

Culture

The Parachute Paradox

(Chapter from a Jerusalem memoir)

Steve Sabella

Steve Sabella, born 1975 in Jerusalem, Palestine, is a Berlin-based artist whose work is exhibited and held in collections around the world. He holds a MA in photographic studies from the University of Westminster and a MA in art business from Sotheby's Institute of Art. He received the 2008 Ellen Auerbach Award from the Akademie der Künste Berlin, which included the subsequent publication of his monograph Steve Sabella—Photography 1997–2014, spanning his two decade career.



*This is an excerpt from chapter fourteen of *The Parachute Paradox*. In September 2016 Kerber Verlag published the Berlin-based artist's memoir, which explores three decades of his life under Israeli occupation and the arduous search for liberation from within.*

...A year earlier I had rented the occupied house in Ein Karim, Jerusalem, that once belonged to a Palestinian family who in all likelihood had been forced into a refugee camp and then condemned to a lifetime of exile following Israel's creation in 1948. For those thirty-eight days I struggled with my identity, the Palestinian Right of Return, and morality.

I would often think about what Najwan [Darwish] said in the 2007 documentary *Jerusalem in Exile*,

I can't understand how a nation can take the land of another. Who could live in someone else's home, without a problem, not even on a psychological level? Isn't it surprising that the people who live in these houses don't think about who used to live there?

When I took my first step onto the arabesque tiled floor, I felt it shatter under my feet. I stood still for a moment, thinking of the original owners and how they would feel, should they ever return. The kitchen at the far corner of the house looked frozen in time, with its old stove and a single, dusty wooden shelf with pans dangling from it, as if untouched since 1948. The Israeli who was guiding us through each room answered all of my questions, but when I asked if he knew the identity of the original owners and their fate, he had no clue.

That night, lying in an Israeli's bed, under white sheets, Francesca and I spoke till the early hours of the morning, listening to the crickets chirping in an endless concert. The next day, I felt compelled to photograph every detail of the house, confronting the injustice in the space. I became an obsessed visual investigator, collecting images, searching for clues, for any trace of the original owners. I photographed the framed portraits hung on the wall, showing the family tree of Jewish grandparents, parents, and children, which celebrated heritage. I photographed the antique cupboard decorated with wood carvings, which I thought could have dated back to the original owners, the kitchen utensils, broken bottles, and the broad silver spoons in the deep drawer. I photographed the children's drawings on their bedroom door and a toy dinosaur on the shelves. I flipped through the pages of all their books and was surprised when I found a published photo of mine—I was already there. I photographed the floors' ornamental patterns, the family's shoes, the contents of their bedroom drawers, their wardrobes, and their clothes, along with the storage boxes, the views from their windows, the wood ladder in the garden resting on a lemon tree, even the worn hammock Cécile liked to sink into to watch the sunset in the valley behind the trees.

I felt like I had violated the space. I wanted to use the images in my work, but was ashamed, despite knowing that I could justify my act and that many would perceive it as a victory against the Israeli occupation. When I returned to London, I questioned my ethics further. The line between right and wrong seemed blurry. I asked myself,

Did I have the right to go through their belongings?

Was is it right to rent a stolen house?

In the end, I emailed the Israeli family about what I did and what it meant to me.

I didn't know what I was going to do with the images, or the whole experience, till four years later, when I realized that the fragments¹ could be used as bases to print the photographs on. I decided to face Jerusalem and the alienation I felt in the occupied Ein Karem house—I would return to the house I was born in, and other familiar places around the Old City, to collect fragments and merge them with the photographs, in an attempt to reveal a new Jerusalem.

¹ Of paint that peeled away from the walls of Old City houses. For me the fragments were like a hidden archive that recorded the passage of time and its changing realities. Their layers created palimpsests, as if each was a handwritten manuscript that had been erased and written over, but still bore visible traces of its past form. I saw the layers as the last physical residue of my past, as visible traces that I could reach out and touch.

But I had to figure out how to get access to those houses, knowing that many residents would find my project suspicious. When I lived in the Old City, my own home was under threat, like everyone else's. I did not trust strangers who claimed they needed to come in for any reason. This fear came from the countless stories of Palestinians losing properties because Israel would sometimes dismiss documents of ownership that dated back to times of Jordanian, British, or Ottoman rule. There is even a reference book, written by a notorious lawyer, about the complexity of ownership loopholes in this small part of the world. For decades, fanatic Jewish Israeli settlers have succeeded in snatching up properties in the city's Muslim and Christian Quarters. What's more, some houses were sold by greedy Palestinians who would flee the night before the settlers moved in and draped long Israeli flags like banners over the houses' facades. Some of these sellers were targeted by nationalist Palestinians and killed for being traitors. But whether the sellers were killed or if they escaped, that wasn't the end of the story. Around-the-clock settler security personnel, armed from head to toe, escorted every member of the Jewish families, turning homes into army bases and neighborhoods into sites of unending confrontation.

