

EXPOSITION

AN EXTRAORDINARY WORK OF ART—ENCOMPASSING TWO
SYMBIOTIC FORMATS—PHOTOGRAPHER BETTINA RHEIMS
AND WRITER SERGE BRAMLÉY CREATE MULTIFARIOUS POETIC
ILLUSIONS OF THE CITY OF LIGHT



*"He is nowhere and
everywhere at once,*

his shadow hovers above the strangest mysteries, and his traces are found near the most inexplicable crimes." Though that line was first published in the 1911 French pulp novel *Fantômas*, sub in a feminine pronoun and it might well be a caption in *Rose C'est Paris* the new, limited edition photo/film tome, an ambitious year-long collaboration with Taschen, by fashion photographer Bettina Rheims and her writer ex-husband Serge Bramly. Rest assured, this is exactly their aim.

*"Unless a picture shocks,
it is nothing."*

Where the Surrealists found "the absurdity of this titular masked criminal profoundly inspiring—the authors wrote sequential chapters at a novel-a-month clip (for 32 months) and were soon killing characters off in one chapter, only to have them unintentionally alive the next—the breakneck production of this swashbuckling print-and-film sensation spurred Rheims and Bramly to pen "Alice In Wonderland lost in a dirty world" stories based around the Fantômas-ian twins B and R (yes, it's partly biographical). To wit: R, aka Rose, goes missing, and B, deftly played by Belgian model Inge Van Bruystegem, goes undercover—as a Geisha knitter, blind accordionist, orgasmic cabaret dancer, and Rose herself—to investigate whether her sister was abducted, sold into prostitution, sucked into a terrorist ring or simply married to a lover.

As the "Annie Leibovitz of France", who regularly works for the likes of *Elle* and Chanel, Rheims gained exclusive access to shoot a bondage-clad, knife-wielding B on the roof of the Palais de Justice, a tchotchke-crowned "Queen of Paris" beside the Observatory dome, even older twins hovering above the empty racks in the old Bibliothèque nationale de France. (An exhibition of the series is also on view at the new La Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) through July.)

What ultimately emerges are 212 luscious, highly eroticized black and white tableaux that heavily reference Magritte, Dalí and Duchamp (from *Etant donné*s to his female alter-ego Rose Sélavy, who inspired the project's title). Throw in ethereal cityscapes of Paris, Dr. (Azzedine) Alaïa psychoanalyzing Naomi Campbell, a vagrant subway doyenne (Charlotte Rampling) who unlocks the riddle for B, with their son Virgile Bramly masquerading as Fantômas himself, and the result is a painterly suite of hypnotic images that intentionally defy a strict narrative understanding. Though Bramly's lush, if at times photographically frozen, 97-minute noir feature provides a compelling dialogue with the stills—like dueling ex-lover's perspectives on an old affair—in the end we are left with two works that beg for repeat inspections, which invariably recall Duchamp's artistic maxim: "Unless a picture shocks, it is nothing." Rose is raw electricity ■ Michael Slenske, *Rose C'est Paris* by Bettina Rheims and Serge Bramly, Taschen taschen.com

