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## Inside the Vale of Cashmere, a Bucolic Cruising Spot Threatened By ‘Restoration’

By Nicole Disser    October 30, 2015



Like many Brooklynites, Prospect Park is my go-to, but the awesomely named Vale of Cashmere— a relatively isolated area on the east side of the park and the subject of photographer Thomas Roma’s new book— didn’t sound familiar at all. To outsider eyes like mine, the Vale (depending on your taste) is either a beautifully wild or pitifully neglected patch of land, overgrown with disobedient trees and untamed plants, at the center of which there’s a once-elegant fountain clogged with weeds and fetid puddles from years of neglect. Park staff has planted shrubs and flowers there too, lending the area a rotting romanticism.

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But the Vale has another history: it's long been a cruising spot for gay men, but especially gay men of color. Until recently it was considered an open secret, and one that many park powerfuls have decided not to engage, despite demands from elsewhere that they do so (in various ways). While Roma's series is ultimately a personal exploration of friendship and loss, it's nearly impossible to unravel his images from questions about what kind of impact a looming project will have on the community that has made this space its own.

I met Thomas in his Columbia University office (he's the founder and director of the photography program there), where there were a few attentive students sitting across from his desk, watching while he picked apart an old camera. He wore a suit, but somehow it wasn't stiff, and had thick-rimmed glasses— Roma looks a lot like how you'd imagine an Ivy League professor in the '50s. "It's very therapeutic," he explained, gesturing down toward the camera parts.

The room smelled strongly of darkroom chemicals, something that instantly made me feel at home. "People come in and they'll say, 'This is photography,'" he said. "I still do all my own darkroom, I have no assistants. I do everything on my own." He paused. "So how do you want to enter this Vale of Cashmere?"

At 65, Roma has an endearing croak, and he's an indelible storyteller. But unlike most people with this gift, he can be self-deprecating to the extreme. "You know, I don't have any credentials, I don't even have a high school diploma," he said later on. "So I allow myself to do this." He was referring to photographing the Vale.

In a way, Thomas Roma might know the Vale better than any living person— though the term "know" is slippery here. He consistently visited the Vale— "I was there three or four days a week, twelve months a year for three-and-a-half years, it was a commitment—" and not just to enjoy the scenery, or even to cruise. It's kind of a "complicated story," Roma admits— but ultimately he was there to take portraits of who he refers to fondly as "the men of the Vale," who by the way were also there all the time, and to pay homage to his very close friend who used to frequent the Vale himself.

In the mid-1970s, Thomas's life "took one of these turns that life takes," he said. "I was poor, I was in my mid-20s and I had everything from family problems to work problems, you name it." Roma was born and raised in Brooklyn, and has pretty much photographed Brooklyn and only Brooklyn (there are a few exceptions) his entire life. After getting evicted, he moved into a furnished brownstone in Boerum Hill, where friends of his girlfriend were living— these days, it's a rather genteel section of Brooklyn to say the least. "Back then it was rough," he remembered. "I was paying I think five or six dollars a

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week– it’s hard to believe it was \$5...” he trailed off. “But I remember moving in with a paper bag, that’s all I had.”

The house was “cooperatively owned” by four gay men. “They took me in, essentially– I mean I rented it, I wasn’t taken in like a homeless person– but I had visited a bunch of times. I had gone there for dinner. I felt as much at home as I’d felt at any place,” he recalled. Thomas quickly became very close with Carl, another guy living in the house. “The book is dedicated to Carl,” Thomas said, his voice shaking. “We did everything together, we even traveled. He used to live in Sicily– I’d never been outside the country– and he took me there and showed me everything you could see. Carl was a communist, Carl was a martyr, Carl taught me how to cook, he was outside of the capitalist system.”



Carl, a gay man, was also Thomas’ introduction to the Vale. “I’d been living there for a while and I was heading out for the evening. I said, ‘I guess I’m going over to Park Slope,’ or something– I was going to a bar– and he said, ‘Will you drop me off by the park?’” Thomas agreed and as they approached the entrance on Grand Army Plaza, Carl told him to continue along Flatbush Avenue. “He said, ‘Stop here,’ so I stopped and he said he was going to meet someone and there was a hole in the fence, and he went through the hole

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in the fence. I thought it was strange, to be perfectly honest, it was already after dark. And then I left him there.”



