

Steve Sabella

By *Martina Corgnati*

In 1997 Wijdan Ali wrote that, generally speaking, art Palestine-made is overwhelmed by its content, or, as Nada Shabout put it more recently, prisoner of an obsession, obviously the obsession about its own country. It was right around this obsession almost every artist of Palestinian origins, maybe in particular those who reside far from the Territories under the Palestinian Authority or from Israel, constructed their own artistic path and, in some cases, their own credibility within the international art system, always ready to welcome their fight, and to ensure its citizenship right much more willingly than with other realities that are less celebrated by the mass media.

Steve Sabella (Jerusalem, 1975) is one of the very few artists of the last generation who was able to escape the bottleneck of operations and contents of this obsession by enlarging it, including broader themes that embody the perception of the self and of the world outside, themes that can be shared on a universal – not just ideological – basis. A much more important merit if we consider the medium used by Sabella from the origins of his history as an artist: Photography. With photography he could have very well been a documentarian, stressing in particular all those elements that are so popular within the current “war of aesthetics” like nearly most of his colleagues had done. Well, he did not. From 1997 on, the images, series and projects of Steve Sabella are periscopes drowned in the invisible of human condition, the uncanny and the search for a meaning; an “exile” that starts as physical and contingent and ends becoming mental, a category of the soul that needs an answer, or a series of answers from each one of us; answers that change – evolve during a lifetime. So, Sabella raised the horizon to his own eyelevel: From a contingent one to a universal one, escaping every rhetoric, though not losing his identity as an artist, but on the contrary, conquering it.

Reconstructing the process that had led him to the

conception of probably his most famous work, *Jerusalem in Exile* (a project started in 2006 and still in progress), he explains: “I realized that I was not physically in exile, but rather, I was going through a process of mental alienation leading to a unique form of mental exile.” Mental exile, as in alienation from apparently familiar places and situations, is evidence of a loss or an impossible recognition. Freud defined the object of this condition as “the uncanny” that takes us often by surprise, confining us to its paradoxical evidence. Somebody is coming towards us from the bottom of a dark corridor: Something looks familiar, but at first we do not recognize him. Only at last we understand that it’s just our reflection in a mirror.

Suddenly a taste, or a smell, recalls a very distant memory, only apparently dissolved, but in fact just buried into some hidden corner of our subconscious. It’s Proust’s *Madeleine*, that for a moment brings to the present not only a place or dissolved circumstances, but also an inner self that is lost and that became another with time. Exactly so, the loss refers to a previous self, together with the place and the landscape. In fact in another project, made little time before (*Till the End. Spirit of the Place*, 2004) Steve Sabella emulsified some rocks with the image of places, buildings or fragments of a landscape representative of his childhood’s environment, that was already transforming and disappearing. The city is changing, it’s being transformed, covered by complex and even conflicting meanings that it didn’t have before. Well, this kind of experience has not been made just by people who lived or have grown up in Jerusalem: Which city did not undergo an important, maybe even excessive or violent transformation within the past few years, both in the Arab World and outside? What happened for example to Cairo, London, New York (where Steve Sabella actually lived and studied, and at the moment resides in London)?



In this artwork, Sabella started conceiving Jerusalem as a floating disappearing image, leading eventually to his conceptual project Jerusalem In Exile in 2006.

*till the end, spirit of the place (#1), 2004. Photo emulsion on Jerusalem stone
UNIQUE (one original) / Image courtesy of the Artist*

*till the end, spirit of the place (#2), 2004. Photo emulsion on Jerusalem stone
UNIQUE (one original) / Image courtesy of the Artist*



*till the end, spirit of the place (#3), 2004. Photo emulsion on Jerusalem stone
UNIQUE (one original) / Image courtesy of the Artist*

Thanks to the universality of the problem, the subject of the young artist becomes immensely more actual and relevant. Not by chance are his recent images of the *In Exile* series (2008), taken in London and shown for the first time at an exhibition curated by myself; *Le porte del Mediterraneo* (Rivoli, Torino, 2008; cat. Skira). It revealed a sort of non-remote relationship with the photographs of Luo Yongjin, one of the first Chinese artists who landed in the global art system more than ten years ago. Even in his case: Upside down cities, spasmodic collisions of buildings, warped, denatured and alienating perspectives. The Chinese identity and its landscapes went through a violent revolution and it's now running the risk of exploding and collapsing. Steve Sabella takes pictures of London out of his windows. After that he makes replicas of an image's fragment, transforming it into the tesserae of an overwhelming mosaic made of visual wild splinters. No horizon, no sky, just warped and disjointed walls, where we must plough through somehow. The exile becomes a permanent situation, now untangled from its physical place and present circumstances, and becomes a condition that has been exiled from its self and must be lived through.

