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## How Nicole Gravier Demolishes Domesticity

Nicole Gravier's 'fotoromanzi' at Ermes-Ermes, Vienna, create an escapist melodrama that stresses the dependence of capitalism on unpaid housework by women



Nicole Gravier's 'Photoromans: Mythes & Clichés' (all works 1976–80) is a feminist critique grounded in *fotoromanzi*: thought-bubbled filled, comic strip-style stories once targeted at bored housewives. Gravier parodies the styles and storytelling capacities of *fotoromanzi* by using their comic-book form to tell a tale about a young woman, played by the artist, waiting for her husband to return home from work. Gravier uses escapist melodrama to show how, in capitalist societies, our emotional lives and material well-being depend largely on unpaid housework and emotional labour performed by women.

In *Sei una stupida, Patricia* (You Are Stupid, Patricia), the character beautifies herself in front of a mirror; she sits alone with a cup of coffee and a magazine in *Il tuo caffè* (Your Coffee), and dreams of her husband (or lover, or *fotoromanzo* star) in *Andrea*. Gravier thus turns traditionally passive gestures, including reading *fotoromanzi* themselves, into material for radical social change.

The viewer follows one almost-uninterrupted story from the wood panelling around the gallery's entrance, across grimy white enamel walls, and up the stairs to a small, brightly-lit room. Making sense of it relies on knowing about 1970s Italian politics, when referenda on divorce (1974), family law (1975) and abortion legalisation (1978) dented patriarchal power. Unlike peers like Lisetta Carmi or Carolee Schneemann, Gravier does not confront the male gaze with images of women's bodies. Instead, she shows how that gaze is formed and expands our sense of what kinds of experiences are worth representing.



Nicole Gravier, *I tuo caffè*, 1976 - 1980, collage on photograph, 30 x 40 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Ermes-Ermes, Vienna; photograph: kunst-dokumentation.com

Woman is, Luce Irigaray wrote, 'the target, the object, the stake, of a masculine discourse, of a debate among men, which would not consult her, which would not concern her'. Gravier makes these processes visible with two moves. One, she shows how the *fotoromanzo* is a system of narrative conventions prepared by male publishers for their female readership, but never truly about them. She does this by, second, ironizing these conventions, which quickly become clichés with emotional payoffs as predictable as housewives' lives themselves.

In *Non è possibile* (It is Not Possible), for example, the woman looks horrified by a letter she has read, reacting with an exaggerated gesture. By showing up the campy artifice of moments like this, Gravier lets us laugh about the gulf between the original material and real feelings. This lets us question the depth and honesty of our emotions in a male-dominated society, inevitably prompting us to ask what we can do about them if they have neither truth nor meaning.



Nicole Gravier, *Roberto (Moro)*,  
1976 - 1980, collage on  
photograph, 30 x 40. Courtesy:  
the artist and Ermes-Ermes,  
Vienna; photograph: kunst-  
dokumentation.com

This is possible because she is utterly in control of how she represents herself, most evidently in *Roberto (Moro)*. Here, we see the artist lying on a pink blanket, reading magazines. She is absorbed in her own activities but meets the viewer's gaze without enticing us; we rather get the feeling that we are intruding on her private experience. The narrative reads 'Un pensiero, un nome soltanto' ('A thought, a name only'); the thought bubble says 'Roberto...Roberto, amore mio' ('Roberto...Roberto, my love'). Who is Roberto? A character in *fotoromanzo* she is reading, perhaps. On top, however, in the foreground, is another kind of publication: a political magazine with an exclusive story about the 1978 kidnapping and assassination of Christian Democrat politician Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades.

This is not just about encouraging women to take part in politics, but an attempt to allow a radical new subject to enter the stage of history. 'The problem, then, becomes how to bring this struggle out of the kitchen and the bedroom and into the streets', wrote Silvia Federici. We don't see that happen in 'Photoromans', but we do see a subtly powerful demand to revolutionise social relationships by upending familial relations. Gravier shows us that there's something sinister behind the dumb sweetness of *fotoromanzi* imagery, and she gives it a much sharper aftertaste.

Nicole Gravier, *'Photoromans: Mythes & Clichés'* at Ermes-Ermes, Vienna, was on view until 7 February 2020.

Main Image: Nicole Gravier, *'Photoromans: Mythes & Clichés'*, exhibition view, 2019, Ermes-Ermes, Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Ermes-Ermes, Vienna; photograph: kunst-dokumentation.com

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