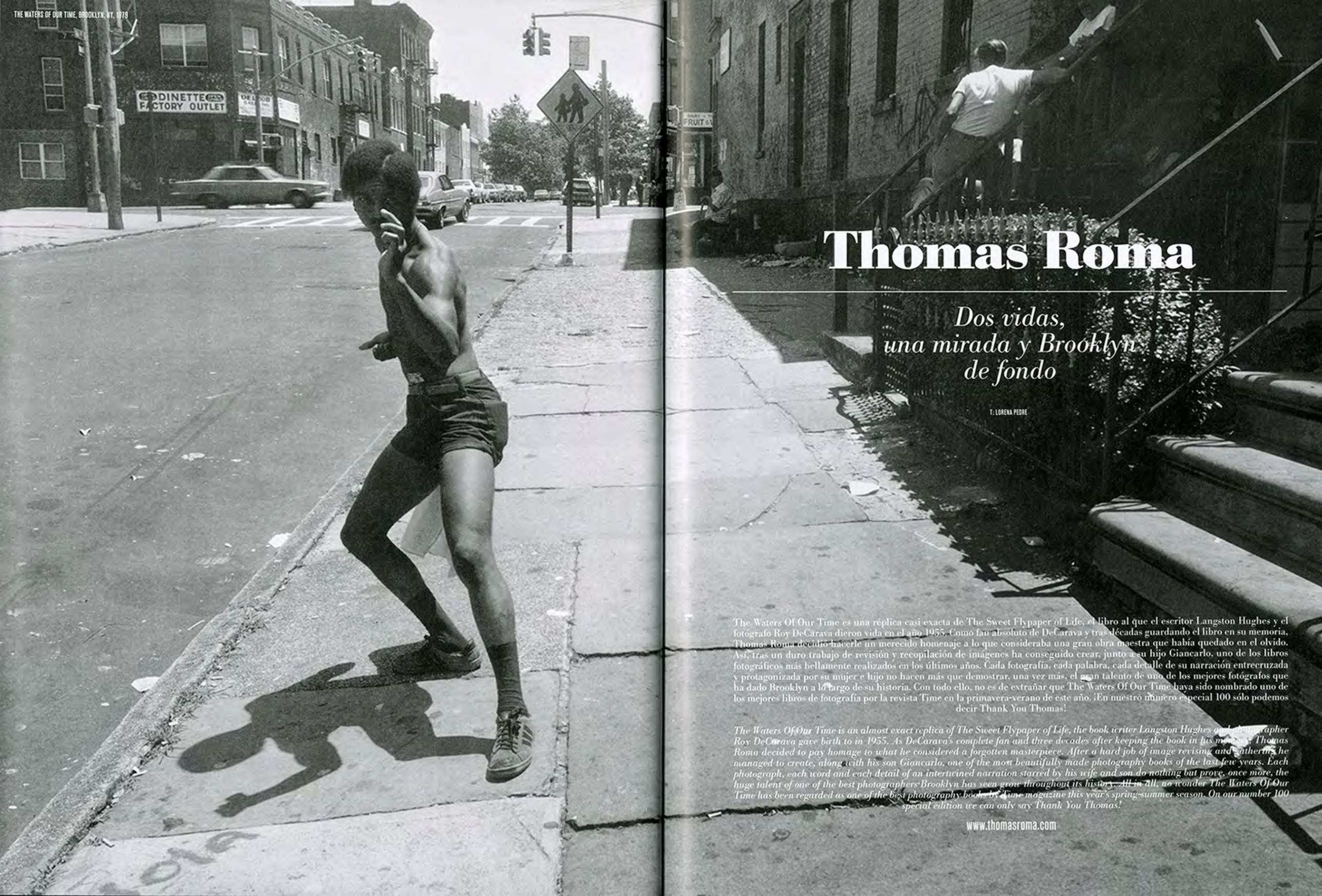


THE WATERS OF OUR TIME, BROOKLYN, NY, 1979

Thomas Roma

Dos vidas, una mirada y Brooklyn de fondo

T: LORENA PEDRE

The Waters Of Our Time es una réplica casi exacta de The Sweet Flypaper of Life, el libro al que el escritor Langston Hughes y el fotógrafo Roy DeCarava dieron vida en el año 1955. Como fan absoluto de DeCarava y tras décadas guardando el libro en su memoria, Thomas Roma decidió hacerle un merecido homenaje a lo que consideraba una gran obra maestra que había quedado en el olvido. Así, tras un duro trabajo de revisión y recopilación de imágenes ha conseguido crear, junto a su hijo Giancarlo, uno de los libros fotográficos más bellamente realizados en los últimos años. Cada fotografía, cada palabra, cada detalle de su narración entrecruzada y protagonizada por su mujer e hijo no hacen más que demostrar, una vez más, el gran talento de uno de los mejores fotógrafos que ha dado Brooklyn a lo largo de su historia. Con todo ello, no es de extrañar que The Waters Of Our Time haya sido nombrado uno de los mejores libros de fotografía por la revista Time en la primavera-verano de este año. ¡En nuestro número especial 100 sólo podemos decir Thank You Thomas!

The Waters Of Our Time is an almost exact replica of The Sweet Flypaper of Life, the book writer Langston Hughes and photographer Roy DeCarava gave birth to in 1955. As DeCarava's complete fan and three decades after keeping the book in his memory, Thomas Roma decided to pay homage to what he considered a forgotten masterpiece. After a hard job of image revising and gathering, he managed to create, along with his son Giancarlo, one of the most beautifully made photography books of the last few years. Each photograph, each word and each detail of an intertwined narration starred by his wife and son do nothing but prove, once more, the huge talent of one of the best photographers Brooklyn has seen grow throughout its history. All in all, no wonder The Waters Of Our Time has been regarded as one of the best photography books by Time magazine this year's spring-summer season. On our number 100 special edition we can only say Thank You Thomas!

www.thomasroma.com

THE WATERS OF OUR TIME, BROOKLYN, NY. 1972

> **“No me cansaré de dar las gracias a John Szarkowski, él tomó en serio mis fotografías antes de tomarme en serio a mí”**

