

Foreword

In an interview with Sara Rossino in 2010, Steve Sabella spoke about his series Exit (2006) and said, "When I discovered that my city of birth disappeared and went into exile, I was lost or entrapped in my immediate space -my city. I started perceiving the world in a very harsh way. I had nowhere to go and I was on the edge of total physical and mental collapse." Fast forward to a few weeks ago during the height of the war on Gaza. Steve and I were extremely busy coordinating Layers, his first exhibition at CAP Kuwait, which we had begun planning over two years ago to coincide with the release of his monograph. In an email Steve wrote, "The Israeli war on Gaza has pushed me to my limits."

Steve Sabella has always lived in a very fragile world that could collapse at any moment. The deep humanity in his work was born from a sense of accountability towards the land he has left. In the past he would try to escape the captivity of his memory and experiences, only to end up back where he started, a cycle that was mirrored in the form of his early collages. But I envisioned him as a warrior in a battlefield, fighting for a cause others no longer felt the strength to fight. And he remained resilient, a strong believer in the ability of art to defend, communicate and be the catalyst for change. Instead of weapons he wields a camera and computer to reconstruct the outside world according to his own aesthetic values and philosophical beliefs.

Three years ago he told me, "If you want to understand my work you have to understand me first, delve into my psychological composition. My work is significantly related to the course of my life and mental composition." So, in order to get acquainted, I familiarized myself with his persona. I have come to enjoy the exciting sense of narrative he exercises while recalling life events and his relationships with the people and objects that surround him.

Steve's experiences and his evolving perception of the power of images comes through in Layers. It begins with a departure. In Exit (2006) people's hands become human maps, the tissue of their skin delineating their journeys. These people built their civilization's landmarks with these hands, in a country with a clear identity and significant cultural and historical heritage. These landmarks became the veins that Steve dissects with his camera, metaphors for the streets that he once walked through. Whether they have departed or are still alive, these people, regardless where they come from, have their Palestinian identities woven into their skin.

In Metamorphosis (2012), Steve is torn between two very different worlds: an inner world of inspired isolation and an external one that provides a premonition of hope. His collages present dismantled forms that become distinctly separate from their original contexts. The identifiable elements are often polarizing barbed wire against the blue sky; cactus flowers and closed windows; steel bars and transcendent light. Do these works embody a new transitional stage in his life? Are they manifestations or echoes of life lived among contradictions that so many Palestinians relate to, as he wrote in a previous statement on the series? Metamorphosis contrasts with his series In Exile, where he masterfully constructs a visual architecture with constantly shifting facades that transform the concrete to organic, depicting a surreal world, and not without hallucinations. Steve has left the door wide open for the viewer to interpret the nature and symbolism of these and his other works of art, and they might find explanations that are far from his original intentions.

For 38 Days of Re-collection (2014) he revisited Jerusalem, and ultimately presents us with one of the most important projects of his career. In my opinion this work challenges traditional concepts of photography as a reflection of reality and record of history. By printing photographs taken in a house that is inhabited by Israelis, but was originally built, owned and inhabited by Palestinians, he puts his memory of and longing for a place to work. Like an archaeologist, he has excavated the relics of the past Palestinian residents. He printed the traces of these people onto thin layers of paint, taken from the walls of homes in the Old City, including the home where he was born in, producing a most beautiful, sensitive and authentic work.

These pieces reflect the tenderness and vulnerability that come after the landmarks and culture of one's homeland are replaced by the extraneous and oppressive components that represent the occupation. But walls do not forget – their memory is resilient. Many years ago good people lived in this home, the smell of their coffee and cigarettes still linger; one can hear their footsteps and the melody coming from the old oud: the morning light casting a shadow of a mother's hands holding green olives onto the tiled floor. These traces left by the light were waiting to be discovered.

Now Steve is no longer interested in discussing his personal experiences in direct relation to his work, and even views his older works in light of this new perspective. This expansive way of thinking about the universality of art leaves interpretation open, perhaps making space for questions rather than answers. Sabella concludes his exhibition with a project titled Independence (2013), in which his wife and daughter appear as two figures suspended in space and time. Floating in darkness, they appear both liberated yet unsettled. They seem transported into the beyond, but their silver skin is abstracted and fragmented. While the title suggests transcendence and elation, the images present the viewer with more polarizing signs that suggest apprehension and disorientation, perhaps a comment on the struggle towards liberation.

Layers presents a unique constellation of Steve Sabella's work, not bound by chronology or an overarching concept. The intersecting themes and overlapping questions within Exit, Metamorphosis, 38 Days of Re-collection and Independence exist for the viewer to discover and imagine. This openness towards the understanding of his works represents the most recent chapter in the artist's journey, one that I anticipate will continue to reveal new meaning.