

Reflections on Palestine



The Empty Quarter's latest exhibition, *This is Not a Love Song*, is a collection of photos that all look to Palestine. Nyree Barrett finds out what the artists have to say

Steve Sabella Palestinian

HIS MESSAGE IN A NUTSHELL: 'Alienation is the new world syndrome.'

Steve Sabella's images are without horizon: the abstract landscapes layer many images of one window over each other hundreds or thousands of times. It took Sabella a year to create five pieces using this process, and the result is a disorientating but visually arresting new landscape with no sky and no respite.

Sabella is a tortured artist in many ways, and says he has sometimes been 'near fatally self-reflective.' I grew up in Jerusalem feeling out of place and alienated in my own

place of birth. I am in mental exile, and Jerusalem itself is in exile.'

The work was inspired by one sentence from his daughter, Cecile. 'I married a Swiss woman and we gave birth to Cecile in my home town of Jerusalem. But Cecile did not learn my mother tongue – it was agonising because I gave birth to someone so foreign to me. But when we went to London after three years she was standing at this exact window like this [above], and she said to me and my wife, "I want to go home – I want to go back to my country." Something happened in this moment: her state of consciousness mirrored mine, and for the first time we had a common language, the language of exile. I wanted to mirror this language.'

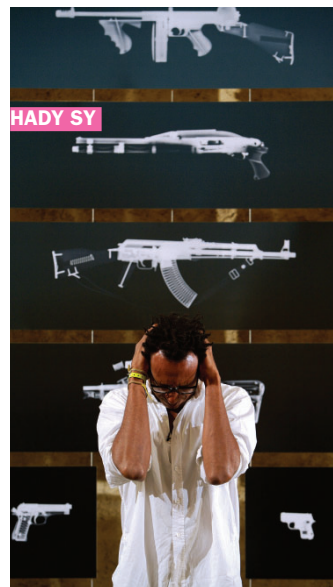
Hady Sy French, with a Lebanese mother and a Senegalese father

HIS MESSAGE IN A NUTSHELL: 'We need more peace talk and less gun talk.'

We walk past Hady Sy and his *This is Not For Sale* exhibition, and overhear him giving a grim commentary. 'This is the gun that killed Kennedy, and this Beretta is the type of gun that killed Gandhi and Rabin. This type of Glock was used in the Virginia Tech massacres and this one was used for the Columbine massacres.'

His X-rays of guns are some of the most visually arresting pieces in the group exhibition – Sy has been using X-rays as his artistic weapon for many years. One of his past works involved putting together X-rays from four people who have war wounds, from World War II to today. 'We've learnt nothing,' he laments.

But this time he has focused solely on the weaponry. 'This is the story of guns, and they're in X-ray because they're sick. A gun doesn't need a passport, doesn't need a visa. It travels and kills us and it's still very alive. I can just imagine a designer sitting in his little atelier designing a weapon to kill. You have to be a bit weird to do that, you know – or be paid very well.' Steve Sabella walks past as we talk. 'I like the guns,' he says. 'The art's very loaded – literally as well.'



Raed Bawayah Palestinian

HIS MESSAGE IN A NUTSHELL: 'Images can pass on humanity, resonating between characters on either side of the photo.'

Unlike the other two artists, Bawayah's photographs capture real moments without subverting them, but he still likes to differentiate himself from photojournalism. 'Palestine is, at times, a term used abusively by the media as a logo, as a marketing icon for misery and despair. Unfortunately, like other countries with conflicts, it often mixes politics into its image. To me, Palestine is like any other place in the world. People live and work, holding their lives in their hands, and children are nurtured – they are the hope for future Palestine.'

Taking real photos, Bawayah collects real stories; he tells us one story he says he will never be able to delete from his mind's archive. 'I visited a psychiatric hospital in Bethlehem to take photos [below]. Even before I asked, an old woman sitting on a bench started telling me her story. The story was very precise: it was about the beauty of her childhood in the city of Jaffa. I began to feel the sadness and darkness of a lost homeland. This woman had lost her family and had been living in the hospital for more than 30 years. Her feeling of being abandoned put me in an emotional abyss.'

This is Not a Love Song continues at The Empty Quarter until April 4

