

Viewfinder

Thomas Roma is like a mid-career novelist whose mantle of literary awards hasn't altered the fact that to the public, he's largely unknown. He shouldn't get (and isn't asking for) your sympathy. Most photographers would be thrilled for a piece of his success: two Guggenheims, 11 books, solo shows at MoMA and ICP, and a tenured job directing the graduate program in photography at Columbia University, a department he founded 13 years ago. (Full disclosure: I have been a regular guest at his classes.)

According to the cash values of the photography market, however, Roma's name barely registers, and to the larger art world that's obscurity squared. Dozens of artists have sold more prints this year than this 58 year old probably has in his lifetime. He hasn't had a New York gallery show since 2004. This isn't the fault of auctions or galleries, businesses which offer the public a splendid bargain: the chance to view artworks for free so long as their clients buy enough for a residue of profit. The sort of photography Roma practices—small- or medium-format black-and-white urban documentary—wouldn't pay some dealer's framing bills. "I've never had a great drive to have a gallery," says Roma, adding, "Don't get me wrong, I like money. But I get enormous satisfaction from going into the darkroom and printing photographs. It's the reason I gave up drinking seriously. And I loved drinking."

A Brooklyn native whose first job out of high school was working as a runner on Wall Street, he left the world of puts and calls behind after reading John Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye*. "He tricked me into becoming a photographer," Roma once said, "into thinking it was easy."



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