



Shadow photos of dogs reveal their 'primal nature'

By [Emanuella Grinberg](#), CNN

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Photographers often go to bizarre lengths to earn the confidence of their subjects.

Just ask [Thomas Roma](#), who got on his knees and howled his way into the heart of a pit bull mix named Violet at a dog park in Brooklyn, New York.

Something had to be done. Each time Roma showed up, Violet charged at him, barking and occasionally nipping at his legs.

One day, Roma knelt down next to her and started to howl "like a wolf," he said. She stopped "dead in her tracks" and joined him, starting a ritual that persists today.

"She matched me howl for howl, and immediately after that she just loved me," Roma said.



Thomas Roma

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Violet was one of many canine friends Roma made at Dyker Beach Park, where he spent three years shooting what he calls the most unexpected work of his career.

The 64-year-old says he has spent most of his life looking through the viewfinder, "hoping to be surprised" by what he saw. "Mondo Cane" ("A Dog's Life") stands out in his oeuvre thanks to its perspective.

To take the photos of the dogs and their shadows, he would mount a camera to the end of a pole, raising it up to 7 feet.

"The pleasure of it was learning new skills after all these years being a photographer," he said. "And the dogs are just running around like maniacs. That's what's so great about it."

Response to "Mondo Cane" also has been unusual, he said. The photos are being exhibited and sold in galleries in New York, Rome and Tokyo before he has had a chance to edit them into a book. That's a first in [a career](#) that began in the 1970s, when Roma left his job as a Wall Street trader to focus full-time on a hobby.

Not that he's been struggling for recognition. He is a two-time Guggenheim fellow, and his work has been exhibited around the world and published in 13 books. As Columbia University's director of photography since 1996, he has also earned the admiration of many students, including one who started a Tumblr, "[S***t My Photography Professor Says](#)," dedicated to his "legitimately insane" and "legitimately brilliant" classroom rants.

Roma and his wife, Anna, started bringing their standard poodle to Dyker Beach Park about nine years ago, when Tino was just a puppy. Prospect Park was closer, but dogs have to be kept on leashes there, Roma said.

At Dyker Beach, located in the southwest corner of Brooklyn near the Verrazano Bridge, Tino could roam free.

Roma didn't start photographing the dogs until 2011, when he was nearly finished with another project and started fretting over what was next.

One day, as the sun streamed unimpeded across the park, casting long canine shadows, he had a revelation.

"There was something about the primal nature of the shadows of these little lovable pets of ours. Their shadows, I felt, revealed a wilder side of their nature," he said.

"They immediately struck me as something like cave drawings."

The powdery layer of dust on the ground made for a fresh canvas each day, Roma said. When he arrived in the morning, the wind had blown it smooth. As the hours went by, tracks from dogs and people brought to life new texture and form.

"What was interesting to me is I was essentially photographing the ground," he said. "I would find interesting patches of ground and call the dogs over or follow them and get picture of what was actually there."

He stopped photographing there last year when the city renovated the park, tearing up the ground and putting down a new surface.

It's actually better for the dogs and their owners. It's less dusty, and Tino still gets to hang out with Violet and the rest of their friends. But it effectively ended Roma's project.

"It's a beautiful pebbled surface," he said. "I could see taking a few pictures but I think I would get bored pretty quickly."



Thomas Roma is an American photographer and professor at Columbia University. You can follow him on [Twitter @ThomasRomaPhoto](#)