



# Layers

STEVE SABELLA

**Selected works: 2006 - 2014**  
Exhibition & Book Launch



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cover  
**38 Days of Re-Collection**, 2014  
B&W white film negative (generated from a digital image) printed with b&w photo  
emulsion spread on color paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's Old City house walls  
Unique  
[detail]

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# Steve Sabella

Steve Sabella, born 1975 in Jerusalem, Palestine, is a Berlin-based artist who uses photography and photographic installation as his principal modes of expression. In 1997 he earned a three-year art photography degree at the Musrara School of Photography in Jerusalem. In 2007 he received a BA in Visual Studies at Empire State College of the State University of New York. Through a Chevening Scholarship he earned an MA in Photographic Studies in 2008 at the University of Westminster with a Caparo Award of Distinction, and through a Saïd Foundation Scholarship he earned his second MA in art business in 2009 at Sotheby's Institute of Art.

Sabella was one of the winners of the A. M. Qattan Foundation's Young Artist of the Year Award in 2002. He was a shortlisted and exhibited artist in the 2008 Independent Photographers Terry O'Neil Award in the United Kingdom. He received the 2008 Ellen Auerbach Award from the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, which included in part the publishing of Sabella's 2014 monograph.

From the late 1990s through 2007 Sabella was based in Jerusalem and exhibited internationally as well as extensively throughout Palestine, including eleven solos. He was one of the commissioned artists for the Istanbul Collection donated to the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo. In 2009 he was one of the commissioned artists for the inauguration of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, where he presented the installation *Settlement—Six Israelis & One Palestinian*. His work was included in the show *Keep Your Eye on the Wall* as a part of Les Rencontres d'Arles Photographie, Edition 2013, and in 2014 he participated in the FotoFest Biennial exhibition *View from Inside*. In 2014 he was commissioned by the Bahrain National Museum, where he presented his photographic series *Sinopia* as part of the touring exhibition *Recreational Purpose*.

His works have been collected by the British Museum in London; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha; Contemporary Art Platform

in Kuwait; Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo; Cuadro Fine Art Gallery in Dubai; the Salsali Private Museum in Dubai; the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah; and the Samawi Collection in Dubai; as well as being acquired by several private collections.

Sabella has given art talks and presentations at various institutions, including the University of Cambridge; Turin University; the School of Oriental and African Studies in London; University of East London; Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti di Torino in Turin; Contemporary Art Platform in Kuwait; Rostock University; Akademie der Künste in Berlin; The British Museum; and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Among the several TV documentaries and short films on Sabella's work are *Jerusalem in Exile* and *Kan Yama Kan*, two episodes in the documentary project "Beyond Blue & Gray" by Eyes Infinite Films (2005 and 2006); *Europe through Their Eyes* by Ma'an TV Productions (2010); *Artist of the Month*, aired on IkonoMENASA (2011); *Artist of the Month* featured on IkonoTV (2013); *Arts InSight: Who is Steve Sabella?* produced by Ernie Manouse (2014); and *In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella* by Nadia J. Kabalan (2014). He also appeared as an invited speaker at TEDx Marrakech (2012).

Sabella has published numerous essays, including several as a regular contributor to *Contemporary Practices* journal, such as "Palestinian Conceptual Art, Emily Jacir Shifting to an Art that Engages the Mind of the Viewer" (2009), "Is the United Arab Emirates Constructing its Art History? The Mechanisms that Confer Value to Art" (2009), "'Valued' in the 'West' Sold in the 'East'" (2010), "Reconsidering the Value of Palestinian Art & Its Journey to the Art Market" (Part 1, 2010; Part 2, 2011), "The Business of Looking" (2011), and "The Colonization of the Imagination" (2012). Sabella's essay "Hostage" (2014) was published by Phaidon in *From Galilee to Negev* by Stephen Shore, and his autobiography, titled *The Artist's Curse*, is forthcoming.



# Foreword

In an interview with Sara Rossino in 2010, Steve Sabella spoke about his series Exit (2006) and said, "When I discovered that my city of birth disappeared and went into exile, I was lost or entrapped in my immediate space -my city. I started perceiving the world in a very harsh way. I had nowhere to go and I was on the edge of total physical and mental collapse." Fast forward to a few weeks ago during the height of the war on Gaza. Steve and I were extremely busy coordinating Layers, his first exhibition at CAP Kuwait, which we had begun planning over two years ago to coincide with the release of his monograph. In an email Steve wrote, "The Israeli war on Gaza has pushed me to my limits."

Steve Sabella has always lived in a very fragile world that could collapse at any moment. The deep humanity in his work was born from a sense of accountability towards the land he has left. In the past he would try to escape the captivity of his memory and experiences, only to end up back where he started, a cycle that was mirrored in the form of his early collages. But I envisioned him as a warrior in a battlefield, fighting for a cause others no longer felt the strength to fight. And he remained resilient, a strong believer in the ability of art to defend, communicate and be the catalyst for change. Instead of weapons he wields a camera and computer to reconstruct the outside world according to his own aesthetic values and philosophical beliefs.

Three years ago he told me, "If you want to understand my work you have to understand me first, delve into my psychological composition. My work is significantly related to the course of my life and mental composition." So, in order to get acquainted, I familiarized myself with his persona. I have come to enjoy the exciting sense of narrative he exercises while recalling life events and his relationships with the people and objects that surround him.

Steve's experiences and his evolving perception of the power of images comes through in Layers. It begins with a departure. In Exit (2006) people's hands become human maps, the tissue of their skin delineating their journeys. These people built their civilization's landmarks with these hands, in a country with a clear identity and significant cultural and historical heritage. These landmarks became the veins that Steve dissects with his camera, metaphors for the streets that he once walked through. Whether they have departed or are still alive, these people, regardless where they come from, have their Palestinian identities woven into their skin.

In Metamorphosis (2012), Steve is torn between two very different worlds: an inner world of inspired isolation and an external one that provides a premonition of hope. His collages present dismantled forms that become distinctly separate from their original contexts. The identifiable elements are often polarizing barbed wire against the blue sky; cactus flowers and closed windows; steel bars and transcendent light. Do these works embody a new transitional stage in his life? Are they manifestations or echoes of life lived among contradictions that so many Palestinians relate to, as he wrote in a previous statement on the series? Metamorphosis contrasts with his series In Exile, where he masterfully constructs a visual architecture with constantly shifting facades that transform the concrete to organic, depicting a surreal world, and not without hallucinations. Steve has left the door wide open for the viewer to interpret the nature and symbolism of these and his other works of art, and they might find explanations that are far from his original intentions.

