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Photographing the Cruising Culture of Brooklyn's
Prospect Park: Thomas Roma on Longing and Loss in
the Vale of Cashmere

By Moze Halperin October 29, 2015

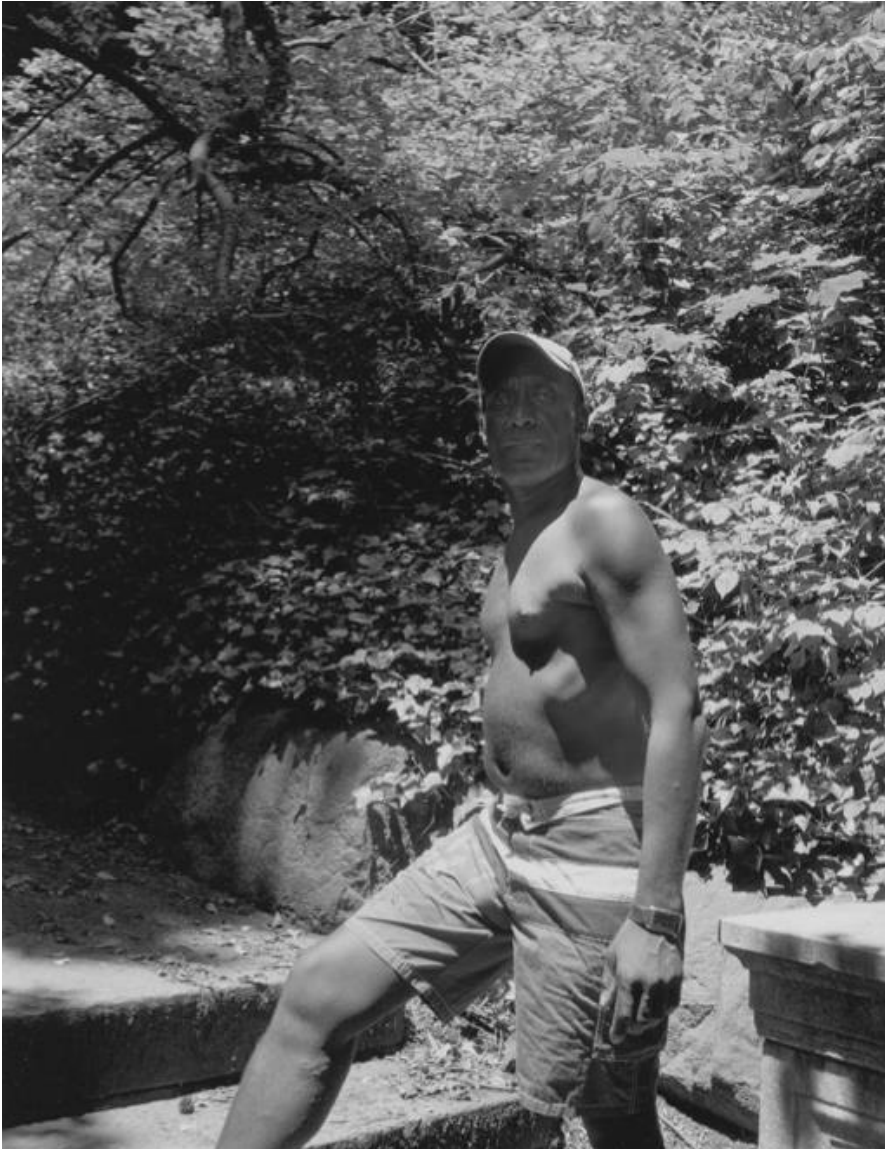


“No one ever found a reason to take a moment or a season to find the real me,” Johnny Adams bellows in “The Real Me,” a song written by Doc Pomus that shifts its tone, midway through, from despairing isolation to gratitude. The singer is finally able to see his “real” self in the mirror only after someone else — a lover, or society, or whomever — is willing to see him. Thomas Roma — a two-time Guggenheim Fellowship-winning photographer and professor at Columbia, who once said he plays music before every class he teaches and “use[s] music to demystify art” — tells me this is the song to pair with his new, moment-and-season-traversing monograph, *In the Vale of Cashmere*. “I couldn’t have made those pictures when I was younger,” says the 65-year-old

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photographer. “There’s something that I’ve been trying to get to with my work. I’m a lot more understanding about the frailties of others but especially my own.”

