

# THE DAYS OF YORE

Interviews artists about the years before they had money, fame,  
or road maps to success, and inspires you to find your own.

## Thomas Roma

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**Thomas Roma** is an American photographer born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., who has spent several decades exploring the passage of life as lived in his home stomping grounds with a camera he built himself. Roma has published eleven books of photography since 1996: *Come Sunday* (1996), *Found in Brooklyn* (1996), *Sunset Park* (1998), *Higher Ground* (1999), *Enduring Justice* (2001), *Sanctuary* (2002), *Show & Tell* (2002), *Sicilian Passage* (2003), *In Prison Air*, *The Cells of Holmesburg Prison* (2005), *On Three Pillars* (2007), and *House Calls* (2008). He is the recipient of not one, but *two* Guggenheim Fellowships. His work can be found in many permanent collections and has

been exhibited in innumerable places, including one-person shows at the Museum of Modern Art and the International Center for Photography in New York City. He is a founding contributing photographer for *DoubleTake Magazine*.

Roma founded the Photography Department at Columbia University's School of the Arts, where he currently serves as Director. He has also taught at The School of Visual Arts, The Cooper Union, Fordham University, and Yale University.

Roma is a builder of, among many other things, baseball bats, motorcycles, and cameras. One panoramic camera he built is called "Pannaroma 1X3," playing off the name of his wife, Anna Roma.

**How did you become interested in photography?**

I was excused from further study in high school by the NYPD because I got involved in a fracas—I was kicked out of school. I finished the tenth grade. I came from an extremely lower middle class family. I don't believe we were even in the middle class—I think we imagined ourselves in the middle class. So I needed to work. I was sixteen years old. I ended up with a job on Wall Street, on the floor of the American Stock Exchange. But since I was too young to legally work, I proposed working for free until I turned seventeen, and then at that point if I was good enough they could hire me, but if I wasn't, they could let me go. No one loses. It was an offer that it didn't make sense for them to decline. I did very well and I loved every minute of it. This was 1967 to 1971. So, I was a trader during the best years on Wall Street. Enormous camaraderie, collegiality, it was a wonderful experience.

### **How did your work on Wall Street transition into photography?**

In the middle of my time on Wall Street, I got involved in an automobile accident and sustained a brain injury. During my rehabilitation, my firm agreed to pay me for the rest of my life if I could never come back to my job. It was a wonderful time in America, and a wonderful time in capitalism. For all the bad things we hear, there was a real human element to what I lived through. But I worked my way back. Though my capacity for doing my job at first was slightly diminished.

The recuperation process meant sitting, bolt upright. I did it next to a window. I couldn't watch television because it would give me headaches and I couldn't read because my concentration wasn't good enough. So I would look out the window. One day, my older brother visited me and he brought a camera. A strange camera, an East German model, I don't even know how it made it into the country. He sold me that camera for 35 dollars. It turned out much later that the camera was broken. I was mostly photographing the life of the squirrels that lived on my block, morning, evening and night.

That was the beginning. I found it extremely satisfying to look at the world and have it become this other thing, this photograph, that was related to the thing I saw but was also something else that didn't exist before I made it. That was really fascinating to me because on Wall Street I was well compensated and really creative, but at the end of the day, a bell rings and then there is nothing. Whatever beautiful thing you did, whatever the performance was, whatever connection you made, it was gone forever. We would all go out and drink afterward. And I realized that we *had* to do that because we were all trading on the floor and only we knew what we were doing, the rest was just numbers and letters flashing across a screen. With photography, I could actually make something. The performance led to something. I was actually changing the world in a substantial way. It was real.

I asked my mother to drive me to the public library. In the Mapleton Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library I read every single thing they had, the collections of photography magazines bound in

twine. In one magazine, I saw a review of a Garry Winogrand book. In that review, it said that there was a bookshop in Manhattan called the Laurel Book Center. I got my mother to drive me there. There, I found the greatest photo books ever made. They were all on the shelves. That was it for me. I was 19.



### **Did you take any photography classes?**

When I first got back to Wall Street, I couldn't work as much as before, I didn't have the concentration. So all of a sudden I could go home earlier and I started taking evening classes in photography. I met people who were not in the cult of Wall Street. They read novels and listened to Bob Dylan. At one class, I met a social worker who took me under his wing and brought me to another place where people had serious aspirations to a creative life. There I met a photographer named Arthur Freed. He taught at the Pratt Institute but he had evening classes in his loft above a bar called The Village Purple Onion. We'd sit around and people smoked pot, and talked about philosophy, about Nietzsche. I had no idea what those words even meant.

### **You were attracted to that scene?**

Let me tell you what the most attractive thing is for me. If someone likes me, then I am probably going to like them. I have to be honest about it. They liked me. I was different from them. All these people were college educated and I wasn't, I had tremendous knowledge about Wall Street and I

also had a kind of street credibility that they could never, not even in their wildest dreams, touch. I grew up in housing projects, I'd been arrested. So, I was an exotic to them.

