

PRESERVING *THE IMAGE*

For 38 days, Steve Sabella lived in a Palestinian home occupied by Israelis since 1948. **Robin Mann** discusses the artist's resulting work – a recollection of the time spent there.

T

he decision to make the work in question – the so-called 'signature' image of the exhibition *Fragments* at Berloni Gallery in London – was a relatively easy one. Steve Sabella has worked in a state of exile in the past, but, more recently, has come to terms with the notion that perhaps it is not solely him who is forced into a state of exile, but the city of Jerusalem itself.

38 Days Of Re-Collection bears witness to the time that the artist spent residing within a Palestinian house that had been 'occupied' for decades, passed down through generations of Israelis. The photographs that Sabella took during the time spent as denizen range from ornate patterns found on floor tiles to the very pots and pans used by the family; lone

Jurassic to multiple knives; family portraits to empty chairs.

Denial of access for a Palestinian born and living in Jerusalem is not a new concept for Sabella; what is required from him though, in order to harness and advance 'the image', is something we see more rigorously here than perhaps ever seen in prior works. All of the fragments are indubitable relics: decades of 'covering up'; paint that has refreshed the very surroundings and confines of Jerusalem is the medium (the paper), onto which Sabella develops the image.

It is striking how much the work is reminiscent of a continent itself. Jagged edges of peeled paint define the end of the snapshot, cut off listlessly and creating its own border. Interweav-



ing layers of varying faded oil tones and plaster applied to the Jerusalem city walls from which it is peeled, creating a lattice of colour, gradations of brown through green. We are nonetheless looking at a black-and-white image.

Sabella ostensibly redefines the possibility of the image itself. A stranger in his own land, he lays bare the innocuous pertinence of frying pans and cutting knives.

Doubtless, there are naysayers who question the validity of the 'uniqueness' of the digital image; here though, Sabella deftly quashes such claims. The photographic image undergoes transition from binary incarnation, to black-and-white negative from which the image is developed on top of a decades-old residue of paint, creating a unique original.

Sabella instils a new history into something already historical; he preserves an amalgamation of events. The fragility of what one sees is complemented by the museum box frames that suspend each fragment in the air, and together with the long shadows cast by meticulous lighting, one wonders where the border between fact and fiction lies.

The importance of the work should not be confined only to those individuals implicated within its topographical origins; it poses a more significant question on the preservation and transience of the image. Sabella coins a photographic vocabulary unique to him alone and the darkroom is the setting for the piecing together of what will unquestionably prove to be a much larger picture. 📷

Steve Sabella. *38 Days Of Re-Collection*. 2013. Black and white photo emulsion on paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's old city. 46 x 27 cm. Photography by Stephen White. Image courtesy Berloni Gallery, London. © Steve Sabella.