

Taking the Local

From street stoops to courtrooms, Thomas Roma explores public and private lives in his native Brooklyn

BY BLAKE ESKIN

At the 1996 opening of "Come Sunday: Photographs by Thomas Roma" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a colleague asked Roma how a white man with a camera and cumbersome flash could make such intimate pictures of African American churchgoers in Brooklyn. "How did you do it?" the photographer asked. "How did you become invisible?"

"I wanted to belt him," Roma says. "That's exactly not the point. The point is, I was present. I wasn't invisible—this is what people allow me to see."

What Roma has been allowed to see over the past three decades as he's explored the neighborhoods and institutions of his native Brooklyn has essentially rendered him the borough's visual poet laureate. Using a handmade camera, Roma has

made black-and-white pictures that can be unflinching and sensitive at the same time, both earthbound and spiritual. Best known for the series "Come Sunday," praised in the show's catalogue essay by African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as "a triumph of metaphysical empathy," Roma works by choosing a theme and pursuing it doggedly. He usually moves on several fronts at once and has published books of photographs taken during his peregrinations through his borough (*Found in Brooklyn*, W.W. Norton, 1996), on the elevated subway (*Higher Ground*, D.A.P., 1998), at a public swimming pool (*Sunset Park*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), and in the corridors of a criminal-court building (*Enduring Justice*, Powerhouse, 2001). Roma has just published *Show and Tell* (Powerhouse), a collection of miscellaneous photographs selected and annotated by his ten-year-old son, Giancarlo, and this month will publish *Sanctuary* (Johns Hopkins), architectural photographs of Brooklyn churches.

"I stayed in Brooklyn all these years photographing, and I never bump into myself," Roma, 51, explains in the low-ceilinged studio on the top floor of his Greenwood Heights row house. "I grew up in this world of photography dominated by Robert Frank. Everyone's doing their version of *The Americans*, everyone's traveling across the country and saying, 'This is what I think about America.' And I always think, Who cares what you think America is? It's too much about the photographer, and not enough about the world."

For *Enduring Justice* Roma spent 14 months approaching wary strangers in the hallways of a courthouse in downtown Brooklyn. Roma, a slight, brown-eyed man whose most conspicuous trait is the brash patter he delivers in an outer-borough accent, won over skeptics with a rapid-fire spiel that is alternately harsh and hilarious. "There's court television, there's tabloids, all these things," Roma would tell them. "What I'm trying to do is make pictures that might in some way have something to do with what it actually feels like to be here."

Roma photographs "things he admires and loves and feels deeply about," says Peter Galassi, chief curator of the Modern's department of photography. "Because photography is so available to cheap emotion, it's artistically dangerous to try to make pictures about feeling a human bond with people who are different from you." In his best pictures, says Galassi, Roma manages to dodge the danger.

As he leafs through *Enduring Justice*, Roma describes how reluctant one subject, a man in a Tommy Hilfiger shirt, was to participate. "He kept shaking his head, and finally he said, 'Look, I don't need any trouble.' I said, 'Trouble? You think I'm trouble? Look where you are, you're in criminal court.' And he looked at me. I said, 'You don't think you weren't pho-



Tom Roma and his ten-year-old son, Giancarlo, with whom he collaborated on *Show & Tell*, from *Powerhouse*.



An untitled 1988 image from the book *Found in Brooklyn*. Having photographed his native city for the past three decades, Roma claims, "I never bump into myself."

tographed walking in this building? There are hidden cameras all over the place.' Well, he laughed hysterically. As he's laughing, I'm telling him what I'm doing, and he went over to the wall and just stayed there. And I thought, Does that mean he wants me to take the picture or not? I'm a photographer, so I just did what I do. I made four exposures."

For Roma, four exposures can take several hours. "All my heroes are 35-millimeter photographers who work very quickly," he says. "I think of myself as having a different temperament, a different pace. Things can be going on very quickly around me—say, an armed robbery, which I've lived through. I tend to see everything happening very, very slowly, to stay in control, and to do the right thing at the right time. So I have no anxiety about missing the picture."

Roma describes his work as "documentary-style" photography. His heroes include street photographers like Helen Levitt, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander, and he is a contributing photographer of *DoubleTake*, a magazine founded in 1995 and inspired by the Depression-era collaboration between James Agee and Walker Evans. However, Roma resists the documentary label. "The pictures don't document what's really going on any more than a marriage certificate is a document of what a marriage is," he says. "I don't even remember what was going on for most of them."

What he does remember can undermine a viewer's assumptions. He explains, for example, that in one image what ap-

pears to be a family is, in fact, a pair of young lovers holding a baby that does not belong to them. "I'm only interested in what pictures mean, and so who cares how they're made," says Roma, who avoids titles and captions because he doesn't like how they compete for attention with the images themselves. "In 'Higher Ground,' people weren't aware that I was photographing. In church they were aware, but I never spoke to them. And at the pool they were completely directed. It all felt the same to me."

