

Steve Sabella

The Journey of Artistic Interrogation and Introspection

By Yasmine El Rashidi

Palestinian-born artist Steve Sabella could well be a younger, more alternative, more artistic version of the late Edward Said. Like the literary exile who lived in an enclave of a world he had created for himself on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, surrounded and consumed and embedded in the construct of texts that deconstructed the reality he struggled with, Sabella is one who lives in an equal state of alienation – confined to an exile that transcends place: London, and rather is contained in the bounds of his mind. A mind that like Said's did deconstructs only to rebuild again, but in this case, using a terminology of visual narratives.

It was perhaps, with him as well, a seed of displacement that was placed in the very second he was born. "I love my name," Sabella says, "but people had a problem with it. It placed me out of context." And he was, in many ways - born in Jerusalem, to a Christian family, in the Muslim Quarter. As a child he belonged neither to the Muslim or Christian quarter, and "always", he says, "felt

different at home, and completely out of place at school. People had a problem with who I was."

The result of being born into a culture with this identity that was formed with perhaps the malfunction of creating difference rather than sameness, was the foundation for a mind and voice that had scope to sculpt itself even further in its deviation from the norm. "Monks go out into the desert, in isolation, to lose their identity," Sabella says. "I decided to lose mine, and become a stranger only to myself."

For Sabella the journey has been one of stripping away the layers of what he was told were himself, and freeing his being from the confines of a set of constructs grouped under headings commonly referred to as "Personal Details" on National ID forms. From the age of ten he began to ask himself the questions we are warned away from, such as who he was, what he was, what he wanted for his life, and what identity would



Exit, 2006
Projection of images on a white tiled wall in darkness
Image courtesy of the Artist

perhaps suit him best. “I thought, why not try other identities? I prefer to choose my own course and my own identity.”

His starting point, in many ways, was Jerusalem itself - the city he was born to, the city in which he never quite belonged. Jerusalem, he believes, fell victim to the greatest battle of all – the battle of stereotypes and classifications; the battle of a divided land struggling on either side, and in its many quarters, to create and project out of “Jerusalem” an image and narrative selectively convenient. In this city torn between the reflections of many, Sabella somehow fell through the cracks, always being told he belonged somewhere else.

“I tried to live in the city. I wanted the city but the city refused me. I became very aware of the difference between ‘I am’, and ‘I come from’. ‘I am Palestinian’ means I believe in the nationalist idea of that space, with all its ideologies. ‘I come from Palestine’ frees me of that.”

Jerusalem, a city that he describes as being in exile itself, was as much the undoing of him as it was his making. He discovered through it not only the burden of its own lack of belonging, but the reality that in the city’s exile was but a sliver of a shadow of his life. *“Jean Baudrillard said the world has been transformed to an image, we live*



Search, 1997
B&W Infra Red Photography
Image courtesy of the Artist



End of Days, 2003

Digital editing. Light boxes installation placed at random in a complete darkened room
Image courtesy of the Artist

in a world where there is a copy with no original, and I realised that Jerusalem had indeed been transformed into an image in people's minds, and I was simply living in that image. This was not where I belonged. There was no home."

His journey from that point of recognition, in 1997, has in many ways been as fragmented as Jerusalem itself, and as torn as well with the agony of war. In his state of mental exile his reformation as a constructed identity examined through art can be looked at as a mosaic that has been pieced together over the years, perhaps only recently reaching some form of whole.

With each of Sabella's projects came an exploration of one component of a deconstructed self-in-reconstruction. In his earlier series of works, *Search*

(1997), *Identity* (2002), *End of Days* (2003) we see a younger artist hit hard by a reality of existential displacement, who appropriately, begins to search for other worlds, other realities, other vignettes of existence that may help, ultimately, with the construction for himself of something new. Exploring elements, landscapes, horizons, and fragmented details of tangible existence, Sabella sought to transcend what had been turned through the media into the visual myth he was meant to call home. *"This was my way out of the struggle, a transcendence of the unfinished account of my childhood, my history and my identity."*

In these formative years of expression Sabella appears to have been an artist in many ways collecting small

details that he could later take out of his mental archive to collage and montage a reality that he could call, with assurance, his own. In ways we begin to see that happening later on. In *Till the End, Spirit of the Place* (2004), *Kan Yama Kan* (2005), *Jerusalem in Exile* (2006), and *Mentalopia* (2007), we watch an artist that has begun already to piece together a selection of those fragments. In these works that in many ways draw on the fine line between imagination and reality, memory and dreams, past and present, Sabella constructs paradigms into which viewers can transgress. It is in these other dimensions of a reality constructed based on the deconstruction of his own, that one gets a tinge of a sense for the depths this artist has observed. He gathers, he collects, he examines, and he documents, questioning through it all what is his, what could be his, what does he really want in this world?

