

# Gabriel Kosmály

## Just trying to survive

**Gabriel Kosmály** was born on 18th July 1958 in Svodov in the Levice district. His parents were teachers, so they often moved to different places for work, but they settled in Levice in 1967. He became captivated by modern fine art during his primary school years already, what then resulted in his application for studies at the High School of Decorative Arts in Bratislava. He wasn't accepted to his desired field of study—Graphic Arts, but he was given the opportunity to study in the Applied Photography field. In his words, he was completely captivated by the school, especially by the period during which he studied in the class of Milota Havráňková (then still Marková). Her phenomenal pedagogic and especially artistic leadership left a strong, lasting influence on him to this day. After finishing high school, he started studying for his teaching qualification in Slovak Language and Literature and Art at the Faculty of Pedagogy in Nitra. He was one of the best students at the Art Department, to which his achievements during his studies testify. Let me mention just multi-annual victories in the Slovak University Artistic Creativity and the second place in the field of University Scientific Creativity (The Interpretation of Lebiš's Illustrations of Villon's Great Testament). It was this piece of work that comprised the basis for the more in-depth

version, which was the subject of his Ph.D. oral examination. In those times, when socialism was at its peak, the atmosphere in the ranks of students of art was highly creative. The then Department Head Ľudovít Jelenák led a three-member painting circle, of which Gabriel Kosmály was also a member. It was probably then when his liking of dark tones and colours developed. They still comprise a significant part of his artistic repertoire. In those times, he also developed a long-lasting and deep friendship with Karol Felix, a prominent Slovak graphic artist. They rented a shared atelier in the old part of the town, which also served as a meeting place for other students, not exactly loyal to the ideology of that period. This was also the birthplace for the occasionally published samizdat Patinované listy [Patinaed Sheets], the content of which comprised their works of art but also reflections about society, mostly by Jozef Pavlovič—a priest, theologian and linguist. The guardian angel of these students was the then assistant dean of the university Doc. Oľga Felixová. Her apartment in the centre of Nitra was open to students for creative discussions, mostly about art. After his university studies, Gabriel Kosmály taught at the Primary Art School in Levice for 8 years and after more than 10 years of running his own bu-

siness he founded the Photographic Design field of study at Ladislav Bielek Secondary Art School in Levice, which he was then the head of for more than a decade. His role-model in the pedagogic work was the already mentioned Milota Havráňková. Many of his former students are now students of or graduates from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in the Photography and New Media field of study. Gabriel Kosmály has always been a local patriot—he lives and works in Levice to this day. His wife Marta and children Kristína and Gabriel are, in his words, the main support for him in life.

### Work

Rebelliousness in the field of artistic photography, typical of the author's persona, fully manifested itself at the beginning of his creative career already. He never perceived photography as a capture of unrepeatable moments or the depiction of the beauty of the visible. Rather, he tried to breathe into it a peculiar artistic character which shifts it to a broader, multi-media framework. He started using non-traditional photographic techniques at the beginning of his creative career already. Martin Vančo describes him: "Similarly to Havráňková, Kosmály, too, uses pseudo-solarisation—the so-called Sabattier effect, solarisation and isohelia—to achieve abstractly expressionistic effects of his pieces. He expanded on these technological procedures by his own authorial techniques of destructive interfering with photographic matrixes by scratching, folding or tearing of the negative or the positive. Using this combination of techniques, the author creates unique photo-graphic works that verge on several art forms: photography, traditional graphic art or painting." In the words of the photography theorist

Václav Macek, this process of the author's unique specialization can be characterized the following way: "His tendency to use the photo-graphics doesn't mean the transformation of photography into graphics; he doesn't want to escape from photography to drawing or graphics. Rather, he proves that photography offers the same possibilities as graphics or drawing. He doesn't want to model himself on something. Rather, he is laying bare the unknown or little known possibilities of the given medium."

