

Mural of The Great Return
Steve Sabella - On a Journey to the Beginning and the End

Interview by Mohammed al-Assad

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Palestinian artist Steve Sabella presents his work The Great March of Return in which he reconstructs the Palestinian reality inspired by Renaissance Art. On the 71st anniversary of the Nakbah, here is a conversation with the artist.

On this Creation:

The Great March of Return, which resembles a mural painted on a “space without borders”, is by the Palestinian artist Steve Sabella. Some who saw it for the first time said that it is the Palestinian Sistine Chapel, resembling the heavenly ceiling by the Italian painter Michelangelo. He painted the many stories of the creation of the world, its death and revival—the beginning and the end of time—between the years 1508–1512. This work is considered the peak of the Renaissance period, the period of revival.

We interviewed the artist Steve Sabella and it seems that this idea was not far from his mind. He worked for a long time creating a composition including more than 1000 photographs. The idea behind the work is of a rising nation embarking on a great return journey towards its homeland, that is, towards life again. Amidst fire, smoke, killing and destruction, a rising nation tells its stories.

And who is more skilled than the artist to depict these stories, or to let them lead him, as he says, to distribute them along endless space, to extend from Gaza to the outside world, and even beyond.

In this conversation, we discover the context of the work, its source of inspiration, the concerns of the artist and his unique techniques, using the colours in photographic images like the painter uses his brushes and palette.

The Great March of Return is your first circular work of art. What are you trying to say with it?

This two meter diameter circle includes over one thousand photographs captured by five award-winning journalists from Gaza—Atieh Darwish, Mustafa Mohamad, Majdi Fathi, Mohammed Asad and Ashraf Amra. The photos are of Palestinians who have gathered every Friday since March 2018 to end the Israeli Occupation.

I combined—dissolved—these images together to create new realities, a new world. I merged the hermetically sealed Strip with outer space, with infinity, resulting in a monumental “present-day fresco” demonstrating people’s eternal fight for liberation. The work is a reality within reality, a journey to the beginning and the end of time.

Life in Palestine feels like a loop. And like never before Palestine has fallen off the map of the world—sidelined. The struggle of the Palestinian people lost its center. I wanted to create a work in which the gaze is focused on the story from multiple angles, where every scene matters, where every life is connected to the bigger picture. The work is inspired by Renaissance art, a word which literally means revival. And what scares me now is the death of the Palestinian story, it becoming a religious icon devoid of aura.

The work is visually stunning, please tell us about the techniques you used to make it.

I sometimes say I use my camera like a brush, but maybe in this work I used the colour of these images like paint. Yet the base of this paint will always be photographic, mixed with real struggle and pain. The spreading of fire, shining stars and tear gas transforming into floating clouds ignites the work, triggering the imagination to jump from one dimension to another—from Gaza to the world and beyond.

The first time I saw The Great March of Return on TV it looked surreal to me. People were drowning in smoke, undeterred by fire, captured in photos in poses that felt biblical, as if taken from the frescoes of an old basilica.

I made the collage over 700 hours, sitting day and night, many times in darkness except for the light that emanated from the images I cut and pieced together, always searching for the space where they would blend. I often discovered new minute details after looking at the same image for the 300th time. In those many hours the last thing I wanted to happen to me was to become numb to these photos, which many are numb to. Keeping the eyes alert required me to constantly weave these images with the imagination. Throughout the process, the figures started to tell a story of their own. I let go, allowing them to guide me.

Who are the people in the photographs? Do you know any of their stories? What are the reactions to this work?

These are people with endless stories. I would like the viewer to know and connect with these people, many of whom have been injured or killed.

Even though the reality looks grim in the work, many viewers feel power and hope. I was happy that some picked up the Renaissance feel of the work, dubbing it the “Sistine Chapel of Palestine”. It stirred people’s emotions, shedding new light on this impossible reality on the ground.

Palestinians are entrapped within their own story, and this work questions and challenges the mechanisms needed to escape—to break free.

Can you describe your shift from abstraction towards the non-linear narrative story telling in this work?

Said lightly, abstraction might be an easier route to question hardcore issues like homeland, occupation and exile, and I did this for many years. But sometimes there is no route except facing these realities.

I don’t see my work shifting from abstraction to figurative or vice versa. For me it all depends on the projects I’m working on and what visuals they ask me to work with. I do feel the image should serve the artist’s intentions and not the other way around. Having said that, it’s always intriguing to explore the depth of images and journey within them without fear. The first, and perhaps most difficult image to transcend is the image of the self. And if the self is occupied, then what it constantly mirrors is this reality. What needs to be done is to heal, to reimagine this skewed image of self.

We notice after you moved from Jerusalem to London to Berlin that the Palestinian theme became more present in your work than when you lived in Palestine. How do you see the effect of exile on your art?

Most of my works till Independence (2013), a series of figures freely floating in darkness, tackled the side effects of what it means to live in what I believed was permanent exile. I gave that sentiment different visuals. But after Independence, after that year where I liberated myself from all aspects of Occupation, I simplified my visual arguments and learned new tools to express myself, how to bend semiotics. A bigger picture was unveiled, allowing me to reach deeper into essence, giving me more clarity.

Exile taught me how to find my liberation, that for me, the essence of life is to uproot the self and plant roots in the clouds, to always remain in transition, free. And from that upper view, I was able to look at life from much wider perspectives.

I was born in Occupied Jerusalem, in an impossible reality. Through living there, investigating image formation and making art on it over the years, I found my independence and I feel it is my responsibility to share my route.

I often repeat this sentiment, that I believe Palestinians have reached the point where they can no longer imagine living in freedom, so how can anyone expect them to liberate the land? My visual research has led me to believe that there are infinite realities hidden in images. A good start would be to liberate ourselves from the image of Occupation, an image fixed to us from the day we're born. Being able to imagine different possibilities is freedom, and freedom can only be reached by decolonised imaginations.

Palestinians have infinite possibilities to discover their voyage to liberation.