



THOMAS ROMA/The Museum of Modern Art

COME SUNDAY:

An unidentified woman lays hands on a praying member of her church congregation. The photograph is one in a series of pictures by photographer Thomas Roma that were published in book form by The Museum of Modern Art.

Photos portray black churches' spiritual lives

By FLO JOHNSTON
The Herald-Sun

"Come Sunday," an exhibit of photographs by New York photographer Thomas Roma portraying the spiritual lives of black congregations in Brooklyn, N.Y., opens Thursday in the Juanita Kreps Gallery at the Center for Documentary Studies in Lyndhurst House, 1317 W. Pettigrew St.

The opening reception from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. will feature a slide presentation by Roma, who made the photographs between 1991 and 1994 at more than 150 religious services in 52 black churches throughout Brooklyn. Also featured will be gospel music by the choir from Durham's New Bethel Baptist Church.

The traveling exhibit, arranged by The Museum of Modern Art, features 80 black-and-white photographs.

please see **PHOTOS/B3**



THOMAS ROMA/The Museum of Modern Art

PRAYING: A woman lifting her hands in prayerful praise is photographed during a church service.

'COME SUNDAY' EXHIBIT

Opens: Thursday.

Where: Juanita Kreps Gallery at Center for Documentary Studies in Lyndhurst House, 1317 W. Pettigrew St.

Reception: Thursday, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Roma said in a telephone interview this week that he wanted the exhibit to travel so people in the larger community could see the photographs that capture the spiritual passion he found in black churches.

"I did not ask permission to go into any church," said Roma, who noted that the Brooklyn neighborhoods into which he went were as segregated as any neighborhood in America. It was not only unusual to see a white man in one of the churches, but just as unusual to see one in the neighborhoods, he said.

"When the pastor walked in I would be standing there. I would explain what I was doing," Roma said. "I was making myself available to be invited into the church. I visited over 200 churches and 52 invited me in. The others were not sure, or they had to speak to the elders or to others. When I heard that, I didn't think [the place] was right and I thanked them.

"I was doing this by faith and faith alone. And I needed other people to act on faith. I couldn't make any assurances. I came in as a stranger. The people had to have faith."

Part of the reason Roma set this enormous project for himself was his belief that it is possible to make religious pictures of modern times.

"All the religious pictures I had seen in museums were of people who died thousands of years ago, generally white people with robes and long beards. Was

it possible to make religious pictures of modern times? I was on a pilgrimage, not sure of the goodness of the project, but a believer in the goodness of the purpose."

Roma does not think making photos in a worship setting is an invasion of privacy.

"I was not intruding on private moments. Churches are open to the public," he said. "This is happening before the eyes of God. What could be more exposed than that?"

Roma, 47, an Italian-American Brooklyn native, did not originally set out to photograph worship in black churches, but to photograph the architecture of houses of worship in Brooklyn.

"Brooklyn has been called the 'City of Churches,'" he said, "The density of churches here is unimaginable. There are Jewish temples and mosques and some of the most beautiful Eastern Orthodox temples in the world. [The project] was to be a pilgrimage because I was looking for a way to directly address the spiritual through my work."

Ironically, after he'd spent a year and a half on the project he titled "God's Work," it was the words of a black preacher that prompted him to drop his original plan.

"One day a pastor in Brooklyn, which has the largest black community in America, saw me and asked what I was doing. I was photographing a Nigerian Church, housed in an old Orthodox Jewish temple. He just smiled and said,

'You should know better. God's work is not the building, but what's going on inside the church.' It took someone to tell me I was deluding myself," Roma said. "He challenged me and said to come to the service and see what God's work really is.

"It is life-changing for anyone to immerse himself week after week in pursuit of people's experience of living by faith," Roma said. "Imagine some of these neighborhoods, where people rely on faith a lot more than I was used to relying on it... Immersed in that, I don't think anyone that has breath could go to these churches and not come out the other side feeling as if they had experienced life in a new way. What I tried to do is put that in the photographs."

Roma uses special equipment, including cameras he makes himself, and an electronic flash rig, with four and five flash heads on the camera. With the flash rig and a 40-pound battery pack tied around his waist and shoulders he said he looks like "a mad bomber."

"The reason the pictures look the way they do is because of an enormous expenditure of energy and money to make them look like that. An unusual technical leap had to be made," he said.

He estimated he spent \$6,000 alone on flashes and at least \$3,000 to \$4,000 on film.

"I used to make and sell cameras. It used to be a business, but I started teaching in 1983. I love teaching. I'm a

teacher by trade and an amateur photographer."

He is a full-time teacher of photography at Columbia University.

Roma never shoots color. He said the colors in color photography are not the colors of the world, but the colors that are put into the paper.

"There are many more variations in black and white than are possible to achieve with color," he said. "The colors are the manufacturers' colors. An abstraction made with black and white is more interesting to me."

Roma said the people he met on his pilgrimage always will be important to him. "So many people I want to get back to, but I haven't done that as yet... pastors doing such good work... How could I live without them? I was exposed to such wonderful people. I know I will be going back.

"As I get older, I realize things seem to happen when you're ready for them to happen. Possibly, this would not have been as moving for me when I was 27 years old."

Roma, who was raised Catholic, is not now affiliated with a particular church. "I do believe in the Christian God, but it's OK for people to think there's some other one out there," he said. "Culturally, I'm a Christian, but I'm comfortable with other ideas about God."

The reception on Thursday to view the exhibit and to meet Roma is free and open to the public.