Thomas said he never thought much more of it. “Over time, talking about it, and meeting some of the people he met there— he’d bring them home, I got to realize it was a place to cruise.” For a long time, Thomas didn’t know this place even had a name. Carl never mentioned one.

The two remained close for a long time, and Thomas actually named his son after Carl. In December 1991, Carl died from complications associated with AIDS, “and my son was born in September,” Thomas recalled, heavily. “So Carl knew— he got to hold him and all of that. He was very proud of the fact he had a baby named after him.”

There is certainly a story behind this book, and within the photographs too, but Roma emphasizes— and it’s clear from the photographs themselves— this was not an anthropological study, a foray into a sub-culture, nor was it an exploration of a group he does not belong to. “The problem with documentary photography is that people want to

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attach a ‘therefore’ to it– therefore you know something about this place– no, you don’t know what it’s like at all. You only know the photographs of this place.”

These are not distanced studies; the portraits are intimate depictions of individuals, couples, and groups of men. There’s a certain rawness to these photos, not just in Roma’s exacting eye for nature, but also for the nuances of human expression. He’s able to freeze flickering expressions, moments of incredible vulnerability and openness. The looks on the men’s faces range from sensual and poised, to sassy, forlorn, even bored. They never look uncomfortable, though maybe slightly melancholy– but their bodies are relaxed and open toward the camera.

This sense of comfort partially due to Roma’s method of capturing them: through a medium format camera of his own design where he can look through the viewfinder and directly at his subjects at the same time. “I’m looking at someone and my other eye is open and looking at them,” he explained. “That’s part of the reason why my pictures look like that– I’m not behind a machine or seeing through a tunnel, I’m very present.”

But the sense of ease in the photos can also reflect the relationship between the men and their environment. There’s a multi-layered communion here: between the men and nature, and between the photographer and the men. It’s rare that you can sense the presence of a photographer in the pictures they take, but here you can really feel Roma’s presence. And that’s not simply because the shots are posed (indicating at least a basic level of communication and direction) but because there’s a certain sense of comfort, and of stillness, which is definitely something I felt when I sat across from Roma. I don’t know how much he told these guys about Carl to make them understand, but he probably didn’t even need to.

“The question that kept coming to me is, ‘Why?’ Why do I want to take their picture? Not everyone asked, but some of them did.” And depending on the situation, Thomas said, “I either answered it tongue-in-cheek or deadly serious. But it was always the same answer, that I thought the person I was photographing was beautiful.”

And while the photographs are deeply personal for Thomas too, he doesn’t expect that his story will be any part of it. “[The book] represents an historic moment, but not a moment in time,” Thomas explained. “I think more of it like a poem that takes your whole life to write, there’s a lot that informs this book.”

If anything, Roma will admit he came to know the landscape intensely. The same tree, for example, appears again and again in the book. “From all the years walking there, I got to be pretty familiar with the landscape– I’m from Brooklyn– but all of a sudden, I felt like I was in the country. You can’t see the rest of the park from the Vale of Cashmere, it’s cut

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off. I started photographing the trees and more trees and other trees— there’s a lot of trees.”

Projects to revamp Prospect Park have been underway since 1980 when Mayor Koch unveiled a \$10 million plan to begin restoration of the park, which was known at the time as a “haunt for vandals and muggers” to its former glory. But the Prospect Park Alliance, came in a little bit later. Founded in 1987, the PPA (in conjunction with the City’s Parks Department) solidified the current public-private partnership in maintaining the park.



By the time the PPA was founded, Prospect Park had already seen a dramatic recovery: the number of people using the park had tripled and tennis courts, the boat house, and the Long Meadow were fully functioning in addition to nine new baseball diamonds that were nearly finished. There was even talk that the Friends of Prospect Park, a local grassroots effort, was planning to restore the Vale of Cashmere—something that had been on the table since at least as far back as 1965, when the neighborhood group formed, at first embarking on projects like raising around \$800 to save an old elm tree.

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It's easy to forget that parks and green spaces are not exempt from socioeconomic forces. Prospect Park's revival has had a huge impact on the neighborhoods that surrounds it— something urbanists have dubbed “green gentrification.” As the park has become a more desirable place to be, the surrounding neighborhoods have become more white and more expensive.

