

EXODUS AND BACK

STEVE SABELLA



Steve Sabella has often wondered if the roots of his alienation began with his family name – which is Italian – and especially so in a region where first, and particularly last, names ‘place’ people. So much so, that one’s nationality, religious sect and sometimes even residential suburb, can be discerned. “The problem is how people *perceive* my name,” Sabella says, likening this ‘predicament’ to the late Palestinian literary theorist and political activist, Edward Saïd, whose seminal book, *Memoirs: Out of Place*, tackles, among other things, his name as a basis of preliminary comprehension or misjudgement.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

If one were to look into Sabella’s mental archaeology, aside from a perpetual drive to give exile a visual form, one would also find an innate love for aesthetics and beauty, which he admits have “mesmerised” him for as long as he can remember. And if one were to peer deep into Sabella’s complex memory, a 2005 kidnapping incident in Gaza, in which he was mistaken for a foreigner, reveals a desperate desire to classify himself. The event was also one of many which sealed Sabella’s belief in fate – “I believe that if you go after good energy, it protects and shields you,” he says. At the time of his kidnapping, there was an unnoticed signpost in Bab Huta, the Arab Muslim neighbourhood in which the Sabellas lived. On the trilingual board, both the Arabic and English text denoted Bab Huta while the Hebrew, Sabella realised, named it Antonia Street. Fascinated with aesthetics – “I liked the name” – Sabella went to the Jerusalem Ministry of Interior to have this modified on his identity card, which also includes his father’s name, Emile, and his mother’s, Esperance. However, with names like these on his card, his kidnapper didn’t believe that his hostage was Palestinian and when asked where he lived, Sabella reverted to Bab Huta, because “I needed something to contextualise me as a Palestinian!”

Crucially, whereas Sabella’s name may mislead, the titles of his artworks do not. *In Exile, Euphoria, Exit, Beyond Euphoria, In Transition* and a host of others are literal descriptions of his state of mind. This makes ‘reading’ his photographic works a lot more fluid and, in many respects, helps unfold a photo diary of sorts. It also accounts for a succinct psychological portfolio of a man who has searched for himself through art

Opening spread:
Left: *Euphoria*. 2010. Lambda
print mounted on Diasec. 155
x 127 cm.
Right: (Detail) *Beyond
Euphoria*. 2011. Lambda print
mounted on Diasec.
205 x 117 cm.

Above: *In Transition*. 2010.
Lambda print mounted on
Diasec. Triptych. 205 x 44 cm.



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since 1994 and through his first body of work in 1997, aptly titled *Search*. “If I don’t speak,” he pauses, “you’ll understand my life through my work.” Palestine’s First Intifada from 1987–1993 attracted a great deal of criticism from the USA towards Israel as an occupying force and as a result generated substantial media coverage. In 1987, an American news channel created a programme on the Intifada and interviewed the then 12 year-old Sabella. “If you heard me speak [then], you would be amazed at how, even early on, I criticised the structure of society, the structure of life, what it means to be Christian or Muslim or Palestinian or Israeli,” he muses. “Back then, I had already begun to question the formation of my identity and my *raison d’être*.” The years trudged by, during which time Sabella had got hold of his amateur photographer father’s camera and shot random pictures of his

environment. “It’s funny, the concept of my photography never changed – it was always photos of my immediate surroundings,” he explains. “It’s always been my personal, private sphere – the salon, the window, the door – I don’t go further, but the work does and it’s always about me trying to define my surroundings and rebuild them”. The camera, he laughs, has now been lost for over two decades but his father still asks him about it.

By 17, Sabella was a promising high school student who had great visions for his future. But his world turned upside down when the Second Intifada occurred in late September 2000. Nothing – not even his family of musicians and their attempt at coping with the oppression via music – could alleviate the suffering which Sabella endured. “The Intifada paralysed thought and I refused for that to happen to me,” he says,



“Jerusalem became the capital of my imagination and I finally recognised that the city itself is in exile.”

Above: *Exit*. 2006. Lambda print mounted on Diasec. 70 x 62 cm.

Facing page: (Detail) *In Exile*. 2008. Lambda prints mounted on aluminium. 136 x 125 cm with a 5 cm aluminium edge. Barjeel Art Foundation collection.

