

## Thomas Roma | In Prison Air: The Cells of Holmesburg Prison

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN SZARKOWSKI.

powerHouse Books, New York, 2005. Designed by Marvin Hoshin. Printed by Oceanic Graphic Printing, China. Clothbound with a tipped-on illus., 96 pp., 44 duotones, 11 x 14 \$45.00

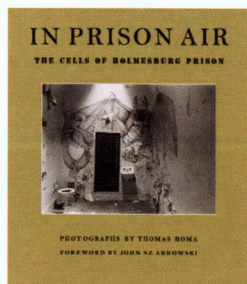
Thomas Roma's ninth book is a straightforward document of a twisted place, Philadelphia's shuttered Holmesburg Prison. The prison's peeling interior skin of cracked paint, bathed in slit-windowed light, simultaneously reminds the viewer of the dungeons of the Inquisition and the voluntary visionary seclusion of Fra Angelico's monastic cell. Roma finds a strange beauty in the decrepit remains of the unstoried lives lived in each tiny compartment. The institutional impoverishment embodied in the sinks, iron bedsteads and commodes is offset by the photographer's careful scrutiny of layered graffiti and tattered magazine photographs. Like incarcerated people everywhere, the prisoners obviously struggled to maintain their identity in the face of the grinding forces working to enforce their anonymity. Perhaps surprisingly, the inmates of this outpost of hell seem to have had heaven on their minds more often than not. There is relatively little sexual imagery, but references to the passage of time, and to eternity, are ubiquitous. Expressions of faith run the gamut, sprinkled among scrawled calendars, untutored drawings and even amateur hieroglyphs. As a ruin, Holmesburg is picturesque,

but its meanings are more nuanced: the prison was the site of a 25-year series of human experiments, in which a variety of consumer products and dangerous chemicals were tested on illiterate inmates by academic, military, intelligence and commercial entities. The addition of this layer of suffering lends the stains, scrawls, and drooling lines of rust in the photographs a more ominous cast. In light of Holmesburg's history, Roma's choice of title, drawn from Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, is all too apt:

*The vilest deeds like poison-weeds  
Bloom well in prison-air:*

*It is only what is good in Man  
That wastes and withers there:*

*Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate  
And the Warder is Despair.*



PHIL HARRIS



From *In Prison Air*, by Thomas Roma