The growing challenge to equal access to green spaces is often talked about as a two-fold problem: one, which has been reiterated by Mayor de Blasio (and it's the reason why he hates the High Line) is the inequitable distribution of green spaces across the city. While some areas like Chelsea, for example, have access to immense resources to build awe-inspiring parks not just thanks to the City, but because of private donations and the efforts of volunteers who have the time, connections, and power to fundraise and advocate for the neighborhood's green space.

Secondly, and maybe less talked about, is the issue of who has access to these green spaces. If you visit the High Line, it's pretty clear that it's mainly for tourists and people who live and work in Chelsea (a group of people that hardly look anything like the City's population). But Prospect Park actually attracts a diverse crowd. That can mostly likely be



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attributed to the fact the neighborhood is surrounded by several neighborhoods with vastly different demographics— think Park Slope versus Flatbush and Ditmas Park. And in fact, a park survey taken in the mid-'90s demonstrated that most people who visit the park live nearby.

While no doubt the area surrounding the park is changing rapidly due to a hot real estate market, the park is still easily accessible to people from a variety of income brackets and backgrounds. (In 1994, the Times made a comparison to Central Park that is unlikely to be made today: “But unlike Central Park, which defines the most expensive real estate in New York, [the Friends of Prospect Park and the Prospect Park Alliance] can call on a perimeter that is largely modest, middle-class housing.”)

But that could change as the park continues to see improvement and unhinged real estate prospectors build fancy new buildings (complete with amenities like “pet spa rooms”) and rents continue to rise. Earlier this year, a Prospect Park-side mansion sold for \$12.4 million while condos overlooking the park in this glass monstrosity go for an average of \$900 a square foot (according to the real estate guide Trulia, the average price for homes per square foot in Brooklyn is currently \$649).

There is a clear divide between the east and west sides of the park and it is reflected in nearby neighborhoods— Crown Heights, Flatbush-Ditmas Park, and Lefferts Gardens lie adjacent to the east side, while Park Slope and Gowanus border the west side. According to real estate guide Trulia, median rent for apartments as close as you can get to the west side of the park is as high as \$2,350 a month (in Park Slope) while the lowest median for any area bordering the park is \$912 (at Parade Place and Canton Avenue in Flatbush-Ditmas Park).

In the park’s recent history, renovations have prioritized the areas of the park closer to largely white neighborhoods (and those closer to institutions like the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Brooklyn Museum) while spots closer to traditionally African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities are relatively “neglected” by official manicuring, even in the eyes of the PPA. (Whether that is because these areas are closer to largely white neighborhoods is up for debate.)

As such, not all areas of the park have been touched by the expansive renovations. A third, and much less talked about issue with green space and public spaces in general, is the issue of queer space. As Prospect Park develops and is “restored,” it’s subject to increasing social control. Various groups have called on the need to “fix” the Vale for decades now and explicitly cited the cruising that goes on there as an issue.



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The “Litter Mob,” a now disbanded Park Slope-based community effort founded and led by Marie Viljoen (author of the cookbook *66 Square Feet* and a blogger who had enough time on her hands to enthusiastically record “the minute changes that occur in a garden, like the opening of a rose”) aimed to curb cruising in various ways. Viljoen told *New York* magazine in 2012: “I don’t care if people have sex, but all the little trails they leave behind are really bad for the forest floor.” The *Times* also did a piece on her efforts in what they referred to as the “Midwood” section of the park, and described Viljoen as “a Brooklyn-chic bushwhacker in cargo pants, tall leather boots and a shock of red lipstick.”



Her responses to the media were relatively benign (even if the articles seemed to be poking fun at her bleeding heart activism), but her own blog entries, accompanied by various finger-wagging photos including one depicting a used condom hanging forlornly from a branch, tell a different story: actually the major goal of the Litter Mob’s efforts was to curb the cruising activities and her blog is a record of intolerance, ignorance, and pearl clutching. Viljoen may have cleaned up garbage, but she also took it up on herself to hang signs reminding people the park closed at dusk.