“it blocked everything and it also blocked me.” Slowly, like an image which reveals itself as one moves further away from a mural, so too Sabella began to understand that the Palestinians “were subjugated to a unique and severe form of mental dictatorship”. The Israelis, he adds, “make you feel that you’re an ‘other’, that you’re a no-one and I never felt that. I’m Steve Sabella who is just living in my city, Jerusalem.”

PHOTO THERAPY

It seems that the higher the tensions mounted during the uprising, the more intense was Sabella’s determination to break free. The two factors were directly proportional and, just as a snake sheds its skin, Sabella sought to rid himself of a toxic “mental colonisation” that tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to seep into his skin, into his very being. In a record three weeks, he taught himself Hebrew to study art photography at the Jerusalem School of Photography and New Media in 1994. “In order to live in Jerusalem, you have to understand its lan-

guages,” believes Sabella. It wasn’t just a language that he mastered, but the ability to create an alternate reality and one that was literally inverted in his body of work. Using infrared photography and other techniques, Sabella reversed images – what was white became black, and what was black became white, which he saw as light. “It’s to see what can’t be seen; in order to see the invisible, you have to penetrate more deeply into the visible,” he explains. “In my work, I was searching for the ‘light’, only to understand years later that this was in fact the search for my self.” The resulting images have a rather desolate feel, but in retrospect, confirm that Sabella was well on his way of “putting thoughts together”.

‘Thoughts’ were not the only things that he was constructing. With a quick inhalation and exhalation of his cigarette, Sabella leans forward and whispers, “I started creating my own city.” In that millisecond, my mind raced through screenshots of the Hollywood blockbuster, *Inception*, and a frown appeared on my face. Sabella grinned and realised that I had grasped that to mentally

'create a city' can only mean eventual doom and gloom. "Yes, I reached toxic levels," he admits, "I got deep into my head and entered the highest level of consciousness. It almost destroyed me." In 2002, Sabella presented his *Identity* series on landscapes to the Qattan Foundation's Young Artist Award, and won. One of the judges, Kamal Boullata (*Canvas 4.3*), interrogated Sabella's supposed illustration of Jerusalem with no evidence of the city. "I simply replied, 'do I have to photograph Jerusalem to talk about her?'" and suddenly Kamal beamed and said, "Bravo! That's exactly what I want to hear!" laughs Sabella.