"Unlike the surrealists, he doesn't depict super-reality, but real items just by expressive deformation of things and people, be it in the works Predmety [Items], in which he plays, for example, with the depiction of a cell phone, Nočné motýle [Night Butterflies] or Kúpajúci sa [Bathing People]. The Hungarian photography historian Klára Szarka states that it is impossible to classify Kosmály in terms of artistic movements or types; his work ignores trends, it is playful, gentle and draws us into a mysterious world he created. Václav Macek continues by stating: "The work of Gabriel Kosmály stands aside from the main post-modern trends not only because it focuses on the hidden possibilities

of the photographic technique, but also because it stands in opposition to the often harshly brutal aesthetic of the recent period, due to its lyrical orientation. The world as seen by his eyes is varied and internally rich. His pictures are exceptional not only because of their playfulness, but especially due to their gentleness and kindness, in which even the greatest deformations give the impression of a declaration of love and not of attempts at shocking or surprising. In his own way, he is a romanticist, a one who discovered a tool for celebrating the world in photography. That was true about his creative beginnings and is still true today.

If we wanted to describe his work in chronological terms, we could divide it into several periods. The first one is characterized by creative searching for the basic expressive means in the form of abstraction. Various studies of lines and shapes belong here. Fig. 1 Mobil [Cell Phone], gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm, 1985/ Martin Vančo characterized this period of his work by stating: “Gabriel Kosmály is a Little Big Man, (one of the photos by the author’s bears the same name), not only by his physical appearance but also by his work, which, unlike those of other artistic photographers who have been dealing with abstract photography till now, isn’t for him just a temporary experiment exploring the possibilities of the photographic medium, but a long-lasting artistic program, which is unparalleled in

Slovakia or abroad.” Fig. 2 Malý veľký muž [Little Big Man], gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm, 2002/ The extensive cycle named Zo sveta nočných motýľov [From the World of Night Butterflies] is characterized by a playful search for an imaginary world of insects, which feels mysterious or even mystical. Fig. 3 Zo sveta nočných motýľov 6 [From the World of Night Butterflies 6], gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm, 2000/ Similar atmosphere, in the area of figures, can be found in the trilogy Príbehy z podvedomia [Stories from the Subconscious]. Fig. 4 Príbehy z podvedomia 3 [Stories from the Subconscious 3], gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm, 1999 and in the cycle Twilight. Fig. 5 Súmrak 1 [Twilight 1], gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm, 1999/ Fig. 6 Súmrak 3 [Twilight 3], gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm, 1999 The meaning of these works corresponds with another cycle by the author, a cycle consisting of as many as 12 parts, named Padlí anjeli [Fallen Angels]. It is as if these were the photos that thematically predestined the creative framework of the author in the form of Biblické príbehy [Biblical Stories ] from 2012. Fig. 7. Padlý anjel 5,6,8 [Fallen Angel 5,6,8], gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm, 2001 Enchantment by a woman’s beauty is another stop in his work. This motif actually appears throughout the whole of the authors work. Here, too, it would also be useless to search for current influences of the post-modern ways of expressing a naked body. His Nahé príbehy [Naked Stories] is a poetic

expression of admiration, spiced with a gentle irony of the present. Fig. 8 Nahé príbehy 7 [Naked stories 7], digital print, 33 x 48 cm, 2002/ Fig. 9 Nahé príbehy 1 [Naked stories 1], digital print, 33 x 48 cm, 2002/ Fig. 10 Nahé príbehy 4 [Naked stories 4], digital print, 33 x 48 cm, 2002/Even though he uses deformative elements of expressing the body in the earliest periods of his work (especially in the cycle Chvála sivej [The Praise of Grey] and in Začarované princezné [Enchanted Princesses]), the meaning here, however, concerns a playful search for a motif, a proto-shape, a kind of a metamorphosis of an act; in the latter case it is a mature artistic reflexion of children fairy-tales. The most mature artefact from the latter period of the author in the area of acts seems to be a trilogy called Hommage a A. CH. Johnnston Fig. 11 Hommage a A. CH. Johnnston 1, digital print, 50 x 84 cm, 2015/ The Acts made following this year lose their realistic character. This can be clearly seen in the cycle Intímne príbehy [Intimate Stories] and Neočakávané príchody anjela [Unexpected Arrivals of an Angel]. Here we come to the already mentioned Biblické príbehy [Biblical Stories] which are the expression of the author’s intense search for faith. This spiritual thread weaves its way not only through the whole of his private, but also through his artistic life. As he gets older, the questions of faith and religion resonate ever more intensely in his work. He depicts stories from the

