

Photography Straight Man

There's a story Thomas Roma likes to tell—of when he was a young man, a very garrulous Wall Street trading clerk turned photographer, and he finally got around to showing his pictures to two older friends of his, photographers Tod Papageorge and Paul McDonough, both of whom had, to put it mildly, a bit more experience. "I'd known them for two years, and I had just gotten a New York State Council on the Arts grant. At that point, they were interested in seeing what I did. So I brought them this box of prints. Tod said, 'These aren't ironic. They aren't even funny. You're funny. Why aren't these pictures funny?' And I said, 'Well, maybe because I'm funny I don't have to turn to photography to be funny.'" Now, two and a half decades later, Roma is having the last laugh. Not only are his eloquent, humanistic photographs of Brooklyn's people and neighborhoods currently the subject of **"Intimate City: The Photographs of Thomas Roma"** (International Center of Photography, 1130 Fifth Avenue, at 94th Street; through November 29), the 48-year-old photographer has received two Guggenheim fellowships; taught at Yale, the School of Visual Arts, Cooper Union, Fordham University, and Columbia (where he is currently director of photography and a professor of visual arts); and recently had a one-person exhibition at MOMA (of the series "Come Sunday," depicting worshippers in Brooklyn's black churches). Roma's new exhibition and first retrospective draws from that series and his four other projects to date: "Higher Ground," photographs taken in and from Brooklyn's elevated trains; "Found in Brooklyn," a series of neighborhood studies; "Sunset Park," staged photographs centering around a public pool in Brooklyn; and "Court Portraits," a work-in-progress consisting of photographs of people in the corridors of the Brooklyn criminal courthouse. It's serious, life-affirming work—in the tradition of Helen Levitt, Lee Friedlander, Walker Evans, and other documentary-style photographers Roma admires. But he hasn't lost his sense of humor. "I was recently called a dinosaur," quips Roma, who lives in Brooklyn with his wife, Anna; son, Giancarlo; and two standard poodles. "I think of a dinosaur as a very successful organism." **EDITH NEWHALL**

