

For Roma, Photography Reveals the Mystery of Simplicity in the World

By DAVID COLBERT

Spectator Associate Features Editor

Thomas Roma, photographer and Columbia photography instructor puts photography far down in his world hierarchy, below painting, poetry, and even chess and math.

But the associate professor of visual arts, who is largely responsible for the shape photography instruction has taken at Columbia, only wants to make a point.

"It's nonsense," he admitted. "It's meant to be nonsense. It's not something I believe in, it's something I say... I talk about pure math as being a language, a medium that's close to God, and below that would be something like chess..."

Roma wants his students to think of photography as a medium, as a language for expression, one that can be used "the way writers write poetry or fiction." But, he said, writers do not always have artistic goals.

"You could write notes or you could write poetry. You could write a shopping list, or you could write a novel."

The problem with the medium of photography, Roma said, is that it is too useful. It is too easy to use for practical, non-artistic purposes, for example in newspapers. Roma believes that the more practical a medium is, the less interesting.

"There's nothing practical about chess," he said. "I'm interested in being pure. I practice photography in a pure form."

What interests Roma in photographs are the meanings they carries, whatever it is that it expresses that which could not be expressed any other way. Thus, he does not want his students making pictures that are merely visually pleasing, that could make it to the front of a greeting card.

"The vast majority of pictures are nothing more than visually pleasing or, worse, mementos. Memento of Joel's bar mitzvah or Mary's communion, or Jane and Dick's marriage. I don't make pictures that are mementos. I make new things in the world," Roma said. "Does it have to have meaning? No. But I believe that all artists, in the simplest sense, are trying to make things that don't get thrown away. All the pretty things are going to get thrown away. All the things that have no meaning will certainly get consumed and thrown away."

According to student Ryan Shams, CC '99, although Roma is known for his technical ability to make "immaculate prints," he does not tend to emphasize the technical aspects of photography to his students, allowing them, for the most part, to work them out themselves.

Rather, he concentrates on "more meaningful conceptual stuff," another one of his students, Carolina Garcia, CC '99 said.

However, this approach does not mean that he is vague or unclear when critiquing photographs. His students, both former and present, agree that one of his greatest strengths in teaching was showing them how to look at pictures critically, how to go from understanding a picture as whole and then seeing how its parts work together.

"One thing I learned that was really valuable was the importance of paying attention to exactly what's in the frame," former student Patty Wortham, BC '99 said.

"Most people will say 'this is good,' but won't say why. He'll give you practical advice."

When running his critiques, Roma has students hang their pictures on



CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER—DAVID COLBERT

Thomas Roma, Columbia photography instructor, wants his students to think of photography as a language for expression.

the wall, pick one and describe its meaning without referring to anything in it.

In other words, Roma won't let his students slide anything by him. Some students say he is tough and harsh critic. One called him "grueling." But, they say, they appreciate his frankness and ability to teach them how to improve their pictures and to do their best.

"He's at least as tough as an art professor should be. I've had more wishy-washy teachers and didn't learn as much," Debbie Grossman CC '99 said.

"I don't engage my students directly; I engage the work directly. So if someone has a wonderful experience taking the picture, and they want that picture to inform the critique, I don't let that happen," Roma said.

Roma's former and current students agree that he has very definite opinions about photography, art, and well, just about any topic.

He often diverges and editorializes, for example, explaining how the word "art" is misused and abused, often being used qualitatively.

"The biggest way that it's misused is that used qualitatively. If something is really good, it's art. 'Oh, you should go to my shoemaker, he's an artist.' No, he's a shoemaker, he's not an artist," Roma explained.

A native of Brooklyn, Roma has spent most of his life in the borough. He also traveled to Sicily on a Guggenheim Fellowship where he took pictures for his forthcoming book, *Perhaps the Heart*. Roma has published two other books and has two more forthcoming.

"I entered photography through books, more than galleries and museums ... and I live in a world of books... My ambition is to publish a lot of books," Roma said, since books are so easily portable across both space and time.

In fact, Roma's first experience in viewing serious photography was through a book—Gary Winnograd's *The Animals*.

"See the European Brown Bear picture" Roma said, pointing to a Winnograd poster in his office, with a photograph of a chain link fence, a sign instructing zoo visitors not to feed the bears, and only the bottom part of the bear's jaw visible, wrapped around the bottom of the sign.

"I looked at that picture and so much of the frustration of that caged animal was clear to me. I realized that photography could be that clear ... that what's mysterious about art doesn't have to be vague, or subtle ... that the mystery was in the world."

Roma—like photography—is a

relative newcomer to Columbia, now completing his third year. When he heard that Columbia was going to start teaching photography, he jumped at the chance to take the job and immediately called the University, never dreaming he would have "anything more than a conversation."

"Columbia was the great New York school. And I'm a New Yorker. I don't belong anywhere else."

Students say they appreciate that Roma is making pictures while he is teaching photography, and that he shares his own experiences with them.

Roma's classes have a lighter side as well, however.

"When some one does something incredibly stupid, like take pictures of an old lady on a bench, they have to bring in donuts for everybody," Grossman said.

Sometimes the class would turn into "The Tom Roma" show, Wortham added.

"He's so into his suits. He only wears Italian clothes and he loves telling you the brand of every item he wears and relishing in them with you. He's just so into being from Brooklyn."

Quote of the Day

"Women's colleges have had to be more explicit about the fact that the women's college is just as deserving of support as the one the husband went to."

—Barnard Public Affairs Director, Lucas Held on the advertisement in the most recent issue of *Barnard's alumnae* magazine.

See story, page one.

Contact Information

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