



Steve Sabella,
'Metamorphosis',
2012. Courtesy the
artist and Berloni
Gallery

BERLONI GALLERY, LONDON

REVIEW: FRAGMENTS

Printing on peeled paint and meticulously documenting swathes of fabric, Steve Sabella's first solo exhibition in the UK impressed Sheyma Buali

Through Berloni Gallery's floor-to-ceiling windows, Steve Sabella's large-scale photographs appeared like fragments, a fitting title for this four-part retrospective of the Palestinian artist's work. Closer inspection of *Exile* (2008), Sabella's splintered mosaics of images, reveals windows that are open, closed, opaque or protected by cages. The most striking of all depicts Cecile, the artist's daughter, looking through her window in different directions as images of her are cut up, mirrored and repeated. This series opened the exhibition and set the tone for the fractured feelings, frustration and obstructions that Sabella narrates through his photographs.

Each section of *Fragments* uncovers a different side of Sabella's mental, physical and familial worlds. Honest and forthright, the works express anxieties associated with being in exile. *Metamorphosis* (2012), for instance, is another disembodied world of fractured imagery, only this time we see walls rather than windows, and bricks so densely packed that the thick cement between them creates an obstructive barrier. This motif is repeated, producing an image of claustrophobic occlusion. In others, barbed wire sticks through the surface of the walls, knotted and stitched through the images, resembling a hastily repaired wound.

While these images are probably the most iconic in Sabella's oeuvre, it was really his latest project that brought the exhibition to life.

For *38 Days of Re-Collection* (2014), Sabella spent 38 days in his hometown of Jerusalem, staying in a house that was owned by a Palestinian family until 1948 when it was occupied by an Israeli family. While there, he visited the house he was born in and collected fragile pieces of paint that was peeling from the walls. He brushed light sensitive emulsion onto these strips of paint, then printed photographs that depict images of people, kitchen objects, architectural details and marble patterns onto their surface. Displayed in box frames, the works looked like archeological finds and fragments of petrified nostalgia. In *38 Days*, Sabella does not simply construct images but creates relics from his own imagination based on a very personal perception of place.

These abstract souvenirs evoke notions of home and alienation and the friction between perceived and physical distance. On a more political level, they question the duality of Israeli occupation and Palestinian Right of Return. Sabella was referred to as an artist in exile long before he left his home in Jerusalem, a place that bars access to its own (Palestinian) residents. In his work, he attempts to reconstitute the place he has been exiled from through images, recreating a world he once knew that has now become so distant