In the Vale of Cashmere sees both the subject and the artist attempting the fulfillment described in the song with sudden, albeit sometimes stiff, intimacy. Each photograph is an encapsulation of the slight awkwardness of posing for long exposure photos (taken through Roma’s homemade camera) with a total stranger — often over the course of 30 to 40 minutes of attempts, Roma explains. On top of that is the added intimacy of both photographer and subject’s shared knowledge that their exchange is an ellipses to the



sexual purposes their immediate surroundings serve.

Roma’s new book (which launches today, alongside the opening of an exhibit of selected works at the Steven Kasher Gallery) is a collection of portraits and landscapes, all taken inside the dilapidated, wooded quarter of Brooklyn’s Prospect Park called the Vale of Cashmere. This has long been a site where predominantly black and Latino men seek one another, as Roma will explain, to satisfy desires

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both sexual and communitarian. “Clearly, rather than simply being driven into concealment by a heteronormative and homophobic society, many men... entered the Vale of Cashmere after dark because we enjoyed it (even drew a sense of resistance to societal norms from it),” writes author G. Winston James — a former frequenter of the Vale — in his introduction to the book.

Roma’s first encounter with the Vale, as the photographer explained in the New York Times, occurred when his friend Carl had asked him for a ride to meet someone there in 1976; when they got there, “he entered the park through a hole cut in the fence.” Carl died due to complications with AIDS in 1991, in Roma’s arms. It was Roma’s son — himself named after Carl — who inadvertently led Roma back to the Vale years later. When Roma dropped him off for baseball practice in Prospect Park, he took to wandering, and found himself back in the section he’d come to affiliate with his friend. Later, beginning in 2008, he’d spend three and a half years photographing it.

Though Roma never physically appears within his own book, he’s hyperaware of a photographer’s subjectivity and inextricability from their work; in my phone conversation with him, it becomes clear that this is just as much a project of self-reflection, and an attempt to also visualize an ineffable commonality between all forms of desire, as it is an exercise in capturing a particular sociosexual milieu.

There’s a pervasive humanism implicit in the Vale of Cashmere, a romantic ideal that a person can self-create through constant seeking and through duration. This notion is tied up in the fact that the book begins by positing itself as something of a memorialization-through-seeking. The dedication, which is “in memory of Carl,” is a quote from “Song of Solomon” (via Last Exit to Brooklyn). It begins with a dejected admission of failure, “in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul liveth: I sought him, but I found him not,” but resolves to continue the search: “The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?”

Flavorwire: I was looking back on the “Song of Solomon” quote, and its placement with Carl’s name at the beginning of the book. And it made me curious as to whether you were also trying to see/understand what Carl was seeking (both literally and in the abstract), and how it might relate to your own searches.

I think of the people in all of my photographs as people who’re going to be with me for the rest of my life. I don’t leave them behind. I want them all. I hadn’t thought of it in that way, but of course! We always throw a lot of things away — not just our disposable income, but magazines, for instance. But a book is something we feel very strongly about. Book burnings are considered a crime against humanity. The fire in the Library of Alexandria — we’ll forever mourn the loss of all that history. So when you’re trying to

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make something that'll be held onto, it has to function on more than one level. When we lose people, when they're too young — and I have way too much experience with this — we're always looking for them. As I said in the Times piece, I wasn't thinking of Carl [when I first unknowingly wandered back into the Vale] — I wasn't thinking of anything. I saw these men that were beautiful, and thought, "Why have I been here before?" And then when I saw Flatbush Avenue from a hill, I realized it just had to be that.



In that same NY Times piece you wrote, you explained that you used long exposure on these photos, that the portraits themselves often took up to five to six seconds? Was this a purely aesthetic choice, or is there something else to be taken from this gesture?

I wanted everyone to know that these are not photographs that could be easily grabbed, or taken out of time and space. It's a commitment to stand there. You'll notice in quite a few of the pictures, people are leaning, or even touching a tree, because it's actually hard to hold still.

There's a deliberateness, they're sort of sculpting themselves for the photos.

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These are collaborations. The great writer, Phillip Lopate, said when he first saw the book galley, “this is about people presenting themselves.” This is what’s difficult for people. Someone wrote an email to me and said, “I have a hard time believing that people allowed you [to do this]” — no one “allowed me” to do anything. When I say “collaboration,” that’s to say that I also find myself in the portraits.

How did you approach asking the men in the Vale for their photos?

