

Sarah Irving The Electronic Intifada 2 November 2015



From Steve Sabella's "Search" series, 13 x 20.5 cm, 1997.

Steve Sabella - Photography 1997-2014 with text by Hubertus von Amelnunxen and Kamal Boullata (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014)

The work of Jerusalem-born photographer Steve Sabella has appeared in exhibitions, books, magazines and documentaries across the world.

Now, in a luxurious large-format art book — with essays by Palestinian critic Kamal Boullata and German curator Hubertus von Amelnunxen — almost two decades of Sabella's photography is shown in overview.

Boullata's foreword locates Sabella's work within two histories. Firstly, that of Palestinian photography, which started with Khalil Raad in 1890. And secondly, that of the use of abstraction as a technique in painting and then, later, in photography.

As Boullata notes, Sabella's photographs are infused with themes of exile, identity, memory and dislocation, with visual abstraction and experimentation a means to explore the artist's experiences of and meditations on these concepts.

Ethereal

The photographic works selected for the book are then assembled in chronological collections, each grouping representing the images shown together as an exhibition or contribution to a group show.

In “Search,” for instance, black-and-white images show the Palestinian landscape as ethereal and luminescent, while the dark shapes of prison bars and silhouetted figures impose themselves onto it.

And in “Till the End,” rural scenes and ruined houses — part bucolic, part melancholy — are printed onto fragments of Jerusalem stone, the pale golden limestone characteristic of the area.

In both series, Sabella manipulated his photographic images to evoke ideas about the land, the people who live and build on it, and their relationship to place. And through each runs the thread of time — of elements of a scene which pass in months or years, and those which remain steadfast.

“Kan Ya Makan,” meanwhile, offers some similar themes — of land, landscape and place — but in a much pacier, more colorful way. Here, the human figures are real, and very alive, whether they are the lined faces of older men and women or the hurtling figures of boys leaping from the walls of Akka, an ancient Palestinian city in present-day Israel.

The title of this set of photographs — comprising five sequences, each with a powerful tale to tell — is the Arabic equivalent of a literary formula such as “once upon a time.” It implies heritage, common understandings and rich stories to be told and shared.

Ambiguous

Some of the most viscerally disturbing pictures in the book are to be found in the 2006 sequence titled “Exit.”

This is made up of photographs of the backs of many different hands and wrists. All belong to elderly people; the skin is almost translucent, many seem bruised or withered and some are gnarled with arthritis.

The title of the work is ambiguous; is the “exit” the extremity of the body, the ends of the fingers? Or the apparently imminent exit from life?

But the images are also fascinating; each hand, on examination, implying so many tales of work, touch, love, injury, beauty and pain.



From Steve Sabella's "Exit" series, 62 x 70 cm, 2006.

"Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian," by contrast, is more confrontational and combative in its message.

On one side of a gallery stand six men wearing only their underwear, their backs to a concrete wall very much like the one built by Israel in the occupied West Bank. On the other side stands a lone man in similar clothing and against a similar setting.

They all look similar — in a state of undress, there is little to differentiate one from another. What is their relationship to the wall? To be confined by it? Protected by it? To guard it? What rights does each one have, and how and why might such similar figures be so categorically divided?

Sense of distance

Later sequences of work such as “In Exile” (2008), “In Transition” (2010), “Euphoria” (2010), “In Translation” (2010) and “Sinopia” (2014) document Sabella’s increasing fascination with abstracting his photographs, layering and repeating images to create atmospheric but less immediately readable pieces.

Some involve direct and challenging imagery — razor wire and brutal metal shapes — while others have a much more tender, personal feel. The abstractness, though, creates even here a sense of distance, as if a question is being posed.

The viewer is also challenged by the complex relationship of aesthetic with content. In abstracting his images, Sabella makes barbed wire and the harsh metal technologies of exclusion and social violence somehow beautiful. Where do aesthetics and ethics meet in such a picture?



From the “Sinopia” series by Steve Sabella, 70 x 54 cm, 2014.

Interspersed with the collections of Sabella’s photographs are the sections of an extended essay by von Amelunxen. He offers often illuminating readings of Sabella’s art, and places the work into context — both biographical and in relation to Palestinian art and literature.

Citing the likes of poet [Mahmoud Darwish](#), intellectual [Edward Said](#) and Boullata, as well as philosophers Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, von Amelunxen draws out some of the themes suggested by Sabella’s visual explorations.

Coming from a very established position in the European art hierarchy, von Amelunxen's text is a fine example of how, while fully acknowledging the politics that affect the positioning of any Palestinian artist, Palestinian creativity still stands up to the most rigorous examinations of art criticism.

All images courtesy of the artist.

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