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Neiman Gallery exhibit focuses on prof's panoramic camera



Courtesy of Lee Friedlander

WHEN IN ROMA | A photo of professor Thomas Roma and his wife, Anna, is featured in the exhibition “Pannaroma,” on display through Sept. 6 at the LeRoy Neiman Art Gallery.

By [SARAH ROTH](#)

A new exhibit is offering a panorama of School of the Arts professor Thomas Roma's contributions to photography.

“Pannaroma,” which opened at the LeRoy Neiman Gallery on Aug. 26, features photography made with a camera Roma designed after a conversation with fellow photographer Lee Friedlander about the difficulties of panoramic photography.

“The only handheld panoramic camera available back then ... was one that used larger film, 120 film,” Roma said in an interview. “And the camera was much larger, and maybe twice as big and three times the weight, and because it made pictures with a larger film, you needed to use it on a tripod the entire time.”

After a number of failed attempts, Roma was able to develop a prototype of his panoramic camera. Built on a handheld 35mm Nikon F and named for his wife Anna, the Pannaroma was popular among professional photographers, with a total of 31 cameras produced.

The exhibit features photographs shot with cameras designed by Roma from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. Curated by photography professor Kai McBride, “Pannaroma” features work from professional photographers, including Friedlander, and Roma’s former students.

Perhaps the most striking image in the exhibit is Friedlander’s 1988 photo “Anna and Tom,” which depicts the Romas. While the subject matter is simple, it is the extremes of the image that are most notable. The contrast between the scale of the image (its subjects occupy a small part of its considerable width) and the simplicity of the subjects is unexpected and sets the tone for all of the work inspired by Roma’s designs. Roma’s Frankenstein-like cameras redefine what a panoramic camera can do: Where these photographs were once reserved for the rare or the breathtaking, photographers can now add new scope to the familiar.

“Every exhibit needs some kind of organizing principle,” McBride said, “and the organizing principle is that people are using the same camera, and you get to see the range of possibilities.”

Roma believes that the camera being used can be as important as who wields it.

“The person using the camera can be motivated by the equipment,” he said.

While panoramic cameras were once used for natural scenes and vistas, Roma’s designs have made both device and photographer more mobile, allowing photographers to

experiment with “people crouching up into corners, jumping into a room full of people, lots of things that you wouldn’t have been able to do before,” McBride said.

Jeffrey Ladd, one of the artists featured in the exhibit, embodies this idea in his work, which features scenes ranging from people dancing at a party and reclining in bed to images of motion and activity that strike the viewer as more cinematic than photographic. While panoramic images were once considered a staple of natural photography, Roma’s design allows the viewers to immerse themselves in the scene to a much greater degree than with traditional photography.

This exhibit is defined not by its continuity, but rather by the lack of it—the range of subjects and images highlights exactly what these cameras are capable of, and the possibilities available to photographers. “Pannaroma” makes clear that Roma deserves just as much credit for each of these images as the photographers themselves.

“Pannaroma” runs until Sept. 26 at the LeRoy Neiman Gallery in 310 Dodge Hall. Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.