

PAOLO ROVERSI

MAESTRO OF POLAROIDS



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue
(Gemma Ward), 2004, polaroid

The Nicola Erni Collection is exhibiting more than forty photographs by the internationally acclaimed fashion and portrait photographer Paolo Roversi. A stunning treasure trove is revealed on the wall before our eyes—rare, 8 x 10-inch, original Polaroids and a wealth of bewitchingly beautiful pigment prints. The artist himself refers to the Polaroids as his “babies” and parts with them extremely unwillingly. The pigment prints were produced by Roversi to his most exacting paper and print quality standards in his own studio laboratory in Paris. Roversi’s name has a powerful charismatic and almost mythical resonance in fashion circles, among designers, and publishers. A supreme inventor of images and a photographic magician, he is warm-hearted and open by nature with a profound knowledge of literature, theater, poetry, and Renaissance art. Nobody who spends any time with him can fail to sense how much he loves people. This devotion is mirrored in his portrait and fashion photographs with particular intensity. He himself talks about his photographs not as mere reproductions but as “revelations”¹—and he modestly defines himself as “a not very sophisticated photographer that snaps sophisticated images.”²

At the beginning of his career, Italian-born Roversi concentrated on portrait and reportage photography, only entering the fashion world, he says, by chance. Following the advice of Peter Knapp, the then creative director of *Elle*, he went to Paris in 1973 and never left. He gradually started working for fashion magazines such as *Elle*, *Dépêche Mode* and *Marie Claire*, and in 1980 had a breakthrough with an advertising campaign for Christian Dior Cosmetics. Since then, his list of credits runs from shoots for *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* to highly appreciated advertising catalogues for Romeo Gigli, Comme des Garçons, and Yohji Yamamoto. That same year Roversi started using the 8 x 10-inch Polaroid format that would become his trademark. Since the mid 1980s, his work has been exhibited worldwide and published in exquisitely designed art books.

In everything he has done, Roversi has captured images of ethereal beauty, tenderness, vulnerability, and romanticism in the sense of the writer and philosopher Novalis: “To romanticize the world is to make us aware of the magic, mystery and wonder of the world; it is to educate the senses to see the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange,

the mundane as sacred, the finite as infinite.”³ The romantic spirit loves surprises in the everyday, the extreme, the unconscious, the dreamworld, and “the labyrinths of reflection.”⁴

The models Roversi likes to work with must have strong characters and personalities; they have to be like performers, know how to move in front of a camera, and be conscious of themselves.⁵ His muses are among the most famous models such as Guinevere van Steenus, Kirsten McMenamy, Gemma Ward, Stella Tennant, and Natalia Vodianova. Roversi prefers to photograph his models in his studio against simple backdrops. Most importantly he takes his time to allow the soul to come to the forefront.

For Roversi photography is about feelings, emotions, and seduction. His consistent aim is to capture mystery, tenderness, fragility, and grace. Roversi’s approach to fashion photography is not only mystic, but also very close to portraiture. In an interview he said: “My photography is more subtraction than addition. I always try to take off things. We all have a sort of mask of expression. You say goodbye, you smile, you are scared. I try to take all these masks away and little by little subtract until you have something pure left. A kind of abandon, a kind of absence. It looks like an absence, but in fact when there is this emptiness I think the interior beauty comes out.”⁶

As in photographs of the 19th century, Roversi’s subjects appear to be of a different age. Just like the Romantics of that era, Roversi creates pictures which represent a counterpoint to the uniformity of everyday life.

Romeo Gigli, who has been masterminding the most striking advertising campaigns with Roversi for more than a decade, once said: “[Roversi] succeeds in seizing a fleeting moment, a tremor of emotion which projects the women themselves into a timeless dimension—a classical and yet absolutely modern dimension of history and myth.”⁷

Looking at Roversi’s photographs opens a door for dreaming and losing oneself in a world of yearning and sheer beauty.