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In 2012 she wrote: “The weather is warmer and so cruising activities have picked up again. At the foot of grand old trees on the flats a lot more condoms and soiled tissues have accumulated. The Slope was the scene of several parties – lots of liquor bottles, Newport Light boxes and cigar wrappers.” She even wrote a wish list for the park, #3 (just below “a team to patrol the woods once a week,” and “a keeper of the woods”) is a request for signs directing people to the natural wonders. She reasons, “If people are invited into the woods for a positive reason, their presence there will make the forest uncondusive for the sex that produces all the litter.”

The Litter Mob boss called it quits after just one year “in the woods.” Her final blog post reads: “The litter and the cruising activities that generate it continue. The last woods in Brooklyn remain without an active or dedicated conserving presence.” Viljoen was comically, if not painfully mistaken: simply because men are having sex in the Vale, doesn’t mean they appreciate it any less than some “garden designer, blogger, photographer and writer” (as the Times summed up Viljoen’s resume). (I reached out to Viljoen who insisted in an email: “The Litter Mob was NOT trying ‘to curb cruising activities.’ [It] was an effort to focus attention on the huge amount of litter in the woods



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(which persists) – much of which is the result of cruising, in the hopes that resources would be dedicated by the Prospect Park Alliance to the litter’s removal, and that a permanent steward could be appointed to care for the woodland areas.”)

As G. Winston James wrote in the introduction to *In the Vale*: “Controversial sites of public sexuality such as the Vale of Cashmere [...] are in constant struggle against both heterosexual and homosexual agents and organizations that see nothing redemptive or positive in their queer use.”

The Prospect Park Alliance, however, has stuck to more diplomatic explanations for targeting the Vale for “restoration,” namely that the projects they carry out are in keeping with the park’s original design.

At the end of September, the Brooklyn Historical Society organized a walking tour of the “little-known, seldom explored” Vale of Cashmere (part of the “Hidden Brooklyn” series) led by Christian Zimmerman, the Vice President of Capital & Landscape Management at the PPA. He introduced himself and described his job: “I often call what I do ‘Landscape Archeology.’”

Zimmerman pointed to 27 acres (of the park’s 585)– “Northeast perimeter lands”– as the loci of the next big restoration efforts. “Many people call it the ‘Vale of Cashmere’ or ‘the Vale,’” he explained. The area was nicknamed by Grace Chapin, First Lady of Brooklyn (her husband was Mayor Alfred Clark Chapin) in the 1890s. “Olmsted hated the term,” Zimmerman added.

The Prospect Park Alliance have consistently invoked the original planners, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux (the landscape architects also designed Central Park), in their renovation efforts and many of their projects are aimed at “honoring the original Olmsted and Vaux vision.” The central aim of the architects was to create what’s known as a “pleasure garden,” which emphasized both natural and well-maintained landscapes, but above all provided a respite from the city’s orderly hustle.

However, much of the park’s makeover has involved adding new elements that have little or nothing to do with the original design, such as the \$74 million LEED-certified ice skating rink— some of which arguably make the park a busier, less serene environment. (One of the oldest structures in the park, the Endale Arch, is in the process of being “restored,” Zimmerman said the next step is to add “LED lights” to line the shadowy brick underpass, originally built as a rain shelter. “It will be very subtle,” he added.)

When the PPA announced in August that the Vale would be their next big improvement site, they once again emphasized their intention to revive the historic landscape. Grace

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McCreight, external affairs assistant at the Prospect Park Alliance reiterated this over the phone in answer to my question about why the Vale, specifically, has become an immediate priority: “The Alliance has been committed in an ongoing way to restore the park’s original and historic design– the Vale and the Rose Garden have both been longterm priorities that we’re really happy to be getting around to now.”



Messing with the area too much would go against the planners’ intentions for the Vale. As Olmsted and Vaux called it, “the Children’s Playground” was to serve as a bucolic retreat for adults and children. The valley creates a sort of natural privacy ledge, cutting the area off from the rest of the park geographically and in spirit, offering park-goers a retreat that’s in line with a Romantic emphasis on pastoral beauty: a hill to sunbathe on and a pond below where children could splash around with toy sail boats. The area still evokes this hidden gem feeling: it’s one of the few areas in the park where you won’t run into aggressive joggers or suffer the roars of children stuffed into tricked-out strollers. It’s a quiet, serene (not to mention beautiful) place to go as it is.