utilizar en tus clases. ¿Qué importancia tiene la música en tu vida y en tu obra? ¿Y esta canción en concreto? Creo que la música es el arte de todo el mundo, todo el mundo tiene una canción favorita, todo el mundo tiene una lista de reproducción, todo el mundo recuerda la música que estaba escuchando en diferentes momentos de su vida. Me siento como si siempre tuviera una canción danzando por mi cabeza, o tal vez más de una. Empiezo cada semestre con una canción de Dinah Washington, Look to the Rainbow, como algo que creo que mis estudiantes deberían estar pensando de inmediato y termino el semestre con Follow - la versión cantada por Richie Havens (que también es de Brooklyn). Pero creo que la letra lo dice todo, responde a por qué esa canción. No me gustaría decirlo con otras palabras.

La fotografía de la portada, por su parte, proviene del primer rollo que utilizaste en una cámara que construiste en 1972. ¿Cómo fue el proceso de selección y elección entre las 38.000 fotografías que tenías desde la década de 1970? Normalmente, en primer lugar, trato de imaginar qué hacer con un montón de fotografías de 11”x14”, así que tengo que ver miles de ellas. Una vez hecho, me decido por algunos años de mi trabajo que tengo ganas de ver en las hojas de contacto. Así me ocurrió con las 38.000 que tenía para este libro, repasando todas las hojas de contactos que miré y las 8 fotografías por rollo que tenía cada una de ellas. Después de hacer una edición de cerca de 500 fotografías que quería tener en cuenta para el libro, reduje el número y empecé a tratar de darles sentido.

¿Por qué decidisteis enfocar también el libro desde el punto de vista de una mujer? La principal razón fue porque era lo que Langston Hughes hizo en The Sweet Flypaper of Life. Además, también me sentí atraído por la idea de desaparecer tanto como fuera posible de la experiencia del espectador/lector con el libro.

Esa mujer es Anna, tu esposa, y en el libro también aparecen fotografías de tu hijo Giancarlo. Sin embargo, ninguno de los dos se representan a sí mismos. ¿Utilizar fotografías que les habías hecho a lo largo de los años era la manera más certera de retratar una historia en la que se muestra el paso del tiempo en sus personajes? Estás absolutamente en lo cierto. Sí, a la gran mayoría de las personas que he fotografiado en mi vida sólo lo he hecho una vez, pero tenía todos estos años de fotografías de dos personas, por eso tenía sentido utilizarlas. El personaje masculino, Giancarlo, que aparece por primera vez en la página 3 se hace más y más joven según el libro avanza. Y Anna, que aparece por primera vez un poco más tarde, hace justo lo contrario, se hace más y más mayor, ambos en perfecto orden cronológico. Sí, es sobre el paso del tiempo, pero también sugiere algo acerca de la memoria fotográfica.