It is in *Jerusalem in Exile*, which tries to liberate the city from the colonisation of its image through the formation for it of a collective memory - and in many ways the rebuilding of a city, a new Jerusalem - that Sabella perhaps finds many of both the questions and answers that colour the work, that is to come. But it was also perhaps the darkest point on a journey quite shadowed by the burden of an existence severed even from the buoys of time and place. *"I was so angry at the time, with life, because I had at that point realised that I had nowhere to go. If there was no Jerusalem, then I understood that I was lost in my own immediate space."*

The result, *Exit* (2006), his series of images of hands, speaks for itself of the pain of a landscape of both geography and life afflicted in similar ways to Jerusalem itself, with the ravages of battles that extend beyond the symbolic battlefield of war. *Exit* was in many ways his attempt to give a visual form to the cumulative experiences of his life, and the result, which makes one cringe, is haunting. These hands were the landscape of his exile.

But it was, however, the lowest ebb that was his turn of tide, for from the choice of *Exit*, perhaps from life, Sabella chose to rebuild his own utopia in the exile of his mind. *Mentalopia* was, he describes, his own planet, his

own mental utopia, his own way of surviving when he was it seems, on the brink of losing his desire to survive. It was a moment infused with a zephyr of hope, but also a precarious point in the life of an artist on the brink of so many fine lines.

"Let me tell you a story about what was also happening at that time," he says, taking a deep, burdened breath of remembrance.

"My wife is Swiss. English was the language of the house, but I was working all the time. By matter of pure circumstance, something horrible happened. My daughter, Cecile Elise Sabella, could only speak Swiss-German, not Arabic. I had to speak to my daughter via her mother. She could only speak to me by asking her mother to translate. I had brought alienation into my life once again. It almost killed me."

Almost. But like most of those most radical of turning points, most extreme of realisations, most moving of insights, the return of Steve Sabella from a possible point of no return was triggered in a fleeting moment of absolute truth. In this instance, it was a moment between father and child that took place when they moved to London 2007.

"I'm sitting at my desk one day, which was by the window, looking out of my horrible London apartment at the depressing view. Cecile comes and stands next to me, looks out of the window, and says she wants to go home. I ask her where. She says to Jerusalem, 'my country'."

It was in that moment, in the sharing of the sameness of a view of exile, that a language was developed between father and child, between one exile and another. And it was in that moment, that a realisation of relativity and perspective was formed. In *Cecile Elise Sabella* (2008), Sabella photographs the fabric of Cecile's clothes from both sides, making testimony to the science of "the other side" and the duality of exile. In this work we bear witness to a father, who is an artist, who is brought to understanding in a single moment, that no matter what, there is another side; and a connection, even in silence, with Cecile.



Identity, 2002
colour transparencies, 40/50 cm

The pieces that form this series speak of a childhood Sabella never had, they speak of transformation of context to content, and they ruminate on suffering and home and loss. But amidst his conveyance of confusion, alienation even, in the alternate sides of fabric that look in many ways like they have no link to each other at all, the work also speaks of dialogue and the reality of connectivity even in the face of difference and change. And it was perhaps this moment of discovery of the physics and science of the other side that allowed Sabella to create the realities that form *In Exile* (2008). It was, one wants to believe, in that fleeting moment by the window looking out, that he looked out on a world, however faulted, that could form a whole.

Despite the maze of its geometry, and the scope of its infinite repetition that creates a sensation of chaos, in *In Exile* we catch glimpse of an older man to the younger artist – an individual who has picked up the pieces and found his own way of settling into the reality of who he is as a stranger in this world. *In Exile* is a place of seeming claustrophobia, a place of a myriad of questions as well as realities, but it is also a space in which we catch glimpse of instinct and wisdom. Formed perhaps through a connection one afternoon with a girl called Cecile looking out of a window, of the need to move forward with awareness not just for oneself, but as well for a young girl who walks an equally fine line on that path of identity formation.

It makes sense in this context formed from the content



Cecile Elise Sabella, 2008
Limited edition of artist books and prints
Image courtesy of the Artist