I traveled to Jerusalem not knowing where to start, wondering what I would tell people when I knocked on their doors to collect dust. I had two weeks, and in that time I wanted to find as many fragments as possible, in different shapes, sizes, and colors. I didn't want the plastic-based paint that sat like skin on the wall. Instead I searched for the old matte, watercolor-based paint, which cracked and peeled when humidity permeated its pores.

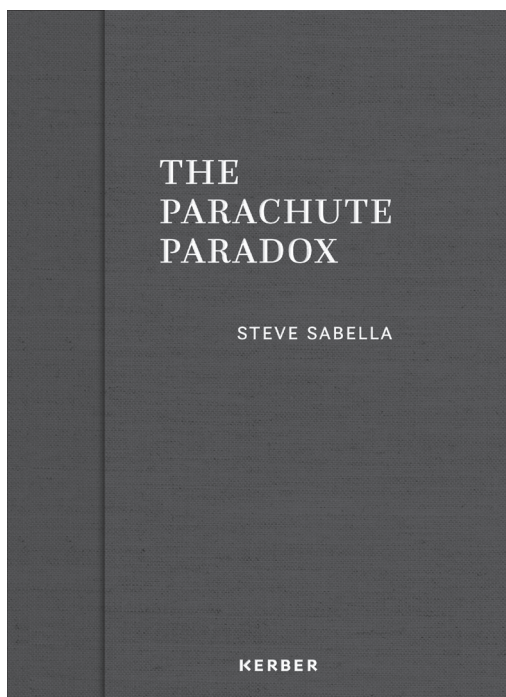
My first destination was the Old City house where my family still lived—the one I moved into at the age of two, and moved out of with Francesca to Tantur the year Cécile was born, when I was twenty-nine. I headed straight to the inner room on the second floor where two alcoves shaped like windows cut deep into walls as thick as ancient tree trunks. I climbed up the wood ladder my father had built, and used my sharp scraper to start peeling away fragments. The more I removed, the more layers I found of all the colors the house had been painted in throughout its history. I recognized the light blue and orange, but was surprised to also see traces of pink. I remembered all the times I painted the house with my family. Some layers remained in the far reaches of the alcoves that we hardly cared to scrape and painted over instead. The pieces I found there were a celebration of color, painted by many hands over the years, including my own.

I was working like an archaeologist, collecting what everyone else would throw away. I asked many people in my neighborhood, friends and strangers, to help me locate houses. I also called several local painters, asking if they had jobs in the Old City that I could join them on. To my

surprise they took me seriously, even though what I needed was essentially worthless to just about everyone else.

I found out that the house of my Old City neighbors Abu and Em Nidal was being renovated, which was a few doors down from our place, at the bottom of the hill. I rushed straight over to find their front door open. Hearing the echo of their voices coming from the cave-like rooms, I walked straight in, through the mess, and saw them gathered in the inner-most room. They had just started removing the single layer of plastic-based paint. At first I wasn't interested in it, but when I saw it come off in strips and patches, like burnt skin exposed to desert sun for too long, I changed my mind and peeled alongside them. The skin on the walls mirrored my own skin — each violent tear exposed what was hidden beneath my scars.

Once, while searching for more homes with Hussam, a friend who was helping me with the project, we saw an old, sealed-off structure in the Muslim Quarter, with a sign in front of it warning about the danger of collapse. From the street I could see the ceiling of one of the rooms, covered with peeling paint. We ducked under the red tape, walked through a dusty narrow corridor and up the steep stairs, to find ourselves in a small courtyard with exposed stone arches on two sides. Only stray cats occupied these premises. We could see why the building was abandoned, as thick cracks formed around the pillars of the house, a sign of too much pressure from



the weight above, or soft land below. Jerusalem had had its share of earthquakes and wars that turned it into rubble, and was always rebuilt on the remains of the old. As I peeled, I couldn't help but think about how I was collecting the last traces of a centuries-old house that would soon disappear. We wandered from room to room, taking our time, rescuing every fragment we could from destruction.

