

Steve Sabella's Ecdysis: The Catharsis of Metamorphosis

By Dorothea Schoene



“History breaks down into images, not into stories” — states Walter Benjamin in his final text, *Passagenwerk*. In an era of short-living and over-dosed imagery, this statement becomes even more challenging, more thought provoking: how many histories are there to be remembered, how many versions of one incident? What is worth being considered? What kind of ruptures and divergences exist between word and image? Palestinian artist Steve Sabella has chosen to visualise one history — his very own.

The power of image and narrative to indicate an underlying story is a prevalent aspect of his work. Since 2006, the artist has created around half a dozen different series, each documenting a different state of mind during

his very personal experience of being ‘exiled’ from his home country. Apparent in his early work, it manifested itself clearly with the series *Exit* (2006), *went through In Exile* (2008), *In Transition* (2010) and *Euphoria* (2010) to *Beyond Euphoria* (2011). The titles indicate the content of each series — the fragmentation and de-fragmentation of a traumatised, un-rooted individual; his voice making his collage works a visualisation.

Sabella is now presenting his most recent series entitled *Metamorphosis*. It is conceived as an ongoing project, which the artist is planning to add to indefinitely, in the future. Whatever his state of mind and emotional situation, it will find its way into this body of work. Again, Sabella has chosen a much-telling title for this



work: metamorphosis describes a process, with no clear ending of its ‘morphing’ process, nor a clear definition of its beginning or end. It defines a process rather than a fixed result. The term ‘metamorphism’ applies to “the process by which one shape is transformed into another, especially in Surrealism and other tendencies in 20th-century art.” Revived in the 19th century, the concept of metamorphosis encompasses literary sources from Ovid to Dante Alighieri to Wolfgang von Goethe. While for Goethe, metamorphosis meant more a process of evolution; in the writings of Ovid, it could also describe a miraculous process of transformation. «From the world of nature to another sphere of existence.» It is this miraculous process of transformation, which

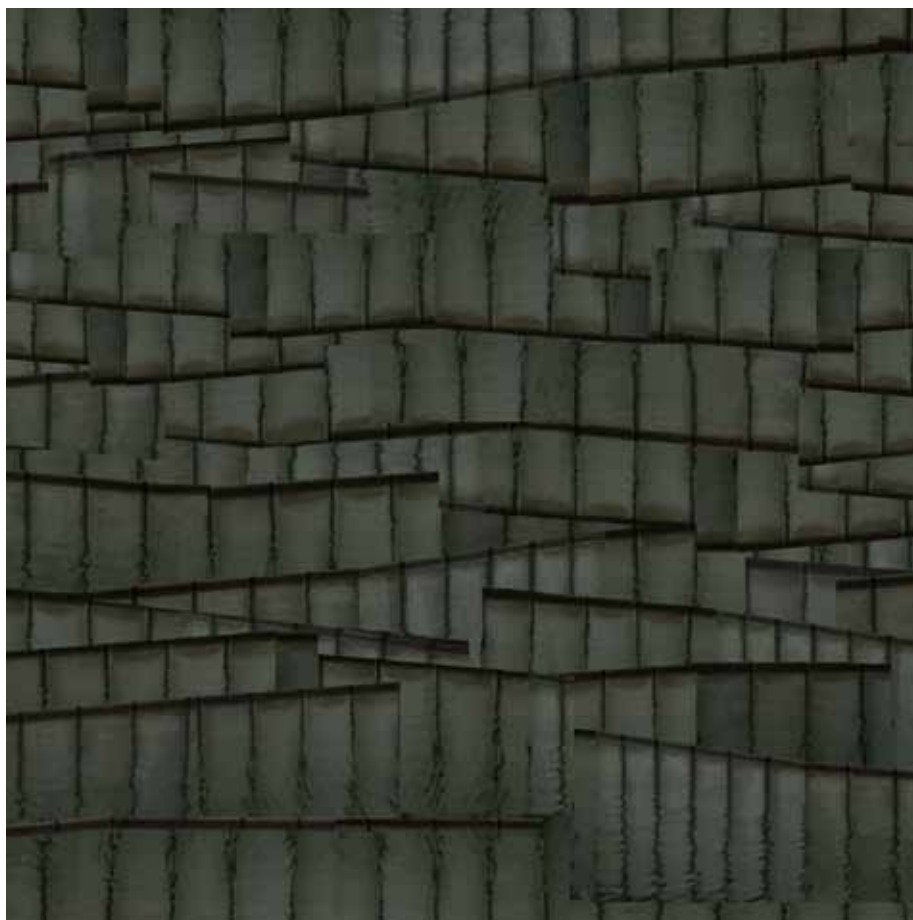
the artist tries to capture in his collages. For Sabella, Metamorphosis has a rather personal meaning: “The way I understand metamorphosis is that the rebirth will still remember or carry with it some burdens of the past, given that there is no DNA change. I do perceive my life in a more mature way now.”