Old Testament in the cycle Oltáre [Altars] Fig. 12 Genesis, digital print, 33 x 48 cm, 2005 Fig. 13 Oltár pre obeť [Altar of Sacrifice], digital print, 30 x 60 cm 2005/ Similar themes can be found also in Biblické príbehy [Biblical Stories] from 2006. Fig. 14 Lót [Lot], digital print, 50 x 70 cm, 2006, Fig. 15 Jonášova ryba [The Fish of Jonah], digital print, 50 x 50 cm, 2006 and Fig. 16 Psiarsky oltár [The Altar of Psiare], digital print, 30 x 60 cm, 2006/ Klára Szarka adds: “It would be in vain to search for European traditions of church art in Biblické príbehy or Oltáre. As almost everything in his work, these pictures, too, are controversial and non-traditional. I wouldn’t search for the source of his transcendental gestures in the blind destination in connection with the name Gabriel—Man of God, but literally in the original meaning of the transcendent, that is, the supersensible. In transcending our limits.” According to the author, the faith in an invisible God is an elementary need and a part of his life.

Another artistic chapter of his work is the cycle Fosílie dneška [The Fossils of Today]. It is a continuation of older studies called Po čom šliapeme [What We Trample On]. It is a kind of a herbarium of items, a collection of objects that no longer serve anything or anyone and represent forgotten traces of the human civilization.

It is interesting that in his depiction, they suddenly come to life and become endowed with aesthetic value, and, what is more, they even tell various stories. They are created by the technique of transferring photography onto MDF boards. Fig. 17 Nové fosílie 1 [New Fossils 1], digital transfer, 90 x 90 cm, 2016 and Fig. 18 Nové fosílie 2, [New Fossils 2], digital transfer, 90 x 90 cm, 2016/ Together with other objects, these constitute another cycle, named Metamorfózy [Metamorphoses]. They, unlike before, deal with abstractions of ordinary objects and shapes, with results in a new surprising motif that has nothing in common with the original. Fig. 19 Metamorfózy 10 [Metamorphoses 10], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2014, Fig. 18 Metamorfózy 11 [Metamorphoses 11], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2014 and Fig. 19 Metamorfózy 9 [Metamorphoses 9], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2014/

It is worth to mention another cycle from this period, which is called Plážová sezóna [Beach Season]. Even though these works originated in the same year as Metamorphoses, they tell a completely different story. The author suddenly replaces abstraction with figuration and melancholic memories of the time of rest. Fig. 20 Plážová sezóna 1 [Beach Season 1], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2014, Fig. 21 Plážová sezóna 2 [Beach Season 2], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2014/ This creative “impatience” is

characteristic of the overall work of Gabriel Kosmály. Many artists would remain in a certain phase of depicting for many years. But not him. The author himself answers the question of why he changes the conceptions of depiction so often thus: “Why continue when I have already done it, when I’ve said what I wanted? I don’t enjoy making variations.” This statement explains why his standalone exhibitions are full of variedness. Klára Szarka describes his last exhibition the following way: “Interpretations from an analytical, poetic viewpoint, powerful conceptual series, collages, montages of pictures and feelings and much, much more, and all this in a single exhibition, created in one year. We only need to look around to understand that we have to put aside our traditional artistic and photo-aesthetic clichés of classification. I think that it wouldn’t be good to forcibly classify Gabriel somehow. He would stand out everywhere anyway, or it would be possible to classify him as anything. Transcending borders is not something exceptional in his work. Rather, it is a defining basic gesture. One could say that he constantly balances on the borders of expression which often hide surprises. Neither here nor there, both here and there—that is a special situation, not an easy one, but a very inspirational one. It is precisely this intermediality that opens him a free path to multiple visualities and often to contentual transformations.”