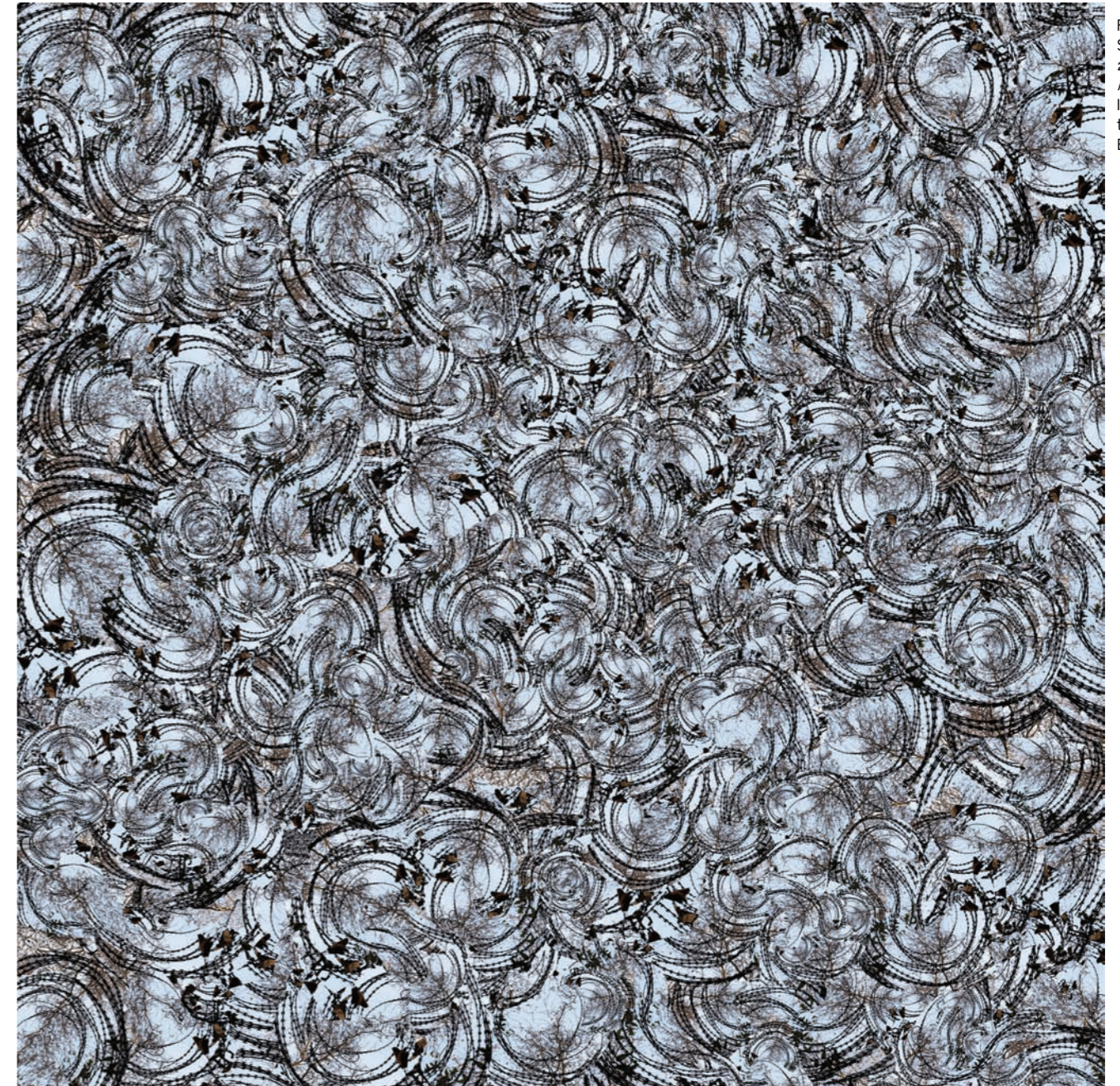


(Above) Installation view, *Fragments*, Berloni Gallery. Photo by Stephen White
(Left) Steve Sabella, '38 Days of Re-Collection', 2013. Images courtesy the artist and Berloni Gallery



(Above) Installation view, photo by Stephen White (Below) Steve Sabella, '38 Days of Re-Collection', 2013. Images courtesy the artist and Berloni Gallery

'THE WORKS LOOKED LIKE... FRAGMENTS OF PETRIFIED NOSTALGIA'



From Steve Sabella's 2012 series *Metamorphosis*. Image courtesy the artist and Berloni Gallery

and unrecognisable. The houses he visited around Jerusalem, including his own, have an altered reality due to the occupation, which impedes Sabella's familiarity with the place and creates a palpable tension.

The final room was dedicated to Sabella's daughter Cecile, a recurrent figure in his work. In this small room, the viewer was surrounded by photographs of the bright colours of her clothes. The image suggest that this little girl has now entered Sabella's fragmented world as he almost obsessively documents the patterns, stitching, lint and stains of her garments.

In a handmade book made up of the same colourful images, Sabella left a half-erased handwritten note for all to see: 'I gave birth to something alien to me. When Cecile was born forty-three months ago, it was only a question of time until we had difficulties communicating.' Cecile spoke her mother's Swiss-German while he spoke Arabic. 'She is simply foreign to me,' he writes. But upon moving from Jerusalem to London, Sabella recounts how he and

his daughter found a language between them in a common experience of exile.

The sense of a palimpsest recurred throughout this show as alienation, exile, displacement, disembodiment and fragmentation intermingled across the works. There were allusions to Sabella's earlier works in which exclusion, obstruction and nostalgia were rendered in photographic form. But we are left with a sense of how Sabella continues to use his work to take control of his own past and future.

Fragments was a personal show that welcomed the viewer into the interior and exterior of the artist's mind as he reconciled the contradictions between memory and reality that he is constantly forced to encounter. His transitions from one home and country to the next create an ongoing and shifting collage. Sabella is not just a photography artist – he is an artful thinker too. His sensitivities and thoughts are played out in the forms and relationships that he lays bare before us. berlonigallery.com