



Criti Min

By Sam

Brooklyn

"The meek shall inherit the earth, and there won't be a photographer among them." Tom Roma, professor of photography at the Yale Art School, routinely twists the old aphorism to impress his classes. One gets the feeling he says it because, when he's left dispossessed, he'll want company.

His students love to describe him: "Tom? Just wait here until someone loud and obnoxious walks by — that's Tom." "That guy's got the most outrageous politics — he's only half kidding when he says that he wants to kill all the white people who own golden retrievers." "Oh, God, Roma, he's too much the uptight Italian, wearing Brooklyn on his sleeve."

Tom Roma, 36, now in his fourth year of teaching at Yale, moves through his classes with a talkative, engaging, some might even say intimidating, presence. Though of medium height and build, with dark hair and complexion, he looks like a bantamweight boxer, swinging his arms and dancing about as he critiques students work. He'll absorb the photographs around him with a knowing eye, and then turn an astute tongue to his students, jumping on the telling detail of the image that speaks, damning the pictures that fail and lie silent.

He is a man of opposites and extremes. Though he screams about sex and drama, his own photographs are quiet and spiritual. While he raves about the mean streets of Brooklyn, as a boy there he read Frost with the ardor of a disciple. Finally, although a self-educated photographer, he teaches at the Yale Art School, one of the best schools for photography in the nation.

Roma was born and raised in Brooklyn by his mother, whose husband left when Roma was three. Though it is hard to believe now, he was a shy and bashful boy, enrolled in "Special Progress" classes for gifted children. Instead of playing ballgames, he read poetry. "I read Robert Frost's 'To Earthwood' when I was about fourteen and I wanted to kill myself; it is so sensual, so

powerful, so dark." To this day he can recite the poem from memory. And from Frost he progressed to other writers and poets, like Dickenson, Eliot and Bernard DeVoto.

But at an early age life outside "Special Progress" beckoned. Though the family expected Roma to go to college ("I was the bright one"), he left school at sixteen. Soon after, on his seventeenth birthday, he began working on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. He vividly remembers his interview for the job. Reaching for the doorknob, Roma knew that once on the other side, he could no longer be a bashful poetry lover. Brave and self-confident during the interview, he got the job. "And now I'm a ham." For the next four years, the "go-go years" of the late sixties bull market, Roma traded on the floor. The work supported his family and enabled his mother to buy a house. He has since bought his mother a natural foods store, where she works and where he gets all his food. Though it does not make a cent, "karma-wise, it's a good thing to do."

On the subject of his early interest in photography, however, Roma hesitates. "This is going to sound too melodramatic." When he was nineteen he was in a near-fatal car accident. "I was hurt bad, gone the whole nine yards. Last rites and everything." Recovery was uncertain. During that time his brother came to him with an old camera, and Roma bought it. His mother took him to libraries and he read everything he could about photography and photographers. Roma took many pictures with the camera, none coming out very well and Roma blaming himself. Until someone told him the camera was broken. Roma asked his brother if he had known that the camera he'd sold him was broken. "Yeah," he answered, "I didn't think that you were gonna pull through."

Photography, like poetry, consumed him. Roma tried taking evening classes at a technical school in New York, but found that approach not to his liking and he quit

