

beach near Bayt Lahia in the North, boys and girls from all the Gaza Strip travelled there that day with their homemade kites.

Apparently, the dream of flying had not been confined to children who survived Israel's wars and who continued to live under a never-ending blockade imposed by Israel in compliance with the Egyptian government. Two months before that day, an American writer travelling to Gaza with a delegation of journalists noted "everywhere we go we see these kites". During her visit she wrote that she met a number of grown-ups in Gaza who confided to her that at night, "when they close their eyes they float up from their beds, through their windows, beyond the lights of the patrolling Israeli ships and armed trucks, and out into the night sky, free to roam the world."¹⁹

According to *The Guinness Book of World Records*, the number of kites flying simultaneously and in the same place had been set the previous year at 967. That day, Gaza's children smashed the official record reaching 3,710 kites flying simultaneously. For that one day, it was the boys and girls of Gaza who ruled the skies way above the Israeli army vehicles stationed across the barbed wire fence in the distance.

The Artist's Child

After putting the final touches on *Untitled*, the one painting in which his own features have been clearly defined for the first time, Hani Zurob seemed to conclude a whole cycle of works through which he had been wrestling with a leitmotif that preoccupied him for years, namely his self-representation within his compositions. Having moved on from suggesting his own face in his expressionistic paintings created in Ramallah, which attempted to speak of the self as a hermeneutic vehicle of the other, to the drowning figure contorting his own likeness in the earliest experimental series he completed following his arrival in Paris; and from the suggested features he superimposed over his gestural abstractions in his attempt to capture the memory of his Gaza childhood to the concealed faces interchanged between the self and the Palestinian other which ended up engrafted in a succession of portraits reduced to black blobs of tar that he finished painting just before leaving for his residency in Essoyes, the underlying process that evolved over the preceding six years in regards to the subject fixation he upheld may be summed up in the way the artist spurred his imagination, ultimately

leading him to replace the mirror with the photograph. Zurob's *Flying Lesson* series is mainly comprised of large paintings whose compositions proceed from a photographic image. This time, the photograph is not of himself but of his son Qudsi.

