



BY ETHELEEN STALEY / **SEPTEMBER 2025** / COLLABORATOR

## Strike a Pose

### Etheleen Staley talks about which fashion photographs belong on gallery walls

September arrives like a collective awakening—the world shakes off summer’s languor as fashion capitals stir to life, runways illuminate, and creative energies converge once more. It is the season of looking forward, of anticipation, when the industry’s heartbeat quickens and possibility fills the air. In the weeks ahead, hundreds of thousands of images will be captured: models frozen mid-stride, fabrics caught in perfect motion.

Yet of this vast visual harvest, only a precious few will transcend their original purpose. These rare photographs outlive the collections they document, becoming cultural artifacts that capture not just cloth and form, but the very spirit of their time—evolving from mere records into art that speaks across generations.

I began in fashion as a stylist. For years, I worked steadily on ads for Revlon, Barneys, Greyhound buses—even lottery commercials. It was a different era. Advertising had big budgets. The shoots were like little movies. I supported myself for fifteen years in that world, and through it I met photographers who became friends. When one of them suggested I take part of their loft and open a gallery, I thought, why not?

When Taki Wise and I first opened Staley-Wise Gallery in 1981, the world had not yet accepted fashion photography as art. Most people dismissed it as advertising, something to be flipped past in a glossy magazine. The other galleries laughed at us, really. But I had spent years watching these photographers work, seeing the artistry in their vision, the way they could transform a fabric and light into something that spoke to the soul. I knew there was something more happening behind those cameras than mere documentation.

Our space was modest, but our conviction was not. Our very first exhibition was devoted to the legendary Horst P. Horst. The response was immediate and extraordinary—collectors, editors, and fellow photographers crowded into the gallery to see his elegant, timeless images. Coverage in the press followed, and soon we had to move to a larger gallery. If you ask me the secret to our success, it comes down to taste. I trusted my eye. Taki trusted hers. If we liked a photograph, that was enough. That principle still guides us today.

Rodney Smith is one of the artists who embodies that standard. Originality is incredibly rare. It barely exists in photography, and his work is original. That’s what elevates him.

His women are contemplative, inward-looking, often surrounded by veils or landscapes. His men, on the other hand, carry a quiet loneliness. There’s an elegance to them, but also a kind of sadness. His worlds are imagined—beautiful gardens, clipped hedges, places of perfection that don’t really exist. And yet they feel timeless. His pictures don’t depend on supermodels or fleeting trends. They fit in any era.

And the prints themselves—flawless. Every detail is considered, every print a perfect object. In the gallery, they radiate a kind of presence that makes you stop and breathe them in.

What I learned in those early years is that the photographs that transcend—the ones that take on a life entirely their own—possess something ineffable. They speak in a language that goes beyond fashion itself, capturing moments that resonate across decades, becoming windows into not just what we wore, but who we were.



RODNEY SMITH  
BIOGRAPHY  
ARTIST'S STATEMENT  
CHRONOLOGY  
PRESS  
BLOG

ARTWORK  
SURREALISM  
FASHION  
HUMOR  
STORYTELLING  
LANDSCAPES  
EARLY WORK

ON VIEW  
EXHIBITIONS  
GALLERIES  
BOOKS  
NEW & NOTABLE  
ARCHIVE  
LICENSING  
CONTACT

SIGN UP FOR THE NEWSLETTER

YOUR EMAIL

SUBSCRIBE ➡➡➡