The artist doesn’t narrate sequentially, but rather arranges his works in multi-layered, repetitive structures of motifs – he doesn’t morph one object into the shape of another. His motifs for this series are powerful symbols of Palestinian life, yet in his arrangement of them, the artist de-connotes them. He aims for a new visual experience – scattered images, at a second glance, reveal new, underlying structures. “In my photo collages



the consciousness of form (what to collage – in essence what to photograph) is what enables the collage at a certain point to achieve its visual unity, trigger different reactions, and go beyond the first indexical association of the photographed image. So when I photograph a barbed wire, the immediate connotation would be the restriction of movement, but it could also refer to pain, physical pain if one gets stuck in it. An unexpected connotation would be to use it as a stitching thread, to stitch wounds. Notice how the wire appears to go in the space and out it. That idea is in conflict with its form and function - this is exactly the opposition I want to focus on in *Metamorphosis*. It is the conflict between form and function, between visualisation and perception.” *Metamorphosis* portrays the scars of trauma, which the artist experienced in Palestine and since his departure. “I remember telling the world: ‘I

am free’, during the creation of *Euphoria* and *Beyond Euphoria*. Now I realise that I was mirroring a state of mind in these two projects, just like *In Exile* in 2008, and that was only the start of my liberation. It was inevitable that once the euphoria settled down, which is by nature ephemeral, my core had to be shaken again. The hard work is now! *Metamorphosis* is a process, a long one, and the reconstruction of the self, especially for people who come from conflict zones, should be done with core ingredients that have shaped their lives and perception. If I manage to create a form that is dazzling through barbed wire, then in many ways, the barbed wire will cease to be what it is and will become part of my building blocks. It will be muted. In short, it will be through metamorphosis where my ‘disturbia’ is mediated and transcended.” Sabella admits that working on such a body of work has been a distressing,



almost tormenting experience because it excavates subconscious and conscious experiences of loss and dislocation in the artist's personal life. Yet it comes at a time when Sabella seems to be working on all fronts to document his past and his artistic oeuvre. Currently, he is working on his first monograph, written by German-British author, Christa Paula. With the support of the Berlin Academy of Arts, from which he received the Ellen Auerbach Award in 2008, the book is scheduled to be published in 2013.

All Captions: Metamorphosis, 2012, Diasec + Aluminium frame, edition of 6, 160x160cm – Courtesy of the artist.

Endnotes

i Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), p.575

ii Jane Turner [ed.], *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 21, (London/ New York, 1996), p.340

iii Ibid.

About the writer

Dorothea Schoene is a Berlin-based art historian, curator and writer. She is the recipient of a Fulbright grant, a Getty research grant as well as a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange service. Dorothea has written extensively on contemporary art for magazines such as x-tra, Art Tomorrow, afterimage, ibraaz et al.). In addition, she has contributed to edited volumes on museum and exhibition history (for example, the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, 2010). She is currently on the advisory board of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore for their upcoming exhibition "Pearls on a String".