For 38 Days of Re-collection (2014) he revisited Jerusalem, and ultimately presents us with one of the most important projects of his career. In my opinion this work challenges traditional concepts of photography as a reflection of reality and record of history. By printing photographs taken in a house that is inhabited by Israelis, but was originally built, owned and inhabited by Palestinians, he puts his memory of and longing for a place to work. Like an archaeologist, he has excavated the relics of the past Palestinian residents. He printed the traces of these people onto thin layers of paint, taken from the walls of homes in the Old City, including the home where he was born in, producing a most beautiful, sensitive and authentic work.

These pieces reflect the tenderness and vulnerability that come after the landmarks and culture of one's homeland are replaced by the extraneous and oppressive components that represent the occupation. But walls do not forget – their memory is resilient. Many years ago good people lived in this home, the smell of their coffee and cigarettes still linger; one can hear their footsteps and the melody coming from the old oud: the morning light casting a shadow of a mother's hands holding green olives onto the tiled floor. These traces left by the light were waiting to be discovered.

Now Steve is no longer interested in discussing his personal experiences in direct relation to his work, and even views his older works in light of this new perspective. This expansive way of thinking about the universality of art leaves interpretation open, perhaps making space for questions rather than answers. Sabella concludes his exhibition with a project titled Independence (2013), in which his wife and daughter appear as two figures suspended in space and time. Floating in darkness, they appear both liberated yet unsettled. They seem transported into the beyond, but their silver skin is abstracted and fragmented. While the title suggests transcendence and elation, the images present the viewer with more polarizing signs that suggest apprehension and disorientation, perhaps a comment on the struggle towards liberation.

Layers presents a unique constellation of Steve Sabella's work, not bound by chronology or an overarching concept. The intersecting themes and overlapping questions within Exit, Metamorphosis, 38 Days of Re-collection and Independence exist for the viewer to discover and imagine. This openness towards the understanding of his works represents the most recent chapter in the artist's journey, one that I anticipate will continue to reveal new meaning.

# Beyond Palestine

Steve Sabella looks perturbed. His hair is messy. He's talking fast. He gives the impression of not sleeping much recently. The Israeli bombing of Gaza hospitals and schools in August makes him feel, in his words, "psychologically unwell." War comes regularly to Palestine but never at a good time. Sabella, an artist born in Jerusalem, is also in the throes of a personal revolution.

In one email he declares that he has even changed the language he uses in describing his art, "after I finally liberated myself from exile," a controversial stance for many Palestinians. He explains, "While the occupation is a given, what's hidden is the colonization of the imagination. When I realized that my imagination is being colonized by a system – not only by Israel – I needed to free my imagination from what was keeping it from feeling free. Palestinians should wake up and declare their independence. They are making an atrocious mistake, waiting for the world to tell them they are free."

The system the artist is referring to is the daily bombardment of visual imagery through mass media. Ever since the invention of photography, images have defined and controlled public as well as self perceptions, and especially so in the case of Palestine. For Sabella, the other war being waged in the Middle East is over the image. In the past he has written and spoken about the inability of the region to understand the power of imagery to commune globally at a time when those who control the visual image effectively win the debate. His response as an artist has been to increasingly explore and interrogate the image, its information and genealogy.

He observes, "This is the quest since the beginning of time – why are we here and what are we looking at. I want to trace back where that image comes from; and as much as I can trace it back, it is always an image. That makes me curious. Is the world a physical construction or it is a creation of our imagination?"

Steve Sabella left the city of his birth in 2007 to study in London, eventually settling in Berlin. Since the contemporary art boom in the Middle East began in the early 2000s, some Arab artists complain they are being ghettoized and are not allowed to make art for art's sake. There is an onus on them to be engaged politically and illuminate regional conflicts in their work. Sabella challenges officially accepted narratives that posit the occupation in Palestine as the marginalized experience of a people taking place 'over there.' His art series Exit (2006), Metamorphosis (2012), 38 Days of Re-collection (2014) and Independence (2013), included in his solo exhibition Layers at CAP Kuwait, reveal the centrality of the occupation to modern consciousness. His work also challenges the limitations of photography, a medium that screams of the here and now.



**38 Days of Re-Collection, 2014**  
B&W white film negative (generated from a digital image) printed with b&w photo emulsion spread on color paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's Old City house walls  
Unique  
[detail]

Even when Sabella is not directly referring to Palestine in his work, some critics assume that he is. Take for example, the portraits of a series of hands belonging to different people in *Exit*. A single hand appears on a black background, the left or right one, usually craggy or mottled with age. Some sport a wedding ring worn for perhaps over sixty years. The fingers are laid flat, open, bunched up or gnarled like the branches of a great oak tree. One hand displays badly painted fingernails as if the eyes of the owner had difficulty seeing what she was doing. The images are disturbing yet strangely comforting at the same time. They are the delicate bruised hands of survivors. *Exit* immediately begs the question: whom do these hands belong to – Palestinians, Jews or both. Or does it really matter?

It doesn't for the artist. He remembers the period during which the work was executed. "That year," he reveals, "I discovered I was living in exile in my own city of birth. I became a stranger to myself. I lost my centre-point. Looking back retrospectively that was a good state to be in, but then it was disturbing." The hands, which actually belong to the dying in an Irish hospital, visually encapsulate Sabella's estrangement both emotionally and physically.

After a prolonged period of self-interrogation, introspection and investigation, he started working on *38 Days of Re-collection*. For 38 days he lived in a house in Jerusalem occupied by Israelis since 1948 and photographed it in detail. He also collected fragments of paint from the house in Jerusalem's Old City where he was born and from other Old City houses and walls. By adding black and white photo emulsion onto the collected paint fragments, he printed his visual explorations from the occupied house. Some fragments show decorative Roman and Mediterranean motifs from tiled floors, or a blurred outline of an old fashioned Palestinian nuclear family. There are ghostly images of a traditional kitchen, the lone teakettle or clusterings of cutlery. All of the fragments attest to the lives lived, lost and forgotten within those spaces. This is a highly charged emotional work, which has at its essence time travel: exile and return, reconstruction of homeland and the past, but above all, the impermanence of the human condition.

For the artist, the fragments "appear to be relics, cave art, like they are going back to the beginning of time." Art rooted in Palestine illuminates the history of the visual image in the wider world. The same multitudes of meaning are true of *Exit*. Sabella comments, "Look at the hands – what they conceal is much more than what they reveal."

In an interview with Wafa Gabsi, he postulates, "... [W]e got stuck on the relationship between image and reality. The focus should have been on the relationship between the image and the reality it creates. Understanding this has liberated me from the systemic daily bombardment of how one should look, dream, think and most importantly imagine."<sup>1</sup>

In *Metamorphosis* (2012), Sabella explores the Palestinian landscape through the repetition of images he photographed in London and Berlin. In 160 x 160 cm light-jet prints, a single motif – a window with a lone cactus, security grills, barbed wire or what looks like a once demolished and now bricked-up wall – is repeated in an explosion of an organized yet chaotic reoccurrence. The images capture the day in, day out monotony of the occupation for those who endure it. From these images one gets the distinct impression that the unseen participants in these cruel, 3-D Escher-like assemblies are either constrained by what is taking place all around them, or have become inured to its relentless constancy.