"The way to relate to people's lives is to make art look like their lives as much as possible," Roma continues. He shies away, however, from the idea that his photographs carry social messages. "There are people who see my pictures and assign all kinds of humanist intentions," he says. "But I don't think my pictures do any good. No one gets out of poverty if I photograph a poor person, and no one gets acquitted if they're really not guilty because I photograph in court. But I also don't think that's how political art works. I think it works subversively." As an example, he refers to "In Prison Air," a recent series of architectural photographs taken inside the abandoned Holmesburg prison, in north Philadelphia. (This is Roma's second project outside Brooklyn; the other took him to Sicily, the home of his ancestors.) "I think the pictures in 'In Prison Air' are as beautiful as I've done. But look close—you want to spend a minute in there? They're torture chambers."

Roma's interest in photography began in 1969, when he



Two of the subjects Roma captured in the hallways of a downtown Brooklyn courthouse, where he recently spent 14 months convincing wary strangers to pose for *Enduring Justice*.

was 19 and recovering from a serious car accident. Before the accident, Roma, whose turbulent childhood involved more than a dozen moves within Brooklyn, was a successful young trader on Wall Street. His brother Joel sold him a camera to pass the time at the hospital. The first pictures didn't come out so well, and later Roma discovered that Joel had sold him a broken camera. "He said he didn't think I would pull through," Roma recalls.

When he returned home, Roma spent time at the local public library looking at photography magazines. A picture from Winogrand's first book, *The Animals*, made a lasting impression. "It just drove me crazy," Roma says. "I couldn't believe I was able to project my own psyche onto a caged animal."

In 1971, after an attempt to return to Wall Street, he became a darkroom assistant at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. It was then that he discovered the work of Brassai, who used a Voigtlander Berghel; with negatives four times the size of those in a 35-millimeter camera, it provided richer detail. "I came from a culture that didn't buy German things, so I said I'll make my own six-by-nine camera. If I had known how difficult it was to make a professional camera, I never would have done it." With guidance from the keeper of the Pratt ma-

chine shop, Roma made his own 6-by-9-centimeter camera and won a New York State Council for the Arts grant in 1973 with pictures he made with it. He went on to set up the Siciliano Camera Works, selling the 6-by-9 and a handheld panoramic 35-millimeter he designed ("Good photographers wanted them—Koudelka, Peress, Friedlander," says Roma), but his head for business was not as keen as his eye. After the camera business went sour, Roma took a "series of odd jobs" and in the early 1980s taught photography at the School of Visual Arts and Yale University. Since 1996, he has been a professor at Columbia, where he particularly enjoys teaching introductory courses to undergraduates.

Roma doesn't take on commercial assignments, and for a long time, he says, "I wouldn't bring my work to galleries—I wanted the Museum of Modern Art." His pictures of Sicily were shown at the Modern in "New Photography 3," in 1987, followed almost a decade later by "Come Sunday." "If there's one thing that's less hip than documentary photography, it's religion," says Galassi. He says the pictures Roma took during church services "are not just documenting a social phenomenon. They are religious pictures. In contemporary art, it's a virtually unique achievement."

After "Come Sunday," Roma signed on with the Howard Greenberg Gallery in SoHo, and he recently moved over to Ariel Meyerowitz, run by the daughter of photographer and friend Joel Meyerowitz. "It was a family thing to do, not a business decision," says Roma. "We're trying to start something new. I can always go back to Inward." Roma's prints range from 11 by 14 inches to 20 by 24 inches, and Meyerowitz sells them for between \$1,000 and \$3,500.

While for many years Roma may not have been represented by a gallery, he did go to them. It was at an opening in the mid-1980s that he spotted a young woman and was instantly smitten. As he approached her, he realized she was Lee Friedlander's daughter Anna, and that they'd met when she was much younger. "She was standing next to her



An image from "In Prison Air," a series of architectural photographs recently taken in an abandoned jail in north Philadelphia, one of Roma's few projects outside Brooklyn.



From Roma's "Come Sunday," 1991, a series of pictures of African American churchgoers that MoMA curator Peter Galassi calls "a unique achievement" in contemporary art.

mother, who I knew quite well," Roma says. "I felt as if I got caught with my hand in the cookie jar."

Roma pursued Anna, and they have been married for 14 years. "I'm a much better photographer since we got married," he says, and describes Anna as "a full partner" in his work. "Anna's with me for everything; she's either with me when I photograph, which is fairly often, or she comes and looks at prints when I'm making them and tells me, 'You didn't get it,' and leaves me to suffer."

Roma and Anna live with their son, Giancarlo, and an aging poodle named Stringy. They also have a country home upstate, where Roma keeps a 13½-foot sailboat.

Though his obsession with sailing rivals his passion for photography, his fear of strong wind and open water means most of his sailing transpires in his imagination. "One day a

year is fine for me," he says.

Most of Roma's world revolves around the single-family house in Brooklyn he has owned for a quarter century. His darkroom and studio are here, and he manufactures cameras and flashes for his own use in a shed in the backyard. Many of the pictures in *Found in Brooklyn* were taken nearby, and several new projects—a series of portraits of all the women on the block; his experiment in "intimate aerial photographs," taken from ceiling height; a series of close-ups of injuries, captured with a fingerprint camera—will not require him to stray far from his neighborhood.

"People ask, 'When you went to see the black churches, didn't you feel like an outsider?' And I say, 'When do I feel like I'm an

insider? You have your home, and that's it.'" ■

Blake Eskin also writes about Tom Friedman in this issue.



From "Uneasy Graces," 1989, a series that features the people in Roma's neighborhood.