Steve Sabella, “My Art Is Not About Palestine! It’s About My Life.”

Steve Sabella is a Jerusalem-born, Berlin-based artist who primarily uses photography and photographic installation in his work. He holds an art photography degree at the Musrara School of Photography in Jerusalem, a B.A. in Visual Studies at Empire State College of the State University of New York, a M.A. in Photographic Studies at the University of Westminster, and M.A. in Art Business at Sotheby’s
Institute of Art. In 2008, he was selected for the Ellen Auerbach award by the Akademie der Kunste (Academy of Arts) in Berlin. He has staged exhibitions in the Middle East, Europe and the U.S. In 2010, he was selected as one of 23 artists for the opening gallery at the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, and his most recent series Sinopia was commissioned by the Bahrain National Museum in 2014. Sabella spoke with the Institute for Palestine Studies via Skype from Berlin on October 6, 2014.

Steve from Palestine

“My art is not about Palestine! It’s about my life.” Steve Sabella quickly corrected me as I started our interview with a line about his art and its connection to the land of his birth. Sabella rejected the effort to label him. “Many people seek to put labels and categories on my work,” he told me. And while aware of the expectations surrounding a “Palestinian artist,” he has long held that what other people think of him is of no consequence to his own truth. Sabella is not trying to distance himself from Palestine. Far from it, he assures me, but he contends, “I think it is better to be from someplace” than to be defined by it. Steve from Jerusalem, Palestine, rather than Steve the Palestinian. Instead of national labels doing the introduction, Sabella argues, understanding people as simply from somewhere—recognizing the individual instead of projecting their representation of a collective upon them—allows for clearer communication between us all. “I used to think I was from the galaxy, now I’ve come down to planet Earth,” he whimsically adds. It is his “Declaration of Independence,” to borrow the title of his recently penned statement, which has defined the young artist’s determination to avoid being categorized or labeled:

From this day onward, I declare that I am a citizen of planet earth and beyond. I am from everywhere and nowhere. No geography or culture defines me. I represent myself and my views only. I am not an ambassador of any country, not even the one of my birth, Palestine. I have uprooted myself and choose to plant my roots in the air, to always remain in transition. Free.

“Declaration of Independence” by Steve Sabella (2014)
To make the point, at a recent solo exhibition, *Fragments* at Berloni Gallery in London, Sabella stripped away any explanatory text or identifying marker; only “weak art” would necessitate them. Ever playful, he hastened to add, “This is my opinion. You may think my art is bad, but you should perceive the art in any way you want, without the intervention of text.” Sabella wanted every individual to bring their own experiences to the exhibit and draw their own interpretations. But can art really be that free of mediating influences? I ask Sabella about his decision to participate in exhibits funded by authoritarian Persian Gulf regimes, such as Doha’s Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. These regimes are image savvy and their paramount interest is to promote their own welfare while pursing policies many believe to be inimical to the well-being of their people and Arabs in general. “Who isn’t image conscious today?” he responds. Such state-led efforts have pushed so many Arab artists forward, Sabella argues. “If they tried to do it the old Western way...it would not have gone anywhere.” While Sabella believes that the resources of the Gulf have been a force for good in the Arab art world, funding alone is not enough. “What is needed is the intellectual,” he tells me. The Arab art world is waiting for a proper intellectual sphere of art historians and critics. Those people, Sabella informs me, are currently earning PhDs at European and American universities and will soon return to the region.

**Out of Place**

“As a visual artist growing up in Jerusalem, Sabella seems to have been intuitively aware of the pitfalls of photographing it,” Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata wrote in a 2004 article in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*. “Sensing how photography has been used to contribute to the mythmaking around him, this internal exile goes out into the open, beyond the city walls, to find his freedom between the rocks and the sky. The city that from time immemorial was considered a bridge between heaven and earth may be absent in Sabella’s photographs, but everything in them indicates how, in solitude, the native photographer rebuilt his own Jerusalem.”

Born a Christian in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City in the Israeli-occupied eastern half of *al Quds*, Sabella spent his early years as an artist in his native home, but, as he related, “felt exile while living in Jerusalem as all Palestinians do” since the nature
of Israeli occupation precludes Palestinians from connecting with their surroundings. His feelings of alienation from Jerusalem led him to identify that the city itself is in exile as everyone has a constructed idea of it in their imagination.