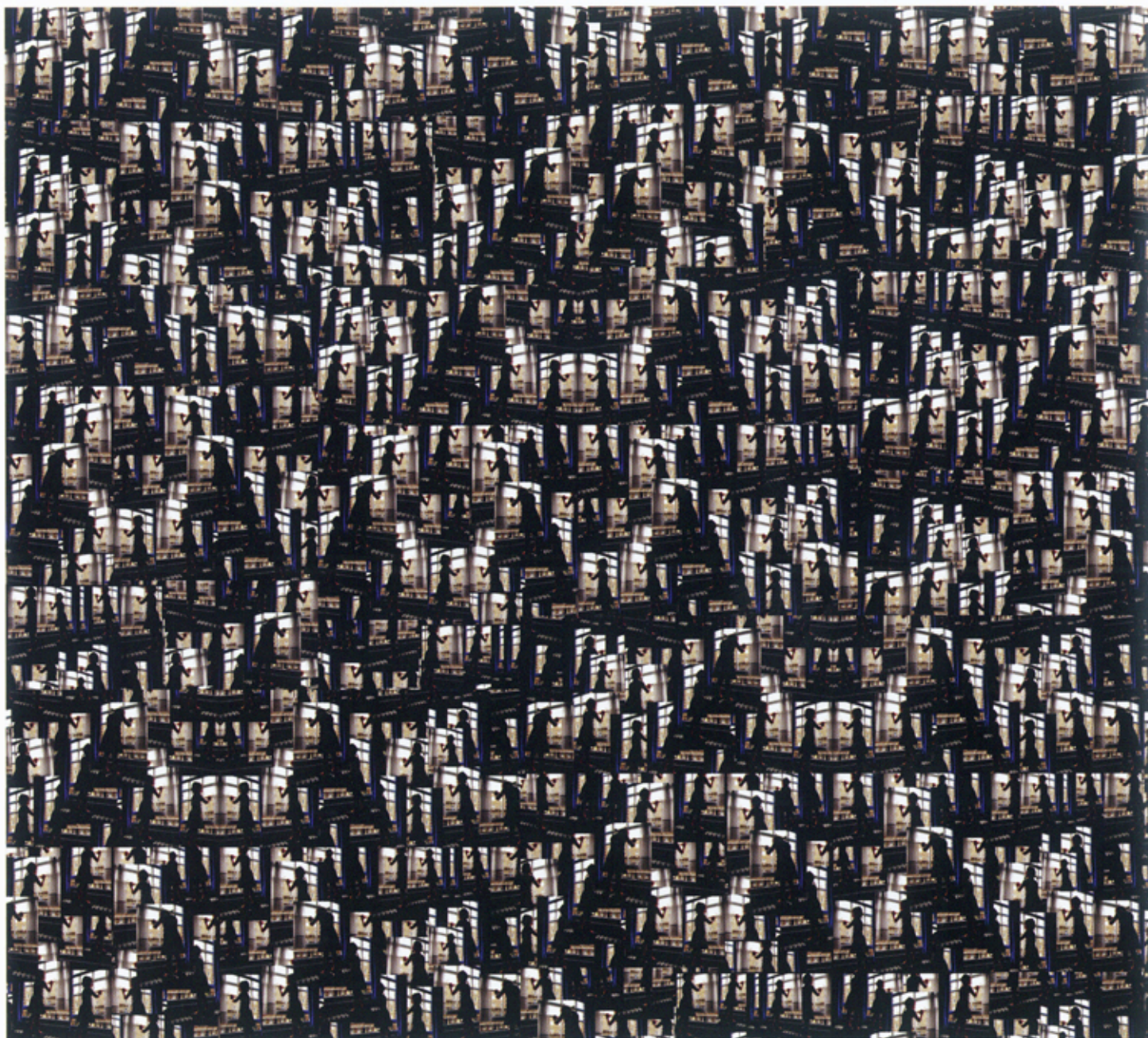
At first glance, the general viewer may wonder: how come the father is so obsessed with exclusively picturing his son in his new series of paintings? Does his identification with Qudsi go as far as to nullify his old self from the picture? Could the artist see his child's biological resemblance to him as being commensurate with his own appearance so that the child as the subject of his painting substitutes the artist's earlier interpretations of his own features? In such a case, would any painting in the *Flying Lesson* series relate to the Gaza artist's memory of the "flying boy" incident he lived through as a child? Or, to what extent was the 2009 series prickled by the thrill of his homeland's children who during the same year gained a world record in flying kites, weaving the Gaza skies with colour?

Most importantly, how does the metaphor of flying in Zurob's painting allegorise the relationship between the father and the son as each goes on his own journey in a different direction: the child obliged to fly away from his father every six months to be in Jerusalem with his mother, while the artist pursues an inward journey to find expression to his own *longing* for the child during his absence; an expression which is inseparably associated with the sense of *be-longing* the parents wish to instil in him?²⁰

Hani Zurob is not the only Palestinian artist whose child had inspired his art. Steve Sabella (Jerusalem 1975) who happened to be a close friend of his had preceded him in creating a series of works that were triggered by photographs of his firstborn. As a prelude to the discussion on Zurob's last series of paintings, examining his friend Sabella's work reveals how two artists differ in giving expression to a vital concern of Palestinians whose children are growing up in exile.

Sabella had never heard Cecile, his three year old daughter, utter a single word in Arabic, a fact which baffled him. Though she was born in his city of birth, the only words she babbled had been in the German of her Swiss mother, a language he does not understand. In 2007, however, after leaving Jerusalem to pursue his graduate studies in London, one day within three months of the family's arrival there he could not believe his ears when he heard Cecile address him with a sentence he could fully understand.

Flying Lesson no. 5, 2010.
Acrylic and pigments on canvas,
200 x 160 cm.