They liked me, so I liked them. I wasn't that discerning. It's not as though I made these life decisions. Wonderful things kept happening to me. I spent a few days with Tennessee Williams back then. How in the world would I get to meet Tennessee Williams and hang out with him 24 hours a day? But that kind of thing just happened. And it had a tremendous influence on me. I was always lucky, that way.

I was out, always out. I only went home to sleep and then go out again.



**When did you decide to pursue photography full time, not just as a hobby?**

After my recuperation, I worked hard and finally got my position on Wall Street back. And then, one day in September of 1971 I went to work like I always did, I did everything exactly the way I always did it. I walked into the trading floor. I would always go say good morning to my boss and then go to my own post. That morning— I can picture it— as I walked towards him I realized it, and I just blurted out: “I don’t want to be you anymore.”

You should understand that I was a prima donna. I had quit before, usually at night, drinking. But this time, I meant it. As I walked away, he started yelling at me, and I just shrugged. I got home

and I was still living with my mother, I had nothing. I didn't know what to make of my life. I thought, "what am I doing here?" I stayed home and got drunk for weeks.



### **What was your first move after quitting your Wall Street job?**

I moved out of my mother's place. I rented a storefront barbershop in Brooklyn. I put all this time and money into fixing the place up. I built a kitchenette, learned plumbing, put up sheetrock, built a dark room. This was going to be my future. I was going to be a photographer. My mother came to say goodbye to me there before she left for the little house in the country that I had bought for her with my Wall Street money— I gave all my money to my mother. Well, at the same time, the superintendent of the property was inspecting the work I had done and said to his wife in Sicilian that now that I had finished the work, he was going to evict me and rent it out for a lot more money. I didn't understand him, but my mother did. All of a sudden she started screaming at this

man. I learned the truth. I had to move out that very day. I moved into a little walk-in basement apartment instead. I didn't know what I was going to do.

Then I found out that there was a job open as a teaching assistant/dark room assistant at the Pratt Institute. I interviewed and got the job. And that is how I supported myself. About 70 dollars a week. It was nothing, even back then.

### **And you kept making photographs?**

I was always photographing. This is another thing about me that is a little different from other people I encounter in the arts. I come from a working class background. My understanding is that whatever you are doing, you do every day. You do it until the job is done or you're exhausted and then you can have a drink in the evening. I don't understand waiting for inspiration. I don't understand trying to be great all the time. I understand practicing one's medium, doing the best you can, chipping away at it since the result is always cumulative. Some days I don't have it when I photograph and other days things go extremely well. But once I am finished, I feel the same on either day. The day's work is finished.

When you're a trader, there are some days when everything goes well and there are some days when the world just goes against you. Say a pipeline blows in Alaska and makes the stocks you've been trading at a high price worthless all of a sudden. It just happens! So, you have a drink at the end of the day and you talk to your buddies and then you go and start all over again. I also believe that we will be judged by our actions. But not until the *end*! I didn't think this thing was a sprint. I thought it was a coast-to-coast race. I could stop and talk to people along the way, I could be distracted.

### **How did you find time to work on your photography while you were working other jobs?**

After I quit my Wall Street job, I worked as an assistant at Pratt and I worked in wedding photography studio, mounting photos onto driftwood. Two jobs. But I would get up every morning before the Pratt job and take the prints I had made the night before. On my way to work I would photograph. I would develop the film during my lunch hour, because there was a darkroom there. I would go to my night job. Then get back from my night job at midnight and print more photos. The next day, I would do it all again. Not because I was a superhero. It is what I wanted to do. No one is going to prevent you from doing what you want to do. But so many people buy into various systems. There is an art school system, an internship system, all that. They want to be explorers and individuals, but they want instructions for how to be their own person. Does that make any sense? "Tell me where to go to go off the beaten path!" I mean, come on.



### **Artists need to support themselves though, don't they?**

I am not going to give one inch to the “you need to support yourself” argument. I had a student at the School of Visual Arts once. He came to class one week and didn't have any work because his camera was stolen. I understood that. But the next week he came back and still didn't have any work because he said he didn't have enough money to buy a camera. I said, “I'm going to throw you out of the class.” I made him come up to the front of the class and I asked him to stick out his arm. He did. I grabbed his hand and said, “What is that?” He had a Tag Heuer watch. I said, “Sell that watch and buy a camera.” He said, “I can't sell that watch, my grandmother gave it to me.” So I said, “Sell your grandmother into slavery and buy a camera.” I threw him out of the class. People who are concerned about money are the ones brushing their teeth three times a day. Maybe you have to live in a way where you don't even brush your teeth. Maybe you can't bathe too regularly. Everyone says “I have passion...but I have to go to the movies...or eat at a restaurant...live in a nice place!” People say they need to support themselves, but what that means is that they have to have a certain standard of living. You make it work. There is always a way to make it work.