However, for those on the outside who see oppression regularly reported from Israel and Palestine on 24-hour rolling news networks, Sabella's *Metamorphosis* also encapsulates a landscape that has been transformed for many in the West into light entertainment. From a jaded perspective of lethargic non-involvement, the kinetic elements of *Metamorphosis* are disturbingly ornamental in their persistent beauty.

Sabella is not a prolific artist and usually creates only one body of work a year. Since 2013 he has been writing his autobiography. Aesthetically, it has been a time of change. The current *Layers* exhibition, like his solo show *Fragments* at the Berloni Gallery in London, departs from the way his art has previously been exhibited.

"I have started to put my work in different constellations," he elucidates, "this liberates them from predetermined readings. It is a new map to be decoded. My work is a visual palimpsest with many hidden layers. I leave it to the viewer's imagination to connect with the works. These layers in time reveal new meanings ..."

Interestingly the artist is letting go. He doesn't mediate the view by providing information text for the exhibition. His quest for artistic freedom has been further emboldened in *Independence* (2014). Blurred or fuzzy bodies in motion belonging to people coated in silver, against a dark background, seem somehow ambiguous. Are they clothed or naked? The figures also have a translucent quality. Some of their bodies reveal shattered bones, but these again are deliberately indistinct.

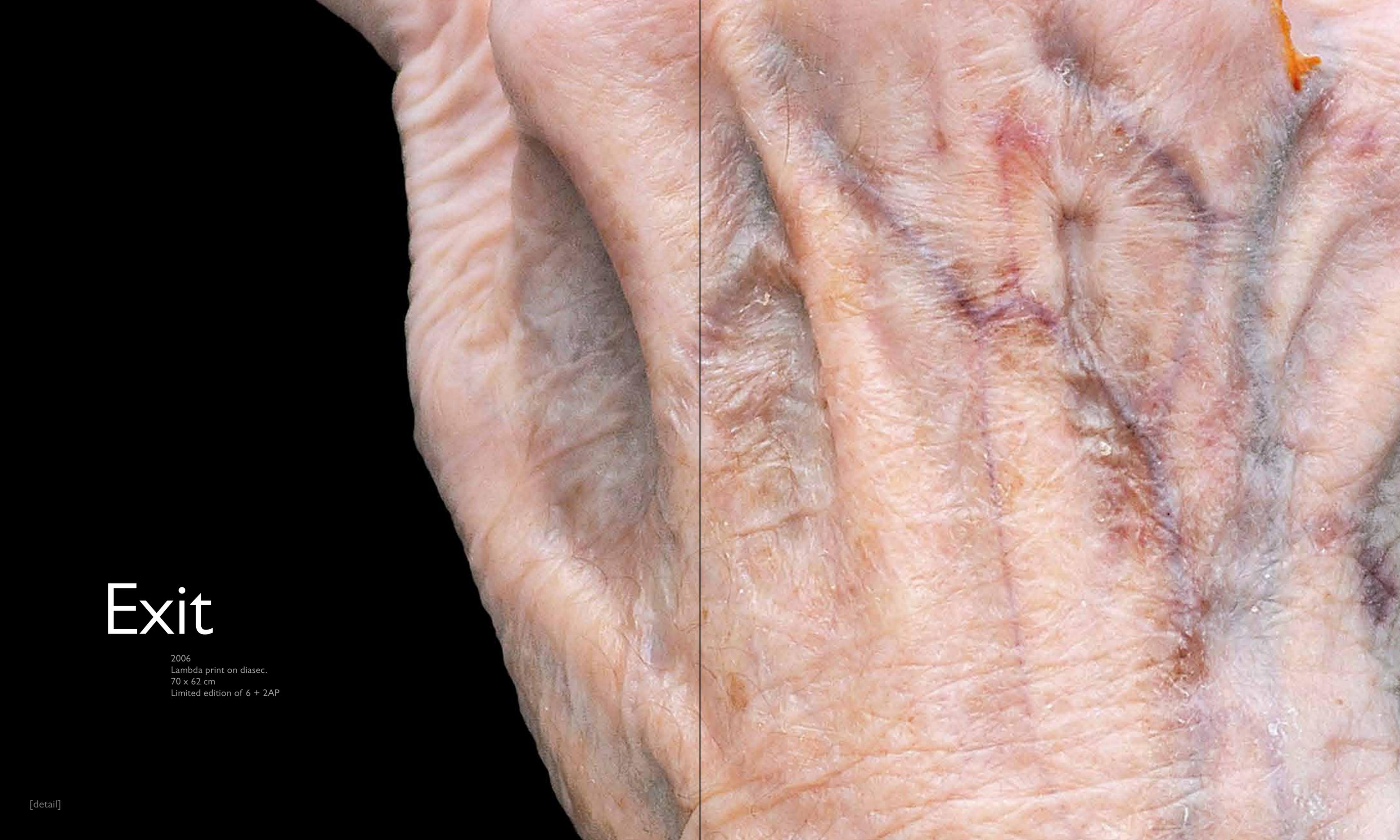
*Independence* positions Sabella inside the major visual movement of our times. The current obsession with incessant image-making has transformed the way the visual image is created, distributed and seen/experienced. A case in point is the rise of low-resolution or pixelated images, particularly in light of the explosion of social media, citizen journalism and moving and still imagery from Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Bahrain and Tunisia over the last three years. While the distance between low-res images and the art gallery is not well traversed, Sabella is not only undeterred, but defiant. "I didn't need a Hasselblad. I didn't need a camera. I was in the moment and the only thing that was going to make the image was my smart phone. Nothing is going to stop me from creating that image. For me, it was independence from the medium."

Sabella is determined to 'unfix' the image and free us from thinking that we are familiar with another country just because we see pictures of it. He is equally intent on showing that 'the real' is an elastic concept, both in the image and in the world. It encompasses experiences, which while sometimes not entirely our own, are ones we recognize, react to and feel intimately.

