shape that vision both technically and aesthetically and he is well equipped for the challenge.

In 1996 Professor Roma had a major exhibition of 87 black and white photographs at The Museum of Modern Art, organized by John Szarkowski, Director Emeritus of the museum's photography department. The exhibition's title, *Come Sunday* is also the title of the catalogue co-published by Abrams. Holland Cotter wrote in his review in the New York Times that the show was "an extraordinary chronicle of spiritual transport and communal fervor." The story of this series began in January 1990 when Roma began a project of photographing houses of worship in Brooklyn, once called the "City of Churches." While preparing to compose a photo of a former Jewish temple that had been converted to serve a black Christian congregation in the East New York section of Brooklyn, the pastor of the church invited Roma to come inside the following Sunday and photograph the service itself. That changed everything and over the next three and half years he photographed more than one hundred and fifty services in Christian churches throughout Brooklyn. The exhibition at MOMA was selected from this large body of work and will be travelling internationally.

The recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, Roma previously taught at Yale, Fordham, The Cooper Union and the School of Visual Arts. He was ebullient in speaking about his current

program at Columbia. He now teaches Photo I, Photo II, and Digital Documentary Photography, a new course he developed in digital imaging. This technology is paperless and chemical free, he explains, putting images directly on a computer disk which can be manipulated for tone, density, and color with the computer programs instead of developers. Students use digital cameras and are very excited by the possibilities. He is quick to add that there are no technical concerns without aesthetic concerns. Students can learn darkroom techniques in a matter of two to three weeks, then they are ready to develop their artistic concerns; weekly critiques help in that process.

With the phone ringing constantly and the door of his office repeatedly knocked on, I hear a quiet buzz of activity in the inner photolabs as he recounts his passion for "making pictures for people to see" and describes his growing up in Brooklyn as part of a large family. Proudly he tells me that he still lives there with his wife and five year old son. He talks rapidly but clearly of his own work. He's used to being in the moment -- grasping and assessing situations quickly as any experienced photographer would do. He speaks of using a "known visual language which already exists" as his aesthetic guide. He recounts his travels in Italy and his interest in the art of the Renaissance. "I love the art, the gesturing figures, the compositions, there are so many great artists. My work comes out of this tradition." As he speaks, I think of the extraordinary photographs in the series *Come Sunday* and the powerful earlier series, *Found in Brooklyn* as examples of this tradition. The subjects of these photographs are ordinary people captured as they worship, work, and relax. The extraordinary occurs as the viewer engages the quality of light, the composing of figures within the space, and the capturing of time and place.

Professor Roma sees the new facilities as a laboratory for learning and developing new ideas. He is visibly animated by the thought of students with "questioning minds." Speaking of future projects with the students, he talks of developing a collaboration between photography, printmaking, digital media, and explorations of photogravure projects.

Coming to Columbia, setting up a photography program and teaching highly motivated students was one of his dreams when growing up in Brooklyn. This has now become a reality. He is also looking forward to the publication of *Sunset Park*, published in the Smithsonian Photographers at Work series. Three additional books have publication dates in the next two years and *Found in Brooklyn* was published by W.W. Norton last summer.

As he and I part, several students are anxiously waiting to speak to him. Forgetting that he hasn't eaten lunch, he invites them to come into the office, sacrificing his own needs to theirs. As the weighty metal doors close, a glance backward reveals students deeply engaged in developing contact prints, rinsing large images in clear water, totally focused. The exhaust fans can be heard humming as the students consider their developing visions. Photography and Thomas Roma have come to Columbia.