Steve Sabella

In Exile, 2008.

Lambda print mounted
on aluminium 125 x 136 cm.

It was expressed in English, her parent's common language. During that revelatory instant, he happened to be snapping photographs of her as she sat on the window ledge of their apartment looking out to a wintry sky. She broodingly said to him, "I want to go back home to Jerusalem!"

For the first time the father realised that his daughter shared with him the same sense of belonging and that she felt as disoriented and estranged as he was since their arrival in London. By 2008, photographs of her against the window panes shot from inside their apartment in addition to photographs taken of the windows from outside their building were the kernel with which Sabella created a series of five photomontages that he entitled *In Exile*. The reconstruction of photographic fragmentations depicting Cecile and the windows viewed from the inside and the outside, present us with a metaphor alluding in its structure to the experience of deracination the father and daughter shared.

Gaston Bachelard wrote that "outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains."²¹ Sabella's reconstructed fragmentations of the two sides of the same windows represents his metaphor's embodiment of 'home' and 'exile'. By allegorising what Bachelard went on to call "the dialectics of here and there," Sabella gave a visual body to the "awareness of simultaneous dimensions" that Edward Said wrote in his description of the experience of the exiled.²²

Using a computer program, each work in the series is composed of a multitude of digitalised miniature photographs of the windows shot from both sides. Each photograph taken from a slightly different angle acts as a unit in an overall abstract image. The combination of variable units and their alternating repetition weave together an infinite field of fragmentations denoting intricate patterns, symmetries and geometric tracteries that recall prevalent characteristics in Islamic art.

During the same year, in an attempt to get a more intimate expression of the bond cemented with his daughter through their shared experience of exile, Sabella sought to carry further the metaphor of his "dialectic of division" from one between the architectonic inside and outside of their common abode to the centrifugal dialectic between the internal and external sides of Cecile's shell. To do so, he took close-up photographs of the two sides of textiles appertaining to clothes she wears. Composed of 14 photographs, the ultimate work included a video and an artist's book

containing cut-outs of textiles. The project was simply titled *Cecile Elise Sabella*.

Whereas the series *In Exile* was all composed in the sombre primacy of black and white, all images in its sequel were gently toned with pastel colours. Texture which has only been inferred in his geometric reconstructions is in his photographs and cut-outs, which mostly trace floral patterns, the main subject of observation. Sabella invites us in his artist's book to turn page after page and contemplate the countless nuances of texture between both sides of the same material. The tactile aesthetics he proposed allow us to recall the Japanese saying which likens a poem in its original language to silk embroidery and its translation to the back side of the embroidered textile.

Two artists and fellow travellers with children growing up away from home may find their inspiration in their offspring, but each goes his own way when it comes to interpreting his relationship with the child. The anecdote inducing the work of one takes mythical dimensions in the work of the other. As much as Sabella's art has been motivated by an instinctive drive, where his metaphoric language could only be expressed through the interpolations of abstraction, Zurob's work has remained reflexive; his art abounding with metaphors is rooted in figuration. Consequently, after completing his two sequels of work inspired by his daughter, Sabella moved on to explore themes beyond the sphere of his paternal life. In contrast, Zurob appears to have never ceased to rediscover themes in which his son takes centre stage in his painting.

Flying Lesson

Hani Zurob launched his *Flying Lesson* series with a diptych. It was the first diptych he ever painted. Unknowingly, the artist adopted a painting format whose history, going back to the Byzantine tradition, had always been associated with travelling. It was first used as a portable icon composed of two equal panels that were joined together with hinges to allow them to be folded for protection during the journey and be unfolded for prayers upon reaching one's destination.

Zurob's diptych, however, whose horizontal dimensions exceed two metres long, is the largest he has explored thus far in his career. And as the tradition of portable diptych brought together emblematic images

Flying Lesson no. 9, 2011.
Acrylic and pigments on canvas,
81 x 65 cm.