M a l u H a l a s a

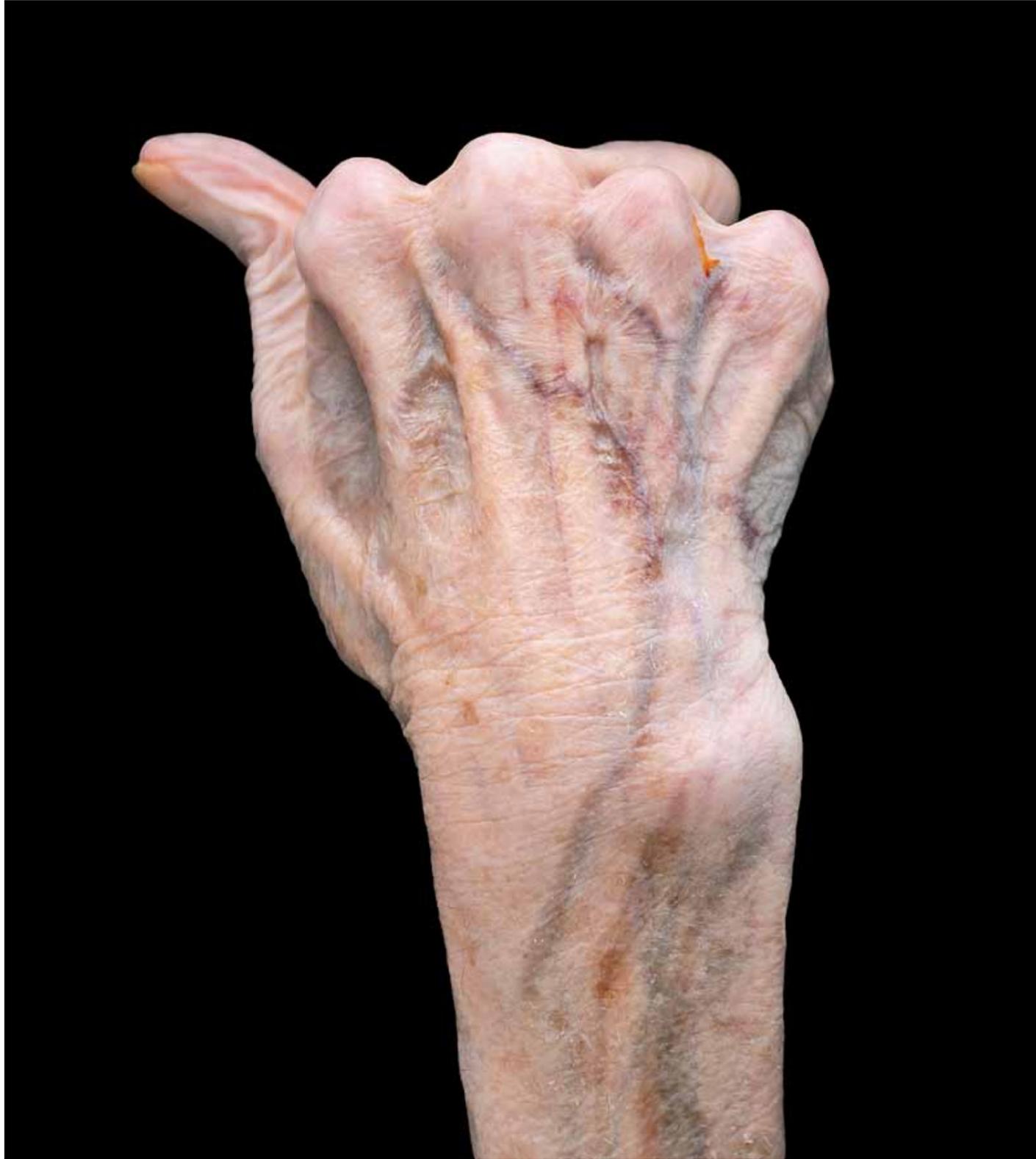
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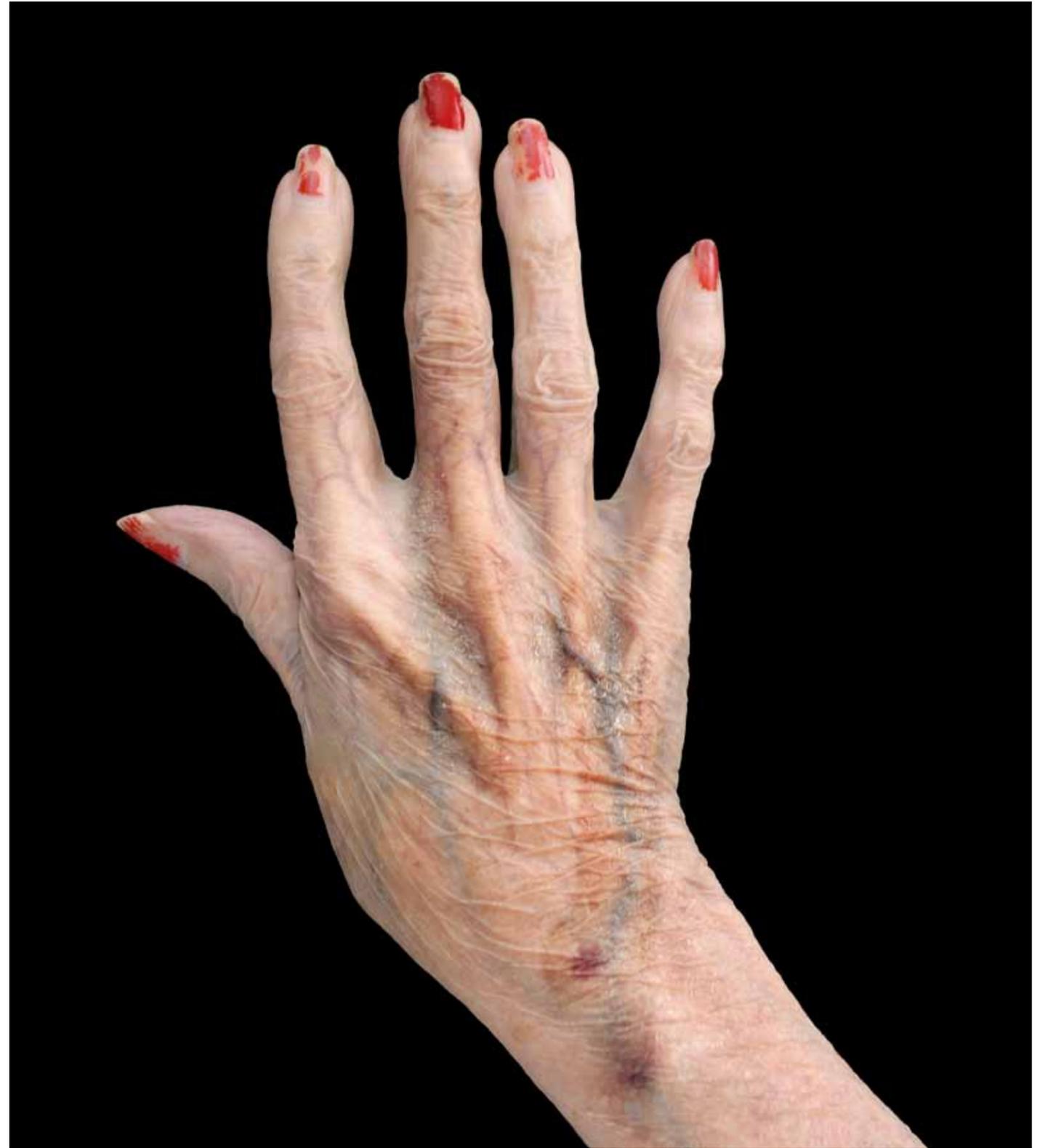
<sup>1</sup> Wafa Gabsi, 'Image as Witness – Archeology of the Past: Interview with Steve Sabella', *Contemporary Practices*, Journal XI 2012, p. 71. My emphasis.



