The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible.

– Jacques Rancière

Photography is a strange and powerful beast. Shortly after the artist Louis Daguerre invented the first-known method of ‘fixing’ an image, writer Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed daguerreotypes as mirrors with a memory, ‘faithful witnesses’ of reality.

Fast-forward to nearly two centuries later: the flawed assumption that a photograph can be synonymous with reality has only evolved a short distance. The photograph not only serves as an apparatus of representation today, it has been a corroborator in sculpting historical record. In recent decades, counter narratives in the humanities have helped shift the way we look at historical events. The widespread use of photography in digital crowdsourcing, considering the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ as an example, has expanded debates about the authority of visual representation. Yet, the photograph remains an important instrument in opaque systems of power, which helps structure how we perceive the world around us and our roles within it. John Tagg describes this well: ‘What lies “behind” the paper or “behind” the image is not reality – the referent – but reference: a subtle web of discourse through which realism is enmeshed in a complex fabric of notions, representations, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action.’

For Steve Sabella, a Palestinian artist who has spent more than half of his life growing up in occupied Jerusalem, his national identity has been tethered to particular images that are circulated the world over. Mainstream media regularly depicts Palestinians as a traumatized or violent population, living in exile or under occupation, at odds with Israelis in the pursuit of land. There have been many efforts to ‘rescue’ this image of Palestinian identity, yet perhaps the most difficult perception to re-write is an internal one—what Sabella refers to as a ‘colonization of the imagination’.

Free-Falling Into the Future:
In Conversation with Steve Sabella
Madeline Yale Preston

Like the aforementioned fractured constellations, Independence is viscerally and deceptively whole. It is a new visual experience, wherein the only borders lie on the images’ edges themselves, and the outlines of the figures contained within them appear intact. The two females – one appearing young, the other older – could be floating or flying. Some of the images in the series are monological, though most portray the characters engaging in an intimate gestural dance. On closer inspection, fragmentation emerges. What could possibly be parts of bone or metal appear on or beneath the surface of their diaphanous skin. Lacking any facial detail, they are stripped of characteristics that could convey expressions, left with the sole sense of touch. Amidst a dark void, they appear in blurred obscurity, like anonymous forms suspended in extremis.

As theorist Roland Barthes implied, every photograph is of a dead moment. Whether we philosophically perceive a photograph to be of an experience that is
the pre-existing boundary between non-art and art, and critic Hito Steyerl as a practice that has dissolved variations in exposure, dramatic colour casts, and the genre, characterized by traits such as pixilation, camera phones, and social media have introduced few decades in art photography. Digital photography, on Independence
The aesthetics of Sabella’s gesture

Such are the limits of the image; thoughts and emotions

11 For most of photography, however, memories made of organic mineral

These scans of life before birth are metamorphic, parents, been the first memory of their child’s existence. 11

Throughout histories of images, the human form has between life and what is constructed in the mind. can be read as a critique of the slippages characterizing matter. If a photograph has the ability to

substrate, effectively ‘inventing’ information, subjectively before it, the camera still registers light on the surface ghost of the image that once was, which is a ghost ‘real’ or ‘imagined’, it is a tangible reproduction, which

Arguably, Sabella is not a photographic artist expanding into other genres such as installation, but instead a visual investigator who is decoding visual syntax, exploring how to ‘unlink’ images so as to set us free from the power they hold in our lives.11

Madeline Yale Preston (MYP): Independence was born on an annual summer road trip that you take, which recalls for me the legacy of the photographic road trip in America following World War II, such as Robert Frank’s The Americans (1958), Stephen Shore’s American Sunsets (1972–73), and even Ed Ruscha’s conceptual Twentysix Gasoline Stations (1963). These bodies of work describe the sociocultural conditions of a specific nation—one in which photography can be regularly positioned as ‘independence’. The abstract visual forms in your series Independence seem divorced from these modernist photographic references. Is there a relationship between the history of photography, specifically the canonical photographic road trip, and this work? Is it a visual liberation from it?

Steve Sabella (SS): To answer you I need to briefly take you through an earlier ‘road trip’ through exile and my liberation from it. I was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, and started my visual journey from there. My project, Jerusalem in Exile (2006), led me to conceive that Jerusalem exists in an image state, especially because everyone has constructed differing and overlapping mental images of it. When I realized that I lived in the image of my city of birth, I felt entrapped, or to use my previous terminology, I felt ‘in exile’. I understood then that my struggle was to understand images in order to be free. Ultimately I liberated myself from exile, or the image of exile to be more precise, by resorting to the imagination. However, I soon realized that I became entrapped in other images too, such as the image of the artist, which I had to liberate myself from as well. Life is an endless process of liberation. We need to identify all systems and images that occupy our thoughts and imaginations so that we can think and imagine in our own way.

Road trips present to us the notion of the linear progression of images. Ed Ruscha’s gas stations are one good example. The Americans by Robert Frank is a look at life and the meaning generated by the symbols we associate with it. Stephen Shore’s work looked at the photographic image itself and offered criticism of photographic discourse. Photographers go out and hunt for images or hunt for the opportunity to transform people or things into visuals. But what if everything is already in an image state, and our hunt is actually a process of isolating images and differentiating them from others?

I do not perceive the world in a linear way. My stations are random and my quest is to understand images, their origins and their function in decoding the visual puzzle: the world we live in.

MYP: Several of your series’ titles – In Exile, Metamorphosis, Euphoria, Beyond Euphoria, to name a few – suggest states of being that are interconnected in sum. One interpretation is that these ‘states’ are autobiographical, referring to your own evolutionary psychological framework, largely in response to living in occupied Jerusalem for the majority of your life. The title Independence – also a state of being – is a leading one. What is it independence from?

SS: In my catalogue essay for the Archaeology of the Future exhibition in Verona (October 2014), I ask whether we can break ourselves free from our image. In my work I explore decoding fixed systems that are constantly at work to entrap people in bordered spaces. Over time this investigation led me to see the bigger picture. Each series I have created began with a search of how to explore and exit the state of mind I was living in. I transformed this state into a visual dilemma or a question, which, once solved, would lead me to a new state with a new visual challenge. Looking back at my work, I see that I was unfolding visual panoptics that explore the multiple layers of my past, and the influence perception had on my ‘reality’. Today my images gain their independence from my narrative. The narrative might still be there, but it will unfold itself in a different way. There are hidden layers in images that change perception all the time. It is time to engage further in the process of looking, where meaning resides only in the mind of the viewer.

MYP: Since you began the series in 2013, the argument over who should control Gaza and the West Bank has once again erupted in horrific violence. Have the events in Gaza since July 2014 redefined your relationship to Independence?
Arguably, Sabella is not a photographic artist expanding into other genres such as installation, but instead a visual investigator who is decoding visual syntax, exploring how to ‘unfix’ images so as to set us free from the power they hold in our lives.¹⁹

---

Madeline Yale Preston is a photography specialist, independent curator and writer. She is a doctoral candidate at the University of the Arts London, where she is writing her dissertation on Middle Eastern contemporary photography. She is a frequent guest curator and previously the executive director for Houston Center for Photography.

⁴ John Tagg, The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 100.
⁷ Sabella, ‘Colonization of the Imagination.’
¹⁴ David Bate, Photography: The Key Concepts (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), 156.
¹⁷ An installation of Independence is on view in a retrospective exhibition of Sabella’s work at the International Center for Photography Scavi Scaligeri in Verona, 8 October–16 November 2014.
¹⁹ Sabella, ‘Hostage.’