The return to childhood would be a proper name for another cycle by the author, the main character of which is a wizard. It includes the pictures Čarodejníková krabica [The Wizard’s Box], Narodeniny čarodejníka [The Wizard’s Birthday], and Čarodejníková dcéra [The Wizard’s Daughter]. Childishness is not the point of these pictures; rather, they hint at a space that we might call the “eternal childhood” of the author. Maybe this is the reason for the author’s continual playful search, restless imagination, constant disassembling and putting together of the elements of his work. Klára Szarka expresses it by stating: “Kosmály draws a magical circle around himself with a pencil: this is my world, these are rules made by me, my forms, my contents, my colours. I’m the master within this circle, I decide here. We needn’t be afraid, because it is a good, loving spell, celebrating life.” Fig. 22 Narodeniny čarodejníka 3 [The Wizard’s Birthday 3], digital transfer, 60 x 110 cm, 2015 and Fig. 23 Dcéra čarodejníka 1 [Daughter of the Wizard’s], digital transfer, 80 x 48 cm, 2015/ Fig. 24 Krabica čarodejníka [The wizard’s box], digital transfer, 90 x 90 cm, 2015. Departing from an abstract motif (as if it was enough already), another work by the author is, again, more realistic and directly follows Fosílie dneška. [New Fossils], Using a general name Živé zátisia [Living Still-lives], he introduces a surprising, new world to us again, one in which the leading roles are

played by objects such as rubber jar sealings, a CD, knickers, broken electronic parts, a fragment of car wheelcover looking like a little fish, a chilli pepper or a crushed can of Coca Cola and often traces of sprayers found on front facades. These items come to life as if they have been sleeping for a long time. They comprise the themes of the “still lives” in which something is vibrating, something is played out. One could say that they are traces of the already mentioned wizard who left us his journal. Fig. 25 Rybička [Little Fish], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2016, Fig. 26 Zmrzlina [Ice-cream], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2016, Fig. 27 Je načase odísť—povedalo prasiatko [It’s Time to Leave—Said the Piglet], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2016. In a short break before another extensive cycle the author introduces the triptych Ľudia a stromy [People and Trees] Fig. 28 digital transfer, 60 x 90 cm, 2017/ This Picture is a solitaire, a “piece of relaxation” before an extensive project.

An extensive, 24-piece, last cycle full of questions is the author’s description of his attitude to religion and bears the name Kresťanské príbehy [Christian Stories]. He often depicts these issues in a controversial way and puts them to qualitative opposition to pure faith. These pictures embody his life’s journey of searching but also of disappointment. They’re exceptional in that the author (like never before) exposes himself and uses them for

description of his critical attitude by clear symbolism. Fig. 29 Kresťanské príbehy 6 [Christian Stories 6], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2017, Fig. 30 Kresťanské príbehy 1 [Christian Stories 1], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2017, Fig. 31 Kresťanské príbehy 6 [Christian Stories 6], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2017, Fig. 32 Kresťanské príbehy 7 [Christian Stories 7], digital transfer, 40 x 52 cm, 2017.

To conclude by the words of Klára Szarka: “Gabriel Kosmály often transcends the borders of art forms, as if he was losing contact with the present. Nonetheless, there is nothing destructive in his artistic thinking. You won’t find protest, offense or destruction in them. He guides us to an unexplored world with his art. Nonetheless, it is one in which we don’t feel lost or threatened. His work makes him a solitaire of Slovak photography. He is turning 60 this year.

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Šimon Evin.

**PaedDr. Gabriel Kosmály**  
(\*1958, SK)

was born on 18th July 1958 in Svodov in the Levice district. His parents were teachers, so they often moved to different places for work, but they settled in Levice in 1967. He became captivated by modern fine art during his primary school years already, what then resulted in his application for studies at the High School of Decorative Arts in Bratislava. After finishing high school, he started studying for his teaching qualification in Slovak Language and Literature and Art at the Faculty of Pedagogy in Nitra. After his university studies, Gabriel Kosmály taught at the Primary Art School in Levice for 8 years and after more than 10 years of running his own business he founded the Photographic Design field of study at Ladislav Bielik Secondary Art School in Levice, which he was then the head of for more than a decade.

**Study**

1982 Faculty of Pedagogy in Nitra - PaedDr.  
1981 Faculty of Pedagogy in Nitra  
1977 High School of Decorative Arts in Bratislava

**Participation on Exhibitions and Awards**

1978—Bratislava  
1980—Nitra  
1980—Banská Bystrica  
1981—Sopron /Hungary/  
1998—Esch /Luxembourg/  
1999—Děčín /Czech Republic/—Silver Medal  
2000—Kyoto /Japan/  
2000—Vsetín /Czech Republic/  
2002—Luxembourg  
2004—Morstel /Belgium/—Gold Medal, Belgian Prime Minister Award  
2005—Portugal  
2015—Bridges, Nitra, Bratislava, Piešťany, Trenčín  
2015—The Old New, Levoča  
2016—Pictures and Pixels—Photographic Art and Beyond—National Salon—Kunsthalle Budapest /Hungary/  
2016—Self-portraits, Budapest /Hungary/  
2016—The Old New, Slovak Centre of Design—Bratislava

