



Untitled (from the series "In The Vale of Cashmere"), 2011 THOMAS ROMA

A photographer captures a hidden world of gay cruising in Prospect Park.



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The Vale of Cashmere is one of those almost-mythical, untouched parts of New York City you can't quite believe still exists. Originally conceived as a children's playground in the late 19th century, it's now a neglected, overgrown oasis on the northeast end of Brooklyn's Prospect Park, with zig-zagging paths, fountains and a sunken garden.

It's also, like Central Park's far more notorious Ramble, a place where gay men meet and hook up.

"There are people who claim that it has been a gay cruising area for 100 years," says Brooklyn-born photographer Thomas Roma, who has spent three-and-a-half years shooting this hidden sanctuary and the (predominantly black and Latino) men who seek communion and companionship there for his series "In the Vale of Cashmere," which has just been published by PowerHouse Books. "But," he adds, "I talked to many gay friends who had never heard of it. It's very hidden."

Roma had his first brush with the Vale in the 1970s, when he would drive his roommate, Carl, over to Flatbush Avenue, drop him off and watch him enter the wooded area through a tear in a fence. It wasn't until 2001, however, 10 years after Carl had died of AIDS, that he encountered it again.

"I was killing time taking a walk in the park, and I came across this place that was so stunningly beautiful and unique," he recalls. "I saw these men sitting on benches and walking the paths, which led to the top of this ridge, and I looked down and

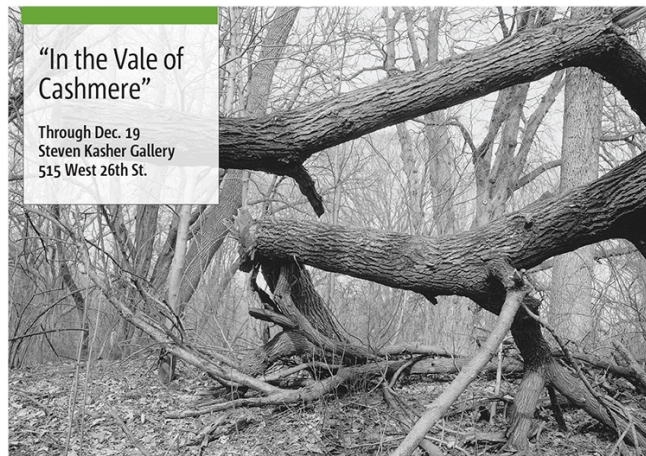
I saw Flatbush Avenue, and that fence that years before I watched Carl walk through. Once I realized that, I had to stop and think, 'Maybe this is something I should pursue,'" he says.

"In the Vale of Cashmere" is dedicated to Carl, and features 75 black-and-white portraits and landscapes. The images are tender, raw, vulnerable; portraits of a precarious world that — like so many other places in the city — is in danger of disappearing, and the men who have created it.

"There was a certain element of desperation to it, visiting the park and thinking maybe this is all

going to go away some day," Roma says. "But I did [the project] because everything about the place struck me as beautiful."

And human: "I was astounded by the capacity for connection. No one I met walked into that park thinking, 'Today I'll be photographed by this crazy Brooklyn photographer.' But 10 minutes later, I'm taking their picture and we're talking about life and beauty. We, all of us, have so much more in common than we realize," he says. "Look at these photographs and perhaps you'll see something of yourself."



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"In the Vale of Cashmere"

Through Dec. 19
Steven Kasher Gallery
515 West 26th St.