

Exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery presents portraits taken in a secluded section of Prospect Park



NEW YORK, NY.- Steven Kasher Gallery presents Thomas Roma: In the Vale of Cashmere. This exhibition of Roma's most recent project consists of an intricate sequence of 75 black and white portraits and landscapes photographed in a secluded section of Prospect Park, a meeting place where black, Latino and other gay and bisexual men have long sought one another out to fulfill their wish for community and to satisfy sexual desire. This is Roma's first major New York exhibition of new photographs since his acclaimed solo exhibition *Come Sunday* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1996. The book *In the Vale of Cashmere* will be published by powerHouse Books in conjunction with the exhibition.

Roma is one of the most critically acclaimed photographers of our times. A Bard of Brooklyn, Roma is a poet-photographer who has been making profound images about the people and places of his native city since 1969. Fourteen books of his photographs have been published, almost all of them taken in Brooklyn. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Director of African American Research at Harvard University, has said of Roma's work: "These brilliant photographs, capturing the dialectic between desire and disappointment, anxiety and comfort, ultimately remind us of our own continuous rites of

passage as human beings. Roma's photographs are truly saving graces."

With *In the Vale of Cashmere*, Roma brings us into a little known Eden, one that has been quietly thriving for decades. Roma's portraits of men set in an uncanny urban wooded landscape carry a history of New York and Brooklyn that predates and parallels the gay rights and civil rights movements. Roma brings us into a secret world, giving us the opportunity to consider the individual with sensitivity and respect while also engaging in a larger discussion of race, gender, sexuality, and class in an increasingly gentrified New York.

In 2008, Roma decided to bring his camera to the Vale of Cashmere, a section of Prospect Park he had frequented decades ago. Over the course of years of weekly visits, he approached the men there, introducing himself and explaining why he was taking pictures. Nine out of ten times Roma's request to make a portrait was declined; it was from that tenth ask that the intense portraits in this exhibition come.

In the Vale of Cashmere was created as a memorial to Carl Spinella, one of Roma's closest friends, who died in Tom's arms of AIDS in 1992. Roma first met Spinella in 1974; a year later they were roommates living on Dean Street in Brooklyn. Spinella had been instrumental in bringing Roma to his native Sicily in 1978 so that Roma could discover his ancestral roots. (These images were later published as the book *Sicilian Passage*.) Their bond was so close that Tom often would drive Spinella to the Vale of Cashmere and sometimes pick him up at the drop-off site, an act of faith in a time before cell phones, when who knows what could happen in the woods. It was to those woods that Roma returned alone in 1996. Tom's son Giancarlo (named after Spinella) was a baseball player who played up to 120 games a year, many at the Parade Grounds in Prospect Park right across the street from the Vale of Cashmere. Roma noticed his son sometimes played better when his father was not around, and started taking walks in the Vale in memory of Spinella. Eventually his photography there began.

The book is accompanied by an essay by G. Winston James, a Jamaican-born poet, short fiction writer, essayist and editor, himself a frequenter of the Vale. James places Roma's work in the context of the history of gay cruising and gay life in New York. During the show we will host a panel discussion with James, Roma, Sarah Meister of MoMA, and possibly Henry Louis Gates, who wrote the beautiful essay accompanying Roma's book *Come Sunday*.

Roma has published over a dozen monographs including: *Come Sunday* (with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.), *Found in Brooklyn* (with an introduction by Dr. Robert Coles), *Sunset Park* (with an afterward by Richard B. Woodward), *Higher Ground* (with an introduction by Ian Frazier), *Enduring Justice* (with an introduction by Norman Mailer), *Show & Tell* (with text by Giancarlo T. Roma), *Sanctuary* (with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.), *Sicilian Passage*, *In Prison Air* (with an introduction by John Szarkowski), *On Three Pillars* (with text by Phillip Lopate), *House Calls with William Carlos Williams, MD* (with an accompanying text by Dr. Robert Coles), *Dear Knights and Dark Horses* (with an introduction by Alec Wilkinson), and *The Waters of Our Time* with a text by Giancarlo T. Roma.

Roma's work has appeared in one-person and group exhibitions internationally, including one-person shows with accompanying books at the Museum of Modern Art, the International Center of Photography, and the Wallach Gallery at Columbia University, NY. In 2003 he received a New York City Council Proclamation for contributions to the cultural and educational life of New York City, and in 2011 Roma received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. He is a two-time recipient of Guggenheim Fellowships (1982 and 1991) and received a New York State Council for the Arts Fellowship in 1973.

Roma has taught photography since 1983 at Yale, Fordham, Cooper Union, and The School of Visual Arts. In 1996, he became the founding Director of the Photography Program at Columbia University School of the Arts where he is a Professor of Art.