**Standalone Exhibitions**

1978—Nitra  
1978—Güsteow /Germany/  
1980—Želiezovce /with K. Felix and T. Fiala/

1981—Hlohovec  
1982—Levice  
1996—Levice  
1998—Bratislava—Month of Photography  
1999—Nové Zámky  
1999—Esztergom /Hungary/  
2000—Levice  
2000—Brno /Czech Republic/  
2001—Nitra  
2002—Bournemouth /UK/  
2004—Bratislava—Artotéka  
2006—Komárno  
2006—Esztergom /Hungary/  
2007—Budapest—The Slovak Institute /Hungary/  
2008—Nové Zámky—Ernest Zmeták Art Gallery  
2008—Krakow /Poland/  
2010—Pásztó /Hungary/  
2010—Salgótarján /Hungary/  
2011—Levice—Levice Days of Photography /with M. Havránková, T. Stano and M. Švolík/  
2015—Veľké Zálužie, Mart Gallery  
2016—Esztergom, Rondella Gallery /Hungary/

**Collections**

Tekovské múzeum, Levice /SK/  
Galéria umelcov Spiša, Spišská Nová Ves /SK/  
Magyar fotográfiai múzeum, Budapest /HU/

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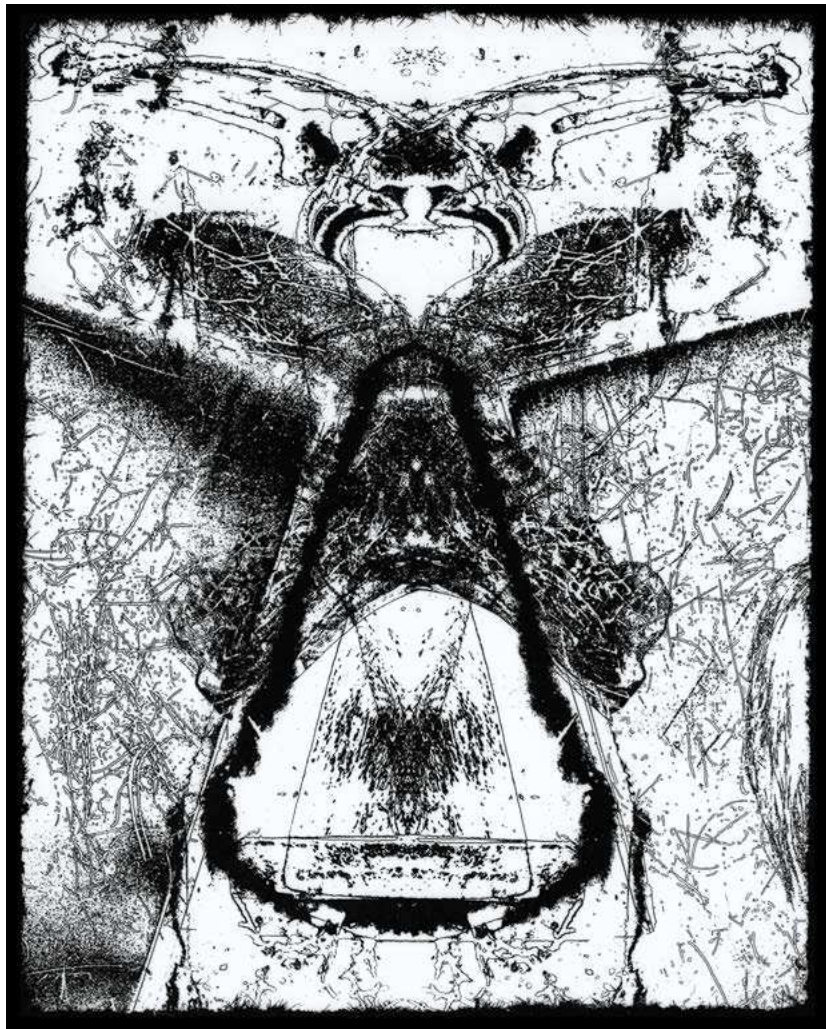