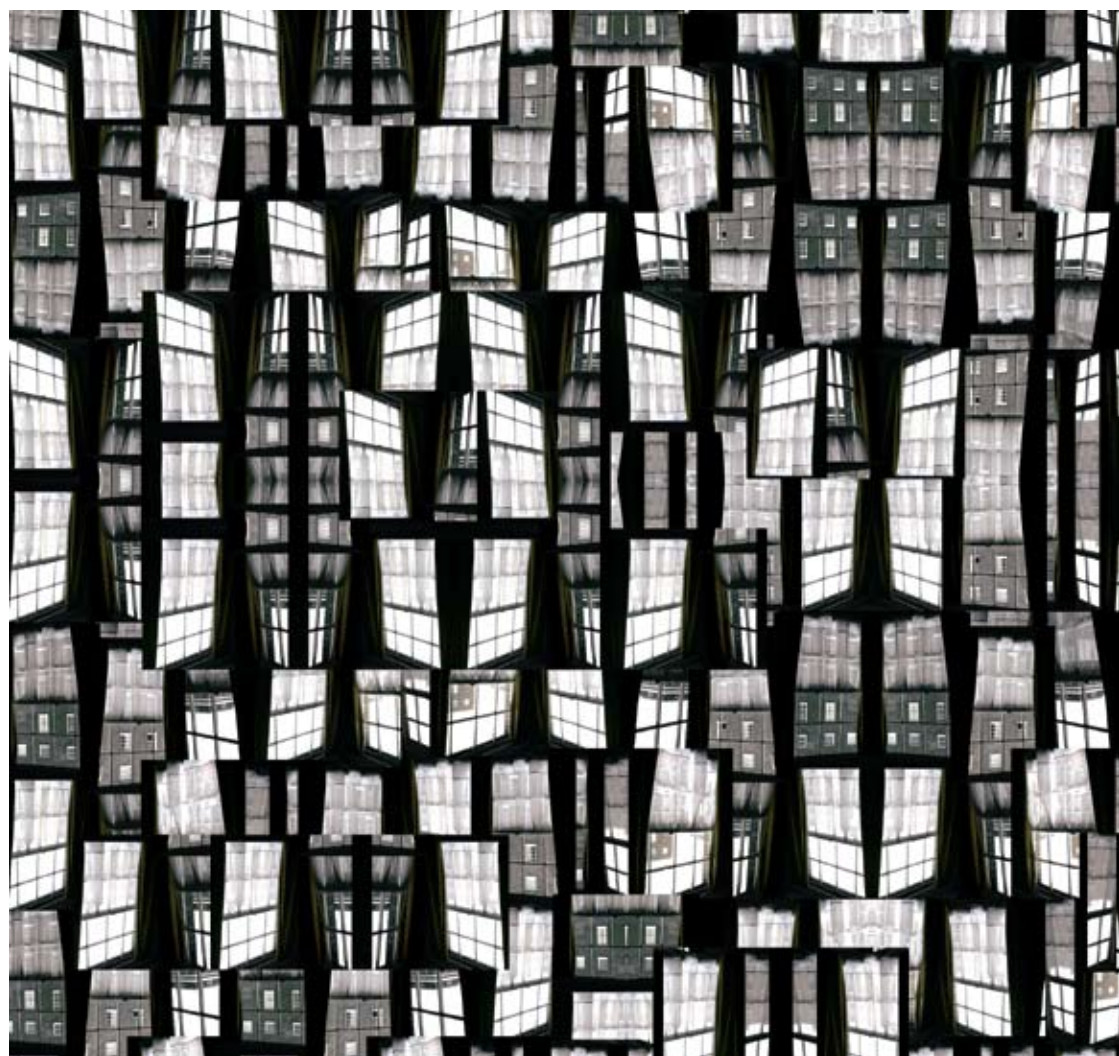
Having been given such an accolade, but more importantly, being 'seen' by a fellow Palestinian artist, gave Sabella the impetus to question further. After all, although it had gone into remission, the suffering was still there. It was then that a "hyper obsession" with Jerusalem began, marking a pivotal moment in Sabella's life – he became aware that it wasn't him, but the city itself. "I thought, there's no way I can be in exile because, theoretically speaking, I am living on this land," he explains, "but something must have happened with the place; Jerusalem became the capital of my imagination and I finally recognised that the city itself is in exile." Sabella made this realisation go viral by inviting Palestinians all over the world to submit their mental images of Jerusalem to him via the Internet. In doing so, he made another startling discovery – above and beyond its physicality, Jerusalem was actually a universal place, "and not a local place, as the Israelis had planned!" The city had been transformed into an image; it had lost its 'original reference' and the idea that he lived in the image of his own city augmented his state of alienation and fragmentation. Sabella was now in mental and physical exile.

FLIGHT AND FIGHT

In 2007 Sabella left Jerusalem and now shuttles between Berlin and London. He went on to complete a BA in Visual Arts at the State University of New York and two Master's degrees in London from the University of Westminster and the Sotheby's Institute of Art. He quickly

points out, "I didn't leave Jerusalem, she left me," but before this 'departure', Sabella created his *Exit* series – a likely nod to his impending physical exodus, but also reflective of a whirling mental vortex that was about to arrive. It was the first time a human element – hands – made their way into his body of work and just as deformed, twisted, excruciating-looking and agonising as those hands appear, so too Sabella felt. "I became consciously aware that I had lost my centre, my point of origin," he explains, "and it was here that the physical space [Jerusalem] meant nothing to me." London didn't help Sabella – her "lack of architectural harmony" made him feel all the more alienated and he sunk into a bottomless pit of deliberation.