# Exit

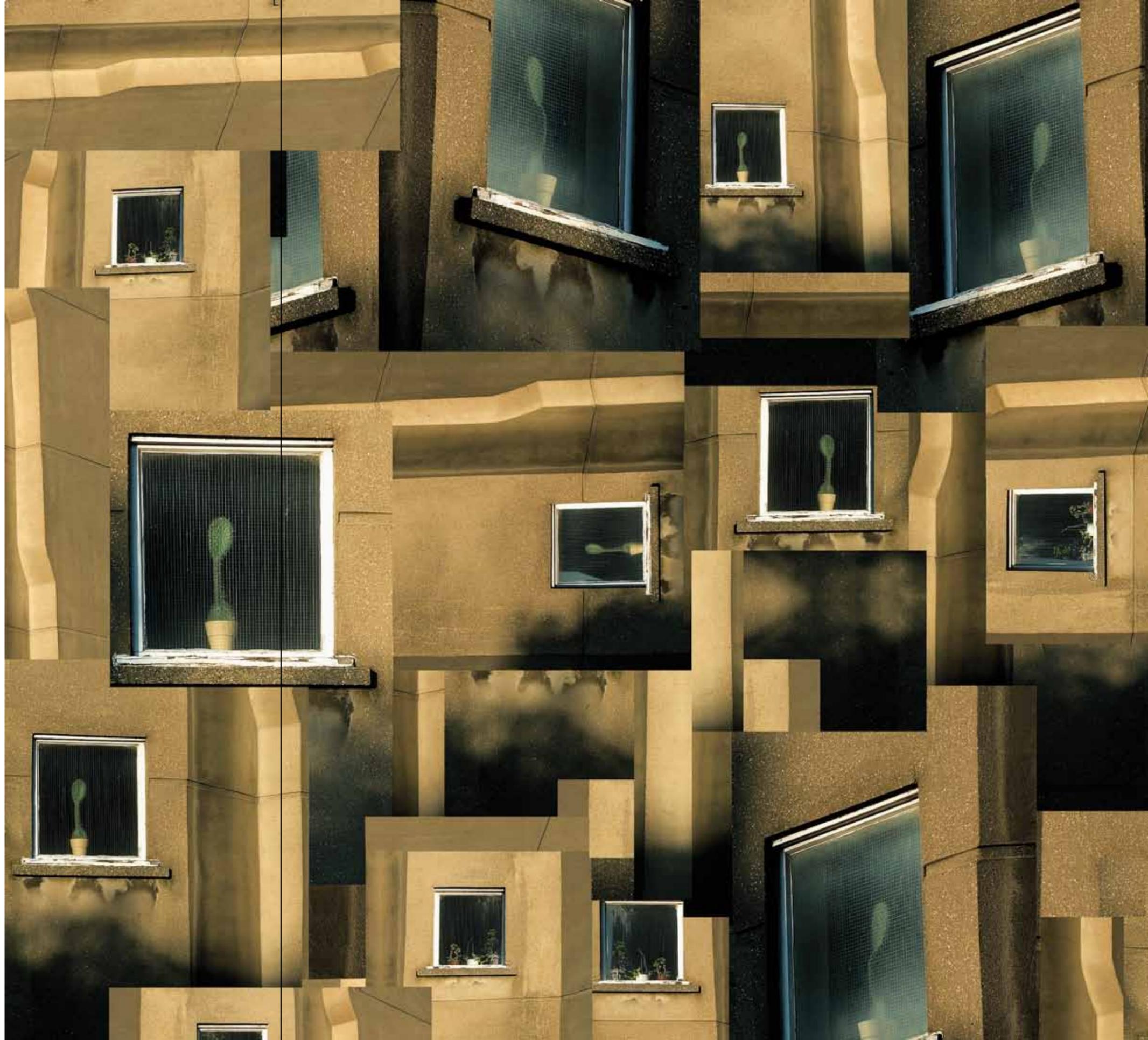
2006  
Lambda print on diasec.  
70 x 62 cm  
Limited edition of 6 + 2AP