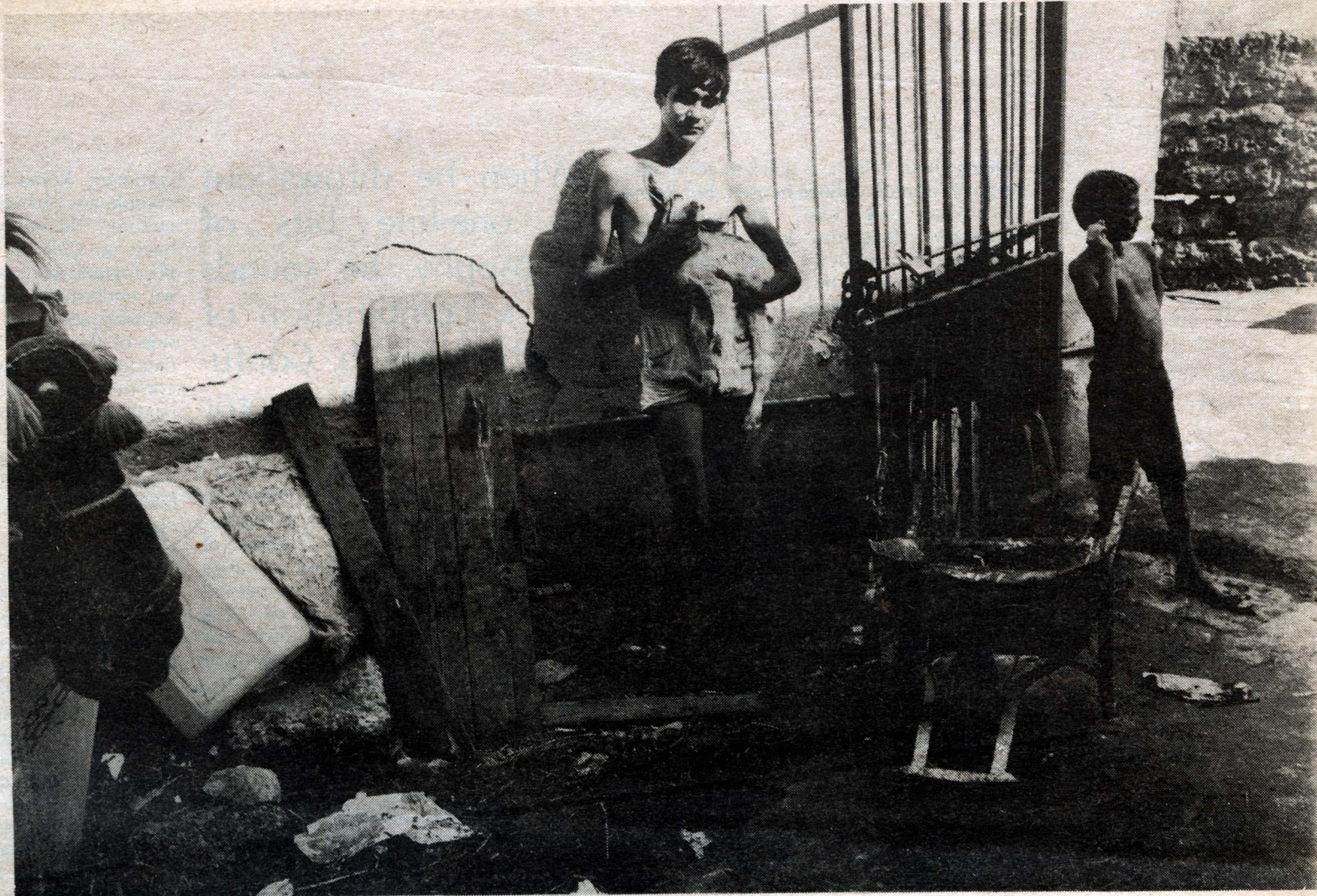
after four weeks. Instead, he kept returning to particularly good book stores, going through the *Day Books* of Edward Weston and other books of photographs. "I worked so that I could have the books." On Saturdays he would go to the Print Study room at the Museum of Modern Art and pore over the prints of Walker Evans. Finally, by the summer of 1971, a year and a half after the accident, Roma quit his job on Wall Street. He was twenty-one and he knew that photography was for him.

In the Fall of 1971 Roma took a job as a darkroom assistant at Pratt University, and began a personal and professional relationship with Tod Papageorge, who was teaching there. Now also at Yale, Papageorge has been one of Roma's closest friends and most important influences. "It's not a matter of copying his work, but we have the same tastes," Roma explains. Papageorge brought Roma into the close circle of the New York photography scene, introducing him to Gary Winogrand, one of the major American photographers of the past thirty years. In his class at Yale, Roma tells stories about "Gary," "Tod," "John" (Szarskowski, curator of photography at MOMA), and "Lee" (Friedlander, another one of the greats, and Roma's future father-in-law). For any star-struck young Yale in love with photography, such talk is like John Blum talk about "Eleanor" and "Ike."

A New York State Council of the Arts grant allowed him to quit his job in 1973 and spend more time on his own work. To take the kinds of pictures he wanted to take, however, Roma had to start from scratch. Winogrand and Friedlander were using 35mm single reflex cameras. His other influence, Walker Evans, had used a large and unwieldy view camera. Roma, to merge the benefits of both types, wanted a hand-held camera that could give him a larger negative and more fluid-looking frame. So he built what he needed. During evenings he apprenticed at a machine shop to learn milling

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Sicily

techniques, and then he took out a loan from a family friend named John Siciliano.

