

A visual hymn to black faith

BY HOWARD HENRY CHEN
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM

Seven years ago, a photographer named Thomas Roma rigged five flashes onto a custom-made camera, strapped 45 pounds of battery packs onto his back and headed for church. He spent the next 3½ years of Sundays photographing African-American church services in Brooklyn. He went only into the churches into which he was invited, and made black-and-white images of worshippers so flush with technical brilliance and spiritual verve the Museum of Modern Art last summer exhibited 87 of the images.

That same exhibit opens in Durham tonight at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, and Roma, a 46-year-old Brooklyn native and a Catholic, will explain how and why anyone would devote so much time to enter a world so different — racially and spiritually — just to make pictures.

And risk looking like Rocketman trying to do it.

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WHAT

"Come Sunday,"
photographs by
Thomas Roma.

WHERE

Center for
Documentary Studies,
Duke University,
1317 W. Pettigrew St.,
Durham.

WHEN

Reception tonight,
5-7, with a gospel concert
at 6 and a
presentation by the
photographer at 7.
Both are free.

HOURS

Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-
5 p.m., Saturday 11
a.m.-4 p.m.

On exhibit through
Aug. 30.

CALL

660-3663.



ROMA

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"I went to 52 churches in all," says Roma in a telephone call from his office at Columbia University, where he teaches photography, "and why I started it is in my past at this point. There are a lot of beginnings for this project, many of them I'm sure were in the back of my mind, and I could pick any one of them."

The reason he has most widely given — articulated in the exhibit's accompanying book, "Come Sunday," and in an issue of DoubleTake magazine, which published a series of the photographs last year — is that he was photographing exteriors of Brooklyn churches of all denominations for a book to be called "City of Churches." In 1991, while photographing a Jewish temple that had been turned into an

African-American Christian church, he explained his project to the pastor. After listening to Roma, and admonishing him ("The truth is — and you should know better — that God's work is not the building itself but what goes on inside"), he invited the photographer to attend a service.

The images in the exhibit are the results of subsequently visiting more than 150 church services, often with his wife, Anna Roma, and their son, Giancarlo, accompanying him. And the images he made reflect the energy and patience he gave to the congregations, and the trust that they gave him in return.

"So much of what I've seen [in work on church services] seems to show and celebrate how different the people being photographed are from the rest of us, how odd and quirky they look and seem," says Alex Harris, co-editor of DoubleTake magazine

and an admirer of Roma's work. Roma is a contributing photographer to the magazine. "Tom's photographs manage to be very particular ... while at the same time feeling universal."

Almost all of his work, says Roma, is drawn from what he finds in his native Brooklyn, whether it's work on municipal swimming pools, or the elevated subways trains that roll through the borough or his childhood neighborhood.

"I'm working in a place that's larger than a lot of countries," says Roma. "Leaving to work somewhere else never made sense to me. Right now, I have six projects going on in Brooklyn. I can walk out my door and make photographs, and I'm not about making art about something or somewhere I know nothing about."

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