

Thomas Roma

'Intimate City'

International Center of
Photography
1130 Fifth Avenue, at 94th Street
Manhattan
Through March 7

This small retrospective comprises six sections: "Come Sunday" (church interiors), "Sunset Park" (a public swimming pool), "Sanctuary" (church exteriors), "Found in Brooklyn" (neighborhood scenes), "On Higher Ground" (elevated subway lines) and "Court Portraits" (Brooklyn Criminal Court).

Although the 40 photographs represent very different projects, together they suggest that Mr. Roma, a professor of visual arts at Columbia University, is consistently drawn to three things: geometric order, interior or human moments and Brooklyn.

For example, one photograph is of a street divided by a tree covered in wire mesh. To the right of the tree is a rectangle of sunlit pavement. To the left is another rectangle, which is itself neatly subdivided into a shadowy half and a light half. Mr. Roma must have waited for the geometric moment.

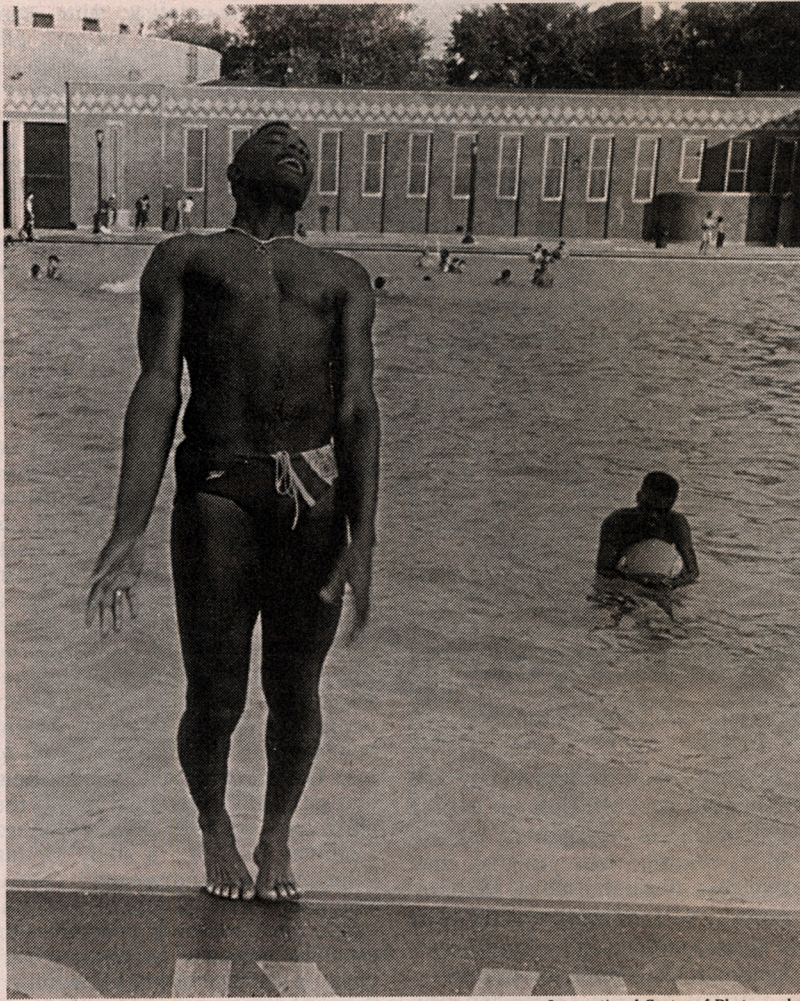
But something else must have attracted him to the shot of a man with a scarred face and a tilted head in a church, looking out while everyone else prays with palms up and eyes closed. And it was certainly not the geometric moment that made Mr. Roma snap a shot of a drunken teenager sleeping on an overpass, barely gripping a leash holding a black puppy that is waiting for his wake-up call as the cars on the highway below whiz by.

One of Mr. Roma's subway pictures contains both geometric order and quiet intrigue. It is of two bare-legged black women conversing across an old, black-clad Hasidic Jew studying a newspaper. There are some lovely symmetries: all three are touching their heads, and their arms and legs seem to recapitulate the shape of the subway seats. But against the backdrop of pure geometry is a gentle sociological moment.

A public swimming pool seems to be Mr. Roma's ideal venue. And why not? It's a big rectangle filled with human intrigue. In one shot, a girl in sunglasses lies in the lap of another girl. Together they form a T. In another picture, a group of youths form an informal grid (bodies vertical, legs horizontal), with one girl blowing a horizontal puff of smoke across the scene.

The most stunning photograph is of a man poised to execute a back dive into a swimming pool, his body a cross dividing the water. His toes still cling to the edge of the pool, but the dive has already been cast. His hands, blurred, are out for balance; his expression is ecstatic, his mouth open. In the pool a man holds a beach ball and watches. It's hard to make out the giant letters on the pool's deck, but they appear to spell "No Diving."

SARAH BOXER



International Center of Photography

A large detail from a work in Thomas Roma's 1991 series "Sunset Park," on view at the International Center of Photography.