If you don't treat your work as if it's important, and *necessary*, there is no point. Every creature on earth has the need for food, shelter, and to reproduce. Humans, we are exactly the same way.

But we also have this one other drive and that is to express ourselves. That is why poets lock themselves in a garret, even though they get nothing else out of it, even if they never find recognition. But if that drive is not as powerful as those other three, or if you are only using that drive to get at one of the other three—the house in the Hamptons, food, or sex—then what have you done? You're a mammal, or something! It's not a luxury what I do. It is a necessity.

### **You are a firm believer in hard work and perseverance.**

The political prisoner who was tortured can say, "I paid in blood for my beliefs." Why should the artist expect any less of herself than to pay in blood? There is a great expression: "shoe leather," as in something took a lot of work, a lot of walking around. Well, the shoe leather is the every day. You have to put yourself in a position where you are going to be affected by the world. And it's not a luxury to say you're not going to chase every dollar. You need to give yourself time to be in the rain. Robert Frost wrote, "I have walked out in rain — and back in rain." I read that and wondered what he meant. He means that you have to be rained on. You have to do things that other people consider mistakes and then hang on to those mistakes. We have to acknowledge that failure isn't only an option, it is your companion.

Artists begin their lives with this meek little voice in the back of their heads. We were a little different from our siblings who wanted to do business, or our classmates who won the spelling bee. It's a weakness that we start with. So we have to deal with that first. Then, when we learn enough, we become someone who understands a medium and that makes you powerful. Now I am a powerful person. I can say things. So what do I say?

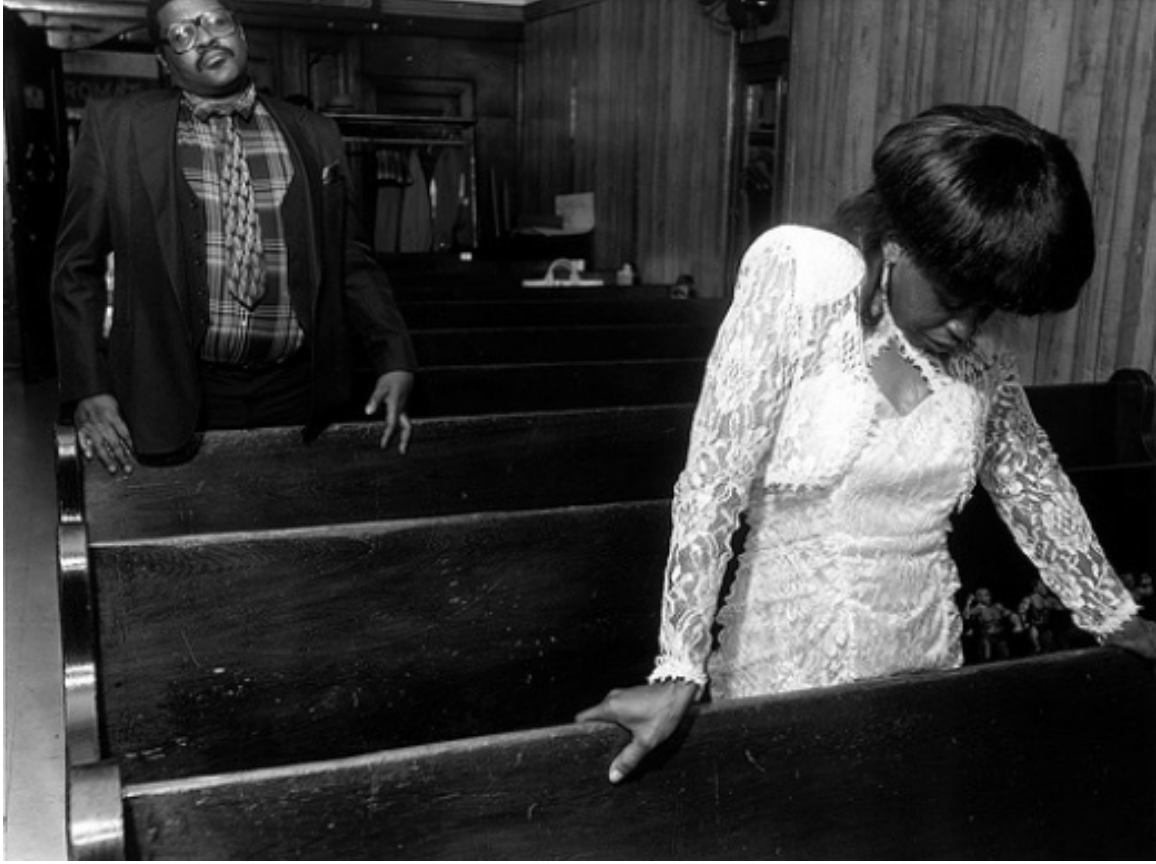
### **Does it ever get easier?**

When I am working I have tremendous doubt that I'm not good enough, that I was never good enough, or that I was good but now I've lost it... Even if something that I've done in the past was acknowledged, if I do that very same thing again, it's going to be kitsch. Now, having done something that even I believe was worth doing, it's going to be even more difficult because I can't do that thing again. It gets increasingly difficult. But that is what makes it worth doing. If it was something that you could always repeat, what would be the point of it?

