

Paolo Prince of Polaroids

Paolo Roversi's photography 'allows time for the soul to appear', he tells Ian Phillips. Now his influential work is on show in London.

THINK of a fashion magazine and the odds are that Paolo Roversi will have worked for it. Think of a designer and you will probably find he has shot one of their advertising campaigns. Think of the images of romantic, fragile, Pre-Raphaelite women which marked the demise of power-dressing in the late Eighties, and most will either have been signed or inspired by him.

Roversi's list of credits runs from shoots for *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire* to catalogues for Romeo Gigli, Christian Dior and Yohji Yamamoto. Whatever his work, it is marked by immense refinement and sensibility and his images portray an almost supernatural, ethereal beauty.

Romeo Gigli, who has collaborated with Roversi for more than a decade, believes his photographs stand alone in a world of "pyrotechnical media images of femininity".

Gigli says: "He 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."

Christian Ravera, *Vogue Hommes*' artistic director, says nobody else makes women appear more beautiful, while Franca Sozzani, editor of Italian *Vogue*, believes Roversi has used the camera in a more intimate way than anyone else. Sozzani also recognises that his influence on fashion photography has been "enormous".

In an era in which photographers have become almost as famous as their subjects, his position in fashion's oligarchy would suffice to grant him star-like status. But, while Bruce Weber and Steven Meisel crop up regularly on the celebrity pages of magazines, Roversi remains comfortably demure and humble.

When we met last week in his elegant Paris apartment, there were splotches of white paint on the right knee of his jeans and he wore a cardigan and shirt which would not look out of space on a Marks and Spencer rack.

He probably offered the best description of himself when he said that he was « an unsophisticated photographer taking sophisticated photographs ». Yet, what he lacks in pretension, he makes up for with humour.

Roversi remembers one of his first shoots for *Marie Claire* in the Seventies : "I had cut out all of the pages and put them in my book. I went to the kiosks to see if people were looking at them. Then, on the Saturday, I went to the market to buy a fish and the guy took the page with my most beautiful photograph on it, tore it out and wrapped the fish up in it. That was the first slap on the face of my career.

His career began in his native Italy at the age of 17. Initially, he concentrated on portraits, only entering the fashion world, he

says, by chance. On the advice of Peter Knapp, the then creative director of *Elle*, he came to Paris in 1973, and at the end of the Seventies, developed his own distinctive style with a technique of double exposure, which added an outline of second colour and a rather painterly quality to his photographs.

At the same time, he started to experiment with Polaroid film - which became his signature. He found the medium brought out interesting colours and contrasts and allowed him to see the results of his work immediately. As there are no negatives, each shot is unique and while this holds much appeal for Roversi, it caused him some problems in deciding which pictures to put on sale in Hamiltons exhibition. "I haven't got the mentality of painters who are used to doing canvasses, then being separated from them".

His approach to fashion photography is both « very mystic » and « very, very close to portraiture ». He believes that taking someone's photo is ' a very intense exchange, especially if you attempt to take more than the person's picture, to capture a lot of their soul, a little of their personality. »

French *Photo* magazine claims that « those who have posed in front of his objective eye always seem to have exposed the depths of their soul ». Roversi puts this down to the slow exposures of two or three seconds, which he uses. « You can't explain this scientifically, but the look it gives is more intense, more profound than when you expose with a quick flash. It's as if it allows time for the soul to appear. »

Most of the souls he has chosen to reveal share a sense of mystery and a presence that draws you into the picture. He describes Kirsten Owen, whom he shot for the Romeo Gigli campaigns as "somewhere between an angel and a demon" and he also has a penchant for English models such as Kate Moss and Honor Fraser.

So, whom would he like to point his lens at next? The diplomatic list is exclusively English: Helena Bonham-Carter, Tilda Swinton and the Queen.

"And why the Queen?" I ask. After all, she is no super-waif.

"I love the dignity of official portraits, images that are meant to last for ever" he explains. "Mind you, having said that, I may just put the Queen in something comfortable, tell her to stretch out on the floor and say "Keep cool'."

She has been warned.

Ian Philips

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