Ira Stehmann

1 Cf. Introduction by de Bure in Paolo Roversi and Gilles de Bure, *Paolo Roversi*, London 2011, n.p.

2 www.vogue.it/en/encyclo/photography/r/paolo-roversi, accessed on 02/10/2015

3 Frederick C. Beiser, “Bildung in Early German Romanticism” in Amélie Rorty, *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, London 1998, p. 294

4 Cf. Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik. Eine deutsche Affäre*, Munich 2007, p. 13

5 Contribution by Freshmilk TV on Youtube; Paolo Roversi talks about his pictures during an exhibition opening at the Galerie CameraWork, Berlin, 06/12/2009; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPskO5fmsQE&spfload=10>, accessed on 12/22/2014

6 <http://the-talks.com/interviews/paolo-roversi/>, interview of 02/18/2013, accessed on 02/10/2015

7 Ian Philips in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 09/18/1994



Chanel Haute Couture for Vogue (Lara Stone), 2010, pigment print



Dior Haute Couture for Vogue (Lara Stone), 2010, pigment print



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue (Lara Stone), 2010, pigment print



Valentino Couture for Vogue (Frida Gustavsson), 2011, pigment print



Valentino Haute Couture for Vogue (Marie Piovosan), 2012, pigment print



Jean Paul Gaultier for Vogue (Lara Stone), Paris, 2010, pigment print



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue (Lara Stone), 2010, pigment print



Chanel Haute Couture for Vogue (Monika Jagaciak), 2011, pigment print



Valentino Couture for Vogue (Frida Gustavsson, Monika Jagaciak and Kristina Salinovic), 2011, pigment print



Dior Haute Couture for Vogue (Marie Piovesan), 2012, pigment print



Valentino Haute Couture for Vogue (Marie Piovesan), 2012, pigment print



Jean Paul Gaultier for Vogue (Marie Piovesan), Paris, 2012, pigment print



Dior Haute Couture for Vogue (Frida Gustavsson), 2011, pigment print



Jean Paul Gaultier for Vogue (Kristen McMenamy), Paris, 2011, pigment print



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue (Monika Jagaciak), 2011, pigment print



Chanel Haute Couture for Vogue (Stella Tennant), 2011, pigment print



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue (Stella Tennant), 2011, pigment print



Valentino Haute Couture for Vogue (Nimue Smit, Giedre Dukauskaite and Suzie Bird), 2009, pigment print



Chanel dress for Vogue (Guinevere van Seenus), 2009, pigment print



Valentino dress for Vogue (Sasha Pivovarova), 2009, pigment print



Dior dress for Vogue (Heidi and Iris), 2008, pigment print



Dior for Vogue (Lara Stone), 2009, pigment print



Dior Haute Couture for Vogue (Stella Tennant), 2011, pigment print



Valentino Couture for Vogue (Stella Tennant), 2011, pigment print



Prada for Vogue (Arizona Muse), 2011, pigment print



Prada for Vogue (Arizona Muse), 2011, pigment print



Prada for Vogue (Arizona Muse), 2012, pigment print



Prada for Vogue (Arizona Muse), 2012, pigment print



Valentino Couture for Vogue
(Kristen McMenamy), 2010, polaroid



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue
(Kristen McMenamy), 2010, polaroid



Corset by Dior Haute Couture for Vogue (Lily Cole), 2007, polaroid



Valentino Couture for Vogue
(Natalia Vodianova), 2004, polaroid



Valentino Couture for Vogue
(Lisa Cant), 2005, polaroid



Dior Haute Couture for Vogue
(Natalia Vodianova), 2004, polaroid



Dior Haute Couture for Vogue
(Kristen McMenamy), 2010, polaroid



Jean Paul Gaultier /La Perla for Vogue
(Kristen McMenamy), 2010, polaroid



Jean Paul Gaultier for Vogue
(Natalia Vodianova), 2004, polaroid



Chanel Haute Couture for Vogue
(Natalia Vodianova), 2004, polaroid



John Galliano for Vogue (Milla Jovovich), 2002, polaroid



Chanel dress, Bottega Veneto coat, Dior hat and socks for Vogue (Stella Tennant), 2001, polaroid



Balenciaga for Vogue (Stella Tennant), 2001, polaroid



Chanel Haute Couture for Vogue (Natalia Vodianova), 2006, polaroid



Jean Paul Gaultier for Vogue (Natalia Vodianova), Paris, 2006, polaroid



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue (Angela Lindvall), 1999, polaroid



Givenchy Haute Couture for Vogue (Irina Lazareanu), 2006, polaroid



Dior Haute Couture for Vogue (Irina Lazareanu), 2006, polaroid