En el libro, texto e imágenes coexisten como iguales haciendo, así, la narración realmente fluida y fácil. Sin embargo, el final está abierto a muchas interpretaciones. ¿Por qué? La esperanza que teníamos era que estábamos haciendo algo lo suficientemente denso y complejo que podía soportar múltiples lecturas e interpretaciones. Quiero decir, hemos querido hacer un libro que merece una segunda o tercera o incluso más lecturas. Las palabras no son títulos de las imágenes ni las fotografías ilustran las palabras, éste es un libro que hay que volver a revisar de vez en cuando para que traiga una verdadera recompensa a su lector.

El número 100 de nuestra revista es un homenaje a toda esa gente que nos ha apoyado durante todos estos años. En tu caso, si tuvieras que darle las gracias a alguien que haya sido un pilar fundamental para ti en tu faceta profesional. ¿Quién sería? En mi vida profesional sería John Szarkowski. Él tomó en serio mis fotografías antes de tomarme en serio a mí.

You started your career working on Wall Street. What were those years like and why did you decide to leave it? *I started working on Wall Street when I was 17 years old and it was my first experience outside of Brooklyn and it was a great one (in fact, it was on my 17th birthday). I was doing the job of grown men and I was treated like one of them and I happen to be good at it and enjoyed my work. When I was 19 ½, I got into a bad car accident and fractured my skull and while I was re-cooperating, I discovered photography. It is actually a long story – I went back after a year and a half, and as much as I loved my time on the trading floor, I missed all the life that was going by outside. You have to understand, in the wintertime I would arrive at work and it was still dark, the building had no windows, and then by the time the workday was over it was dark again. During that time, there were protests against the Vietnam War, student demonstrations right outside our doors on Wall Street and something stirred in me. Photography seemed to be a way out into the world. I didn't completely understand this as it was happening, it makes much more sense in retrospect. I knew as much as I loved my work there, there was something else and it was worth taking a chance by walking away.*

Later on, how did you become a professional photographer? *Funny thing is, I never really became a professional photographer. I thought I would be but I never got around to it. I was only unemployed a few weeks when I was offered a job to be a kind of teaching assistant and darkroom technician at Pratt Institute, a local art and engineering school in Brooklyn. There, I became immersed in the lives of what we used to call "serious photographers." That is, photographers who understood photography to be a serious personal endeavor. And although many of them were "professional" photographers, they were much more interested in trying to have a life in photography doing their own work, rather than making photographs on assignment.*

Since 1983 you have also been professor of photography at Yale University, at Fordham University, at The Cooper Union and at the School of Visual Arts, and in 1996 you became the Director of Photography Program at Columbia University School of the Arts. What gives you the process of teaching which do not other aspects of your life? *I've been fortunate all these years to mostly teach photography on the most basic level, what we call "Photo I." In that sense, I am always working with students who are just discovering photography. It's like always being in the first weeks and months of a love affair and it keeps me in touch with why I made the commitment myself to be a photographer in the first place.*

You have portrayed life in Brooklyn like no one else. With a sincere, close and natural look. Do you think the fact that you make your own cameras yourself has helped get what you convey with your photos? *I have answered this question in different ways and some of my answers are more true than others. The simple fact was that I wanted to make a camera to do exactly what I wanted it to do, and nothing else. The bare minimum. Even cameras that were around in 1971 and 72, when I first started building my first camera, were able to do many things, they had many features that I wasn't interested in using. My attachment to my camera is not unlike a musician's attachment to his instrument. Much of the look of my pictures I believe has to do with the fact that I use medium format film which has a very long grey scale, a focal length that is only slightly wide angle (something like a 40mm lens on a 35mm camera), and the fact that the lens that I use is not so sharp, certainly not as sharp as modern lenses are so that as the sharpest thing in the photograph transitions to things that are less sharp, it is a gradual, not abrupt shift, the way we see in photographs made with more modern optics.*

Still since 1991 you use a medium format camera one-of-a-kind, also built by yourself. Does this camera have something special

THE WATERS OF OUR TIME, BROOKLYN, NY, 1973

> **I can't thank John Szarkowski enough, who took my photographs seriously before he took me seriously**

