



CONTEMPORARY ART PLATFORM

*"I encountered the work of Steve Sabella at a time when the art of photography, or photography as art, seemed increasingly irrelevant to me, unattached to a world long since overdrawn by images...It obviously needed a Palestinian artist doing astonishing work to shake the very foundations of the certainty of my view and interpretation."*

- Hubertus von Amelunxen

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Steve Sabella's art practice, as Amelunxen has written in the artist's monograph covering 20 years of work, upends the common notions of photography in our image-saturated world. Since his beginnings in Jerusalem, Palestine, Sabella has pushed the medium to its limits, from experimentation in darkroom processes to iPhone photography. In doing so, he has consistently invited viewers to question the appearance of reality, operating both as an artist and researcher who unlocks visual codes surrounding us. His works are, as the historian and artist Kamal Boullata writes, "a dream to discover."

Perhaps what Boullata refers to is an imaginative world deepening with every image Sabella creates, each independent and interconnected. To understand his recent artworks, critics often refer to the first. And yet, the universes contained in his works are always placed in dialogue with the world we inhabit. Encountering his *38 Days of Re-Collection* (2014), one sees ancient fragments, pieces of chipping frescos, until noticing the photographic detail of a kitchen counter or wooden ladder, and reads the caption: "B&W white film negatives (generated from digital images) printed with photo emulsion spread on colored paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's Old City house walls." In this capacity to be both radically imaginative in his visuals, and reflective of the historical realities from which they originate, Sabella has continuously redrawn the border of truth and illusion.

For all of Sabella's formal experimentation, he is also an artist who dares to speak to the politics and powers of today. The photographs from *38 Days of Re-Collection* were taken in a Palestinian home occupied by Israelis since 1948. His installation *Settlement—Six Israelis & One Palestinian* (2010), commissioned for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, places the viewer in the midst of a spatial representation of the conflict, with six life-sized photographs of Israelis on one side of an interrogation room, and one of a Palestinian—the artist himself—directly opposite, all of them clad only in their underwear and standing in front of an imposing concrete wall. Sabella photographed the Israelis, and an Israeli photographed Sabella. Still, concepts of nationality need not completely define this work. There is a provocation to its blunt title and presentation, yet, supporting the gesture is a many-layered conceptual structure, probing the relations between self and other, passive spectator and active supporter. No doubt these photographed subjects also speak to the peculiarity of individuals regarding each other.

In merging the human and cameral gaze, Sabella has sometimes treated the camera like a brush, producing gestural and fluid forms from the basis of a static image. Critics and scholars have found a painterly quality in his works, such as the kinetic bodies of the *Independence* (2013) series, whose photos Sabella took with an iPhone. Others have noted a musicality, linking notions of polyphony and counterpoint to a body of work that so often brings divergent voices into contact. In photo-collages like *In Exile* (2008), *Metamorphosis* (2012), and *Sinopia* (2014), Sabella cuts, layers and tiles pictures of the everyday, such as images of Bahrain's political graffiti (and its overpainting by the police), or a cactus standing on a windowsill in London. These vibrant planes of color and form give a pulse of our world, but also conjure worlds unseen. Sabella is an artist who never repeats himself, so each of his works stands as a unique mediator between past and future, absence and presence, reality as such and dreams yet to be discovered.