

# Rambling Man

A REVIEW OF THOMAS ROMA'S *PICTURES FOR BOOKS*

BY ALEXANDRA MUHLER

The first room of *Pictures for Books*, an exhibit at the Wallach Art Gallery by School of the Arts Professor and Director of Photography Thomas Roma, is decked out with photographs of Brooklyn. Don't worry—there are no go-for-broke sunset shots of the Brooklyn Bridge, and none of the plaintive nostalgia of 1940s boys in undershirts playing stickball as the evening begins to glow. At first, Roma's disordered landscapes—vines, fences, hanging laundry, composed mostly in the middle gray tones—barely catch your eye.

Slowly, the tangled photographs compose themselves: the curve of a telephone wire, barely visible, perfectly divides a cluttered scene. Three boys huddled around a piece of flaming garbage are fenced in by the arc of a sidewalk corner and the painted rays of a crosswalk. Drawing beauty out of trashed scenery requires a sentimental attachment to the landscape, and Roma is a Sicilian-American Brooklyn boy through and through.

But Roma's Brooklyn reaches far beyond Italian neighborhoods. Also featured in the current exhibition are photographs from his books *Sicilian Passage*, observations from his ancestral island; *On Three Pillars*, a collection of synagogue exteriors; and *Come Sunday*, cinematic shots of black church services.

Roma's probes into these communities have shown him where he is welcome among his borough neighbors. After September 11th, his habit of photographing Jewish temples earned him a surprise visit from the FBI. *Come Sunday*—originally called *God's Work*—began as a series of exterior shots. When he explained his project to one pastor, he was invited to document God's real work inside the churches on Sunday mornings.

The pictures from *Come Sunday* are unlike Roma's pictures of daily life in Sicilian fields and on Brooklyn streets. For one thing, there is sharp contrast between the black skin of the parishioners and their white Sunday clothing. The close-up is not standard Roma, either, but it's hard to imagine any other option in the tightly-packed pews. What remains of Roma's style is the arrangement of seemingly mundane modern life into the beautiful, if crooked, scene. After he heard a

pastor refer to his congregation as "saints," he articulated his project: "Why can't I make two-dimensional art of saints?"

*Come Sunday* was shot with a self-built camera, jury-rigged with five or six large flashes and worn with a harness that supported 45 pounds of battery packs to power the high-wattage equipment. Sued in the whole apparatus, "I looked like a mud bomber," he says.

Roma has been building his own cameras almost since he began taking photographs. His photographer friends admired the craft of his contraptions, so for a while he commissioned cameras of his own design from the machine shops that used to litter Brooklyn. Since the venture failed he has kept his power tools in a shed behind his Greenwood Heights row house.

The row house, the machine shops, even the habit of showing his photographs in books rather than in galleries all point to a preference for doing things the good old way. "I just want to make something that people won't throw away," he says of his books, in which pictures have been paired with essays by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Phillip Lopate, and others.

Perhaps the most instructive accompanying commentary is from *Show & Tell*, a book available for perusal at the current exhibit. The author is an elementary school-aged Giancarlo T. Roma, CC '13, the professor's son. The inferences Giancarlo draws from his father's pictures are simple but penetrating: he induces an underlying feeling from the marriage of his own memory with his observations of the photo's light, scale, and expression. A good instruction for anyone learning to look at photographs—including the Photo I students Roma loves to browbeat and reform.

The last picture in *Show & Tell* is of the Roma family, a surprise among the legion of images Roma has made of perfect strangers. Roma's unexpected scene picks away at the edges of those borders that separate our families from our friends and our surrounding community, bringing his viewer in as near, and as far, as he stands himself. •