It was the planners who came in 40 some years later, the same architects behind Grand Army Plaza– McKim, Mead & White– who imposed a more orderly arrangement on the

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area, which then came to be known as the Vale of Cashmere. The area was given more fanciful details: a fountain and more defined landscaping.

Later on, park designers would increasingly prioritize recreation over natural setting before Prospect Park fell into disrepair altogether. Now, the closest renovation to have taken place near the Vale of Cashmere is the installation of the Donald and Barbara Zucker “Natural Exploration Area” (New York magazine voted it Best Playground of 2014). The project salvaged trees that were broken or damaged during Hurricane Sandy and converted them into a crunchy, natural children’s natural play set. Judging by various blog posts, there seems to have been some misperception disseminated (whether purposely or not) implying this playground had something to do with Olmsted and Vaux’s original plan.

Despite this commitment to “historic design,” the PPA repeatedly declined to go into specifics about what the renovation project for the Vale of Cashmere will actually look like. “Since this is a very early phase of the project and we still need to start a capital campaign, we don’t have a design set yet. But I’m sure whatever work we do will follow work that’s been done in other areas in the past which have included woodland restoration, reclamation of park acreage, restoration of historic buildings– we’ve also created some new buildings,” McCreight explained (Zimmerman told the tour group he’d like to see the reflecting pool restored). “So I’m sure all of those thing would go into the Vale.”

She added: “But we know that park visitorship is up and we’d be able to bring a lot of visitors from an already-crowded park into an area that’s sort of underutilized at the moment,” Grace explained. “We will be taking community input to see how people want the Vale to be in the future and what they see as important now.”

The next step for the Vale is fundraising, followed by design pitches, and running plans by the community. I asked Grace how the PPA usually goes about this. “When the project is more developed, we do plan to hold public input sessions of some type,” she wrote in an email. “Additionally, Prospect Park is a landmarked park, and all restoration projects pass through a public design review process with NYC Parks.”

It’s important to gauge community input for public spaces, though as with an survey there is the problem with voluntary participation– the people who are participating are naturally the kind of people who would participate in these kinds of surveys, so there will inevitably be a group (or many groups) left out of the process.

This became very clear to me when I arrived at Grand Army Plaza to meet up with the rest of the walking tour. Besides the people from Brooklyn Historical Society, I was the

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only person not eligible for AARP in the group. Eventually, a younger couple entered the fray. The group appeared to be about 99 percent white and at least middle class (in that they were comfortable enough to not be working at their age and have time for leisure).

I tried to stay close to Zimmerman, so I could take diligent notes. But as we descended into the Vale, a few of the tour participants began to inflict their regrettable comments onto my notepad. “[The Vale] is worse than walking around Grand Army Plaza at night–



you don't want to do that.”

As we approached the area, I noticed men sitting or walking alone, and sometimes in pairs– it was quiet, but the area wasn't empty. Our presence turned some heads. “It's really an underutilized area,” Zimmerman said. “Birdwatchers come here, but we really want to bring it back to the public.” He listed off symbols of the glory days, or at least what he considered better times for the area. “There was a carousel here in the 1800s.” One woman suggested the area might make for a great “sculpture garden.”

Another woman wondered, “What makes this area so problematic?”

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Zimmerman paused. “It’s overgrown... there’s no entrance on this side of the park,” he said. “Nobody comes here, because it’s foreboding... the path isn’t great.” Strange, because the blue hairs and I seemed to have no trouble getting down here. I found out later that the pathway leading down to the Vale was groomed into existence, in part, by Viljoen’s Litter Mob. However, as Viljoen’s blog reflects, it wasn’t so much to do something nice for the current patrons of this area as it was simply to prevent further erosion.

Despite all the activity in the Vale, media outlets and the PPA have portrayed the area as forgotten, abandoned, or even dangerous. The Times recently characterized it as “notorious for drug transactions and sexual activity.” Curbed: “The area has become known for illicit activities (perhaps why it is uncrowded), but this is no reason to avoid it.” But, they advised: “Enjoy it before it becomes perfect again.”

But cruising isn’t exactly the “illicit” act it used to be, you can even search “Best Gay Cruising” on Yelp and get back results like the Cubbyhole and The Cock, but also the McBurney YMCA in Chelsea and Arriba Arriba, a Midtown Mexican restaurant. So it becomes pretty obvious at least some of this has to do with race.