„Mobil“, gelatin silver print, 50x60cm, 1985

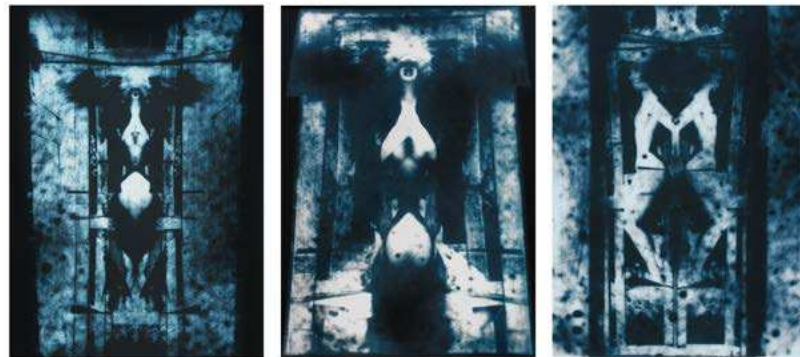


„Malý velký muž“, gelatin silver print, 50x60cm, 2002





„Zo sveta nočných motýľov 6“ gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, 2000



„Príbeh z podvedomia 3.“ gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, 1999



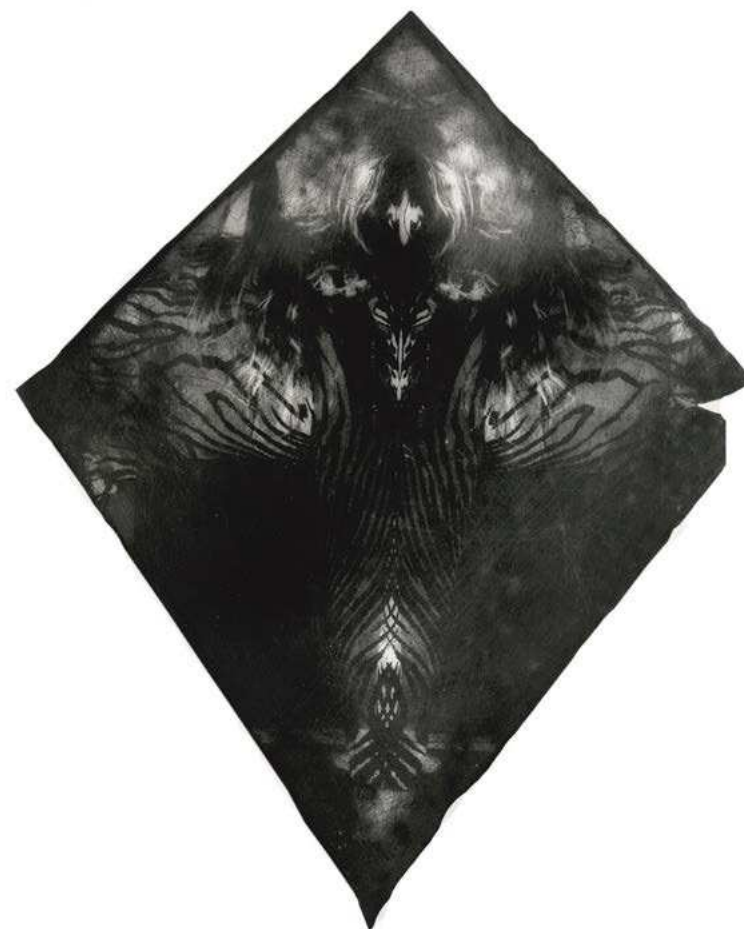
