

Euro Rotelli

REALITY IS NOT THE TRUTH



Euro Rotelli has spent decades using photography not simply to record the world, but to question what a photograph is capable of revealing. His images often begin with something recognisable—a landscape, a body, a movement, a moment—and then move gradually away from description towards something more elusive. Through manipulation, intervention, painting, chemistry and the physical reworking of the photographic surface, Rotelli allows the image to become a space in which memory, imagination and emotion can coexist with what was originally seen.

There is a persistent tension in his work between reality and truth. Rotelli does not regard the precision of the camera as an end in itself, nor does he appear particularly seduced by perfection. Instead, he embraces accident, imperfection and the traces left by the hand, searching for an image that might communicate not only the appearance of a subject but something of its interior life. This is particularly evident in his photographs of dancers, where movement can dissolve the certainty of the body until the figure seems to hover somewhere between physical presence and apparition.

That search feels increasingly significant at a moment when technology can produce images of extraordinary technical perfection and artificial intelligence can create realities that never existed at all. Rotelli's response is not to retreat from technology, but to insist upon the importance of human interpretation. His photographs remind us that seeing is never entirely objective: we bring memory, experience, longing and imagination to everything we encounter. For an artist who still considers himself an observer, perhaps this is the paradox at the heart of his work—the more closely he looks at the visible world, the more interested he becomes in everything that cannot be seen.

Art Talk Magazine: You began with painting before discovering photography. Looking at your work today, those two languages seem never to have completely separated. Do you still think of yourself as a photographer—or did the distinction between photographer, painter and image-maker cease to matter a long time ago?

Euro Rotelli: I have never considered myself confined to a specific category. When I was very young, after experimenting with painting, I discovered photography. I was immediately fascinated by the possibility of capturing images and situations, then developing and printing them myself in the darkroom, initially working with black-and-white film. For me, photography was like entering a magical world, a space where I could intervene in reality and transform it through my own vision. Yet I have never really thought of myself as a photographer. I see myself more as a person with visions and thoughts that need to be communicated.

Photography simply became the most powerful way for me to express them. Over the years, I have explored this through different kinds of film, cameras, techniques, and experiments, always trying to discover new ways of translating what I see and



Tulips 17_2006_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

feel into images.

ATM: There is something almost paradoxical at the heart of your work. Photography has historically been trusted because of its relationship with reality, yet you intervene in that reality—manipulating, transferring, painting, layering and reconstructing it. Do you believe an image can sometimes become more truthful by becoming less real?

ER: It depends on what you mean by “real.” Reality is not necessarily the truth, because everyone perceives the world around them in a different way. As Plato suggests, everything is constantly changing, from one moment to the next. In the same way, there is no photograph that can show reality exactly as it is.

I see the world in my own personal way — or, perhaps better, in the way I would like it to be. Through my camera, I try to translate my feelings into images and transform what I see into my dreams.

So yes, I believe that sometimes an image has to move away from reality in order to come closer to truth. Perhaps it is not the real world, but I believe in dreams. And I like to think that my photographs can be my poems.

ATM: Polaroid became fundamental to your practice because it allowed you to physically intervene in the image. There is something wonderfully intimate about that: the hand returning to a medium supposedly governed by the eye. What did touching the photograph give you that simply taking it could not?

ER: Polaroid gave me everything I could ask from photography. I experimented with every Polaroid film and technique I could find, and even invented some of my own, modifying cameras, chemically treating the surface of the film, and manipulating it during development.

Working by hand became the most intimate way for me to bring technique and creativity together, in an attempt to give form to my deepest feelings.

ATM: We live in a moment of extraordinary photographic perfection—infinately sharp images, increasingly sophisticated cameras, flawless post-production and now AI-generated realities. Your work has often embraced accident, instability, chemical irregularity and imperfection. Has imperfection become more precious precisely because technology is becoming so perfect?

ER: Absolutely. I love imperfection because it reflects human life. As Carl Gustav Jung said, “Without imperfection there is neither progress nor growth.”

I am wary of perfection. I find true beauty in defects, in those unexpected elements that make something unique. Nature itself is also the result of chance and unpredictability.