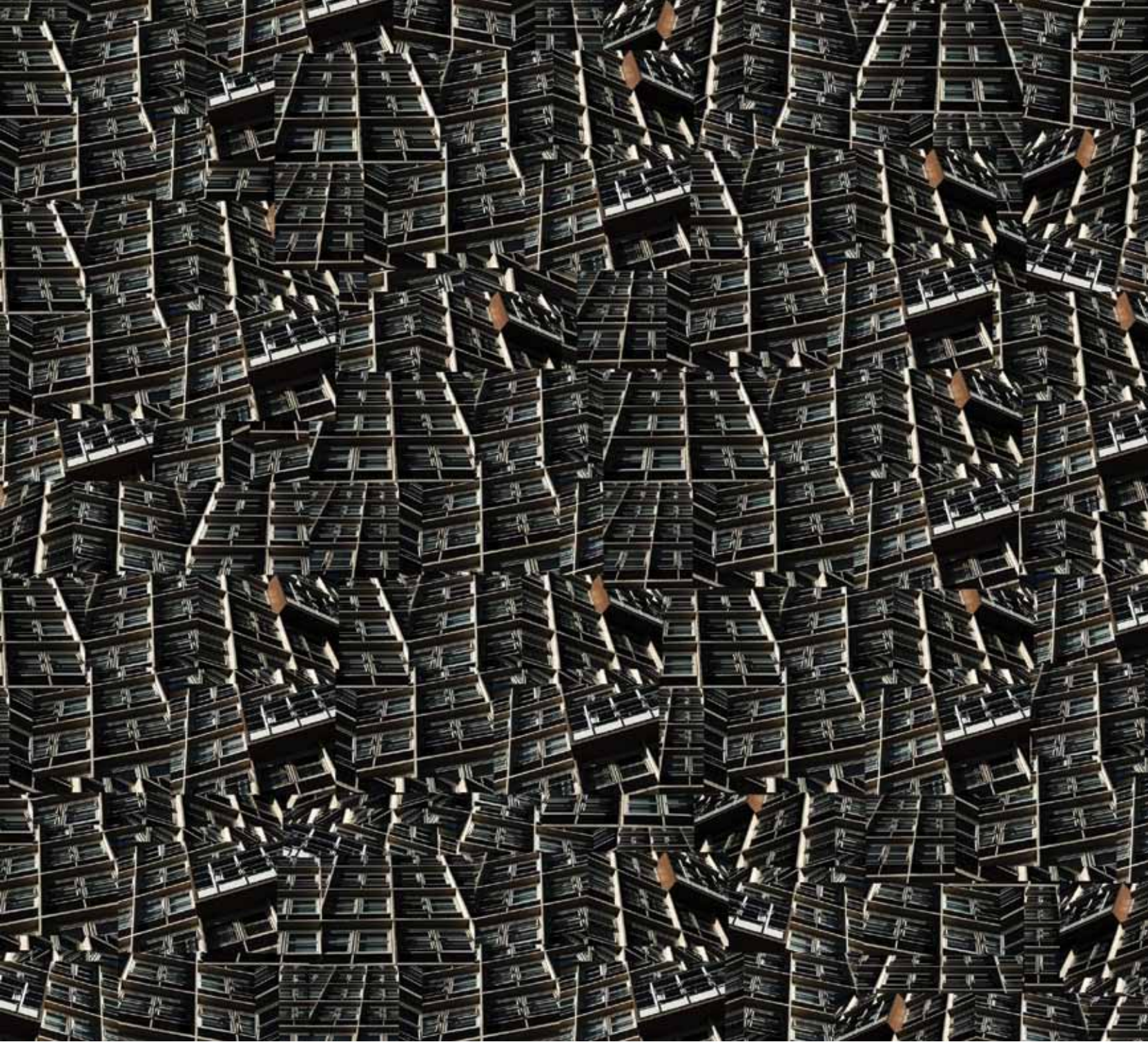


of his art that Sabella's last created work, *Settlement – Six Israelis and One Palestinian*, tackles the issues it does. Using his body in a photographic installation together with six Israelis, Sabella creates an experience that questions the viewer, prodding thought on the very nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and on the reality of the collective versus the individual. Raising questions about the nature of how our minds work in the face of conflict, and how paranoia is induced and fear of the other evoked, through this work Sabella urges viewers to step back and reconsiders the single self: The self, separate from the battlefield of stereotypes and visual myth.

This point of contemplation in the journey of an artist who has pieced himself together in many ways, and who by his own admission glues himself together to live his days, is one that yet again offers a point of turning in a story, visually interpreted, that speaks with pertinence across the dimensions of national constructs and boundaries that are set to determine time, person, place. Through Sabella one is offered a record of a lost or

forgotten world, as well as an entrée not only into a city and a narrative of individual memory and search, but also into a paradigm that urges every reader of images to question him or her self. Through Sabella we are forced to pause in the shadow of our own reflections, and to contemplate, as he has done, the necessity of washing ourselves of ourselves to discover who we really are.

Steve Sabella is a London-based artist. He is laureate of the prestigious Akademie der Künste - Ellen Auerbach Award in Berlin in 2008. His recent international photographic shows include: Gates of the Mediterranean (Rivoli, 2008), Palestine La Création Dans Tous Ses Etats, Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris 2009) and the National Museum of Bahrain 2010, NOW - Contemporary Art of the 21st Century, Phillips De Pury (London 2009). Sabella received his first MA in Photographic Studies (caparo award of distinction) from the University of Westminster & his second MA in Art Business at Sotheby's Institute of Art in London on the value Palestinian Art (distinction). Sabella is one of the artists whose work is reviewed in New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century (Thames & Hudson).



In Exile, 2008
Lambda print mounted on aluminium, limited edition of 6, 136/125 cm
Image courtesy of the Artist