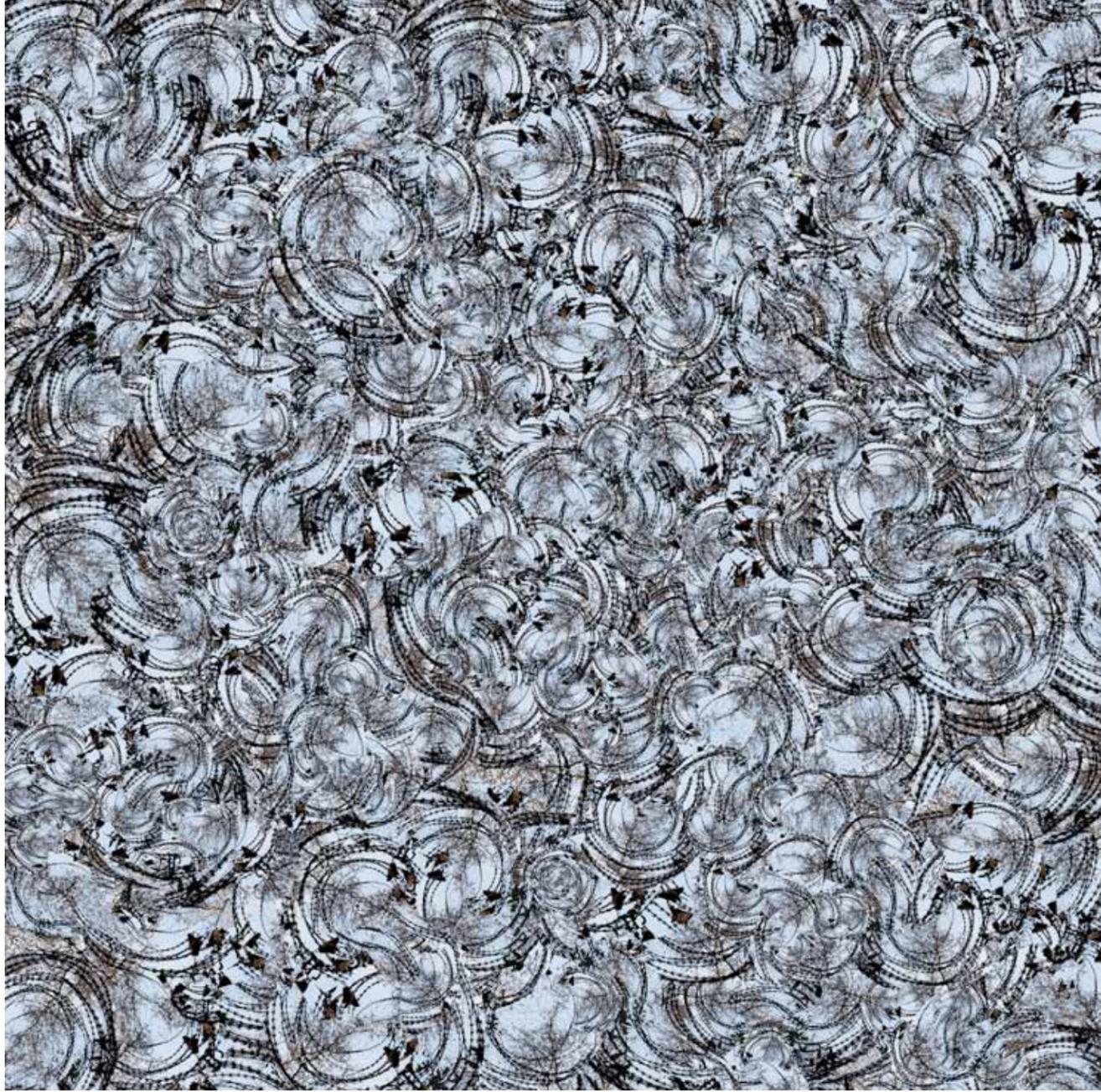


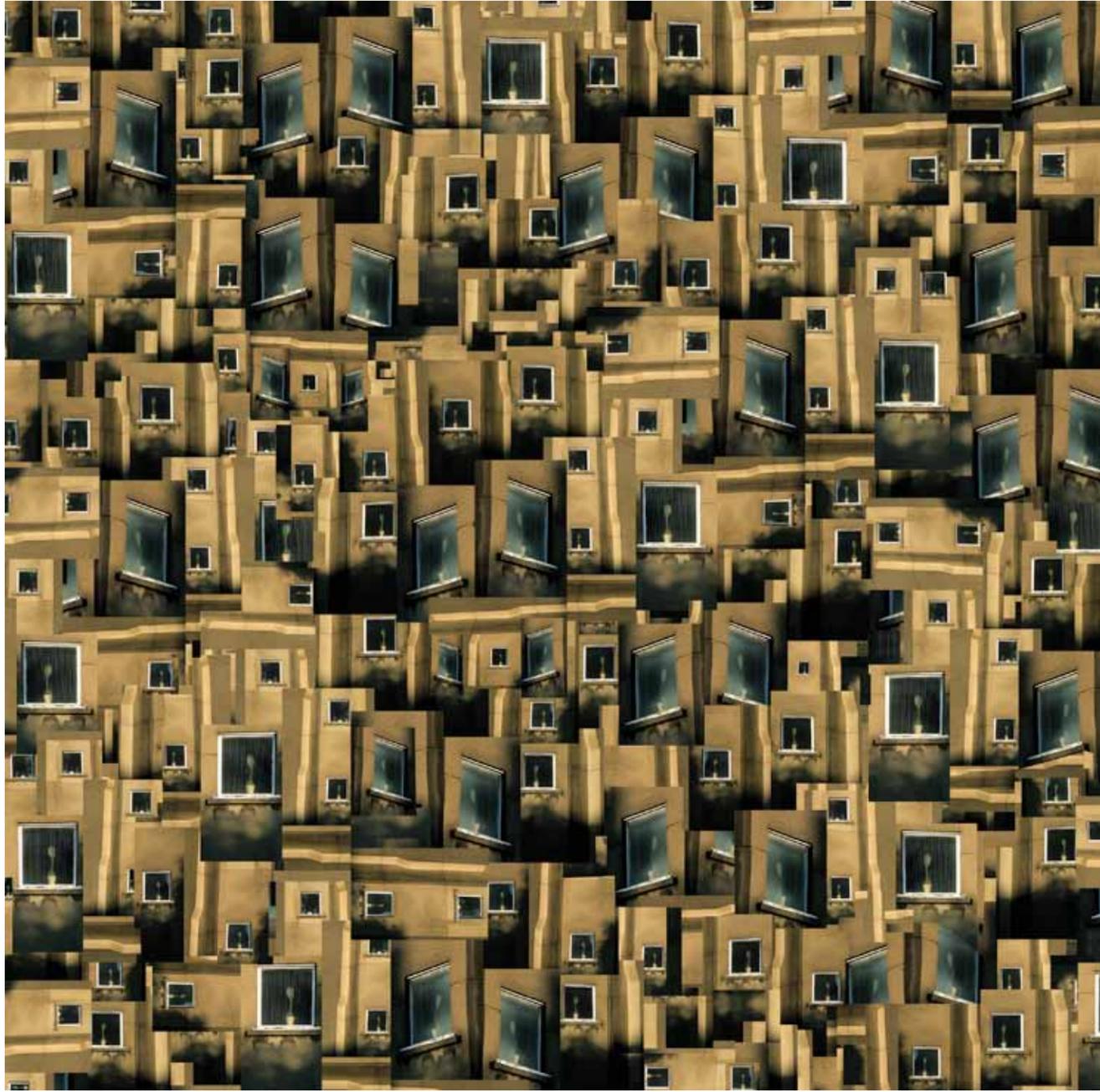
# Metamorphosis

2012  
Lightjet print on diasec  
on 3.5-cm aluminum box edge  
160 x 160 cm  
Limited edition of 6 + 2AP



[detail]