AI can certainly be a useful tool; it is part of human research and development. But the human mind and heart cannot be replaced. Above all,



My Country 5_2006_detail_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

imperfection is what makes us unique. My work is always a mixture of study, experiments, attempts, mistakes, and chance, all of which lead me towards what I am looking for: beauty and uniqueness through imperfection.

ATM: Your landscapes rarely feel like descriptions of places. They often seem closer to memories of places—something seen, absorbed and then reconstructed internally. When you photograph a landscape, are you interested in the place itself, or in what happens to that place once it enters you?

ER: When I travel, or even when I simply walk through my surroundings, I observe what is happening and what exists around me. Fragments of what I see remain inside me, not necessarily consciously, and sometimes, after a long time — even years later — they resurface in my mind and become a project, or part of one.

This happened with landscapes such as Laguna and My Country, which I strongly felt the need to represent like poems. It also happened with Sleepy Places, which was born from observing beaches during the summer and imagining those same places in winter: deserted, in the darkness, completely opposite to what I was actually seeing at that moment.

Another example is Beyond the Rust. It began with a trip to Cuba and developed after I returned home. It was triggered by something as simple as a rusty sign, which became a spark for a deeper reflection on the world we live in and on life itself. It became a metaphor that I developed through a series of photographs with manual interventions.

These are just a few examples, but they explain how I experience, feel, and communicate the world around me. I feel like a writer telling stories: I collect fragments of reality, let them settle within me, and eventually transform them into images.

ATM: Laguna is particularly beautiful in this respect. You have spoken not simply about what the lagoon looks like, but about wind, reeds, water, changing light and even the cry of a seagull. Can a still photograph somehow contain sound, temperature, movement—even smell? Are you trying to photograph an atmosphere rather than a view?

ER: Yes, I am trying to photograph an atmosphere rather than simply a view. I would like the image to evoke not only what I saw, but also what I heard, felt and breathed in that place.

“Laguna” and “My Country” are my poems as well. For these works, I developed a personal process using Polaroid film after the photographs had been taken. I experimented intensely and for a long time, searching for a visual language capable of telling the story of what I had seen and felt in those moments: the rustling of plants in the wind, the reflections of light on the water, the tracks left in the sand, the boats gently swaying on the water... Everything is veiled in nostalgia, like an echo of the past. A kind of sweet melancholy that I always feel at sunset, while still waiting for the hope of sunrise.

ATM: Then there is beauty. Flowers, landscapes, dancers, the human body— your work repeatedly returns to subjects that artists have considered beautiful for centuries. Contemporary art can sometimes appear suspicious of beauty, as though beauty alone were somehow insufficient. You don't seem frightened of it. What does beauty mean to you, and does an artist ever need to defend the desire to create something beautiful?

ER: For me, beauty is an essential part of life. I cannot live without it, and I am always looking for it in everything around me. Even in projects where I address the darkest aspects of human behaviour — for example, Il Cantico delle Creature — I try to bring beauty to light beyond sadness and cruelty, because the world itself is wonderful.

If we learn to recognize beauty and love in the world, I believe we can also understand how important it is to preserve them. This is neither rhetoric nor utopia, but a responsibility.

I believe artists have a fundamental role to play in this process.

ATM: The human figure appears throughout your work, but The Body The Soul takes that fascination somewhere particularly profound. You photographed dancers precisely because the body becomes capable of communicating something that isn't physical at all. What were you searching for in those dancers: the body, the movement—or the moment when the body seems to disappear and something else takes its place?

ER: Paul Valéry wrote that “art as a dancing act unites intellect and physicality in an immediate aesthetic flow” I chose to dedicate my latest Polaroid project to dance as a homage to this sublime art form, the highest expression of the human body.

I was not interested in the body or movement as an end in themselves. I was looking for the moment when they could become a passage towards something invisible.

I spent years photographing some of the best dancers in the world, experimenting with every kind of Polaroid film and developing my own techniques, until I was able to achieve a result that went beyond movement, music, and performance.

I wanted to capture and reveal what lies behind the body: the soul of the dancer.

ATM: Photography and dance would initially seem almost incompatible. Dance exists through movement and time; photography interrupts both. And yet you have described photography as an interpretation of an interpretation— the dancer interprets movement and music, and you interpret the dancer. When you press the shutter, are you capturing their gesture or creating your own?

