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Thomas Roma: The Plato's Dogs Trilogy @Steven Kasher

By: Loring Knoblauch

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JTF (just the facts): A total of 76 black and white photographs, variously framed and matted, and hung against white walls in the main gallery space (separated into two rooms by a dividing wall).

The work on view come from three separate projects:

Plato's Dogs: 23 archival pigment prints, unframed, made c2011-2013/printed 2014, each sized 35x47, in editions of 4+2AP, 16 archival pigment prints, framed in black and unmatted, made c2011-2013/printed 2016, each sized 11x14, in editions of 4+2AP

The Waters of Our Time: 32 vintage gelatin silver prints, framed in black and matted, made between 1973 and 2006, sized either 11x14 or 16x20 (or reverse), in editions of 4+2AP

Higher Ground: 21 vintage gelatin silver prints, framed in black and matted, made between 1993 and 1995, in editions of 4+2AP

A monograph of Plato's Dogs was recently published by powerHouse Books ([here](#)). A monograph of The Waters of Our Time was published in 2014 by powerhouse Books ([here](#)). Both are available from the gallery.

Comments/Context: Thomas Roma's new show is firmly rooted in his hometown of Brooklyn. Bringing together works from four decades, from some of his earliest photographs to recent images made in the past few years, it is a study in the attentive observation of the local. Just a few steps from his own front door, he has found a myriad of photographic subjects worthy of patient investigation – life on the streets and in nearby fenced backyards, everyday trips to the dog park, and countless rides on the subway providing the raw material for artistic projects both large and small.

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The most striking pictures on view are from Roma's new series Plato's Dogs. Taken with a camera mounted on an eight foot painter's pole, the large scale images capture top down views of dogs at play, their dark shadows cast on the dusty hardpacked dirt of the park. What might seem like a hopelessly mundane subject actually turns into something magical in Roma's hands, the black forms running, jumping, prancing, and dancing like shadow puppets or theatrical silhouettes. The actual dogs are largely absent from the frames (although a few do peek in with curiosity here and there), leaving us with just their echoes and elemental forms, turned into bold graphical shapes by the bright sunlight. Like John Divola's series of dogs chasing his car in the desert, Roma's project seems to capture a pure off-leash essence of the animals, their joy at chasing a ball, their intent movement, or their tail raised anticipation detailed in the nuances of gestures. The effect is something like simple animation, where important spiritual qualities are reduced to symbolic motifs like those found in ancient cave paintings.

Roma's street photographs from the series The Waters of Our Time have less conceptual formality, easing into the rhythms of neighborhood life. Conceived of as an homage to the 1955 photobook classic The Sweet Flypaper of Life by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, these images wander across a wide span of time, capturing the cramped low-rise existence of tiny backyards and life spilling out onto the sidewalks. While some of the pictures revel in a resonant detail like a white expanse of car fin, a tangle of electrical wires and tree trunks, or a Marilyn Monroe poster leaning against a garage door, many use fences to break up the compositions, creating areas of in and out, and a divided sense of here and there. A young woman sunbathes jammed up against an aboveground pool, a young girl in a white dress plays ball pushed up against a basketball hoop, and baseball players and billows of laundry peer out from behind screens of chain link, the space hemmed in and crowded, constantly shared and reused. The lack of space leads to eccentricities taking hold on the sidewalks, from earnest kung fu moves and under-the-car repairs to poodle carrying, hotpants, and spiked hair. In all of these images, Roma is consistently aware of the available tonal subtleties, using the diffused light, the cast shadows, and the brightness of the afternoon sun to his advantage when capturing the shifting moods of the streets. When seen together, the project has a gentle rhythm, like the soft sway of a neighborhood stroll.

This quiet drowsiness continues more overtly in Roma's 1990s images from the subway. While New York subway riders have been famously photographed by everyone from Walker Evans to Bruce Davidson (as well as countless others), Roma has found a way to make the subject his own by using the bright backlit light streaming into the aboveground cars to set his mood. His pictures have an end of the line emptiness that contrasts with the usual dense claustrophobia of overstuffed cars. Riders often sit alone, lost in thought or sprawled out on the seats, the light creating a filtered dream-like atmosphere. His pictures are steeped in the essence of commuter weariness, where kids amuse themselves while parents nod off, or riders stare absently out the window, their bodies becoming studies in angles and bent forms.

While Roma's dogs steal this show with their playful graphic brashness, the other two projects reinforce a grounded feeling of routine, of observing a broadly defined "home" for a long period of time, slowly becoming attuned to its silent rhythms. All of these pictures represent a study of place done by an insider, and that hard won intimacy with its everyday quirks is what allows Roma to consistently reveal such nuanced wonders.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced as follows. The prints from the Plato's Dogs series are either \$7500 (35x47) or \$3500 (11x14). The prints from The Waters of Our Time are either \$5000 (16x20) or \$3500 (11x14). And the prints from Higher Ground are \$3500 each. Roma's work has little consistent secondary market history in the past decade, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.