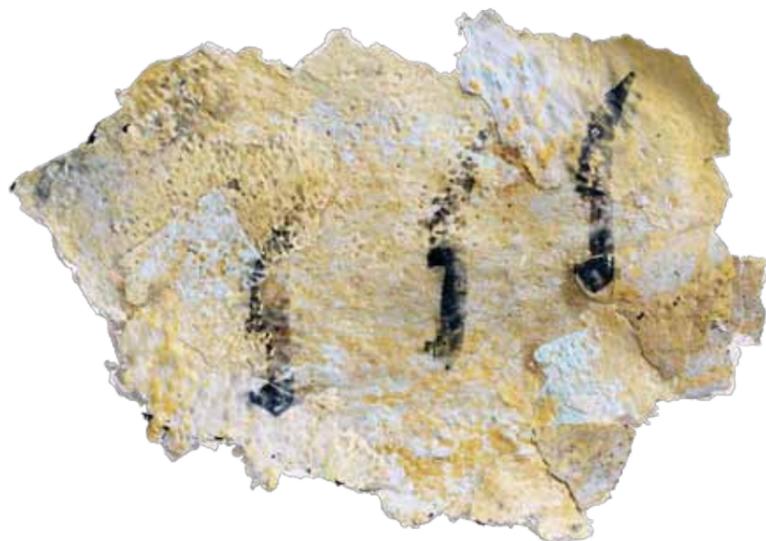
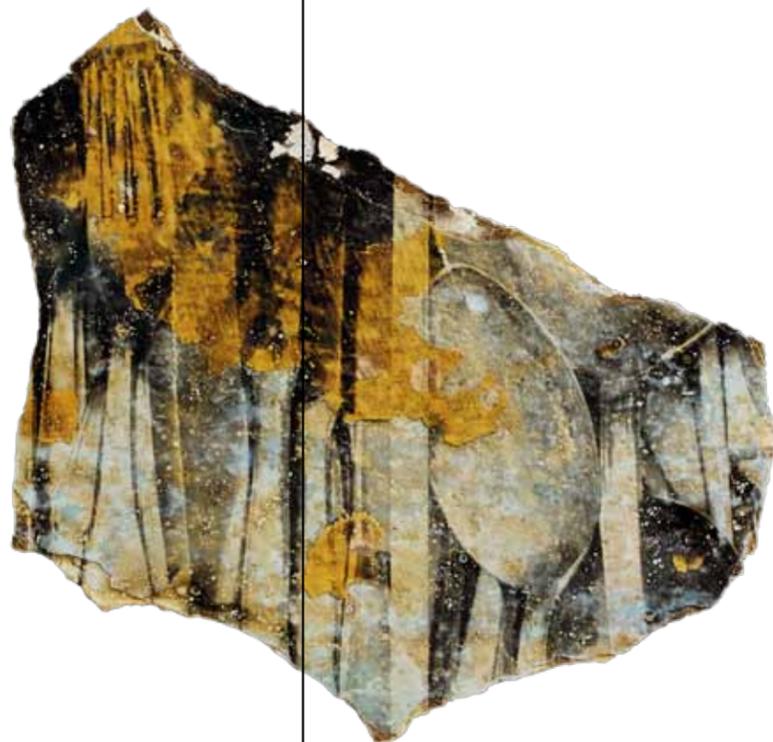
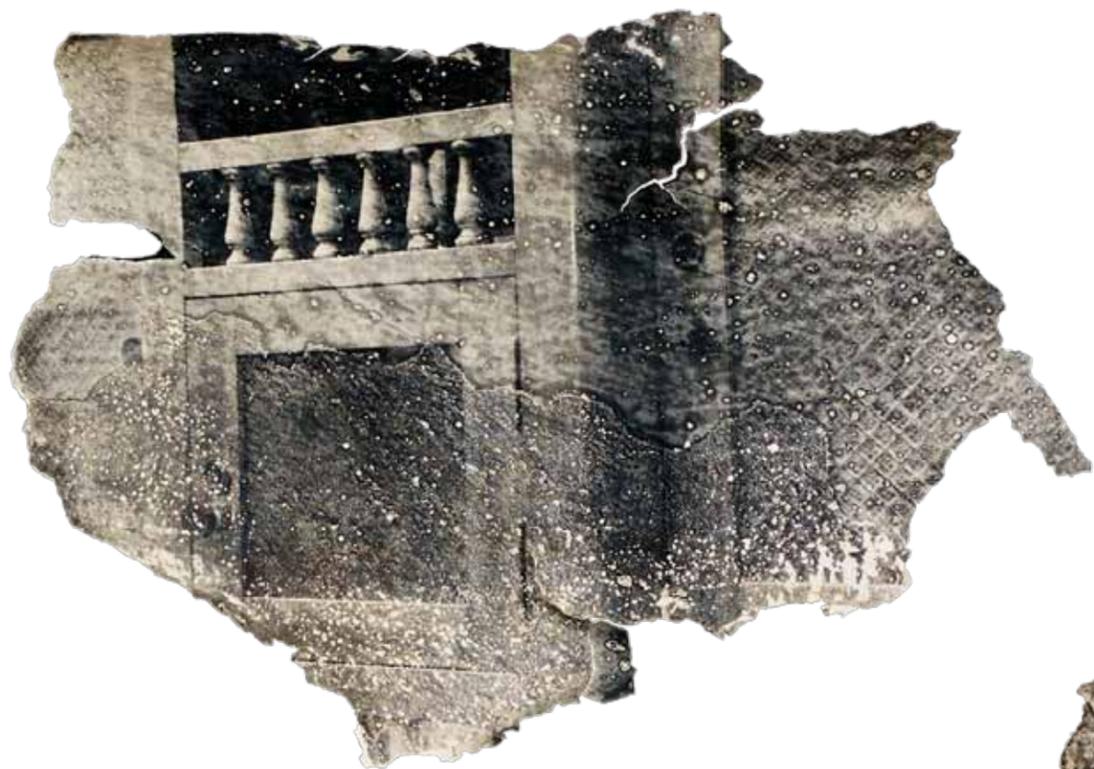




