

Eye for the unusual at Wallach Gallery show

Roma's photography exhibit "Pictures for Books" finds what's extraordinary about the ordinary.

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Courtesy of Thomas Roma

Photography too often falls into a hackneyed realm of sentiments—children holding hands, rolling green landscapes, sepia pictures of despair.

Yet, Thomas Roma, director of photography for the Columbia art department, does nothing of the sort in his exhibition “Pictures for Books” at the Wallach Art Gallery. His black-and-white gelatin prints show familiar subjects—a pregnant woman, a morning at church, laundry hanging out to dry—yet reveal subtle absurdities rather than digestible clichés.

The photographs in the exhibition are arranged according to the artist's photographic publications. Images of the Italian countryside are labeled after his book "Sicilian Passages," the emotional photographs of an African-American church service are titled "Come Sunday," and "Found in Brooklyn" displays a symposium of street scenes.

Faces are rarely turned towards the camera, often obscured by a sheath of hair, an outstretched hand, or the back of another's head. Only in rare group scenes do a human subject's eyes connect with the camera. Instead, the detail of the environment is favored—styrofoam cups in the gutter are vivid, signs in the distance can be read.

The subtle complexities of Roma's photographs reveal incongruities to the viewer. At times, these intricacies can be amusing. In an image from "Come Sunday," a large young woman sits under a sign for the office of the pastor, and while it should be a sterile subject matter, her body suggests a sexual connotation. Another photograph features a synagogue with a Star of David on its front—directly below it is a cross, seemingly made from the architecture of the windows.

The images are not beautiful in the classical sense. They are vivid, often hard-edged, and at first glance, some may even seem dull. Living in New York, one sees a lot of trash, a lot of concrete, a lot of construction, and so these images can be easily passed by unnoticed.

"Pictures for Books," then, has to be taken with time. In an image from "Found in Brooklyn," an alighting flock of birds mimics the budding leaves on the tree from which it came. The background shows rows of cookie-cutter houses. It is a normal, beautiful repetition, but one that needs a concerted effort to be seen. Roma's vividness seems to shake free of cool aloofness, because the things of everyday life are, in fact, not so black-and-white.

"Pictures for Books" is exhibited at the Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, on the eighth floor of Schermerhorn Hall, until March 27. Thomas Roma and MoMA curator Susan Kismaric will host a gallery talk at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 3.