ER: I think it is both. I begin with their gesture, but the moment I photograph and manipulate it, it becomes my interpretation of that gesture. Dance is movement, while a photograph is static. But I love challenges.

As I mentioned in the previous question, I experimented with techniques and ideas in order to capture what I was seeing in these extraordinary dancers: not only their gestures, but, above all, the soul within their bodies.

In my photographs, movement is sometimes reproduced obsessively, while at other times the dancers dissolve into diaphanous figures, gradually disappearing into energy and a kind of primordial spirit. The painterly tones amplify this sense of lightness, transforming movement into visions that capture the very aura of the gesture.

The gaze becomes lost in the rustle of the film and the momentum of the movement. In this way, I was able to interpret their body language as part of a profound dialogue with their souls.

ATM: Your recent retrospective Theatron takes its title from the Greek idea of seeing or observing. You have described your process as seeing something, metabolising it, thinking about it, and eventually constructing what you imagined or dreamed. That suggests that seeing is only the first stage. What happens between seeing something and finally understanding what you have seen?

ER: Between seeing and understanding, there is a period of waiting. Sometimes I do not even know that something has remained inside me. It can take months or years before it returns and becomes an image or a project.

This is my way of living and working. It is not always a conscious or rational process. More often, I instinctively feel the need to communicate sometimes urgently, and I look for the tools and the means to do so.

But I am first and foremost an observer and a reader. As I move forward with a project, I often discover that what I am creating was already somewhere in my mind, simply waiting to be recognized and used for that purpose.

For me, it is a metaphysical journey: a walk through the world and, at the same time, a journey into myself, beyond material reality, questioning the meaning of existence.

Through my work, I am simply looking for an answer or, most probably, I am continuing to ask questions.

ATM: Theatron also brought together very different relationships with the human body—from the beauty and transcendence of dance to the more disturbing implications of Packaging, where the female body is enclosed in plastic and appears to struggle against its confinement. Can beauty and violence inhabit the same photograph? And when does poetry become protest?

ER: Life is a drama, a tragedy, as emerges in Theatron. Every day, we see beauty and violence co-existing. “Beauty will save the world,” Dostoevsky wrote in his famous novel The Idiot. I do not know whether this will ever be true, but I strongly feel the need to do something to confront violence through the beauty of art.

In Packaging and Il Cantico delle Creature, I rep-

resent and denounce violence, but my intention is to invite the viewer to stop, look and think, to feel emotions, to understand the gravity of what is being expressed through an aesthetic composition that ultimately leads back to hope and beauty.

Art and poetry have a powerful force, and I believe they can contribute to creating a better world. I try to do this to the best of my ability.

I must do it.

ATM: In works such as Ri-creatio (Composite Landscapes), you construct images from fragments of different realities, creating landscapes that may never have existed as a single place. Photography once offered us a relatively simple proposition: this existed; I was there. What interests you about creating a photograph of somewhere that never existed at all?

ER: “Ri-creatio” is a reference to the Latin language. Creatio evokes the Bible and an ancestral memory, while the iterative prefix ri- suggests a new creation — a re-creation — through which I try to imagine a different world.

This project was born during the pandemic. I suffered greatly because I could no longer move or travel, which had always been essential to the way I developed my projects. One day, I was walking along the river near my village, the only place I could reach close to home. Looking at the nature around me, I began to reflect on human fragility: on how life can change or end in a single moment, within the space and time we are given.

I was there, physically, but in my mind I was free to create a world that existed only within me. These reflections led me to photograph elements that are usually fleeting to our perception, yet have existed since time immemorial.

Later, I printed the photos taken in different shades and tonalities. I then tore them apart, layered and juxtaposed the fragments in a collage, attempting to represent the passage of time within a single place. Finally, I enclosed the composition within brushstrokes, as if to preserve and frame its memory — and, through the act of re-creating, to give life back to it.

ATM: That question feels particularly urgent today. We are entering a world in which an image no longer needs a camera, a subject—or even a moment that actually occurred. After spending your life physically transforming photographs, how do you respond to artificial intelligence? Does AI represent another tool in the long history of image-making, or does something fundamental change when there is no original encounter between photographer and world?