His visual research as part of the project Jerusalem in Exile (2006) on the mental images of the city, led him to realize how people’s imaginations have been colonized by a system that influences their perception of the actual ground they live on, which he further explored in his essay titled “The Colonization of the Imagination” (2012). It is this idea of internal exile and the image-making surrounding Jerusalem that has inspired much of his work. The 2004 collection Till the End conveyed a Jerusalem as envisioned by the artist:
Sabella mounted a visual ‘rescue mission.’ He revisited places of personal importance, photographed each site and collected a stone which was then used as the base for the photographic image. The original installation was exhibited outdoors at the Khalil Sakakini Gallery in Ramallah. It has an archaeological quality to it and emanates a profound sense of loss. Yet it also offers an archive of subjective memories without resorting to the sentimental. The following year, Till the End – Spirit of Place was conceptually expanded into a monumental collaborative undertaking, gathering images and memories of Jerusalem as remembered by Palestinians globally.

“I am from Jerusalem” in the Euphoria & Beyond exhibition catalogue, by Christa Paula (2011)

Sabella left Jerusalem for London in 2007 and later relocated to Berlin, where he currently resides. Prior to his physical exile, he exhibited the 2006 series Exit.
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.

“Foreword” in the Layers exhibition catalogue, by Abed Al Kadiri (2014)

This was followed by the 2008 photographic collages of In Exile:
The symbolism here is intentionally many-layered. The windows provide prospects and hope, seeming to permit the widest variety of angles of view, but still remain closed and keep the viewer outside, like an uninvolved observer. Life plays out in front of the window, but access to it is blocked. Here the artist seems a captive of the eternal search for himself in the mosaic of his mental landscape. He draws the viewer into disturbing views and robs him of balance and security. He deconstructs the familiar in order to assemble it anew, thereby creating a new constellation of reality that establishes parallels to the experiences of a never-ending exile.
While Jerusalem may be “in exile,” the 2014 project *38 Days of Re-collection* explored the idea of loss and permanence in the city:

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... 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.
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.

The Uprisings & Liberation

“Ben Ali eharb! Ben Ali eharb!” (Ben Ali fled! Ben Ali fled!) shouted by a Tunisian man on the night of January 14, 2011, after former Tunisian dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali departed the country for exile in Saudi Arabia in the wake of a 29 day popular uprising, was a statement that captivated Sabella. The exclamation played on a loop on Arabic broadcaster al Jazeera.

“Until the day I die I will remember this man,” Sabella said as he called a chance meeting with the man in Paris. For Sabella, the protest cry symbolized an Arab rejection of the narrative that holds that the “the Arabs voices and aspirations will always be suppressed” by their own governments and the rest of the world. As he saw it, the exclamation was made for the entire Arab world. “They [media outlets who report on the region] want you to believe that you are inferior, it’s not true.” The Arabs had “had enough and rebelled against this idea,” he exclaimed. Has his art been inspired by the
uprisings? “I don’t make art for revolution,” he says. Although initial hopes around the
democratic protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere have been demoralized by the civil
war in Syria and return to authoritarianism in Egypt, Sabella remains an optimist. “I
think this will last 50 years,” he says of the continued struggle of Arab resistance against
the devaluing status quo.

If the Arab uprisings represent an effort at collective liberation, Sabella has defined
himself and much of his work within the context of individual liberation. I brought up
one of his collage pieces from the Metamorphosis series (2012), which is composed of
barbed wire, a component he had previously described as symbolizing his liberation in
that he had “stitched his wounds with barbed wire.” I relate my interpretation: the
barbed wire represents Israeli occupation, and in his attempt at liberation, Sabella is still
confined by an illiberal force. Turns out I’m off the mark. “I have found liberation,” he
tells with conviction. While the occupation and sense of exile continue, liberation,
Sabella tells me by paraphrasing the words of a philosopher Vilém Flusser, comes “not
with forgetting the lost homeland, but by coming to terms with it, and thus accepting it.”
Sabella has come to accept his place in the world and that has been freeing:

*I have uprooted myself and choose to plant my roots in the air, to always remain in
transition. Free. All we need is the imagination to find who we are and what we are
searching for. It is the responsibility of the individual to stand up and free him or
herself from the new form of colonization that people are affected by yet are unaware
of, the colonization of the imagination. Palestinians do not need the UN, the EU, the
United States or any other country in the world, and especially not Israel, to declare to
them that they are free. We are all born free. Every Palestinian should wake up today
and say — I am a free person. Freedom is not something that is granted, freedom is
something felt. There can be no set date for the independence of Palestine. That
independence day is today. Everyone should declare it.*

