

Beyond skyscrapers

Thomas Roma's photos show a side of New York that postcards don't

Thomas Roma's photographs of New York lack a quality the city is famous for: drama.

Far from portraying the sky-scraping, vertiginous city Berenice Abbott once photographed, Roma's town is filled with uncrowded subways, scrappy frame houses and empty backyards.

A mini-retrospective of Roma's barelyurban photographs, "**Intimate City: The Photographs of Thomas Roma**," consists of nearly 40 black and white gelatin prints taken over a 20-year period, and draws on five projects that have previously appeared in book form.

The unglamorous but elegant pictures convey a sense of the local. People lead unpretentious, day-in, day-out existences. Most of Roma's pictures are set against a disordered tableaux of Brooklyn's gnarly backyards, where modest frame houses lean up against churches.

Roma — who was born in Brooklyn in 1950 — has memorialized many of the borough's various unkempt nooks and crannies, where the light streams in through small crevices of three-story ramshackle buildings and is picked up and diffused by white laundry hanging on a line or reflected off the silver fenders of abandoned cars.

Far from the perfect grid of Manhattan's streets and tall streamlined structures, Roma captures the city's more prevalent makeshift architecture. Ricketty steps are attached to aluminium-sided houses, buckling brick, chicken-wire fences, particle board or any other cheap divider used to delineate property.

Church entrances are not of the Gothic variety, but steel doors set unceremoniously in simple red-brick walls. One one wall, the word "Church" is slopped on with white paint.

This doesn't detract from the experience being had inside the small congregations. Roma also takes his camera into the unchurchly interiors to photograph the mysterious healing going on as the minister presses his palm to kneeling congregants' foreheads.

IN
THE
MUSEUM

by whitney scott



From "Higher Ground" — a series of views from and within New York's elevated subway cars — by Thomas Roma.

If these urban portraits seem to mask the immediate urgency New York is famous for, they possess another kind of power by transforming the mundane into the poetic.

Roma's subway shots, for example, are oddly calm. The pictures don't capture the sardine crush of rush hour, or the dark fluorescent-lit worm holes.

Instead, they are taken during at mid-day on trains that travel on elevated tracks far away from Midtown, with light

streaming in from the windows onto riders' faces. Couples sit comfortably draped over each other. A father shows his child the view from the window.

From these rails, Roma gets his only shots of Manhattan skyscrapers.

From here — next to the thick steel machinery of the Brooklyn train yards — the Chrysler building looks like a flimsy match stick.

International Center of Photography, 1130 Fifth Ave. at 94th Street, through March 7.