

Nafas Art Magazine

Steve Sabella: In Exile

Consequences of mental and physical exile in the photographic work of the Palestinian artist.

By Charlotte Bank | Jul 2010



The effects of exile on the human psyche are a recurrent theme for Palestinian authors, especially Edward Saïd. In his novel about return and exile *I saw Ramallah*, Mourid Barghouti wrote: "I do not live in a place. I live in a time, in the components of my psyche, in a sensitivity special to me."

The young Palestinian artist Steve Sabella has made this feeling that one's psyche is fragmented, this meticulous dissection of one's own mental wounds, of "mental exile", the object of his art. In the large-format photo collages of his project *In Exile*, he shows pieces of closed windows that offer views in and out. He received the 2008 Ellen Auerbach Prize of the Academy of Arts in Berlin for it. The five works are being shown in the current exhibition *Junge Akademie 2010*.

Steve Sabella comes from Jerusalem's Old City, where he was born in 1975. The continuous conflicts and the overlapping and contradictory narrative of his hometown and the appropriation of its symbolic value by the widest possible variety of groups early gave the artist the feeling that he had no room for his own interpretations or his own self. As Sabella himself puts it, he felt exiled even before he lived in physical exile. This feeling also molded his art and led Kamal Boullata to define Steve Sabella as an "artist in exile", even though he still lived in the city of his birth at that time.

Physical exile in London followed mental exile in 2007. There, his artistic grappling with the omnipresent feelings of alienation took on a new, more complex shape. The windows shown from multiple perspectives in the works of *In Exile* are views from the place where the artist lives. 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.

These contorted passageways through his own psyche led the artist to the roots of his wounds and gave him an inkling of the possibility of healing. While the destructiveness of being uprooted was at the center of *In Exile*, Sabella's newest works move release and liberation into the foreground.

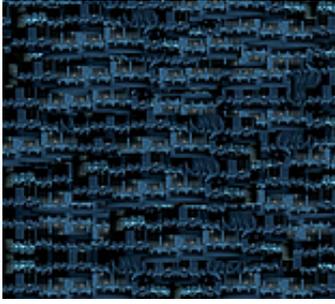
Euphoria (2010) alludes to the blissful feeling of being freed of mental fetters. This feeling – possibly short-lived, as the artist himself concedes – is expressed in playful-seeming, uprooted trees. In this work, which alludes to the work of M.C. Escher as well as to the geometrical ornamentation of classical Islamic art, filigree trees fit into a whole – at first glance. A closer look reveals fractures and fissures. The individual parts of the picture move forward out of the montage, all at once seeming like a broken mirror. Perhaps this is an indication that the mental conflicts are not yet weathered, after all, and that euphoria cannot last.

Nature and plant growth were the theme of an earlier work by Sabella. In *Search* (1997), the artist used infrared photography on a quest for a new dimension beyond the perceptible world. At that time, the plants were still connected with the earth and the ground still seemed the starting point for every search. Now that the experience of physical exile has joined the earlier feeling of mental exile and the artist, according to his own statement, has managed "to glue the components of himself together", Steve Sabella appears to be liberated, floating, enjoying his new state of euphoria, and at the same time observing in downright astonishment.

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