

THE BLUE AND WHITE

Founded 1890 · Undergraduate Magazine of Columbia University

‘One Shot, They’re Dead’
A Conversation with Thomas Roma
by Virginia Fu

Thomas Roma is a photographer and proud Brooklyn native. He has been awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships and his work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art and the International Center of Photography in New York City. At Columbia, he teaches both undergraduate and graduate photography classes and serves as the Director of the Photography Department, which he founded. Roma’s CULPA reviews promise that “you will leave the class at least once crying,” and encourage you to take his class, but only if you are prepared to join a cult of personality or “want to do something meaningful with your life.”

Thomas Roma: Were you assigned this interview or did you want to do the interview?

The Blue and White: I was assigned and I also want to do the interview.

TR: Is [*The Blue and White*] online or do you have a tree-destroying print and ink issue?

B&W: We kill trees to print our issues.

TR: I hope you shoot them first.

B&W: We generally do.

TR: Good. One shot—they’re dead.

B&W: You’ve published 14 books of photography. What was your favorite project that you’ve done?

TR: Favorite is a difficult word. I’ll answer the question instead of giving you a 15 minute lecture on the word. In 2014, I published a book with my son, Giancarlo—he was CC ’13—called *The Waters of Our Time*.

B&W: What did you like about doing the project?

TR: Again the word “like.” I’ll tell you why it was satisfying. The form of the book is an homage to a book that was published in 1955 by a great writer named Langston Hughes and a great photographer named Roy de Carava. The book is a masterpiece. It’s called *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and it’s not as highly regarded as it should be. In it, there’s a story in the voice of an old woman recalling her life and making a decision that she had to keep living because there was more for her to do. In our book, my son wrote in the voice of an old woman recalling her life and came to the conclusion that we’re all going to be swept up in the waters of our time. It’s the opposite but the two can be true at the same time. It’s about internalizing a contradiction, that life is worth living, but we don’t have much to say about it. The picture on the cover was from the first roll of film I ever shot. This physically tiny book encompasses my entire life in photography.

There's one other funny thing I feel like mentioning because your iPhone is here. Roy deCarava was upset by the book. He was a Guggenheim Fellow which was a huge accomplishment, and he wanted his book to be a real book of photographs with these big pictures but the only thing he could get published was this little thing—many photographers want big coffee table books. If you look at that book you'll see that most of them are no bigger than the screen on an iPhone. But what happened in the world of contemporary photography is people are used to seeing small pictures on their phone. So in a way, this thing that's old is very new and people don't have the time to buy big photo books. We used for publicity a picture of the book being held in one hand. So there, it's bigger than an Apple thing.

B&W: Do you own an iPhone?

TR: My phone is not only not a smartphone, but I think mine is particularly stupid. I own it out of great sympathy for it. I take care of it. I just got this one. My last one was even dumber. My last one, to do an "s" you had to hit it four times. It's maddening. Especially when you're angry. A lot of times when I'm texting, I'm furious.

B&W: Who do you text angrily?

TR: Usually it's a note to self.

B&W: How did you become a photographer?

TR: This is an interesting thing and don't hate me for saying this, but I never became one. I stayed the same person. But I knew I wanted to photograph—this is a story I've told so many times, and always slightly differently. I got into a car accident and suffered a brain injury. I was confined to a chair. I had a blood clot. This was 1969. I just couldn't watch television. Reading made me sleepy. Photographing was all right. My older brother came to visit me and he had a camera. I had never seen a 35 mm camera in person. From then on it was like slipping on a banana peel. It was like I was in the hands of fate. So I left Wall Street when my family was on very solid financial ground and I could take the time. I moved out of my mother's home. I thought, let's try not having to work 80 hours a week.

I don't mean to sound dramatic, but I have to have surgery in the next couple months because of the brain injury, all those years ago. I have nerve damage that has finally gone too far which damaged my right eye. Right now I'm looking at you and I see double. My right eye doesn't track my left eye anymore. When I photograph I close one eye and everything is fine. But it's exhausting. Part of why I sound the way I do is brain damage. I slur my words. Some people are charmed by it. It's the deaf, mostly, who are charmed by it.

But I left Wall Street and made a commitment. I left with tears in my eyes. I was treated well there. I was respected. I was valued for exactly what I was capable of doing. That's a hard thing to walk away from. But it was my time to do it. [*at this point, we switched rooms*] You can have the nice chair. I'm used to suffering.

B&W: Do you suffer for your art?

TR: I was being glib. I've had a charmed life. I enjoy my life. I absolutely do not suffer.