Liberation, the act of being free, is the source of the 2010 project *Euphoria:*
This is when I broke my bones and changed my skin. Blood was flowing again in my veins; a spark hit me, ignition and a rebirth. This is when the euphoric explosion occurred and which was followed by the sprinkle of stars – I am free. Hence, with Euphoria, the form had to change and shift. Instead of solid windows, I looked for something more organic – trees; a form that gives a feeling of movement, change, and revival. I was uprooting myself.

And the following year’s *Beyond Euphoria*: 
In the same way that Sabella’s fury rose in parallel to tensions during the first and Second Intifada, his euphoria augmented with each event that contributed to the Arab
Spring. “The spark that ignited in me, ignited in the Arab world,” he says. In always being true to himself and his work, Sabella sought to mirror his self and that of the region’s uprising so that they appear one and the same. Initial pieces from Beyond Euphoria were destroyed and the resulting images reflect a freedom, a boundless energy never before seen in his oeuvre. The inevitable question is where to from here?

“Exodus and Back” in Canvas Magazine, by Myrna Ayad (2011)

Since Forever

The photographic lens has been Sabella’s tool, and in adopting it, he has sought to photograph his own understanding of the world. Although Sabella took his first photograph at age 12, he theorized in our interview, “Is the visual manifestation the starting point in art?” The process of thinking about the photograph started long before – “since forever.” Throughout his life he has sought to visualize his own development and liberation and has spoken previously of the need for “visual liberation” of the Arab image. During his TED talk at the 2012 TEDx Marrakesh, he closed with the following words,

The Egyptians in Tahrir Square were fighting for the liberation of their image. That was the real triumph. They managed to defy the system and force the world to look at them with different eyes. Their challenge now is to assert control of their image, especially because the system is fighting back forcibly to paralyze that victory and reconquer that image. The human struggle today is to conquer its image, nothing less, nothing more. Our image not only needs visual liberation, but an enormous amount of visual correction.

Here, in my own reading, Sabella is echoing the “permission to narrate” voiced by Edward Said, but in his own revamped note. In rejecting labels and categories, in feeling out of place and simultaneously seeking liberation, Sabella has declared his right to narrate his own life without permission from any institution or person. In the aforementioned “Declaration of Independence” Sabella writes,

Palestinians do not need the UN, the EU, the United States or any other country in the
world, and especially not Israel, to declare to them that they are free. We are all born free. Every Palestinian should wake up today and say — I am a free person. Freedom is not something that is granted, freedom is something felt. There can be no set date for the independence of Palestine. That independence day is today. Everyone should declare it.

Sabella is emphatic that he neither trying to depict Palestine in his work, nor is he trying to separate himself from the nation. His art is about his life and Palestine is represented through his experiences. The Palestinian experience is thus visually liberated when Palestinians are free to tell their own stories on their own terms, away from the myths of Zionism or some notion of “resistance” imagined by solidarity activists.

As for image correction, Sabella is, of course, aware not only of how the Palestinians have been portrayed in the West, but also how they have portrayed themselves to the world. In the last Israeli assault on Gaza – lasting 50 days during which over 2,100 Palestinians were killed, mostly civilians and a quarter of them children – Sabella reflected how he’d never seen so many people “from Hollywood to supermarkets” standing in solidarity with the Palestinians. Some actors and artists utilized #FreePalestine to declare it on Twitter and furthermore through public and non-public boycotts of Israeli goods by European supermarket chains. Palestinians “touched the world during the Gaza war,” he says, because “they have moved from being emotionally and textually savvy to image savvy.” The Palestinians have long known how to argue, but “the world understands images.”

As for the future, Sabella does not want to divulge too much. And we won’t either, except to say that his next project involves a cave in Jerusalem.

For more about Sabella and his art collections, including ordering his monograph Steve Sabella – Photography 1997-2014 published by Hatje Cantz in collaboration with the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, including texts by Hubertus von Amelunxen and Kamal Boullata, check out his website at stevesabella.com.

*Interview and article by Khelil Bouarrouj.*