Thomas Roma speaks very carefully about the project and was careful in approaching his subjects, not because he actually ever payed any attention to the warnings people issued to him. “People did warn me because it was ‘dangerous,’ and I believe most of that is racist and part of it is homophobic— it’s the ‘other,’ the ‘other’ is not going to allow you near them, and that’s simply not true. I’m living proof of it. People thought I was crazy for going into the Vale of Cashmere,” he said, exasperated. “You’re crazy for disallowing yourself.”

There was something Roma had long understood but became acutely aware of after his experiences one night: “The biggest problem was the police. You don’t have an ID card when you’re in the Vale of Cashmere, you could just as easily be singled out, as...” he paused, hesitant to go on. “There was a police action, and it happened right around me, they came in— I never saw police in there before this.”

He heard a commotion and a man tried to run away. “I was in the middle of the whole thing and no one looked at me: I was invisible. To the police, a white man in a suit and tie was not their business at all. That was heartbreaking to me. You think, I’m making a connection, I’m putting myself there. I’m visible and people want to be a part of it or not. But the truth is, you peel back another layer and I’m immune to the abuse, completely immune.”

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Roma's emotional attachment to this project runs deep. "There's a lot at stake with this book, and I feel it," he said. As such, there's also a certain degree of protectiveness that comes with this work. Thomas has and will denounce anyone that makes the mistake of asking or saying something ignorant. "The question I get all through the years is, 'Why would anyone allow you to take their picture?' I think that's an obvious question and there's an obvious answer. No one allowed me to do it, people wanted me to do it. People in the photographs have agency— they've read novels, they've seen films, they read poetry, they're in the world, they watch television. What do you think, that someone was tricked by me, standing there with a rather large tripod? No, we collaborated, we were in on it together."

As he always does, Roma said he approached the men of the Vale with absolute transparency and consideration. "I would say, 'You've been photographed a million times, everyone has a cellphone with a camera, this is a chance to be part of something larger.'" Naturally, some of the guys wanted to know more about this guy with the camera. "Everyone has a phone, they'd google me right there," he laughed.

Roma said that "at best" he considers himself "something of a director." He pointed to a poster of John Cassavetes hanging in his office. "He used untrained actors and let them improvise, that's also a way to act. And I think I did that, I gave people an opportunity to show something to me."

There was another thing that rubbed Roma the wrong way, too. Though, I should point out he was reluctant to "make this political," and emphasized his photographs have nothing to do with any kind of activism. "These books I do, that's my life lived. I payed for it— it's there, it's right there. That's the evidence of what I believe in," he told me.

However, I did convince him to tell me what he thought of the "restoration" efforts. Firstly, he told me to disregard what the people in power are saying. "One person said this to me at a cocktail party, and I have a witness, they used the term 'cleaning up'— it's a very ugly thing, this term, I find it infuriating, we've seen this with the piers—and I said, 'I can't tell you how offended I am.' I threw a wet blanket on this little cocktail party," he laughed ironically. "People say these things and I know they mean it, they do mean it. They just don't know they mean it. They think we're all going to agree."

He continued: "Don't they understand that the isolation comes from people not wanting to be with others? This is what happens. It's not people running away. No one's running away, there's no sign that says 'Keep Out.' It's a sad comment on a condition that we've, for defensive reasons, we've come to be suspicious of anyone — this thing where you have to have a credential to be the one that's in love with something."



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As Thomas had told me before, the photographs were not about realizing some definitive end. So what were they about? Besides doing something to honor the memory of Carl. “I’m very careful about that, the photograph is what’s important to me– what does the photograph mean? Because many people have good intentions but they do horrible things,” he said. “They do a lot of damage and their heart is in the right place.”

So what would be the best outcome Thomas could imagine for his photographs? He mused for a while and then finally concluded: “I think the best thing in the world is to do the work and then disappear.”



Thomas Roma’s fourteenth book, *In the Vale of Cashmere*, is available from powerHouse Books. An exhibition featuring the photographs runs Thursday, October 29 through Saturday, December 19 at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea. See more photographs in Thomas Roma’s *New York Times* article.