„Nahé príbeh 1“



„Nahé príbeh 4“

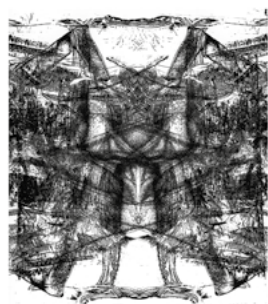


„Súmrak 1“ gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, 1999

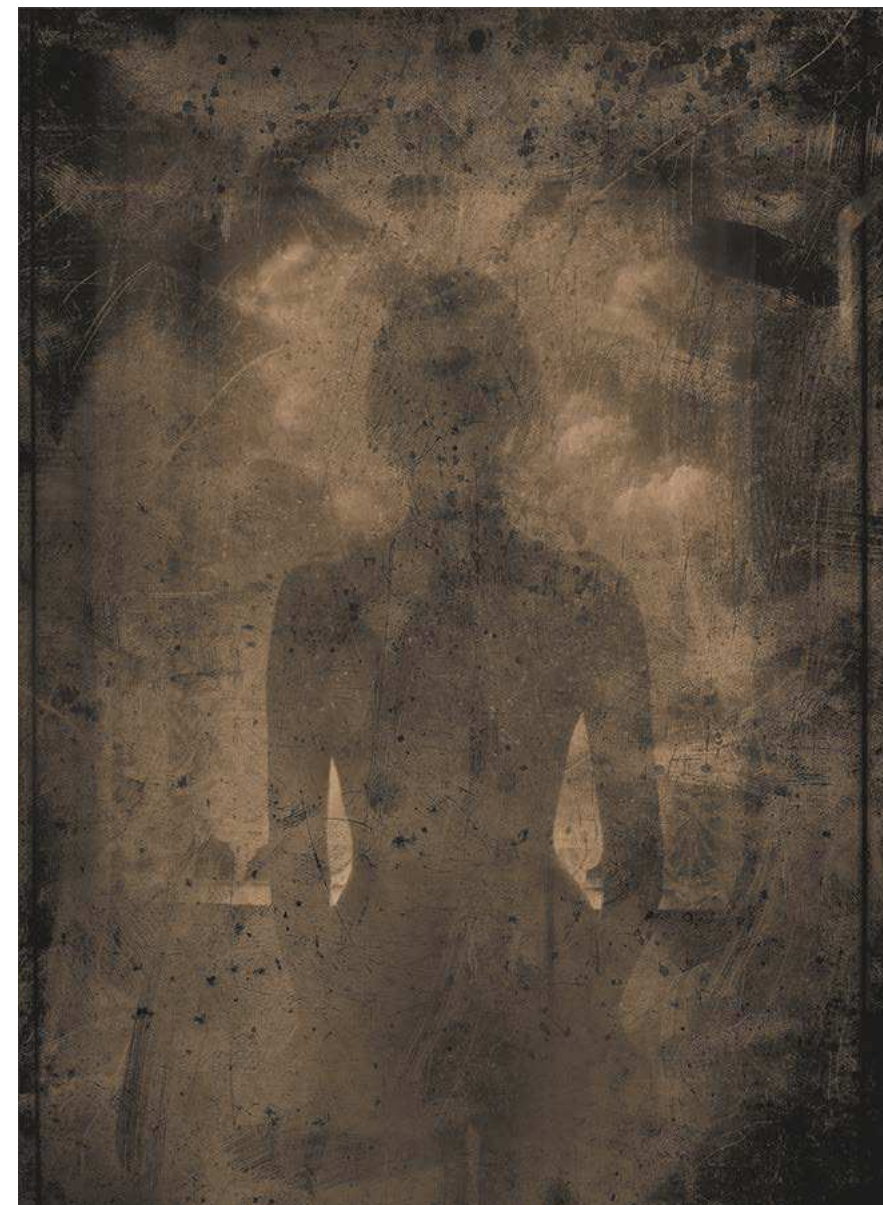


„Súmrak 3“ gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, 1999





„Padlý anjel 5,6,8“, gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, 2001



