

MEEM GALLERY, DUBAI

# ADRIFT

Marking a break from previous stylistic tendencies, in Steve Sabella's latest body of work he incorporates the human figure. Rebecca Anne Proctor examines their forlorn state and what seems to be a search for hope.

With arms so outstretched that they seem to grapple for some unknown territory, perhaps a hook on which to hang or a piece of land on which to rest, a lone figure hovers in the midst of pitch black surroundings and seems to be on a quest for some kind of resolution. And there are several of these – figures that appear to be searching for something seen through their expressive physical movements. So delicately portrayed are they that they appear vulnerable to all sorts of abuses and yet strong and resolute with their mission at the same time. These are figures from Jerusalem-born Palestinian artist Steve Sabella's latest body of works. Entitled 'Independence', a seemingly ironic title for portrayals of individuals that appear to be so forlorn, there is more here – perhaps a glimmer of resolution and faith.

Sabella's latest series of work marks a shift in the artist's *oeuvre*. Here he departs from his prolific usage of collage and precisely rendered photographed patterns and forms to introduce figures into his work for the first time in several years. What one will first notice as they step into the white-walled Meem Gallery, a background structure devised specifically for the show, is the size of each of Sabella's works. At 81 x 45 cm they are much smaller in scale than the artist's recent works. While at first surprising, as one peruses the works which align each wall, the smaller size of each piece actually renders the subject matter more intimate, tangible and more powerful.

To fully grasp the subject matter within each piece, one must examine Sabella's works from up close and then far away. All set against a pitch black background, they appear to be suspended in space or floating in water – hovering where we know not of. Sometimes there is one figure and at other times there are two. On the right wall of the gallery the images are less blurred and we can easily see what appear to be patterned reflections of light on the bodies of the figures as if they were under water and sun was beaming on them from overhead. Rendered at times in couples, some of them appear to be falling into the pitch black space with one on the way down and the other hovering above. Other times two figures reach out to each other as if trying to hold on by some unseen wind that is pulling them apart. The central wall is occupied by the most blurry images and these depict lone figures that appear once again trapped in space but with little or no movement. The most sombre of the series, there is an almost deathly quality to these. They exude pain and sadness – a mourning over the current state they are in.

The diffused images and forlorn figures invite the viewer to contemplate Sabella's chosen theme of independence. But what does independence mean here? Is it freedom? A state of being? Or a state of mind? And how do these seemingly trapped individuals portray the idea of independence? The subjects of these works are devoid of time, place, history and memory. The slightly blurry

quality of the works is almost dreamlike. They are at once vulnerable, yet show elements of strength and determination. Even while the figures search for something we know not of, there is a feeling of peace here – perhaps an acceptance of their present state of uncertainty and temporary loss of identity. Independence here may indeed be a state of mind to which Sabella refers.

While the artist's Palestinian heritage is not a necessary factor in understanding the subject matter of these works – there are no identifying emblems here that directly symbolise his link to a currently occupied country. As an artist living and working in Berlin, many will see his work without considering his nationality in the way one might do in the Middle East. However, references to his previous *oeuvre* as well as to the ideas pertaining to identity, an idea these individuals seem to struggle with, helps to shed light on current themes at work in Sabella's new series. One can't help but remember the present state of turmoil in Sabella's native Palestine when they behold these forlorn figures who seem to suffer just as the Palestinians do.

Mainstream media has circulated images of Palestine the world over. Images of Sabella's Palestine are constantly exposed through violent apparitions of suffering and displacement, of people living in trauma and under occupation. And while there have been many efforts to save the identity of this occupied land from such visual stigmas, it has been difficult to capture the reality otherwise. As the artist himself states, 'Once we are locked inside the images of ourselves, these images take on a life of their own....[They] often outlast us and can replace us as the 'remembered reality.' It has taken time for Sabella to free himself from the mental torments of exile and displacement. Those familiar with his work will remember his series 'In Exile' (2008) when this was first apparent. Here we witnessed the initial visualisation of his movement into freedom through images whereby the artist destroyed and assembled symbols of entry and exile. Then there was the series 'Beyond Euphoria' (2011), a series of jaggedly put together assemblages as if the artist were trying to put back together his fragmented homeland. These pieces challenge the photographic image of Palestine as do his new works in 'Independence'.

It is difficult not to relate these dreamy yet displaced figures to the Palestinian cause and fight for independence. Something is missing. The figures reach out with their limbs and search the space around them, grappling for something they know not of but are aware they need. But even here, in Sabella's latest works, there seems to finally be some peace, albeit tinged with a bit of pain. Even as they reach out with their fervent gestures, they seem to also be resolved at some stage with their present situation and the condition of their uncertainty. For how long, this state of undefined limbo will last one knows not. Independence must therefore be achieved from within. **MBA** [meemgallery.com](http://meemgallery.com)



(Above)  
'Independence  
8' (2013)  
(Courtesy of  
Meem Gallery)