Roma's camera, a lightweight machine making six by nine centimeter negatives, was the first product of the Siciliano Camera Company. At the time his cameras were the only ones of its kind, and even when others like it were made the "Siciliano" remained cheaper than the competition. "I'm very proud of that," he says. Roma's been using the camera since 1975, and other photographers, including Papageorge, use them. All told, Roma built over fifty of the machines. Though he has not made any since 1980, Roma now has in his head all the plans for "a significant new generation" of camera. "I just need somebody ten years younger than me to do the drawing because I don't have the time." The new plans sound amazing, at least if you are into cameras. He proposes a hand-held camera that would have a rising and tilting front that you could work with your hands. His eyes shine when he talks about it.

When Roma looks back on the seventies, he quips that he must have spent the years holed up in coffee shops. Besides making his cameras and taking pictures, he "did every odd job imaginable." By 1980, though, he had a body of work which he personally published in a limited edition. Called *Brooklyn Gardens*, the book landed Roma a Guggenheim Fellowship. He used the money for a trip to Sicily, and has since returned every summer to photograph. He plans to purchase a house there and ultimately have children and perhaps raise them in Sicily. "I want my kids to be bilingual."

A second book, released in 1982, followed the Guggenheim grant. Inspired by Frost's poem, "One Last Brevity", and by a picture he had seen of a dalmation, the book is entitled *Sirius Studies*. Sirius is the dog star. The photographs are of dogs. He printed twenty-one, to give to friends and collections. In a recent class at Yale, a student tacked a few of his own dog pictures

to the wall for Roma to critique. The student tried to comment about the pictures, saying they were "kind of dopey, I guess." Roma, however, seemed pleased with them. "Dopey is good," he said. "Leave dopey in. Art isn't just about death. We need some dopey." One of Roma's favorite possessions, as any student of his will recall, is a brown standard poodle named Gioia.

This year Roma teaches full time at Yale, with three courses a term, while still doing a variety of other work. One morning a week he teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York. And of course he spends some time pursuing his own photography. His students describe his work as very spiritual, full of faith and joy and peace. He photographs in two places: Sicily and Brooklyn. Roma, the students say, never talks about his own work, especially not in the way he makes them talk about their photographs.

For the past six months, however, Roma has had less time for his own photography, as he has been working with Tod Papageorge and John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art. The three have been editing the work of their friend Gary Winogrand, who died two and a half years ago. Roma readily admits the the work has been "one of the biggest things that has happened" to him. He alone was responsible for examining close to a quarter of a million photographs on more than seven thousand contact sheets. Most of those pictures had never before been seen, even by Gary. The job has just been completed. From that vast bulk of material Roma picked a number of images "in the hundreds," which will be printed and then edited again for a future book and major retrospective exhibit at MOMA. The job of editing his friend's work helped Roma "finalize" many of his own emotions. It has also stimulated his own vision. "Along with Tod and Lee Friedlander, Gary has been one of my major influences." That influence fresh in his psyche, Roma

"Although many of his students are quick to defend his style, Roma admits that criticism is a destructive process, 'like taking apart a frog.'"

thinks that much if his latest photography displays a renewed vitality.

Although today Roma loves teaching, he used to be leery of the whole process. "I didn't think you could teach art," he explains. Other than the early stint at the Pratt, Roma did not do any teaching before coming to Yale four years ago. His first visits were at the request of Tod Papageorge. Twice Tod invited Roma to be the guest critic for graduate final reviews. At the end of each semester the graduate students in photography have this review, a grueling and intense two days of criticism. Roma admits that he was "a pretty brutal" guest, since he believes that you can only be true to one thing at a time: "and in a critique I'm true to the subject, the medium. We have a goal." In Yale's photography department Roma found a method to search for that goal, to teach what he had thought to be unteachable. "I had always equated training with teaching, because that was what I'd seen." But at Yale, Roma says, the object is education, not necessarily "making a good photograph." Of course the technical concerns are divorced from aesthetic concerns. "The primary message is meaning. 'The photographs must communicate.'"

Roma believes that much of his joy of teaching results from this institution itself.