

Windsor Terrace Photographer Works With Familiar Materials

By ALAN BREZNICK

The last thing that Thomas Roma wants to be known as is an abstract artist. The 33-year-old Windsor Terrace resident, who has garnered awards and grants for his photography, likes to take pictures of fences, backyards, dogs, bushes, TV antennas, wet laundry hanging out to dry — in short, many of the things that make up ordinary life.

"They're simply things that I've known about all my life," said the Bensonhurst native, who moved to Windsor Terrace six years ago after discovering the neighborhood while photographing it. "The problem in art is to make a metaphor. The easiest way to do that is with material familiar to you."

Roma said he finds his photographic subjects by "basically taking a walk" and focusing on whatever appears to be interesting. His subjects range from dirty wash in Brooklyn to scenes of family life in Sicily, where he has spent much of the last two years shooting pictures under a Guggenheim fellowship program. Some of the photos are considered so good that they have been purchased by the Museum of Modern Art for its collection.

Such success, however, doesn't seem to awe Roma, who has been struggling to support his photography career since he was 19. He started taking photos outside his window at that age because of a car accident that sidelined him for some time. Two years later, he boldly walked away from his job as a Wall Street trading clerk to pursue a full-time life as a photographer.

"It was a very casual decision at first," he said. "It was one of those decisions you just make cavalierly. I knew I could always go back."

Roma had reason to regret that casual decision as he tried to make a living shooting pictures over the next few years. He took odd jobs to support himself, working for the technical staff of Pratt Institute's photo department, doing various commercial photography assignments, assisting with magazine and catalog illustrations — whatever it took to keep his head above water. It was not easy going.

All the while, however, he kept shooting the photos he liked to take, put together photography shows at a few universities and art studios around the Northeast and sold a few pictures here and there to such esteemed institutions as the Museum of Modern Art.

"There's something to be said for sticking with it," Roma said. In 1981, he applied for the prestigious Guggenheim fellowship and was awarded it. He de-

cidated to use the grant to travel to Sicily and spend several months there taking photos.

Why Sicily? Roma explained that his ancestors came from the southern Italian island and most of his family still lives there. He said he also had "a lot of curiosity" about the origins of some Italian American customs and habits, such as the vegetable gardens that dot Brooklyn's Italian neighborhoods.

After five months in Sicily last year and five weeks so far this year, Roma came back to Brooklyn with hundreds of black-and-white photos — which he considers "much more beautiful" than color photography — depicting ordinary life in the Italian countryside. He also came back with a much greater understanding of and love for his ancestral homeland.

"It was a very, very successful trip," he said, referring not just to the photos he took. One of the key ingredients of that success, he continued, was "the pleasure of discovering so many positive things about my culture." Even more than he had thought he would, he found that there was a great deal more to Sicilian life than the Mafia, crime and drugs promoted by popular movies like "The Godfather" series.

For example, Roma said, the Sicilian people are "much, much more open" than their Brooklyn counterparts. "They have an openness and generosity we don't have." Whenever he took photos far from the home where he stayed, he noted, Sicilians always invited him into their houses to share food and wine.

In Brooklyn, on the other hand, subjects do not always welcome the sight of Roma shooting their pictures. "People tend to get very hostile when you take their photos," he said. "There's much more hostility in Brooklyn. I don't know why. Maybe it's



Photographer Thomas Roma's subjects are "the things I've known about all my life." He received a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship in 1981, which he used to travel to Italy.

the American way. There's a lot of fear here...Over there I guess there's nothing to be afraid of."

Roma, who plans to go to Sicily once more in January, is now printing his Sicily photos for display in shows and limited edition books that he has been putting together. He is also gearing up to teach photography classes part-time at Yale University and the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan this fall. He'll be teaching for the first time since he left Pratt several years ago.

What makes for good photography? Roma said he "wouldn't stress" any particular themes with his students but will be "looking for something to do with life." What many aspiring and would-be artists

don't realize, he explained, is that "art isolated from everything else doesn't exist... An artist can't work outside his own experiences." As a result, "there's a lot of bullshit in art" from "people who think they're making art" but actually aren't, he added.

Although he's been working at his craft for 14 years, and has not always been too successful, Roma said he still has "the same enthusiasm" for photography that he had when he picked up a camera for the first time. "I guess that's because it's (photography is) something that's alive," he said. "It's organic, it changes on its own. Life continues to be a surprise and I'm trying to understand it through my work."