One day during my trip, the son of a baker in Bab Huta overheard me talking about the project with the owner of our local grocery store. He invited me to his iconic, family-owned

bakery, which had been making the famous *ka'ak al-Quds*, traditional Jerusalem-style bagels, for generations. It still carried on the custom of cooking meals in a wood-burning oven for customers who brought in their own old iron pots. I remember going to pick up our pot when I was a child and following the custom of offering the baker a portion of its contents. We entered and descended the steps leading directly to the pit where the *farran* — Arabic for the person operating the oven — stood next to several wooden peels, in different lengths and shapes. The baker's son took me to the dark backside of the room, its walls blackened from the oven's smoke, straight to a ladder leading to the attic. The ceiling was a hidden treasure, covered in many layers of paint dating back to the Ottoman Empire. The moment I touched the surface, chunks of cyan and yellow fragments fell off and turned to sand, requiring me to remove each piece like a surgeon. The fragments were extremely brittle from constant exposure to heat, yet this was exactly the fragility I was searching for. The baker's son started helping me by taking the fragments and placing them, like bread, onto wooden trays.

The project spread by word of mouth, and I became known around the Old City as the “dust collector”. I was invited into many homes, and the more I peeled, the deeper I dug into myself. I purposefully waited until the end of the two weeks to collect fragments from the house on Via Dolorosa where I was born, eight years after Israel occupied Jerusalem in 1967. Christa² had flown in from London to continue her research for my monograph. We walked to the house together. I knocked at the door and then waited one step away from my first home, where my connection with Jerusalem began. My deceased uncle's wife came out, together with two of my cousins. Their family had been disconnected from mine since my parents left the shared house to live with our immediate family in Bab Huta. Our relationship was reduced to mere occasional hellos. But my aunt recognized me,

You are the son of Emile and Espérance.

After a brief friendly chat, I asked her for permission to go to the room I was born in to collect fragments. She was pleased that I was going to remove the dangling fragments, since they always made the room dirty, and led us straight there.

Christa was taken aback by the feeling of being transported into the past. A white sheet divided the room in half, separating the living room from the master bedroom. The battered furniture looked like Aunt Marie's. The walls were decorated with Christian symbols, like in a shrine, leaving no empty space. The television blared out Christian youth choir performances from camps

² Writer and author of *The Road to Miran: Travels in the Forbidden Zone of Xinjiang*

somewhere in Lebanon or Syria. My aunt and my two cousins seemed not to care, as if they'd gone deaf from listening to them at that volume, over and over.

Hesitant to drink her glass of what looked like tea, Christa took notes instead. She asked if she could smoke a cigarette, and my cousin Antone offered her one. Out of nowhere he asked me,

Are you the one who married the Jew?

I wondered where he got this information and asked him what he meant. It turned out that he had misread the article Danny Rubenstein had written about my wedding in Bern and the "Hava Nagila" mishap. I tried to explain, but he nonetheless found more truth in the written word.

After drinking my tea, I asked for a ladder. Christa watched as I started peeling and noted how the process resembled the peeling of an onion: removing layers until there was nothing. I was aware of this being my last chance to dig directly into my wound, search for the source of my pain, and extract it. I was consciously projecting my past into each fragment, and the act of peeling got rid of the toxic residue I had been carrying with me for years. I handed each piece I removed to Christa, who laid them on the floor. Standing at the top of the ladder, the distance between me, the fragments, and the history I embedded in them grew. I was letting go. Now, the fragments carried my burden for me—I could finally let go of the stones on my back.

Two weeks had passed, and it was time to fly back to Berlin. I placed all the fragments between dozens of glass plates, which made it look like I was smuggling geological findings. The only thing I was worried about was the paranoid Israeli security officers at Ben Gurion, who were even suspicious of pieces of paper and had been known to check them individually using the most sophisticated security scanners. But these scanners would never be able to detect the unimaginable layers of history hidden in these fragments.

In the taxi on the way to the airport, I closed my eyes and a sense of relief and victory overwhelmed me. The residue that I had carried through the years was dissolving. I was no longer in exile.

Waiting in the long security screening queue before check-in, I was listening to loud music, completely at ease. With a nudge, the officer grabbed my attention. I removed the headset, apologized, and handed her my passport. She asked me where I came from. I answered in Hebrew,

I am a Jerusalemite.

But I live in Berlin.

Less than a minute later, she smiled and wished me bon voyage. This was the easiest screening I had ever endured. I carried my fragments with me and flew home.