Somehow, as the saying goes, 'it's got to get worse to get better', and Sabella's continued art practice made a positive impact on his psyche. In short, art seemed to have rehabilitated him and *In Exile* was born. The series deals with fragments



PROFILE

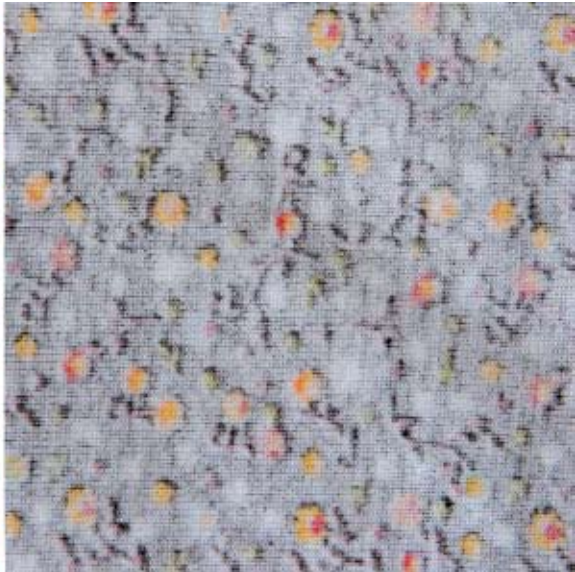


This spread: *Settlement, Six Israelis & One Palestinian*. 2008–2010. Seven light jet prints mounted on aluminium. 230 x 164 cm each with a 5 cm aluminium edge. Mathaf collection, Doha. Image courtesy Mathaf, Doha.

**“[Settlement:
Six Israelis
and one
Palestinian
signals] very
charged
numbers in
the history
of the
Palestinian-
Israeli
conflict
and how
the Israelis
are always
threatened
by the ‘one’
Palestinian
who might
set things off.”**



PROFILE



and embodies Sabella's attempt at 'picking up the pieces' of his self. Featuring spliced windows, *In Exile's* subject matter metaphorically takes on themes of entry and exit, openings and closings, inside and outside. He was relieved, happy even, but unaware of what would come next until a chance discussion with a friend in Dubai in 2010 became the proverbial Pandora's Box and BOOM! *In Transition* came next, stemming from an awareness that, "there is no need to create art just from depression." Sabella's hands shook as he shot trees and grass in London – elements chosen for their organic quality and their allusion to growth, movement and change. Some areas of the images are heavily blurred, while others are distinctly clear – an intentional pictorial definition of the series' name. One cannot dispute that the work suggests a phase-like, in-limbo, quality.

In the same year, Sabella was commissioned to create a work for one of Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art's opening shows – the fantastic *Told/Untold/Retold. Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian*, (now acquired by Mathaf) sought to address the basics: by getting six Israelis and himself to strip down to their underwear with Sabella on one wall and the others facing him, his provocative installation addresses the need to go back to the roots of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There are a number of facets to this work – the ratio of six Israelis to one Palestinian reflects the demographics of Israel and, as Sabella explains, has many connotations. It signals, for example, "very charged numbers in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and how the Israelis are always threatened by the 'one' Palestinian who might set things off." There is the idea of a collective that shapes the region, in which nations are treated collectively rather than taking into account the individuality of people. The installation thereby creates a visual unresolved tension, especially as there is no indication of who is winning – the one or the many. "The spectator who stands in the middle of the installation cannot see both sides simultaneously and must make a critical choice," explains Sabella.

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It then seems as though Sabella's *In Transition* hit the nail right on the head and snowballed into a mental ecstasy. In the same week that he shot images for *In Transition*, came *Euphoria*, "like an explosion!" Here, the images take on a chromosomal quality; the apparent veins and arteries clearly connect to one another and Sabella's DNA is unmistakably lucid. He realised that there must be other "galaxies", that his mental ascension couldn't stop there – "I wanted to reach a supreme state of aesthetics" – and incidentally, as *Beyond Euphoria* began to take shape, the Arab Spring exploded into life. "I think the Arabs understood that in order to break free, you need to go through a process of introspection and deal with yourself first and foremost to become liberated," he says: "They realised they need to deal with themselves as individuals and not as masses."

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? Sabella grins mischievously. "Ah, see, I'm beyond euphoria, catch me if you can!" 📷

Facing page: *Cécile Elise Sabella*. 2008. Lambda matt print hand stitched on primed cotton canvas. Print size: 49.5 x 100 cm; Canvas size: 60 x 110 x 3 cm. Image courtesy Metroquadro Gallery, Turin.

All images courtesy the artist unless otherwise specified.

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