

Euphoria And Beyond

**A Solo Exhibition by Steve Sabella at the Empty Quarter Gallery, Dubai
May 2 - June 11, 2011**

essay by **Christa Paula**

“I AM FROM JERUSALEM”

“The price they paid for this was living in two worlds, in uneasy tension between two identities permanently in conflict that forced them to experience the self and the other in ways that may be incomprehensible to an outsider.” – Kamal Boullata 2009, *Palestinian Art*: 303

Steve Sabella’s oeuvre unfolds like a book. Its chapters chronicle the artist’s journey towards visual and intellectual maturation and bravely investigate his shifting psychological states, narrating a deeply personal individuation process. Thus, in order to fully appreciate the triumph of Sabella’s recent work, it is vital to take into account the evolution of his practice, from his first photographic series *Search* (1997) and *Identity* (2002) to the work presented in his current solo exhibition *Euphoria & Beyond* at the Empty Quarter Gallery in Dubai (May 2 to June 11, 2011),

Sabella was born in 1975 and grew up in a large Christian Palestinian family in a Muslim neighbourhood in the Old City of East Jerusalem. He was twelve when the First Intifada erupted. The uprising remonstrated decades of humiliation and fierce repression of the native population by the Israeli colonial project. It raged for almost six years and was violently countered. Mounting pressure to affiliate along religious/national lines was fragmenting established communities, a fact genuinely resented by the young Sabella. He rebelled and, instead, fashioned for himself a fictional (or hyper-) identity, located in the liminal space between belonging and not belonging. Whilst this permitted him to move freely across the city with his camera, it ultimately engendered an unshakable feeling of alienation. To visually illustrate – and mitigate- this sense of disaffection, or ‘mental exile’, has been in the forefront of Sabella’s practice since his emergence as an artist in the mid-1990s.

It has been noted that, in contrast to the older generation of Palestinian artists, the young contemporaries have opted to avoid the pitfalls of overtly political image production. Sabella’s first three series (*Search* 1997, *Identity* 2002, *End of Days* 2003) do not show Jerusalem. Instead they steer the viewer into depopulated landscapes beyond its city walls, offering glimpses of harsh beauty and superficially integrated alien objects. Light, in different spectra, is significant and is utilized to create an imaginary reality, a promise of relief in a world beyond the visible. The yearning for escape is palatable. Importantly, these early works incorporate aspects of

fragmentation and re-assembly as well as the digital manipulation of the photographic image, prescient of Sabella's mature formal vocabulary. The artist's conceptual bearing, however, was articulated in the course of the projects created between 2004 and 2006: *Till the End, Spirit of Place* (2004), *Kan Yama Kan* (2005), and *jerusalem in exile - tangible memories* (2006-2009). Collectively, they focus on Jerusalem and comprise a thorough investigation of the dialectic between place and perception.

Sabella had already professed his 'mental exile'. Now, however, he perceived an acute threat to the 'true identity' of his city. This threat was two-fold: Punitive damages to Palestinian property were escalating in East Jerusalem whilst new constructions were/are principally carried out by and for Jewish Israelis. This was accompanied by the appropriation and exploitation of the city's image by the state media to reinforce the legitimacy of the Jewish state with Jerusalem as its capital. Historically a multi-cultural city of global significance, the new brand Jerusalem was ideally to be homogenous and Jewish. Consequently, 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. The results were to underscore the artist's hypothesis: that Jerusalem had been exiled and replaced by a hyper-real construct, a simulacrum deployed in the name of ideology which, not only intended to destroy the plurality of the city but, ultimately, aims to colonize the imagination. The corroboration of his long held suspicions left the artist in a state of near physical and mental collapse.

In 2007 Sabella left Jerusalem for further studies abroad. Before his departure, however, he prepared *Exit*, a disturbing photographic sequence of aged hands, gnarled and discoloured by time to which he refers as his 'exilic landscapes.' While for the first time, this artwork specifically makes use of the human body, it also intimates a yearning for re-connection, a release from mental exile. Perhaps it is ironic, or simply human, that he was to achieve this only once he entered the Diaspora, that is, after he physically left home.

Between 2008 and 2009, Sabella created his most critically acclaimed artworks to date: *In Exile* (2008) and *Six Israelis and One Palestinian* (2008-2011). Along with *Mentalopia* (2007) and *Cecil Elise Sabella* (2008) they form part of his search for meaning in exile. As a group they can be divided into two categories: one, the five sublime tightly composed photo-montages collectively

titled *In Exile*, which may be considered abstract representations of the artist's psychological state. As such they are closely related to *Euphoria* (2010) and *Beyond Euphoria* (2011) launched at the Empty Quarter Gallery on the 2nd of May. The second sub-group confronts social, political and interpersonal issues, and is underpinned, in my opinion, by a desperate appeal for ethical behaviour, which, philosophy assures us has its roots in affirmative mutual recognition (i.e. between others) as much as that the realization of freedom is cradled in ethics.

Both *Six Israelis and One Palestinian* and *Cecile Elise Sabella* mandate the acknowledgment of the individual as an autonomous being worthy of recognition. The latter, a tender and apologetic declaration of love from the artist to his young daughter, portrays pairs of square-cuts from the child's colourful clothes and is included in the exhibition. Conceived as an artist's book, these images too deal with duality, but they also mirror the essential connection between a father and a daughter, two exiles born in Jerusalem, two of the same cloth.

In contrast, the *Euphoria* triptych is a joyous retinal explosion. Cut and assembled from hundreds of fragments of trees, like those shown *In Transition*, the resulting photomontages of organic fluidity emanate cathartic relief and a transcendence of the state of 'mental exile.' Long years of self-interrogation have given way to a more stable personality, one open to expansion and to the appreciation of beauty and the sublime. It is also relevant that the production period of Sabella's first post-*Euphoria* works coincided with the demonstration in Tunisia and Egypt. *Beyond Euphoria* relishes in a freedom never seen before in Sabella's oeuvre, a freedom where possibilities are limitless and new fictional spaces beckon to be explored.