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Found In Brooklyn—Pictures From a Local Master

Thomas Roma Exhibit at the Brooklyn Central Library

By RICK PALLEY

It's taken 32 years, but Thomas Roma is finally paying off his debt to the Brooklyn Public Library.

Mind you, this is not a fine from a really overdue book—more a debt of gratitude.

It all started back in 1969, when Roma was nearly killed when thrown from his car in an accident in Borough Park. Sent home from the hospital still suffering from dizziness and vicious headaches from major head injuries, he was comfortable only when sitting.

So he sat and watched the world go by outside his window.

Like the movie "Rear Window," Roma passed the time snapping pictures on a camera he bought from his brother. When he was well enough to get around, his mother would drop him at the Mapleton branch library, where he spent day after day poring over all the photography books and magazines in the archives.

"It was my beginning," said Roma. He has since gone on to earn worldwide acclaim as a photographer (even the Mapleton library has one of his books).

Now he is finally getting a chance to return the favor.

Through October 31, a show of Roma's work will be gracing the Foyer Gallery in the Central Library, located on the spokes of Grand Army Plaza. The photos are from the Central Library's own Brooklyn Collection.

Roma's pictures capture the everyday sights of Brooklyn and

show us the beauty and resonance within them.

Deceptively simple at first, they reveal something different every time you look at them; a smile appears hopeful in one viewing, resigned in the next; a pair of well-worn shoes on a patio, unseen on first viewing, catch the eye and inform us of the presence of their owner.

Most of all, they connect with the viewer on a deeper level.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the eight photos in the show from his book "Sunset Park."

Taken at a public pool in the titular neighborhood, the pictures have a relaxed, unstudied air about them that belies the masterful use of light, camera angle, and composition.

But go past the technique and look at the people — kids toweling themselves off after a dip, fathers lovingly holding their babies in their arms, a teenager ducking the gaze and physical presence of his attention-hungry girlfriend.

While they capture a specific place and time, there is a universality in them that speaks directly to viewers of any culture or age. We see our own lives reflected through the lens of Roma's camera.

"You have to make pictures that are clearly about what's in the picture but also remind us of the other maybe important things in our lives that we're surprised into remembering," said Roma.

Continued on next page



Thomas Roma

Pictures From a Local Master

Continued from previous page

The photos on display are from four of the five books Roma has authored (three more are on the way for the next year). These four are set in Brooklyn, where he has lived most of his life, and not surprisingly has deep ties.

"It's a funny word, 'Brooklyn.' It's been in my ears my whole life and when I hear it there's something magical about it," said Roma.

Roma sees Brooklyn as a refuge for all, a home for wave after wave of immigrants from either foreign countries or other parts of America who in turn change its landscape, churches, stores and pastimes.

"It's an incredibly dynamic place," Roma said.

And even though he often travels to the city, where he is director of photography at Columbia University, Roma chooses to live with wife Anna and son Giancarlo in a house he bought 24 years ago in Greenwood Heights (or what real estate folks euphemistically call the "South Slope").

He relocated there at a time when all his friends insisted he was nuts for not moving to Soho. But with large arts communities now flour-

ishing in Williamsburg and DUMBO, Roma proved to be way ahead of his time.

Besides, he has everything he needs right here.

"In Brooklyn I could walk down the street with my camera and stop right where the world seems to come together to make a picture for me," Roma said.

Just how fertile ground Roma's own neighborhood is became apparent during a recent interview for Japanese TV, when he and the film crew leafed through one of his books.

By capturing the essence of daily life in Kings County, whether the local street scenes ("Found In Brooklyn"), the fervent prayer and singing of black churchgoers ("Come Sunday"), the elevated subway and its riders ("Higher Ground"), or the people caught up in the soulless machinery of the Brooklyn Criminal Court House (his latest, "Enduring Justice") Roma lets us look through a window into our own lives.

The Thomas Roma exhibition will be at the Central Library in Grand Army Plaza through October 31. His works are available for purchase at Ariel Meyerowitz Gallery, (212) 625-3434.