

Beyond Palestine

Steve Sabella looks perturbed. His hair is messy. He's talking fast. He gives the impression of not sleeping much recently. The Israeli bombing of Gaza hospitals and schools in August makes him feel, in his words, "psychologically unwell." War comes regularly to Palestine but never at a good time. Sabella, an artist born in Jerusalem, is also in the throes of a personal revolution.

In one email he declares that he has even changed the language he uses in describing his art, "after I finally liberated myself from exile," a controversial stance for many Palestinians. He explains, "While the occupation is a given, what's hidden is the colonization of the imagination. When I realized that my imagination is being colonized by a system – not only by Israel – I needed to free my imagination from what was keeping it from feeling free. Palestinians should wake up and declare their independence. They are making an atrocious mistake, waiting for the world to tell them they are free."

The system the artist is referring to is the daily bombardment of visual imagery through mass media. Ever since the invention of photography, images have defined and controlled public as well as self perceptions, and especially so in the case of Palestine. For Sabella, the other war being waged in the Middle East is over the image. In the past he has written and spoken about the inability of the region to understand the power of imagery to commune globally at a time when those who control the visual image effectively win the debate. His response as an artist has been to increasingly explore and interrogate the image, its information and genealogy.

He observes, "This is the quest since the beginning of time – why are we here and what are we looking at. I want to trace back where that image comes from; and as much as I can trace it back, it is always an image. That makes me curious. Is the world a physical construction or it is a creation of our imagination?"

Steve Sabella left the city of his birth in 2007 to study in London, eventually settling in Berlin. Since the contemporary art boom in the Middle East began in the early 2000s, some Arab artists complain they are being ghettoized and are not allowed to make art for art's sake. There is an onus on them to be engaged politically and illuminate regional conflicts in their work. Sabella challenges officially accepted narratives that posit the occupation in Palestine as the marginalized experience of a people taking place 'over there.' His art series Exit (2006), Metamorphosis (2012), 38 Days of Re-collection (2014) and Independence (2013), included in his solo exhibition Layers at CAP Kuwait, reveal the centrality of the occupation to modern consciousness. His work also challenges the limitations of photography, a medium that screams of the here and now.

38 Days of Re-Collection, 2014
B&W white film negative (generated from a digital image) printed with b&w photo emulsion spread on color paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's Old City house walls
Unique
[detail]



Even when Sabella is not directly referring to Palestine in his work, some critics assume that he is. Take for example, the portraits of a series of hands belonging to different people in *Exit*. A single hand appears on a black background, the left or right one, usually craggy or mottled with age. Some sport a wedding ring worn for perhaps over sixty years. The fingers are laid flat, open, bunched up or gnarled like the branches of a great oak tree. One hand displays badly painted fingernails as if the eyes of the owner had difficulty seeing what she was doing. The images are disturbing yet strangely comforting at the same time. They are the delicate bruised hands of survivors. *Exit* immediately begs the question: whom do these hands belong to – Palestinians, Jews or both. Or does it really matter?

It doesn't for the artist. He remembers the period during which the work was executed. "That year," he reveals, "I discovered I was living in exile in my own city of birth. I became a stranger to myself. I lost my centre-point. Looking back retrospectively that was a good state to be in, but then it was disturbing." The hands, which actually belong to the dying in an Irish hospital, visually encapsulate Sabella's estrangement both emotionally and physically.

After a prolonged period of self-interrogation, introspection and investigation, he started working on *38 Days of Re-collection*. For 38 days he lived in a house in Jerusalem occupied by Israelis since 1948 and photographed it in detail. He also collected fragments of paint from the house in Jerusalem's Old City where he was born and from other Old City houses and walls. By adding black and white photo emulsion onto the collected paint fragments, he printed his visual explorations from the occupied house. Some fragments show decorative Roman and Mediterranean motifs from tiled floors, or a blurred outline of an old fashioned Palestinian nuclear family. There are ghostly images of a traditional kitchen, the lone teakettle or clusterings of cutlery. All of the fragments attest to the lives lived, lost and forgotten within those spaces. This is a highly charged emotional work, which has at its essence time travel: exile and return, reconstruction of homeland and the past, but above all, the impermanence of the human condition.

For the artist, the fragments "appear to be relics, cave art, like they are going back to the beginning of time." Art rooted in Palestine illuminates the history of the visual image in the wider world. The same multitudes of meaning are true of *Exit*. Sabella comments, "Look at the hands – what they conceal is much more than what they reveal."

In an interview with Wafa Gabsi, he postulates, "... [W]e got stuck on the relationship between image and reality. The focus should have been on the relationship between the image and the reality it creates. Understanding this has liberated me from the systemic daily bombardment of how one should look, dream, think and most importantly imagine."¹

In *Metamorphosis* (2012), Sabella explores the Palestinian landscape through the repetition of images he photographed in London and Berlin. In 160 x 160 cm light-jet prints, a single motif – a window with a lone cactus, security grills, barbed wire or what looks like a once demolished and now bricked-up wall – is repeated in an explosion of an organized yet chaotic reoccurrence. The images capture the day in, day out monotony of the occupation for those who endure it. From these images one gets the distinct impression that the unseen participants in these cruel, 3-D Escher-like assemblies are either constrained by what is taking place all around them, or have become inured to its relentless constancy.

However, for those on the outside who see oppression regularly reported from Israel and Palestine on 24-hour rolling news networks, Sabella's *Metamorphosis* also encapsulates a landscape that has been transformed for many in the West into light entertainment. From a jaded perspective of lethargic non-involvement, the kinetic elements of *Metamorphosis* are disturbingly ornamental in their persistent beauty.

Sabella is not a prolific artist and usually creates only one body of work a year. Since 2013 he has been writing his autobiography. Aesthetically, it has been a time of change. The current *Layers* exhibition, like his solo show *Fragments* at the Berloni Gallery in London, departs from the way his art has previously been exhibited.

"I have started to put my work in different constellations," he elucidates, "this liberates them from predetermined readings. It is a new map to be decoded. My work is a visual palimpsest with many hidden layers. I leave it to the viewer's imagination to connect with the works. These layers in time reveal new meanings ..."

Interestingly the artist is letting go. He doesn't mediate the view by providing information text for the exhibition. His quest for artistic freedom has been further emboldened in *Independence* (2014). Blurred or fuzzy bodies in motion belonging to people coated in silver, against a dark background, seem somehow ambiguous. Are they clothed or naked? The figures also have a translucent quality. Some of their bodies reveal shattered bones, but these again are deliberately indistinct.

Independence positions Sabella inside the major visual movement of our times. The current obsession with incessant image-making has transformed the way the visual image is created, distributed and seen/experienced. A case in point is the rise of low-resolution or pixelated images, particularly in light of the explosion of social media, citizen journalism and moving and still imagery from Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Bahrain and Tunisia over the last three years. While the distance between low-res images and the art gallery is not well traversed, Sabella is not only undeterred, but defiant. "I didn't need a Hasselblad. I didn't need a camera. I was in the moment and the only thing that was going to make the image was my smart phone. Nothing is going to stop me from creating that image. For me, it was independence from the medium."

Sabella is determined to 'unfix' the image and free us from thinking that we are familiar with another country just because we see pictures of it. He is equally intent on showing that 'the real' is an elastic concept, both in the image and in the world. It encompasses experiences, which while sometimes not entirely our own, are ones we recognize, react to and feel intimately.

M a l u H a l a s a

¹ Wafa Gabsi, 'Image as Witness – Archeology of the Past: Interview with Steve Sabella', *Contemporary Practices*, Journal XI 2012, p. 71. My emphasis.