<u>that no other on the market has?</u> *Yes, it is true. In 1991 I made a camera that I believed I couldn't improve upon, this was after 20 years of making cameras. I've been using it ever since (it is named after my son who was also born in 1991). The great improvement of this camera over the previous ones I had been using (and made) is the viewfinder which is a bright-line optical viewfinder with no reduction, that is it shows me the world I'm looking at life size and I am able to keep both eyes open to see things coming in and out of the frame. It is my own design and I've only made a few, for my own use.*

<u>"The waters of our time" is your 13th monograph. Your son has quite some relevance here. What has it been like working closely with him?</u> *My son is an only child, although my wife and I many unsuccessful pregnancies, which I think contributed to how close we are. It is essential to understand that I have not only observed his life up close, he's observed mine and I believe that provided the insight necessary to write what he did, which is a companion to a fictional, autobiographical account of my life. But you asked "how was it working closely?" – actually I provided him with a mockup of the book, I gave him a copy of "The Sweet Flypaper of Life" and told him he had to write in the voice of a woman, and it had to fill in the white spaces between the photographs. We didn't really work together, it was a collaboration that he sometimes describes as making a movie in reverse, that is I provided him with all the visual materials and he had to imagine the words/the narrative. The lyrics of the song which run through the book provide the soundtrack.*

<u>The book "The waters of our time" is a replica of the one you mention, "The Sweet Flypaper of Life" by Langston Hugles and photos of Roy DeCarava. The size, number of pages, images, words in the title on the cover as well as the typo. Why this book? Why such an exact replica?</u> *I don't remember exactly when I bought my first copy of "The Sweet Flypaper of Life" but it was sometime in the early or mid 1970s and had already seen Roy DeCarava's photographs. When I first laid eyes on it, I was struck by how humble it was, humble in the most compelling and beautiful way. I loved that the story began on the cover, that just looking at it you were already committed to knowing what was inside. When I opened it up and realized that the words and the pictures did not quite match up, but were somehow equal in weight, in gravity. I had never seen anything like it, there was nothing like it. I had kept it in my mind to do something just like it. I knew Roy DeCarava and his retrospective and my exhibition "Come Sunday" were at the Museum of Modern Art, NY at the same time. I felt really connected to him and I decided to do a direct homage, as direct as I could in every way.*

<u>The title, "The waters of our time", comes from the song "Follow" by Jerry Merrick, which you once mentioned to usually use for your classes. How important is music for your life and your work? And this particular song?</u> *I believe music is everyone's art, everyone has a favorite song, everyone has a playlist, everyone remembers the music that was playing at different times in their life. I feel as though I always have a song running through my head, or perhaps more than one. I begin every semester with a Dinah Washington song "Look to the Rainbow," as something I think my students should be thinking about right off the bat and I end the semester with "Follow" – the version sung by Richie Havens (who is also from Brooklyn). But I think the lyrics says it all, answers why that song. I'd hate to say it in less good words.*

