

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Steve Sabella: Independence

MEEM GALLERY

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

OCTOBER 28–DECEMBER 6, 2014

In the Middle East, one's identity is often defined by a passport. When someone mentions a country or place, a mental image of that location and its people is frequently constructed. In much of his work, Steve Sabella has questioned this construction, which is built by time and memory, as identity is much more complex than it appears.

Born in Jerusalem, Sabella, who often considers the plight and struggle of the Palestinian people within his work, had at first glance appeared to deviate from this course when he created his *Independence* series, a body of photographic works realized in 2013. The exhibition at Meem Gallery consisted of seventeen deliberately grainy images of figures floating in an abyss-like sea of blackened water. The bodies are distorted and ambiguous and could even be described as painterly, as their representation within the water appears almost to be created with gestural brush strokes. The images were bonded directly onto acrylic sheets using the diasec process, which give the two-dimensional photographs a sheen-like quality.

Refraining from either the blatant or the literal, most images depict two figures interacting with each other in a sort of tender play, whereas others show a solitary being, who appears almost in a state of raptured bliss or meditation. For example, *Independence 5* (2013) portrays a single figure floating in a void-like space—arms extended and legs curled—undisturbed by either the passage of time or circumstance. For this exhibition, the images were more intimate in scale than in previous showings—all measuring 81 x 45 centimeters—which seems appropriate for this dream-like and suggestive body of work. About it, Sabella said, "Looking back at my work, I see that I was unfolding visual palimpsests that explore the

multiple layers of my past, and the influence perception had on my 'reality'. Today my images gain their independence from my narrative."¹

The images were hung individually or as diptychs or triptychs. For example, *Independence 8, 9, and 12* were grouped together to form a triptych depicting a subtle sequence of playful interaction between two bathers. Curator Meagan Kelly Hoffman wrote, "The *Independence* series really lends itself to dialogue and conversation, and Steve and I both felt that grouping together some of the works was a natural reaction to the body of work. For instance, there is a natural progression between *Independence 8, 9, and 12*, and it was an instinctive reaction that led me to group them this way."²

Sabella has experimented with photographic abstraction in his previous work, and notes that his *Independence* series, although a technical departure from his more recent collage work, is nevertheless influenced by it:

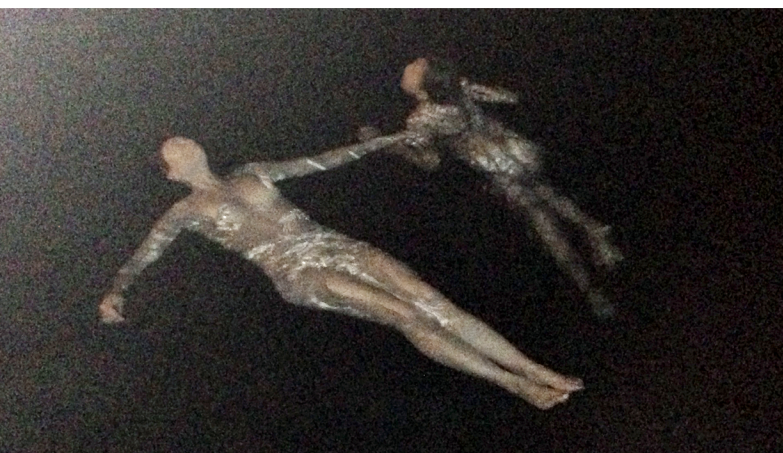
Though its form represents a departure from collage, *Independence* is interconnected with my other works. . . . The choreography needed to create *Independence* reminded me of the way I have thrown cut images together on my canvases to unveil unique visuals. To avoid getting entrapped in one way of looking at the world, I found a need to explore other ways of looking and researching. I liberated myself from medium and technique.³

With this in mind, the series title, *Independence*, which conjures up notions of emancipation and liberation, is fitting in regard to both the images' content and technical departure.

In a 2014 interview with Evrim Altug, Sabella stated, "In many ways, a state of surrender has invaded the consciousness of Palestinians in the never ending Israeli occupation, with the exception of the people in the Gaza Strip. It is the role of the individual to stand up and free him or herself from the new form of colonization that most people are unaware of, the colonization of the imagination."⁴ Perhaps this series is evidence that Sabella has granted himself the freedom that he suggests.

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Independence 9 from the series *Independence* (2013) by Steve Sabella; courtesy Meem Gallery



NOTES 1. Madeline Yale Preston, "Free-Falling into the Future: In Conversation with Steve Sabella," in *Steve Sabella: Independence*, exh. cat. (Dubai, United Arab Emirates: Meem Gallery, 2014), 3. 2. Meagan Kelly Hoffman, interview by author via email, November 27, 2014. 3. Preston, 4. 4. Evrim Altug, "Palestinian Tragedy through the Eyes of the Artist," in *Cumhuriyet Newspaper*, July 27 and 28, 2014, <http://stevesabella.com/Palestinian-Tragedy-through-the-Eyes-of-the-Artist-Cumhuriyet-Newspaper-July-27-28-Evrim-Altug-English.pdf>.