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 **Medium** Loving Portraits of Gay Black Men
Cruising In Prospect Park

By Pete Brook December 20, 2015

The Vale of Cashmere is an almost-forgotten, somewhat overgrown, knotty pocket of criss-crossing paths on the north side of Prospect Park. It's status as one of Brooklyn's most active gay cruising spots has been long established.



Thomas Roma's new book *In The Vale Of Cashmere* takes the viewer on long and repeated walks through the foliage and dappled light. In hundreds of portraits and thumbnail images sequenced like movie-strips, we approach, encounter, pass or pause with the men who meet there.

The Vale is hidden in plain sight. It's not a social milieu that fiercely polices against prying eyes, but rather a space at which outside eyes, and bodies, avoid. And therein lies the

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importance of Roma's book. These portraits gently dismantle the fears, the judgements and the make-believe of those outside of the space — fear and judgements that have fueled discrimination toward homosexual men for decades.

In *The Vale Of Cashmere* bridges socio-cultural boundaries. In some ways, it is a tool against homophobia and against racism. It's a dignified and quiet challenge to the undignified, clumsy and loud prejudices of mainstream America. Roma shows us not a overtly seedy, darkened or hyper-sexualized space, but instead a charged space of possibility populated by bodies that are engaged, vulnerable, languid and much else besides.

How the hell did Roma get so close and so intimate? The simple answer is that he photographed over years, but the truer answer is he built a rapport with his subjects founded on mutual understanding.

Roma visited the Vale of Cashmere weekly, beginning back in 2008. He'd introduce himself and explain why he was taking pictures. Nine out of ten times Roma's request to make a photograph was declined. For every portrait in the book is another nine interactions. Roma must have become almost a regular fixture in the little-known Eden.

The Importance Of Good Words, Too

The books' essay of introduction, by G. Winston James, is a joy. I aborted my first reading to return to the beginning so that I could read it aloud to my partner. It's too good not to share.

At one point, reading James' words there in the kitchen, my partner interrupted, "What's the point in writing a review when this essay says it all so well?" I nodded. She had a fair point. Still, I'll try for the sake of honoring a wonderful portrait project.

Text is critical to a photobook. A photobook's essay says much more than the author's argument. The choice of author says a lot about the photographer's relationship to her or his work and the ways in which she or he thinks about it. Roma clearly wants to position his work in solidarity and in deep understanding of these gay men and their purposefully shared environment.

James, an author of fiction, essays and poetry about sexual identity, LGBT and African American experiences among many other topics, delivers a masterful and readable history of gay cruising and gay life in New York. He explains how the emotions, the risks and the consequences of inhabiting the Vale have changed over the decades. He is an expert on the behaviours, policing and attitudes associated with the social spaces of gay

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male sex. James has also sought out sexual and sensual encounters in the Vale of Cashmere. Authoritatively, James delivers both an emotional and an intellectual reading of the issues at stake in Roma's work.

The best photobook essays, in my opinion, are those written by non-photography people; people who may have an extremely keen eye and sophisticated reading of photography, but who are not blindly devoted to the medium. The best essays are those which talk about the issue that the photographs point to, as opposed to direct commentary on — or worse still, description of — the photographs themselves.



G. Winston James comments upon Roma's technique only to back up his own arguments, and in so doing he provides a fuller and intimately-informed context for Roma's portraits. For example, James tells us that Roma focused on African American and Caribbean men, the demographic that dominates the Vale due to patterns of immigration, but not the only group.

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“Those who frequent the Vale of Cashmere in search of community and sexual gratification have been as diverse and demographically mutable as the communities (near and far) that surround the park,” writes James.

Standing on the shoulders of thinker Morgan Shaw, James reminds us that sex is an activity designated for private spaces, namely the domestic space of the home. But for gay men living in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, homosexual sex could not be expressed at home so it became a public act in public space. Crucially though, gay cruising and meeting spots only function as such at designated times.

“The most defining characteristic of queer space is its temporality. Queer space is not a permanent fixture of the urban landscape, but a sudden transformation that briefly renders traditional public spaces as something more dynamic,” Shaw once wrote.

James adds, “It is precisely this process of transformation (witnessed by a relative few), this dynamism, this history, that Thomas Roma has photographed.”

From within the midst of a hushed and furtive social milieu these men — these cruisers — stand (or lay) in confidence and with knowing gazes. Roma wasn’t considered a snoop, or rejected. Conversation and respect underpin this work and allowed Roma — an outsider — to capture the individuals of this community.

In *The Vale of Cashmere* does what all good photobooks should do; it reveals a subject and then wraps around it a full and rounded narrative. The work carries a history of New York that predates and parallels the gay rights and civil rights movements. Through its comprehensive and careful description, the book becomes the authoritative portrait of a previously near-invisible subculture. It revels in the unexpected intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class.

And just because Roma went in there with a camera does not make this an exposé. It is the limits of public imagination and acceptance that is exposed subtly in these portraits. In dismantling, visually at least, the marginalization of these gay men, Roma questions the assumptions of the majority. This isn’t advocacy but it might function in a similar way.

Roma’s collaborative portraits retain a mystery and they are a tribute to a subculture that exists on the edge, proudly.