### **How are you able to enter real life situations and make your photographs?**

The pastor of one of the churches I photographed for the book, "Come Sunday," said: "I'm a musician and I play jazz. My friends and I get together and we jam. When you're doing that, you have to listen to what other people are doing and find your place." He said, "I watched him [Roma] photograph three times, and it occurred to me that what he was doing was the way I make music." And I only hope that is true.





### **Can you recall a great triumph?**

Having an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art was always my dream. And that dream came true. It was 1996. I was 46 years old when I published my first book [in connection with the MoMA show: *Come Sunday*]. That was 25 years after I left my job on Wall Street.

### **Did you ever want to give up during those 25 years?**

I can honestly say that even though Wall Street was great, and for years I got an enormous number of job offers, I was having a great time as a photographer. How could you walk away from having a creative life? If I went back, I would have made a lot of money but I wouldn't have been where I wanted to be. Doing what I am doing now, I am always exactly where I want to be. When you get what you want, don't you have to shut up?

If I had known how difficult it was to build a camera, I never would have tried. I had to learn so much, and when I thought I knew it turned out I had to do more....I have a machine shop now, and I make a lot of things- cameras, my motorcycle, baseball bats. But I had to learn everything. I didn't know how to do any of it before. I attempt to be an expert at what can be done. It can take me years to get it right. But I don't give up.

### **Do you think it is important to be a part of a community of artists, to have a dialogue with other artists?**

Absolutely. You should be in a community of creative people. I made the book *Enduring Justice*. Then I sent the book of photos to Norman Mailer. He didn't know me, he'd never heard of me— it was completely cold and out of the blue. But then he called me and he said, "Look, I already wrote the essay, but I have one question for you." And I said, "Yeah, I know what your question is. You want to know how I had the nerve to send you that book." And he said, "Yeah! That's the question." And I said, "Norman, when you wrote *The Gospel According to the Son*, could you have imagined who might read it?" And he said, "I never really thought of it that way, but yeah, I could have." I said, "Norman, when I was taking those pictures, I was thinking of you. That's why I get to ask you to do this." I'm not going to ask for something that was not coming to me.

### **Do you have any advice for young artists?**

Perseverance is everything. People become experts of the obstacles in front of them. "I'm not tall enough to play football," "I'm not smart enough to write a novel"...whatever it is. And school, school shows you exactly where the minefields are and is supposed to give you a map so you go around them. What about if stepping on a mine is part of it?

You have to live the life you claim you want to have. No one will prevent you, if you only want to live your life. I think we dance around the issue of doing exactly what we want. One of the reasons we don't talk about doing exactly what we want is to cushion the blow—"Oh I didn't want it anyway, so it's OK that I didn't get it," etc. No. Apply for the jobs that you really want, and if you don't get them, it should hurt. Write your stories and make your paintings so that if they fail, you feel bad, you are diminished in some way. Then you have to analyze why it didn't go right for you, correct it, and go back again.

Another thing we have to sort of come out of the closet about is that what we are doing is trying to be one of the few and not one of the many. So you have to ask yourself: how do I become one of the few? You know what the answer is. Everyone does. *Do exactly what you want*. And then when you fail, it has to feel really bad. It pays to understand what your goals are. If you would be happy writing copy and having your house in the Hamptons, don't pretend to want to do something else, don't pretend to be a poet. Don't be ashamed.

I have never sacrificed a single thing to be a photographer, to do the work I've done. No sacrifice. I wanted to do all that stuff. If you say you're sacrificing, you are doing the wrong thing. Life is a lot more interesting if you say 'yes.' 'No' leaves you exactly where you are. Nothing changes. Try to say 'yes.'

One more thing. I never sell my photographs for commercial purposes. People say, "Why don't you? If you take that money, you can be free to do what you want." I already do what I want. Money is power, yes. But freedom, you can't buy more of it if you already have it. You either have it or you don't. And I have freedom.

Photos Courtesy of Thomas Roma, In order: 1.) From *Higher Ground* 2.) From *Found in Brooklyn* 3.) From *Enduring Justice* 4.) From *Sunset Park* 5.) From *Come Sunday*