

Liminal Light, Liminal Shadow

Written by Nathan Jon Smith

A vague beauty lingers unresolved within a photographic frame, its liminal allure is both accessible and resistant to the gaze. From darkness, the subject's soft, white visage begins to emerge, pausing just before reaching the surface. The portrait, Paolo Roversi's *Kirsten Owen*, leaves us eternally suspended in ambiguity, unable to apprehend the anticipated beauty, and instead confronted with the shape of our own desire. The subject stares back, as if aware of our voyeurism—taunting our impulse.

The tension encased in this exchange, where *Kirsten Owen*'s gaze confronts our own, and presence and absence, is at the heart of Paolo Roversi's vision. Roversi, born in Ravenna, Italy, in 1947, began his professional career in Paris, 1971, as a reporter with the *Huppert Agency*. Without delay, he shifted his artistic practice to center on fashion photography after assisting British photographer Laurence Sackman in 1974. By 1980, Roversi had established himself as a distinguished photographer within the fashion and beauty domain, collaborating with supermodels such as Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss, among many others.¹

Yet, for Roversi, his artistic process more closely resembles portraiture, and it is in this framing that the confrontations between desire and agency find their salient essence. He explains, "I am a portrait photographer. I treat fashion photography like a portraitist... It is the atmosphere and the mood of a portrait which brings clothes to life."² Generally, garments adorn the body and illustrate the soul, yet Roversi's modality inverts this logic. It is the interior of his subjects that breathes life into the exterior—the fashion—and ultimately grants passage to the beauty we hope to encounter. This

¹ "Paolo Roversi Biography," Hamiltons Gallery, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.hamiltonsgallery.com/artists/paolo-roversi/biography/>.

² Paolo Roversi, interview by Alexander Strecker, LensCulture, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/paolo-roversi-the-poetry-of-pictures>.

interplay between human connection and material beauty is manifested in Roversi's aesthetic language. He both hides and reveals, the subjects are both present and absent, laying bare only what is necessary to reach the heart.

Time is that which binds it all together—the light, the darkness, movement, and stasis—but most importantly, time is the conduit through which Roversi mediates the spirit of beauty. Multiple exposures offer a sense of immediacy and duality in his subjects, comprising images simultaneously defined by veiled silhouettes and detailed textures. This coupling advances Roversi's philosophical and aesthetic juxtaposition of echoed vulnerability and autonomy. In a single frame—yet many moments—beauty arises from the paradox of then and now. In harmonious perfection, intangibility and deliberate discretion resonate deeply. Similarly, long exposures allow Roversi's subjects to emphasize motion in an emotional moment and express tenderness over time. Flutters of the heart become visible in the swaying of garments and blur of corporality. On long exposures, Roversi states, “I can't explain technically why the look of the subject is more deep, more touching, more human if the photographer uses a long exposure for the shot, but it is. I learned this from studying early photographs, when the photographers were obliged to use longer exposures. The portraits looked much deeper.”³ With time, depth develops. An emotional exchange evolves as intimacy is forged into a tangible moment. The tension within an enduring instant, between revelation and concealment, is central to Roversi's images of fashion. The imperfections that embellish a shard of time embody his definition of true beauty.

Roversi's interplay between substance and shadow is an essential element in his work and appears consistently throughout his collection at the 508 West 25th Street *Pace Gallery* location. In many instances, this throughline appears aesthetically—in the shadowed contrasts, in the haze of an indeterminate focus, or in the palettes that render the subject nearly invisible, dissolving them into the background. The photograph *Emeline* detaches the subject's essence from her silhouette. Her face, illuminated without veil, floats above her body, partially cloaked in darkness, partially adorned in

³ Paolo Roversi, interview by Susan Reich, *Photographer Magazine*, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.photographermagazine.net/paolo-roversi/>.

fashion. This double exposure creates a clear distinction between the spirit and the vessel—the beauty of both entities is illuminated, the emotional dimension intensifying the physical.

In other instances, this sentiment is evoked metaphysically—found in the historicity of the image. Roversi's nude, *Tess McMillan*, exemplifies this quality in its reference to classical imagery. In the palette of the image, the liminal theme experienced throughout Roversi's collection is stylistically apparent, yet in the posing of his subject and in its compositional quality, Roversi extends this thread to resonate temporally. Historical paintings such as Titian's *Venus Urbino* or Ingres' *Grand Odalisque* heighten the crucial aspect of time as it relates to trace and shadow, and are echoed in Roversi's *Tess McMillan*. The subject is both historical and contemporary. She resides in both the past and the present. Through such gestures, the collection exists in a liminal temporality where beauty takes on the weight of eternity.



Figure 4. Paolo Roversi, *Tess McMillan*. Exhibited at Pace Gallery.

⁴ Paolo Roversi, *Tess McMillan*, in Paolo Roversi: Along the Way, Pace Gallery, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/paolo-roversi-2025/#artwork-96277>.

But what is the meaning of forever without the complexity and chaos caught between it? In Roversi's work, the conflicting desire for visibility without capture deepens his portraits of vulnerable beauty and autonomy. In *Kirsten Owen*, the gaze is handled on its own terms: light converges through the lens to focus her visage, yet this precision conceals as much as it reveals, veiling emotional availability without rendering her beauty illegible. Her agency emerges intensely in her gaze—detached, direct, and defiant. As we, the viewers, struggle to access that which we most desire, the subject stares back with enigmatic poise, subverting our inherent objectification. She is here with us, but our voyeurism is decidedly denied, and in that freedom—to be and to not be—lies Roversi's vision of beauty.

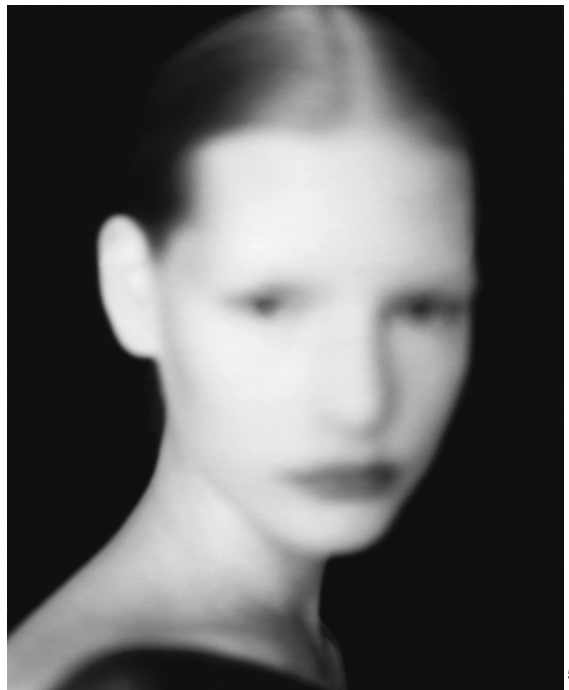


Figure 5. *Kirsten Owen*, Paolo Roversi. Exhibited at Pace Gallery. Self Service Magazine.

⁵ Paolo Roversi, "Kirsten Owen, *Self Service*," *Self Service Magazine*, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://selfservicemagazine.com/credit/kirsten-owen#self-service-n54-27>.

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