

# The many faces of justice

*Photographs capture highs and lows of life in Brooklyn system*

**By D.K. ROW**  
THE OREGONIAN

If Brooklyn has a dedicated chronicler of its many roots and textures — a poet laureate, as some would say — it's photographer Thomas Roma.

A former Wall Street trader who turned to photography in his early 20s, Roma has compellingly documented life in his home borough in a series of published books including "Sunset Park" and "Found in Brooklyn."

In style and temperament, Roma is an old school documentarian in the manner of a cadre of seminal 20th-century photographers from various generations, including Robert Frank, Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand and Helen Levitt.

Continuing the latest chapter in what is now a full-fledged homage/scrapbook of Brooklyn, Roma recently published another series of photographs, "Enduring Justice," which captures the oppressive peaks and valleys of life in Brooklyn's criminal justice system. The photographs are on view at Blue Sky Gallery through the end of the month.

Like much of his previous work, "Justice" is shot in a straightforward, unaffected manner. And given the subject, it's probably Roma's most sober effort, too, though "Sanctuary," an extraordinary series of Brooklyn streetscapes, could rival "Justice" in that department. Like "Sanctuary," it also has "Important Message" written all over it. Fellow Brooklyn resident Norman Mailer wrote the foreword; another Pulitzer Prize winner, Robert Coles, contributed the introduction.

All the attention and praise are expected, of course, for someone who is so highly regarded, has twice been a Guggenheim fellow, had a solo show at The Museum of Modern Art, teaches at Columbia University and was once represented by one of the three most



**A look at justice: a portrait by Thomas Roma.**

THOMAS ROMA

prestigious photography dealers in America, Howard Greenberg. (Roma reportedly parted amicably with Greenberg and now is represented by Ariel Meyerowitz.)

The praise is also deserved. Roma spent two to four days a week for 14 months, beginning in

December 1997, hanging out in the halls of the Brooklyn Criminal Court Building, waiting for and then approaching/shooting his subjects. That patience is evident in the studiously accomplished, quietly powerful black-and-white images, which accurately capture

the system's predominantly low-income, black and Latino individuals and families. Roma also conveys the inherently bleak situation of his subjects: Almost everyone is in trouble.

Despite the dramatic potential  
Please see **ROMA**, Page 58

# Roma: Subtly alluding to a message

*Continued from Page 57*

of his subjects, the uniqueness of these photographs, which are divided between prints of men and women, is their quiet and stillness. Imagine a home movie of someone's daily life, one that proceeds

without physical drama or traumatizing event, yet evokes intense feeling and import because of the accumulation of detail and imagery. A young man in an oversized shirt stares out of a window; another leans against a wall, caught between sleep and exasperation. A

woman holds her child in her lap, looking up forlornly. Couples embrace while sitting in cold, institutional chairs, but it's a reassurance that seems obligatory, too late.

It's this feeling, situated somewhere between idleness and tenseness, that dominates the series: When you're in trouble with the law and your fate is in the hands of more powerful forces, there's only powerless waiting.

Some of the best photographs are stylized moments — you can see Roma working more aggressively with his subjects. One, of a young woman in a print dress looking down at the contours and curves of her slender body, seems strange for the fact that it's a strikingly self-conscious, catlike thing to do in an empty hallway. Yet another woman sucks her thumb, her other arm set against her hip in an admonishing pose. A young man kisses his girlfriend, headphones slung over his head and an open eye looking straight at the camera.

In these photographs, Roma's relationship with his subjects is more transparent. And perhaps, too, his need to frankly share, for a moment, with their point of view, to speak on their behalf. There's an obvious social message about the racial and economic divide in the never black-and-white criminal justice system, of the harder-up classes and their fate. But to Roma's credit it's a message that's subtly alluded to, never directly stated.

That's the profound intelligence of this work. To paraphrase Coles from his introduction, these are people struggling to find themselves. They have deep histories and stories to tell. We've glimpsed them, heard them speak for a short time through these photographs. The rest is beyond the moment of the picture.

## REVIEW

*Photographs by  
Thomas Roma*

**Where:** Blue Sky Gallery, 1231  
N.W. Hoyt St.

**Hours:** Noon-5 p.m. Tuesdays-  
Saturdays

**Closes:** Aug. 31

*"Enduring Justice," a book of  
photographs by Thomas Roma*

Published by powerHouse  
Books, \$45, 184 pages