

## Angels of desire

We live in a world where the image is all-pervasive. Reality is now a TV show. Events and even people themselves seem to exist so that they can be fixed in two- dimensions within a media framework. What is real has been lost, the carbon copy has won. It's no use taking sides anymore, things are beyond our control. In order to reinfuse the world where the image is everything with some of its original charm and substance, the treatment must necessarily be a homeopathic one; treat the image with the image. By fixing the portrait of modern angels on impalpable Japanese paper (his latest show at the Camera Obscura Gallery was called "Angeli", Paolo Roversi proves himself more than ever to be one of the sorcerers of the image trying, in a world where everything is drowned in floodlights, to reinstate something of the pristine mystery of our being. And yet he exerts his profession at the very core of the « great spectacular », where fashion and image unite to produce the illusion of something unique offered to our frantic desire for identification.

At the very centre of a universe that has become more diabolically Wharolian-than-thou, Paolo Roversi charts an opposite course which goes against our desire to see everything, approaching faces with delicacy, without scrutinizing them mechanically, defacing them flatly nor despoiling them via the image. In order to achieve this, he is constantly fighting against the « professional bodies » of models and stars.

Stripped of the imagery, which clings to their skin, their particular way of posing, pouting or just simply looking-beautiful-darling, they seem to dissipate slowly from the surface of the image.

In black and white (almost in black or white), in the quivering of sepia, only the trace of a few contrasted outlines highlight a face in a monochrome setting, where subject and backcloth fade into each other. Far removed from the « this once existed » which Barthes saw as the role of all photography, his portraits, somewhat like religious painting, against a neutral studio background of thick primer, build up a time of abstraction, a subjective time of memories and dreams where moments melt into eternity.

Quasi-transparent, faces and bodies are ringed with a minimal appearance, like a last-second fade black or fade white.

Suspended between appearance and disappearance, his figures vibrate with a presence, which is all the more moving, for the fact that they seem to be vanishing into darkness or light.

Using an 8x10 Polaroid to fix these sensual and fragile prints like some latter-day alchemist, Paolo Roversi has rediscovered the deep aesthetic quality of the beginnings of portrait photography, when it was feared that the soul was printed on

the film once it had left the model's body. Not for one second are we tempted to see any sociological or psychological content in these models.

His women-children are less the object being photographed (whose identity we might guess if we like playing at detective stories) than the almost abstract subjects who, through Roversi's eye, « are in fact looking at us ».

His angeli, « so close to us and yet so far », indecent and haloed in a mystery which renders them untouchable, are not, however, the cousins (even the distant ones) of those whom God sent into Renaissance painting to bear His word: if reality has been lost, God, for his part, has long since left the history of man, art and therefore photography. Like a female Little Prince, his favourite model Kirsten Owen, has not fallen from the stars but has been "booked" through the model agency Zoom, and the look of Roversi, even if devoid of the stereotypes of his trade, makes no pretence to any innocence in the portrait, nor any revealing of reality through the instantaneous technique of photography.

In photography, as in life itself maybe, and in the nude itself, nudity is not attained.

With God gone, his messengers' descendants are indefinitely captured in the world of appearances, and, in the mirror held out to us by Paolo Roversi, his angeli reflect the image of our own uncertain presence, of modern "I"s forever "others".

Stéphane Wargnier

Vis à Vis International N°4 1993