ER: I am fully aware of how quickly the world is changing and how useful these new tools can be in contemporary society. I experienced this myself when digital cameras arrived and I had to change my way of photographing, as well as my approach to work with images on a computer in my professional advertising work.

I have always studied and experimented with new techniques and tools. Change and transformation



My Country 29_2009_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Vibrazioni 51_2006_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Vibrazioni 43_2005_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

do not frighten me; on the contrary, they are ways of improving, evolving, and learning something new.

However, I believe AI can also represent a danger to humanity if it gradually occupies our minds and makes things easier without requiring us to make the effort to think. As with everything new, we should be conscious of how and when we use it. As for me, I am far removed from it, not only in terms of practical use, but also because of the concept itself. I need to think, create, experiment, and make mistakes on my own, without artificial support. AI may be a useful tool for younger generations, who are already accustomed to working in this way. My only concern for the future — and, in this case, for the future of art — is that we may forget the history of art and the importance of gesture, physical creation, feel emotion, and all the effort involved in making something beautiful with our own hands.

I will continue as I always have, embracing technology when it can be useful, but above all relying on my head, my heart, and my hands — three things that I believe AI will never be able to replace.

ATM: Your relationship with Galerija Fotografija stretches back almost two decades—from L'Amour et Psychè in 2008 through The Body The Soul, Silentium and Composite Landscapes, to international presentations including Photo Basel. That kind of continuity between artist and gallery has become increasingly rare. What has Barbara Čeferin and Galerija Fotografija understood about your work that has allowed the relationship to endure and evolve for so long?

ER: I think it is because we share the same sensibility and passion for photography art. From our very first meeting, she immediately understood the way I use photography as an artistic language to interpret the world and the situations around me. She was not interested in my CV, but in my photographic work. She was impressed by its originality and by a style that was not easily categorized. She invited me to participate in fairs and exhibitions, choosing photographs with her heart rather than thinking about the market. This is something quite rare and, especially today, almost anachronistic, when the market so often comes first.

Most importantly, she understood the way I work on my projects, where the camera and the film are not the priority, but simply tools for bringing an idea to life. My approach is eclectic and perhaps difficult to recognize in terms of a consistent style or technique, but it always follows the needs of the project.

Many galleries prefer to represent artists whose work is immediately recognizable and easier to position in the market. But this is not possible for me. When I finish a project, I cannot simply continue working on the same subjects or using the same film or camera. I need to express what I feel, my emotions, and each time I need to find the right — and often different — way to realize a new project. Perhaps this makes me difficult to place within the market, but I cannot do what I do not feel.



Laguna 33_2007_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Laguna 6_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

And what I need to express changes constantly, because the world changes, situations change, people change — and so do I. Barbara Čeferin believed in me and trusted my work. I am deeply grateful for that, and proud to be represented by Galerija Fotografija.

ATM: And finally, after decades of photographing, manipulating, constructing and re-creating images, perhaps we return to the simplest act of all: looking. When Euro Rotelli walks through the world today without a camera in his hands, what still makes him stop and look?

ER: Almost anything can make me stop and look. A person, a landscape, a detail, a gesture, a particular light... the whole world continues to fascinate me. As I said at the beginning, I do not have any particular order or priority.

Sometimes nothing happens; sometimes something catches my attention, impresses me, and remains inside me like a seed. Sooner or later, that seed grows into an idea, and an idea becomes a story I feel the need to tell.

But as I grow older, I have gained more experience and sensitivity. I have seen and read more, and I feel able to perceive reality more deeply. This is positive, because I still feel that I have so many things to say. But it can also be painful, because some things can affect me more deeply.

The world seems to be getting worse day by day, and we are losing values and ideals that we once believed in. I can only hope that I will always be able to create something beautiful, something that can move people and make them think.

Perhaps this is what I have always been looking for: to transform what I see, what I feel, and what I cannot explain into something that can remain beyond me. As long as I have something to feel, something to question, and something to say, I will continue to make images. Because, for me, photography is not simply a way of looking at the world. It is my way of being in the world.