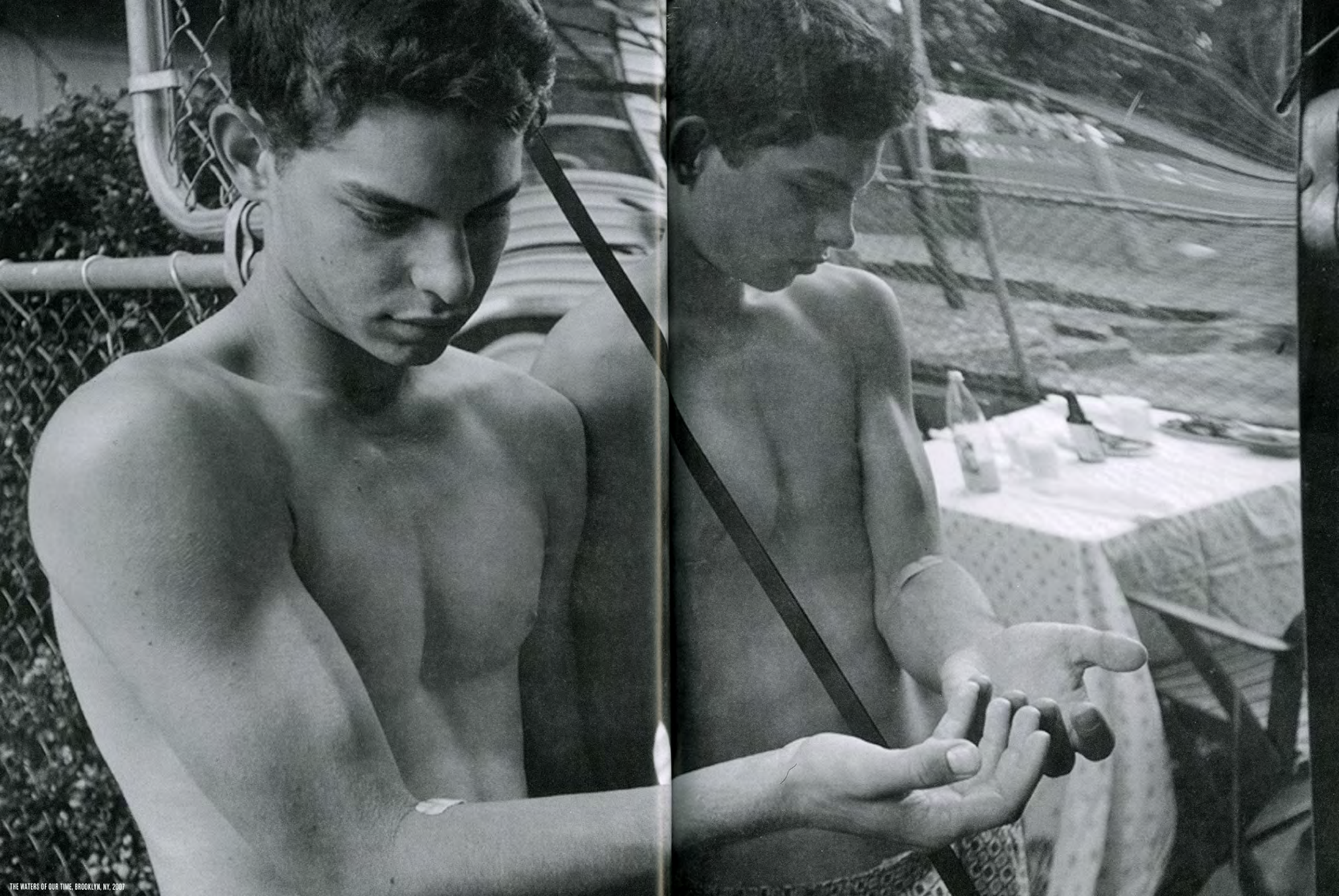
<u>The cover photograph, meanwhile, comes from the first roll you used in a camera you built in 1972. How was the process of selection and election among 38,000 photographs that you had from the 1970s?</u> *Well, first, try to imagine that I make a lot of 11"x14" workprints so I have thousands of those to look at. And then I decided for some years of my work I would look at the contact sheets. That is how I came up with that number, thinking of all the contacts sheets I looked at and each one having 8 pictures on a roll. After I made an edit down to about 500 photographs that I wanted to consider for the book, I reduced them in size and started trying to lay them out.*

<u>Why did you decide to also focus the book from the point of view of a woman?</u> *The main reason was because it was what Langston Hughes did in "The Sweet Flypaper of Life" and also, I was also attracted to the idea that I disappear as much a possible from the viewer/reader's experience of the book.*

<u>That woman is Anna, your wife, and the book also shows pictures of your son Giancarlo. However, none are represented by them. Is using photographs that you had taken of them over the years the most certain way to portray a story where time is displayed in your characters?</u> *You are absolutely correct. Yes, the vast majority of the people in my life, I have only photographed once but I find myself with all these years of photographs of two people and it made sense to use them. The male character (Giancarlo) who first appears on page 3 gets younger and younger as the book progresses. And Anna who first appears somewhat later than that, does the reverse, gets older and older, both of them in perfect chronological order. Yes, it is about the passage of time but also suggesting something about memory photographically.*

<u>In the book, text and images equally coexist, hence making the story a smooth and easy read. The end is however open to many interpretations. Why is that?</u> *The hope was that we were making something dense enough and complex enough that it could withstand multiple readings and multiple interpretations. I mean, we wanted to make a book that deserved a second or third or beyond reading, not words as captions to pictures or pictures illustrating words but rather a book that rewarded being picked up from time to time.*

<u>The number 100 of our magazine is a tribute to all those people who have supported us over the years. In your case, if you had to thank someone who has been a mainstay for you in your professional life, who would it be?</u> *In my professional life, that would be John Szarkowski who took my photographs seriously before he took me seriously.*



THE WATERS OF OUR TIME, BROOKLYN, NY, 2007