

Thomas Roma to exhibit new work documenting gay, black male lives

BY TANYA ZEIF
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Thomas Roma, a legendary photography teacher known around campus for his transformative classes and larger than life personality, takes Brooklyn's Prospect Park as inspiration for his new book, "In the Vale of Cashmere," and its accompanying exhibit at the Steven Kasher gallery, opening on Oct. 29. The book and exhibit are comprised of portraits of the gay, mainly black men in the area of Prospect Park known for open sexual activity.

The Vale, originally known for its picturesque beauty, has become overgrown with foliage. Recently, the Prospect Park Alliance announced plans to renovate the Vale, raising questions about whether the overgrown foliage or the open display of sex and sexuality was the issue. At this pivotal moment of a so-called "restoration," Roma's work is an essential documentation, not only of the lives of the men in the Vale, but of the Vale itself. *Spectator* spoke to Thomas Roma and Cassandra Johnson, the Director of the Steven Kasher Gallery, ahead of the exhibit's opening.

"What I was interested in was looking out and looking in at the same time—something about the experience of being a man."

—*Thomas Roma*

Tanya Zeif: How did you come across the Vale?

Thomas Roma: I lived in a boarding house with a bunch of men on Boerum Hill, not too far away. One of my dearest friends, Carl, asked me to drop him off there and went through this hole in the fence, scurrying up and over, and I couldn't see him any more. I came to know all about it, about how he would meet people there and bring them home, about how there was a whole culture about it.

looking in at the same time—something about the experience of being a man, to look at being a man in an unguarded way. Something about being a father. When I started, my son was at Columbia, and he came with me and photographed a bunch. And something about nature, this lowest common denominator: Here we were—we were in nature—and here we were together. I was there. I was hungry to connect.

Cassandra Johnson: The work raises the question: Is there a value in having some privacy within a public space? This is obviously a public venue; Prospect Park is a public, open space. But these people are going there in the hopes of being temporarily hidden. I think the idea of a place that is known for a display of sexuality allows people who are not ready to openly express their sexuality, who maybe haven't figured it out yet..., who want to be able to do so in a space where they are surrounded by peers but want to be protected.

TZ: What formal elements are employed in order to realize this?

TR: With the "Vale of Cashmere," I tried to shoot everything at a one second long exposure. Almost all of the photographs I ever made in my life, the camera was handheld. I only did one other thing with a camera on a tripod. I had the camera on a tripod partly because I wanted to be seen by everyone, which reassured everyone that there would be no candid photographs, no being caught off guard. Time was very important. It was very important for me to slow everything down. One second didn't work all the time, so sometimes I did six seconds—even longer. So we have people sitting, maybe leaning against a tree, because it's hard to hold still. That's something I didn't do before, not exactly that way, but: change, change, change, change.

CJ: Long exposure times add to the intimacy of the images. If you've ever tried to stand still for even a few seconds, you know it can be very difficult. And one of the things that happens when you are asked to stay in one place for a certain amount of time is that, throughout the time that you are standing in front of the camera, you start to lose that exterior wall, and you begin to soften, you begin to reveal yourself, because it's difficult to stay posed for such a long time. And many of these people he would shoot repeatedly as he returned to the Vale and would see the same faces.

Change lies at the heart of the work, which documents the becoming of beings who may be unsure or feel unsafe about their true selves, gathering in a place that is similarly in constant transition. Most importantly, both the Vale and its visitors exist under the threat that, at any point, someone from the outside may deem the trees too overgrown, the sex too open, and attempt to alter their essence through a renovation, a legislation, and, ultimately, a quiet obliteration of person and place.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

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