My camera is rather large, it’s on a tripod, and I could be seen on the path of the roadway, photographing the landscape constantly. One of the things you can see in the book is that I was there for every season. There are people in coats and T-shirts. I was a presence. I was never just hanging around on a rock or something, I was working the whole time. I don’t know why I don’t have the words for it, but people wanted to talk to me. And the people who didn’t, didn’t. Everyone’s got cell phones with cameras and so one point I would make is, “look at your phone. Every picture you have of yourself, you’re smiling.” A smile always means the same thing. And I would speak very plainly about how what I was doing was giving them an opportunity to try to imagine looking the way they feel. And not looking the way they were expected to feel. Think of all the places people are photographed. This was an opportunity to do something different.

How did your whiteness impact people’s perceptions of you as an observational presence, and their willingness to pose for you?

I have no idea what I project into the world. None. Zero. I’m just as blind to that as everyone else. I can’t really say with authority anything about my whiteness because unless I was looking at my hands, I was looking out at the world. Someone else sees me, but I don’t want to speak for them. These are constructs that have value and I’m not going to minimize it even slightly, but when people are together doing something, that goes right to the top of the list. When I was in the Vale, I was there because I chose to be there. I didn’t stay there for three and a half years because I merely stumbled upon it. A minority of people did ask me, “Why me?” I remember saying, “Have you looked in the mirror lately?” And I said, “You’re beautiful, why wouldn’t I want to photograph you?”

What about discussions of the less visible differences between you and the men who frequent the Vale? Did questions about your own sexuality — as a man married to a woman — change the dynamic?

One thing that’s happening, generally, is there’s almost a kind of schizophrenia in the conversation around sexuality. On one hand, there’s a certain level of sophistication where we hope that we’re all flexible enough to not need to define what we are — it’s just what we always are and always will be. On the other hand, some of the very same

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people who understand that and want that openness and flexibility, when slightly challenged, demand choosing sides. If you write a love song, does it have to be about heterosexuality? When you listen to most love songs, there's nothing but confusion. My favorite love song is "Send in the Clowns" and the whole song is about two people not occupying the same emotional psychological or even physical space at the same time. If I make a work that I think is about longing, and about searching, for community, love, affection, etc., why would it have to be one thing or another?



Did people worry these photographs would be an affront to the anonymity I assume they were seeking in the Vale?

I don't know that that's true [that anonymity was the goal]. These are not photographs made at night, they're not flash photography. And so, it's hard to claim anonymity in absolute public, in daylight in a park. So I think people are there to be seen. People stay away from that section, but not because there's a fence or a wall. The park's self-selecting.

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In the intro, G. Winston James writes, “The faces, races and classes of the men pictured here would undoubtedly change if Thomas Roma were to repeat this project over the coming decades.” Over the course of your time in the Vale, did the gentrifying neighborhoods surrounding the park change the way the space was used, the people who were using it? Did you read the New York Times article about the Prospect Park Alliance renovating the Vale?

I did see a bit of a difference from 2008 to 2011, and the bigger issue is the use of public space. We see this with the piers, we see this with Christopher Street. Is it as simple as saying, “gentrification” and that groups are being marginalized? It might be as simple as that. But the last thing I want to do is reduce it to a binary political condition. But yes, I read the article in the New York Times. I have heard the most offensive things about the Vale of Cashmere. Someone at a cocktail party used the term “cleaning up.” She actually said it to me, and I was so mortified that I said something that was probably a little over the top. And this person said, “I didn’t mean it like that.” “You didn’t mean it,” but it went right through me that your idea of making it “clean” is to get rid of people. And yes, there were condom wrappers. And yes, there were these little one-shot lube things yes, you’ll see them there. But there are concerts in the park and there are armies of people cleaning up after that use. There are picnics and fourth of July celebrations, you name it. The real issue is: why was the Vale left alone? Why wasn’t it maintained?

You quote the Thomas Moore poem from which the Vale gets its name at the beginning of the book. How did the vivid name impact your own affiliations with this place? Do you think it weighs on the place’s identity, generally? There’s something about names — I remember an episode of Seinfeld, he said, if you name a child Jeeves, he’s pretty much going to be a Butler. And Robert Frost has a poem named “Maple,” about someone who names their child Maple instead of Mable, and what happens if you grow up with a name like Maple. I think that the beautiful, voluptuous name [The Vale of Cashmere] probably calls people to it. Life is better with that assumption, so why not assume it?