

HYPERALLERGIC

In the Vale of Cashmere: Prospect Park's Hidden World of Gay Cruising

by Carey Dunne



From Thomas Roma's 'The Vale of Cashmere' series. All the images are untitled. (all photographs courtesy the artist and Steven Kasher Gallery)

“When I got there, I found the park filled with men in the same horny, hungry state of mind I was in ... I can't remember ever seeing so many gorgeous black men in any one place,” Rory Buchanan wrote in his short story “Summer Chills,” from *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*. Buchanan was describing the Vale of Cashmere, a secluded patch of wilderness in Prospect Park that's been the unofficial locus of gay cruising in Brooklyn since the 1970s. Once a formal Victorian garden, it's now an unkempt maze of paths surrounding a sunken fountain filled with reeds and moss.



From 2008 to 2011, using a tripod and large camera he built himself, photographer Thomas Roma took portraits of the mostly Black and Latino gay and bisexual men who frequent the Vale of Cashmere. A lifelong Brooklynite, Roma hadn't visited the Vale since the 1970s, when would often drop off his best friend and roommate, Carl, on a quiet stretch of Flatbush Avenue. He'd watch him climb through a hole in a fence to go meet men in the park. In 1996, Carl died of AIDS in Roma's arms. The series of black-and-white photographs Roma took years later, called *In the Vale of Cashmere*, is dedicated to Carl's memory.

The upcoming publication of *In the Vale of Cashmere*, by Powerhouse, as well as its exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery, is timely, coinciding with a slow but sure sea change in gay rights in the United States. "I could not have taken these photographs ten years ago," Roma says. These men's willingness to be photographed reflects a lessening stigma about both homosexuality in general and the usually hush-hush practice of cruising for sex in public. The photos make clear that "the men of the Vale are and always have been some of our friends, family members, colleagues, and our neighbors," G. Winston James, a Brooklyn-based poet and himself a frequent visitor of the Vale, writes in the book's introduction.



Roma says “it’s a coincidence” that he wrapped up the series just as gay marriage was legalized federally. His images transcend topicality; they’re about more than the changing politics of sexuality. While some photo series focusing on marginalized populations feel deliberately political, these images are journalistic in their detachment and artistry. They don’t convey any particular attitude about the men or their proclivities or their minority status.

Over the course of three years, Roma got to know the men in the Vale of Cashmere, which got its fairytale name from an 1817 Thomas Moore poem. Men would often approach Roma as he was setting up his unwieldy camera. He’d spend a minimum of 20 minutes talking to people he met about his project, and then, if they were interested, he’d photograph them in long 6-second exposures. “These are collaborative portraits,” Roma says. This means they’re free of voyeurism and objectification; they artfully convey their subjects’ humanity and emotion. Some men pictured look full of loneliness and longing; others lounge blissed out against tree trunks.



The photos are also about the otherworldly beauty of the Vale of Cashmere itself, a strange portal where the city’s normal social rules don’t really apply. “It’s kind of a magical place,” Roma says. “It has something to do with the surrounding community being ignored and this part of the park being neglected that turned into a kind of beautiful forest. It’s the wildest part of the park, the closest to nature, the least manicured, the least tended, and it’s kind of enchanted because of that.” In almost mystical light filtered through leaves, the men in these black-and-white photos seem to blend into the surrounding wilderness, their long shadows joining the shadows of trees.

It’s partly this sense of enchantment that makes the Vale of Cashmere persist as a meeting spot even as the search for intimacy in communities of all orientations migrates to the internet. “Apps [like Tinder or Grindr] can’t replace a place like this,” Roma says. An iPhone screen doesn’t offer the feeling of being in a “lush tropical jungle,” or the smell of “vegetation smoldering and seething with a life all its own,” as Buchanan writes in “Summer Chills.” And neither can any bar or nightclub offer an equivalent experience.



“Gathering at the fountains and along the benches in the Rose Garden above the Vale of Cashmere during the day is as much (or more) an act of fellowshipping and strengthening of community ties as it is one of cruising for sex,” G. Winston James writes. “Rather than simply being driven into concealment by a heteronormative and homophobic society, many men (myself included) entered the Vale of Cashmere after dark because we enjoyed it (even drew a sense of power and resistance to societal norms from it), not because we had no other options through which to engage with other men.”



This “enchantment” is coupled with a sense of danger. While the terror of AIDS has somewhat lessened since the virus first devastated the city’s gay population in the 1970s— “It felt like it happened overnight,” Roma says — the fear of disease is still “always on people’s minds.” The Vale of Cashmere has always had a “reputation for being dangerous,” Roma says. It’s known as a spot for drug deals as well as cruising, and muggers and violent criminals often target men in the Vale, suspecting they won’t seek out the police. There have been assorted attempts by city and borough governments, as well as gay organizations, to curb cruising behaviors, “seen by many as socially unacceptable, perilous in terms of risk of bodily harm and potential exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, and deviant, irresponsible, and illegal,” as James writes.



The Prospect Park Alliance has recently revived plans to renovate the Vale of Cashmere, to clean up the currently rose-free Rose Garden, make the area feel more like the wholesome Children's Playground it was in the 1800s. If the plans materialize, in the coming years, these photographs might inadvertently become a swan song for a wilder Brooklyn and the Vale of Cashmere's hidden world.

In the Vale of Cashmere will be published by Powerhouse Books on October 29th, with an accompanying exhibition at the Steven Kasher Gallery which opens on the same day and runs until December 19th.

