

# Gregor Hildebrandt

## Seiten im Buch wie Wände im Raum

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The image of a woman half immersed in water, and her reflection on the rippled surface. It is the iconic actress Sophie Marceau who is seen here as the tragic heroine Nelly in *A ce soir*, a fairly obscure film from 2004 directed by Laure Duthilleul. Gregor Hildebrandt's work is not just an image, however, but a whole ensemble: the motif is spread over the backs of thousands of cassette tape covers, arranged on a wall-sized shelf. If we come closer the image dissolves in the grid, but if we step back we see the actress with her legs already immersed in the water of a lake. Her face is focused and stern, and it is not hard to guess that she is contemplating suicide. The artist has not seen the film, but more important was the fact that the image he found reminded him of another famous image of a reflection, from Jean Cocteau's 1950 classic film *Orpheus*, the famous film still of Jean Marais face down on a mirror plane: a puddle in the sand, but also a locked door into the underworld.

Still, what both these characters share is that they defy the inevitability of death. Nelly, Marceau's character, has difficulties accepting the sudden death of her beloved husband. Her reflection on the lake's surface is distorted by the ripples she causes. She is literally hovering between life and death, and these ripples tell the viewer that the passage from life to death cannot be reversed. Unlike *Orpheus*, who rests on an immaculate mirror plane, she cannot go back into the underworld to retrieve her beloved.

We, the viewers, share this inability with her. Condemned to live in the present tense, we can only dream ourselves away infinitely, but we cannot retrieve the past, which remains out of reach. Much like the music that informs the metaphors of Gregor Hildebrandt's works, and his preferred material, the cassette tape.

Already when the shimmering elegance of the CD and the magic of optical data transmission came up, not to mention the complete wizardry of MP3s and the Internet, the mechanics of cassette tapes suddenly appeared obsolete, bulky and primitive, however cheap and practical they may have been. But cassette tapes introduced a new concept of sharing music, an exchange in which a song or a whole tape of music recorded from vinyl, the radio or other tapes, became a form of social currency. Not only that, but it was able to convey more or less coded romantic messages or even communicate intimate wishes. The sincerity of this support is most apparent in the time invested in the recording of cassette tapes. As an analogue medium, this required at the very least the time span of the whole duration of one cassette tape, an aspect that bears a continuing fascination for those who grew up with it.

Although romantic and not without sentimental traits, Gregor Hildebrandt's work is far removed from retro-fetishism, as it confronts the viewer with surprising physical qualities: colours, shades of brown, white and red, clear marks – and surface structures that can be created with it, fragmented, yet shiny and surprisingly reflective. In this the tape paintings become mirrors once more, reflecting the viewer at the same time as they conceal what is written within them, bearing witness to this romanticized mystery of magnetically encoded information hidden inside the material. Even if the artist tells us, in his titles or in the list of tracks that accompany larger tape pieces, that the poetic and emotional potential is entirely up to the thoughts, experiences and memories of the individual viewer.

Gregor Hildebrandt's works conceal the associations they trigger, what emerges before our inner eyes when we see these works. Like romantic versions of the mirror objects Gerhard Richter produced in the mid eighties, simply titled "Spiegel" ("Mirror"), we see ourselves, but not with the same pristine clarity: the reflection is of a brownish colour, as if the whole concept had been dirtied, muddled up by a different set of personal priorities, by sentimental lingering, if you wish, by guilty pleasures, half forgotten. Add to this an inaudible, but nevertheless prominent background noise, the noise of pop culture, and entangled therein, the individual associations triggered by the memory of the music: how we listened to it, the images it evokes - and where they take us.

Back in time. As Jean Cocteau famously wrote: "We watch ourselves grow old in mirrors. They bring us closer to death." The piece featuring Sophie Marceau consists of exactly 6,496 tapes. If each was a standard ninety-minute tape, the running time of all tapes in the piece would amount to over 400 days. Where will I be then? And where will you be?

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