

THOMAS ROMA

BY ANTHONY LASALA

One wonders if Thomas Roma could possibly be happier. Maybe if they brought the Dodgers back to Bedford Avenue in Flatbush or rebuilt Steeplechase Park again piece by piece in Coney Island—but that's about it. He makes a living photographing what he loves most—Brooklyn—riding its subways, attending its churches, befriending its people. He is like an angel assigned to cover his own tiny section of heaven.

His latest book, *Higher Ground* (Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 1998), the subject of a major exhibit recently at the International Center of Photography in New York, covers the aboveground subway lines that stretch like veins across the outer reaches of Brooklyn's streets.

PDN: What were your influences outside photography?

Roma: I loved all kinds of music. I was probably a little out of step in my day. But when I was growing up, there was music in my house every single day. And, of course, movies. I grew up going to the movies every Sunday come hell or high water. We went to church and then we went to the movies. I think it had a profound effect on me visually, even the bad ones. Pop culture in many ways affected me. When I started in photography the war in Vietnam was on television. People would have dinner and watch the war and it always amazed me when you saw these things that someone was actually behind the camera.

PDN: What was your first big break?

Roma: I left Wall Street in 1971 and ended up getting a job as a dark-room technician in Pratt Institute for \$80 a week. Maybe that was my first big break, because I don't know how long I would have lasted out of Wall Street without a job. So maybe getting \$80 a week to hose down and mop and squeegee the floors of the darkroom, mix 25 gallons of chemicals, be abused by everyone from the students to the faculty and be the lowest of the low for a while—maybe that was my biggest break.

PDN: Why have you focused on photographing Brooklyn during your career?

Roma: If I had to sit down and write a short story or a novel, I guess it would be set in Brooklyn. It's what I know. I don't go anywhere: I've traveled here or there but I almost never bring my camera anywhere. And Brooklyn always seemed enormous to me and varied. There was so much about Brooklyn I didn't know, so many places and cultures that were a complete mystery.

When I first started out, I would take walks with my cam-



Thomas Roma with his son Giancarlo and his wife Anna. Roma's latest book, *Higher Ground*, captures the above-ground New York City subway routes.

era. I read in a letter that Robert Frost wrote to someone that he would take walks talking and that's how language would come to him. So I thought that's what I was doing, just with my camera. And I never had a manifesto that I would just

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photograph Brooklyn; I just never seem to finish. There is always something else.

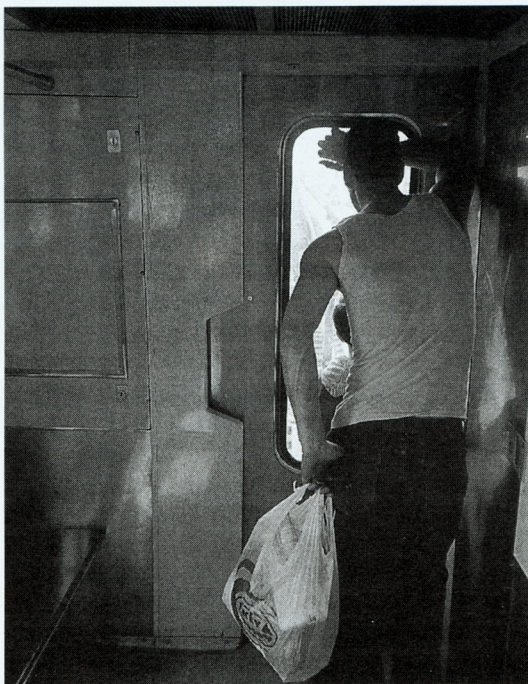
PDN: Do you think there's a downside to photographers limiting themselves to one place?

Roma: Well, I can imagine someone trying to photograph Smallville, USA, all their life, and that being somewhat limited. But Brooklyn has about two and a half million people; it has waves of immigration that are almost unimagined in other places. And it's constantly changing. It looks different than it did ten years ago. . . .

Sure someone can be very limited if their idea of a place has to do with themselves and nostalgia, because to me, notions of nostalgia is anti-art. But if you have a real love affair and watch something grow and develop and even drift away from you in some way and have an appreciation of that, then I don't see the downside.

PDN: Is there one place in Brooklyn you've always wanted to photograph but have never gotten a chance to?

Roma: Not really, but when I was very young my family and I lived in two different public housing projects. I photographed in these communities for about a year but never really got the photographs I wanted. Other than that I've been in every single neighborhood in Brooklyn very extensively.



A photo from Roma's *Higher Ground*.

PDN: Have you found it difficult to mix in with or photograph a particular neighborhood?

Roma: Oh no, not at all. I have walked through Crown

Heights during the so-called Crown Heights Riots, totally welcomed, unmolested. You name the neighborhood, I have walked through it. I have never encountered a single thing that has made me feel unwelcome.

PDN: How do you mix in with your subjects so as not to disturb the scene around you?

Roma: I used to walk with Gary Winogrand when he was photographing. As he was walking down Fifth Avenue or wherever, after he took the picture, which he would do in a very fluid motion, if people looked at him he would look at his camera quizzically as if someone just shoved this foreign object into his hand. Like, "Yeah, I'm curious about this too." And I never saw anyone get angry at him. So maybe I internalized his antics. . . .

It's almost a nonissue with me. I've seen other photographers using cameras that look like rapid-fire weapons. My camera works slowly; I have to cock the shutter manually, advance the film manually. And my manners are nonthreatening. I've actually had more people hypercurious about what I'm doing when I photograph their houses. I think more people are over-territorial about their garden and their window treatment than the way they look. I also think photographers who photograph the world have a purpose in the world and folks know it.

PDN: How did you come up with the idea for *Higher Ground*?

Roma: Fridays I would look after my son all day, and he loved "Thomas the Tank Engine." We would watch the TV show, the videotapes and play with these pull-along trains. I would also take him on the F train to the aquarium, and the elevated subway was such a thrill for him. So my son was actually the inspiration.

PDN: As one of the founding photographers of *DoubleTake*, what's your feeling on the success and recent renewal of funds for the magazine?

Roma: When I try to show people what I really care about, I buy them *DoubleTake* magazine. I think *DoubleTake* is a very important institution. It has had a very different mission than most magazines, which was to encourage people to think about photographing the world in a way where we could reflect the condition of the world. And it has encouraged people to do that. It has also raised the appreciation of photography to that of literature. It tried to find a way where serious photography could merge with serious writing. I think *DoubleTake* came along when it was most needed, and when something is necessary, that is the highest praise you can give it.

PDN: If you could give one piece of advice to someone trying to break into photography today, what would it be?

Roma: My advice changes from year to year but lately I find myself saying to young people, "Try not to know so much." Photography is such a wonderful way of discovering yourself and your place in the world. So try not to know everything right away, try not to take a class and think of yourself as someone who does one certain thing, but rather think of photography as a way to embrace life and the world around you. □