„Nahé příběhy 7“





„Hommage a A. CH“



„Genesis“, digital print, 33x48cm, 2005

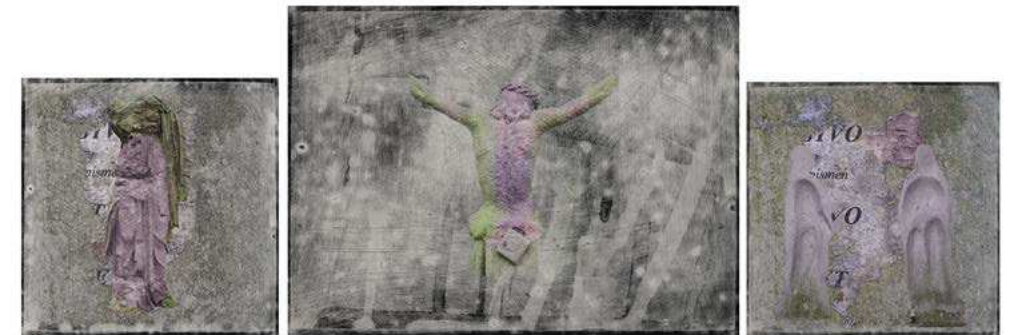




„Oltár pre obeť“, digital print, 30x60cm, 2005



„Lót“, digital print 50x70cm, 2005



„Psiarsky oltár“, digital print, 30x60cm, 2006



„Jonášova ryba“, digital print, 50x50cm, 2006





„Nové fosílie 1“, digital transfer, 90x90cm



„Nové fosílie 2“, digital transfer, 90x90cm



„Metamorfózy 10“, digital transfer, 40x52cm, 2014



„Plážová sezóna 1“, digital transfer, 40x52, 2014



„Plážová sezóna 2“, digital transfer, 40x52, 2014



„Narodeniny čarodějníka 3“, digital transfer, 60x110, 2015



„Rybička“ digital transfer, 40x52, 2016



„Šmolková zmrzlina“ digital transfer, 40x52, 2016

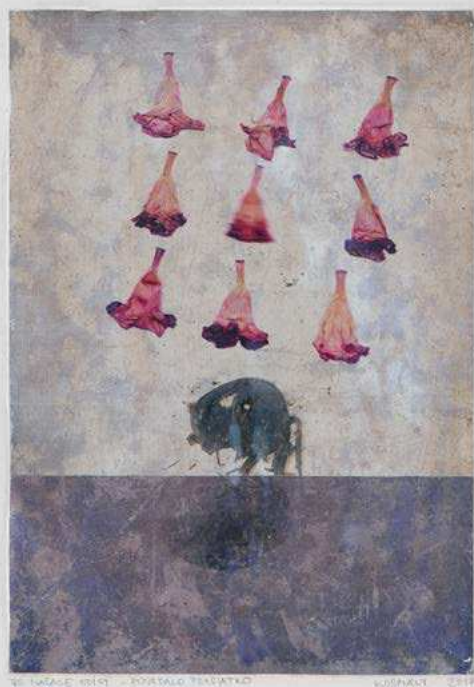




„Dcéra čarodějníka“ digital transfer, 80x48, 2015



„Čarodějnickova krabice“ digital transfer, 90x90cm, 2015



„Je načase odísť - povedalo prasiatko“ digital transfer, 40x52, 2016



„Ludia a stromy“ digital transfer, 60x90 cm, 2017

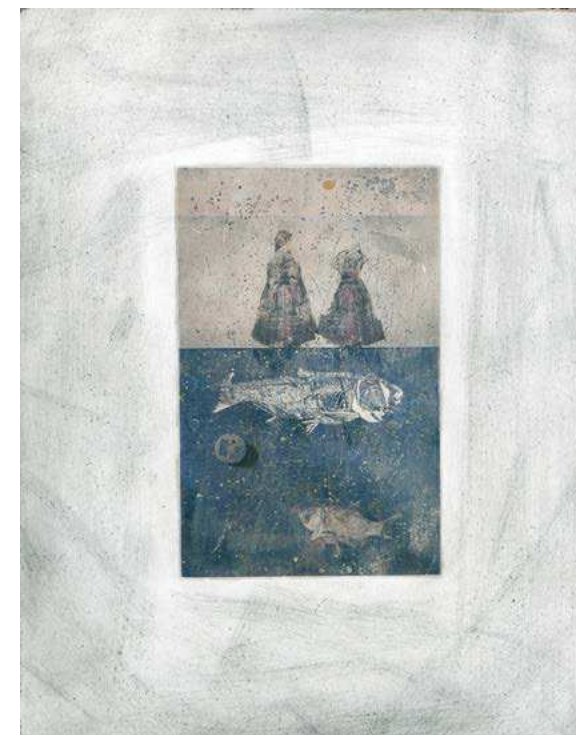




„Kresťanské príbehy 16“ digital transfer, 40x52, 2017



„Kresťanské príbehy 7“ digital transfer, 40x52, 2017



„Kresťanské príbehy 1“ digital transfer, 40x52, 2017



„Kresťanské príbehy 4“ digital transfer, 40x52, 2017