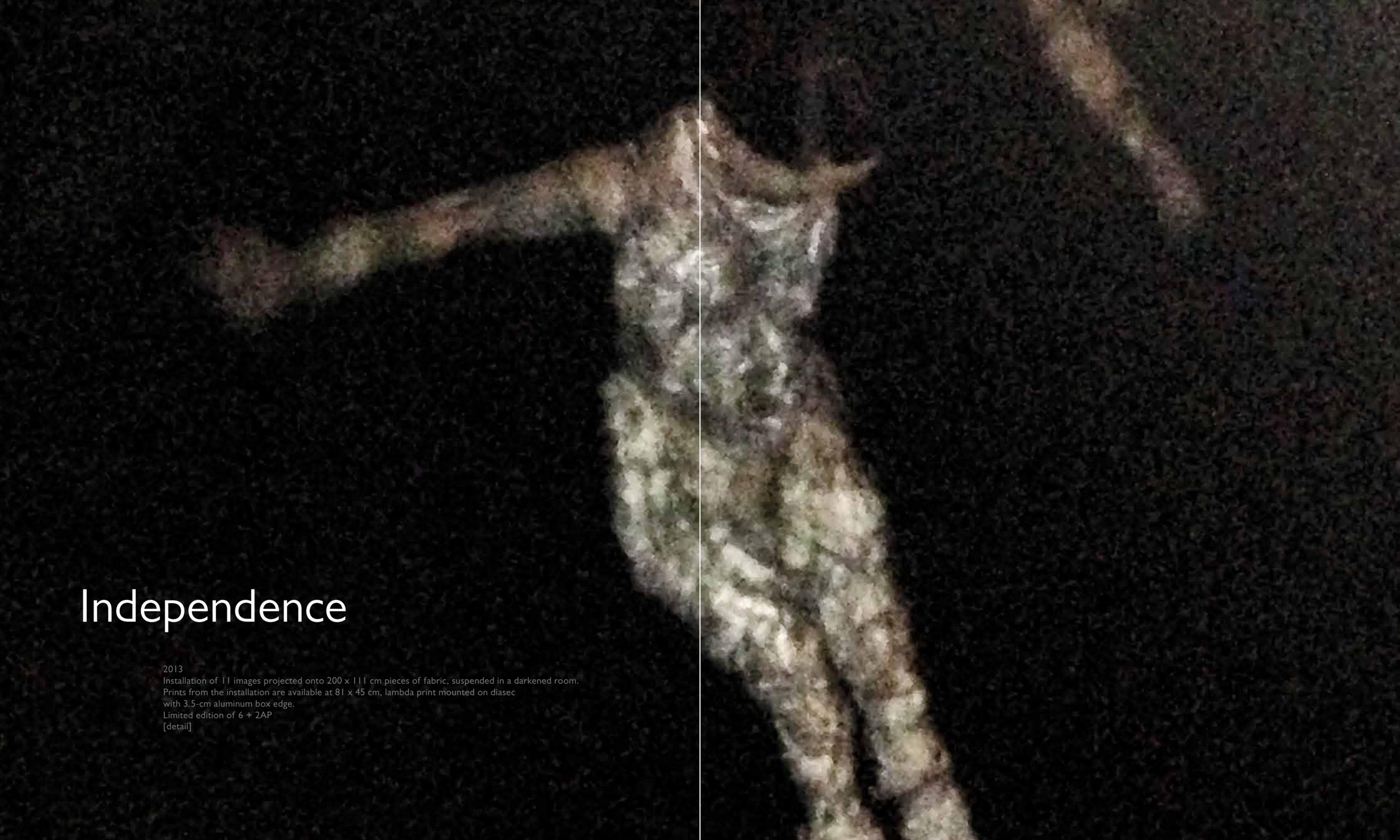


# 38 Days of Re-Collection

**38 Days of Re-Collection**, 2014  
B&W white film negative (generated from a digital image)  
printed with b&w photo emulsion spread on  
color paint fragments collected from  
Jerusalem's Old City house walls  
Unique  
[detail]







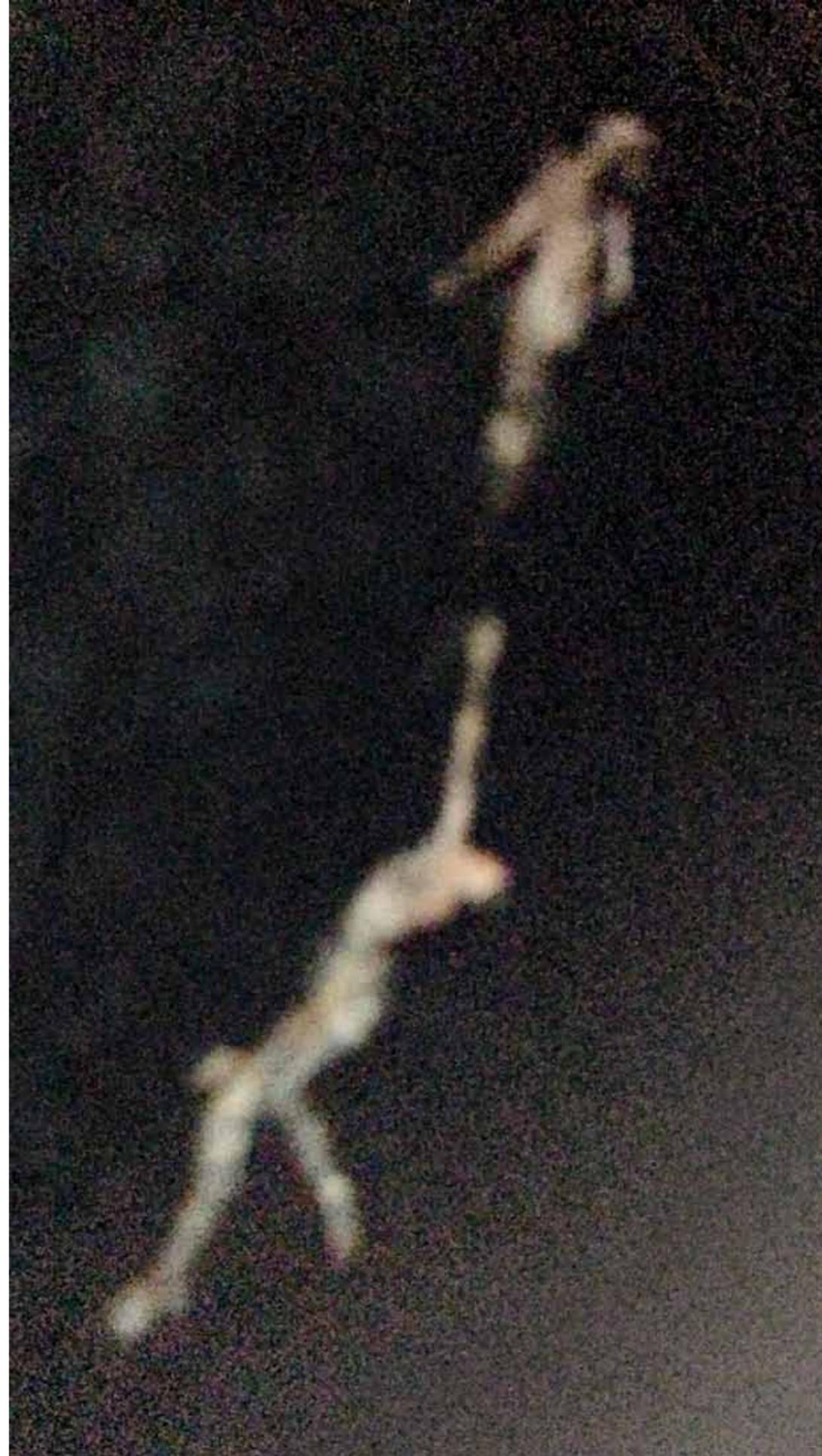
# Independence

2013

Installation of 11 images projected onto 200 x 111 cm pieces of fabric, suspended in a darkened room.  
Prints from the installation are available at 81 x 45 cm, lambda print mounted on diasec  
with 3.5-cm aluminum box edge.

Limited edition of 6 + 2AP  
[detail]





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