Sabella rightly gives ideology its part in responsibility of being a toxic substance that prevents people from thinking. In his project's statement he writes: "Jerusalem has become a scene where its image has become infected with toxic amounts of ideology. Hence, the debate is actually about the Ideology of the Jerusalem Image in the minds of people globally and the meaning it generates." In fact, his collections devote themselves to gathering mental images of as many Jerusalem's as possible, as requested and produced by as many Palestinians as possible. No matter their places of residence, that could have even been the city itself, the photograph became an instrument to materialize these images as evidences and not false documents. But suspended in a half way place, between symbolism and imagination, pure mental projection and reality appeared.

Now, after many years of exploration of these coordinates, so wide and original, the artist is "back to

earth" as he declares, in order to make a direct reference to the difficult situation of the cohabitation of Israeli and Palestinians. But once more, Sabella's work is far more important than the stereotype flattened out of a fixed operative scheme or a media driven image. Sabella says: "Ironically, my first artwork, which was called *Search*, was consciously shifting away from all labels and categorizations. It was questioning the loss of identity. In this new project, ironically, it emphasizes identity but does so in a critical and provocative way." His latest project called *Settlement – Six Israelis & One Palestinian*. The title itself is problematic, and the problem grows when the viewer finds himself in the middle of a narrow gap between two walls, surrounded by the image of two concrete walls, and in front of them the life size pictures of six men (on one side) and another (on the other side), all wearing just underpants. The title informs us about their identity that would obviously be left unknown, since all the superstructures, and the accessories that give shape to the world displaying one's identity, have been swept away. It's just half naked men, the ones facing the others but, as we realize after the first glimpse, the first impression is not hostility. It's cold but open. The man standing alone (the artist himself) could seem in minority, but he could even be the privileged, the only one standing in front of the group. Indeed, the situation is unbalanced, asymmetrical. Why? "The work is highly coded. One of the obvious symbols is the number that might remind people of the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust. As a ratio, 6/1 is also the ratio of Jews to Palestinians who live in the State of Israel." Hence, the choice was not obvious and not easy. Within the Arab World the Holocaust is unwillingly looked back on, many people even completely or partially deny it.

Sabella gives importance to this very strong signifier (and this is much more evident because the setting could look like an execution place, a shooting range) in order to deepen some aspects of the issues making the lives of people in Israel terribly complicated, both on the Hebrew and on the Arab side. The psychological dimension, or as Sabella defines it, the paranoia of the risk that both sides run every single time they simply meet (the ones were persecuted first on the terrible



In Exile, 2008, 136/125 cm, limited edition of 6. Lambda print mounted on aluminum + 5 cm edge.



Installation of life-size images. The image of the Palestinian faces the six Israelis. That is, the work hangs on two opposite facing walls.

stake of the Shoa (the Holocaust) and then of endless wars, terrorist attacks and immense hostility from their neighbors; the others repressed and chased away from their own homes or imprisoned in unbearable situations and contexts), requires a therapy, a cure which is able to penetrate so deeply to finally reach individuals. The artist clarifies: “Any solution between Israelis and Palestinians should also involve a psychological solution. Both nations require mental healing.” On the contrary, the artist’s attempt is evidently to actually see the people in their bare essence: Also to be able to see himself.

“This installation, which could also be considered an act

of introspection and interrogation, will create a clash between the two words ‘Identity’ and ‘Identification.’ Israelis might see the images of Jews as a form of a national Identity stripped bare. Palestinians might consider ‘my cooperation’ with Israelis as a sign of defeat, or possibly even as another form of settling accounts.”

With his work Sabella has been able to go beyond every cliché; as he himself says, he got rid of all the nostalgic layers that gave shape to many works realized in Israel and Palestine, in order to push himself on to a different border; not an emotional border, but a border of consciousness. “... We are confronting each other’s



Settlement – Six Israelis & One Palestinian, 2008,
limited edition of five. 210 cm / 150 cm each

‘Otherness’—face-to-face, and right to the core. The borders whether mental or physical, might move aside and a dialogue of a different nature might take place.”