

art

### Steve Sabella

Steve Sabella, a London-based Palestinian artist has been deconstructing notions of identity since the mid-90s. In this particular work, he surprisingly carries a heavy load of identity.



*Settlement: Six Israelis @ One Palestinian, 2008. Installation of life-size images. Limited edition of 5 + 2 AP. 82.6 x 59 in each. Mounted on aluminum + 2 in aluminum edge*

Convincing six Israelis to strip for him and stand in their underwear, Sabella creates an artwork that is uncommon in the region as it shifts from ubiquitous views of 'Nostalgia'. Instead, it engages the viewer in a strong visual debate and thought.

The installation consists of six life-size prints of Israelis in underwear at one side of the wall and directly opposite, facing them is the image of the artist, similarly attired. Highly coded the work triggers many questions: Why six Israelis and why one Palestinian? Why in underwear? And why at opposite walls?

One of the obvious symbols is the number 6 which may be a reminder of the six million Jews killed

during the Holocaust. The numbers might also leverage the concept of the collective that shapes the region, where nations are treated en masse, rather than taking into account the individuality of people. According to Sabella, more complex though, is the question of survival that haunts both, the Israelis and the Palestinians. In a region hinged on paranoia, it is unclear why Israel, a strong military state, is afraid of Palestinians. Fear of the Other is forbidding people from making rational decisions. "Any solution between Israelis and Palestinians should also involve a psychological solution" says Sabella.

He further explains, "Getting rid of clothes signals the need to go back to the essence in a hope to reconsider

a different way of 'seeing', and to be rid of what is currently shaping us. The real solution lies in going back to basics, and the origin of the Palestinian/Israeli dilemma. The viewer is thus urged to reflect on the many important aspects that have shaped the conflict: the Holocaust, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the stripping of Palestinians in search of suicide bombers, demography, settlement, borders, the Wall with restrictions of either side in crossing over, control and security, among many other issues that plague our land and people.

"Wearing underwear is a metaphor for 'adult infants'. It also mirrors the state of identification conflict Palestinians and Israelis live in. While we search for the ideal Self, the question is how do we locate it? The

viewer standing in the middle of the installation cannot see both sides at the same time. Thus, the viewer must make a critical choice or step back to consider the fact that the onus of resolving these issues lies within themselves. It is also a process of discovering the 'other' that resides in each one of us."

Sabella has carefully chosen an ambiguous title, 'Settlement'. Is he settling accounts with the Israelis on behalf of the Palestinians, or does 'Settlement' imply a resolution, or is he referring to settlements on the ground? One thing is clear, the artist is encouraging interrogation on the clash of concepts between 'Identity' and 'Identification' besides suggesting the image of the concrete wall as a metaphor for separation.

SETTLEMENT