B&W: Do your students suffer for their art?

TR: That's possible. To be serious about it for a minute, Columbia is a competitive environment. People had to compete just to attend Columbia. The students here, I'm talking about all four undergraduate schools and the

graduate schools, everybody has worked hard just to be able to take the class. I don't take that for granted. I have an enormous amount of respect for my students. You go to the library at one in the morning—people work hard around here. So it's almost like there's nothing I can do about it. They are going to suffer. They're the ones who are accustomed to suffering and thinking there's a competition, even when there's not.

B&W: Is there not a competition?

TR: The work of art making is personal. The goodness—the usefulness of a work of art—starts with it being useful to the artist. So, someone else—a professor or a critic—coming along and saying something is not useful is moot. It has nothing to do with anything.

B&W: So according to the Tumblr—do you know what Tumblr is?

TR: I don't really know. But I think you're going to say this website—what is it? “Shit my photo teacher says.” I've never seen it. I've never laid eyes on it. I was told about it. And I've been told there are direct quotes that I couldn't possibly have said and I'll tell you why. There are words that I would never use. I have an intense relationship to words. There are words that being given back that I know I could never utter— and there are a lot of words like this by the way. But in spirit it's probably very accurate. I know I didn't say it but I support people saying I said it.

Times have changed. There were things I would say and do for effect that no longer work.

There are things that people appreciated then that people would never appreciate now. I've been teaching full time since 1982 and I must change with the world. I do try to adapt.

B&W: What would you say is “the role of the photographer in contemporary society?”

TR: Let me tell you what I do. I photograph as often as possible and then when I take a picture it means I have to develop film. And that takes a lot of time and commitment. My darkroom is on the third floor of my home and the chemistry is very heavy. I have to carry everything up. Everything has to go up and then it goes down the drain.

I would say I was probably never a practicing contemporary photographer. By the time I started, even the lens I used in 1971 was made before World War II when there were great advances in optics. I was never up to date.

B&W: You've said it's more satisfying to teach here than at an art school. What's the difference?

TR: Here's the difference. The expectation of having a life in art—it does wear on me sometimes. I worry that students have an unreasonable expectation. I worry that faculty and administration might not be clear enough about how difficult it's going to be. People talk a lot about tuition. I come from a family that did not have extra money, but the money is the least of it. As an undergraduate you're spending four years of your life. You're not going to get those years back. Money—you could win the lottery, you could have a rich relative die, you could find a suitcase on the train. There's no finding those four years again.

I founded the program and I insisted there would not be a photography major. So because of that I could breathe in my classes. I look out at my students and see people who are engineers, philosophy majors, econ majors—great, the econ majors are great—their eyes are open.

B&W: Do you have any advice for the aspiring artist?

TR: We make art for others. I don't consume my own output. I look at other people's photographs, I read other people's novels. I am very interested in other people's songs. Do it for others. If that's the carrot on the stick and you're the mule pulling the wagon you're going to be all right. But if the goal is self-satisfaction you might be satisfied and then you're going to stop pulling the wagon. I believe in a life in art. I believe that art is necessary that it's not there to entertain or divert us from our path. In Italy, the parent will say to the child, "Buon divertimento." "Good diverting yourself." From what? From your own mortality? Well art does not divert you. In fact, it focuses you. If you see *Othello*, you will not turn away from the problems that face us. So live to be an artist. It's a great way to live. Every so often you get a glimpse that people are better off for what you've done.

B&W: So, to go back to what you said, a good photograph is one you look at and you think about death.

TR: No. So a useful photograph...I want to make things that are not going to get thrown away. A useful photograph reminds us of the things that are worth remembering.

Something happened to me in school—I was very young, and I think it was no later than second grade—the concept of the lowest common denominator. This was a revelation. I started thinking about it in everything. I started thinking about it walking home from school. What's irreducible? Over and over and over again I had this lowest common denominator idea. That's how I practice photography. I'm looking for the thing that is momentarily true enough that I could make a picture that I could hold on to.

B&W: What are you working on now? TR: There's actually an exhibition of photographs from my new book, *In the Vale of Cashmere*. The photographs were made in an area of Prospect Park called the Vale of Cashmere. This is a place that's been known for at least for four decades for men who are romantically inclined to go and meet each other.

B&W: So, like a bus station bathroom, but in a park.

TR: It's an idyllic, beautiful place where people can go and have communion. There's a great essay that accompanies the book that describes a kind of public cruising situation and the reasons for it. The show's up at the Steven Kasher Gallery until December.