

Palestinian photographer Steve Sabella declares independence through mental images – book review

Steve Sabella, a Palestinian photographer in exile, is releasing a monograph documenting an innovative body of work.

Sabella celebrates nearly two decades of work in his new book titled *Steve Sabella: Photography 1997-2014*. This compilation represents an intimate look into the work of an artist from the Middle East pushing beyond the thresholds of the digital age and takes on topics such as identity, life under occupation and liberation after exile.



Steve Sabella, 'In Exile', 2008, Lambda print mounted on aluminium with 5-cm aluminium box edge, 136 x 125 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Born in Jerusalem, **Steve Sabella** is a photographer whose portfolio depicts the challenges and struggles of the human condition in familiar yet abstract forms. As a Palestinian visual artist who has lived both under occupation and in exile, Sabella's work brings into focus a sharp and sometimes uncomfortable view of contemporary life in the 21st century in a way that begs reflection by the viewer.

Steve Sabella: Photography 1997-2014 is published by Hatje Cantz in collaboration with the Akademie der Künste Berlin. In addition to Sabella's body of

work, a foreword and six essays complete the monograph.



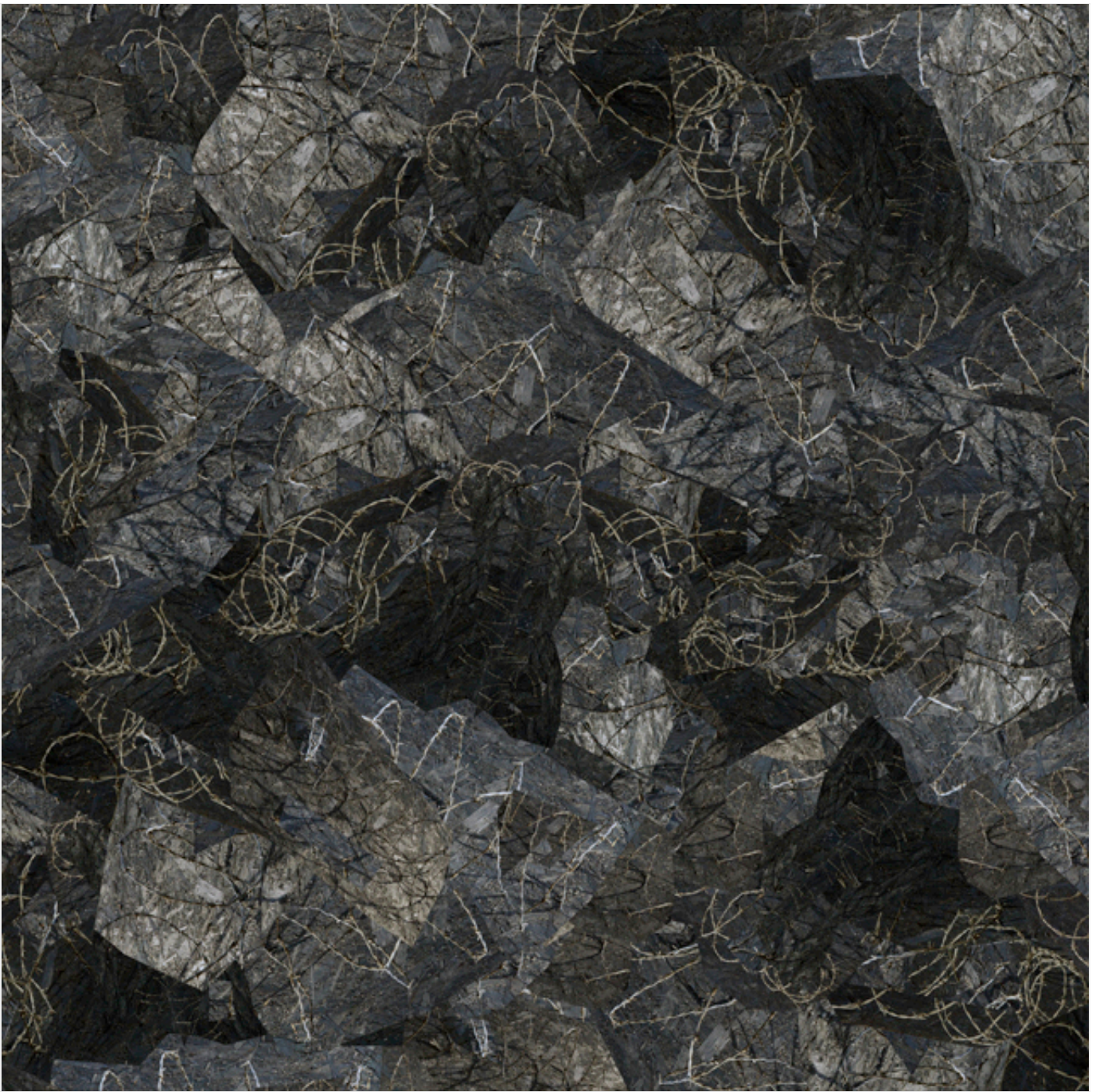
Steve Sabella, 'Settlement—Six Israelis & One Palestinian', installation shot, 2008–10, LightJet print on aluminium with 5-cm aluminium box edge, 230 x 164 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Steve Sabella, 'Beyond Euphoria', 2011, Lambda print on Diasec with 3.5-cm aluminium box edge, 205 x 117 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Well-known Palestinian artist and art historian **Kamal Boullata** pens the book's foreword. Boullata, living in exile since 1967, provides a fascinating and moving narrative about the history of the oeuvre of photography in the Middle East and the innovative characteristics of Sabella's work. He notes:

After Sabella opted to move from Jerusalem to London and later on to Berlin, each of his photographic abstractions have seemed to float amid a space that lacks the gravity of a focal point. In their highly defined details all of the compositioned components call for equal attention. [...] The absence of the focal point and the allure invoked by the unfailing exactness of each detail are features that have long characterised the aesthetic of Islamic miniatures.



Steve Sabella, 'Metamorphosis', 2012, LightJet print on Diasec with 3.5-cm aluminium box edge, 160 x 160 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

The book is divided into sixteen visual journeys, chronicling the artist's trademark "mental images" replicated from memories of an artist living under occupation, exile and liberation, offering up a rich pattern of abstractions. Quotations from celebrated Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish are sprinkled throughout the book, providing a palpable link between past and present.

Of particular interest is Sabella's progress from witness to exile to freedom and, finally, independence. Essays by Professor Dr Hubertus von Amelunxen, member of Akademie der Künste and the President of the European Graduate School in Sas Fee, add insightful content and bookend the images. According to von Amelunxen, Sabella's artwork speaks directly to modern-day concerns, such as displacement and migration:

“My exile is the backdrop of the epic scene,” we read in a line of Darwish's poem “Counterpoint”. The displacement from Palestine is the existential basis of Sabella's art. Irony, as a movement of indignation, carries his concept of the genesis of a picture. That movement harbors hope, not lament. Sabella's work is borne by a movement of doubt; it binds the chasms of loss of helplessness into contiguous moments of sensibility and vulnerability that, in each work, throw the world into another order.

Throughout the book, Sabella's images take us from one world to another. His fresh, early work leads to the pivotal series “Six Israelis and One Palestinian” and “Metamorphosis”, ending with the painterly, rich series “38 days of re-collection” and “Sinopia”.

Sabella's monograph stands as one of the very few records for those interested in learning more about contemporary art and artists from the Middle East to peruse and study.



Steve Sabella, 'Independence', 2013, Lambda print on Diasec with 3.5-cm aluminium box edge, 81 x 45 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Steve Sabella, '38 days of re-collection', 2014, B&W white film negative (generated from a digital image) printed with B&W photo emulsion spread on colour paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's Old City house walls, 20 x 15 cm. Photograph by Stephen White.

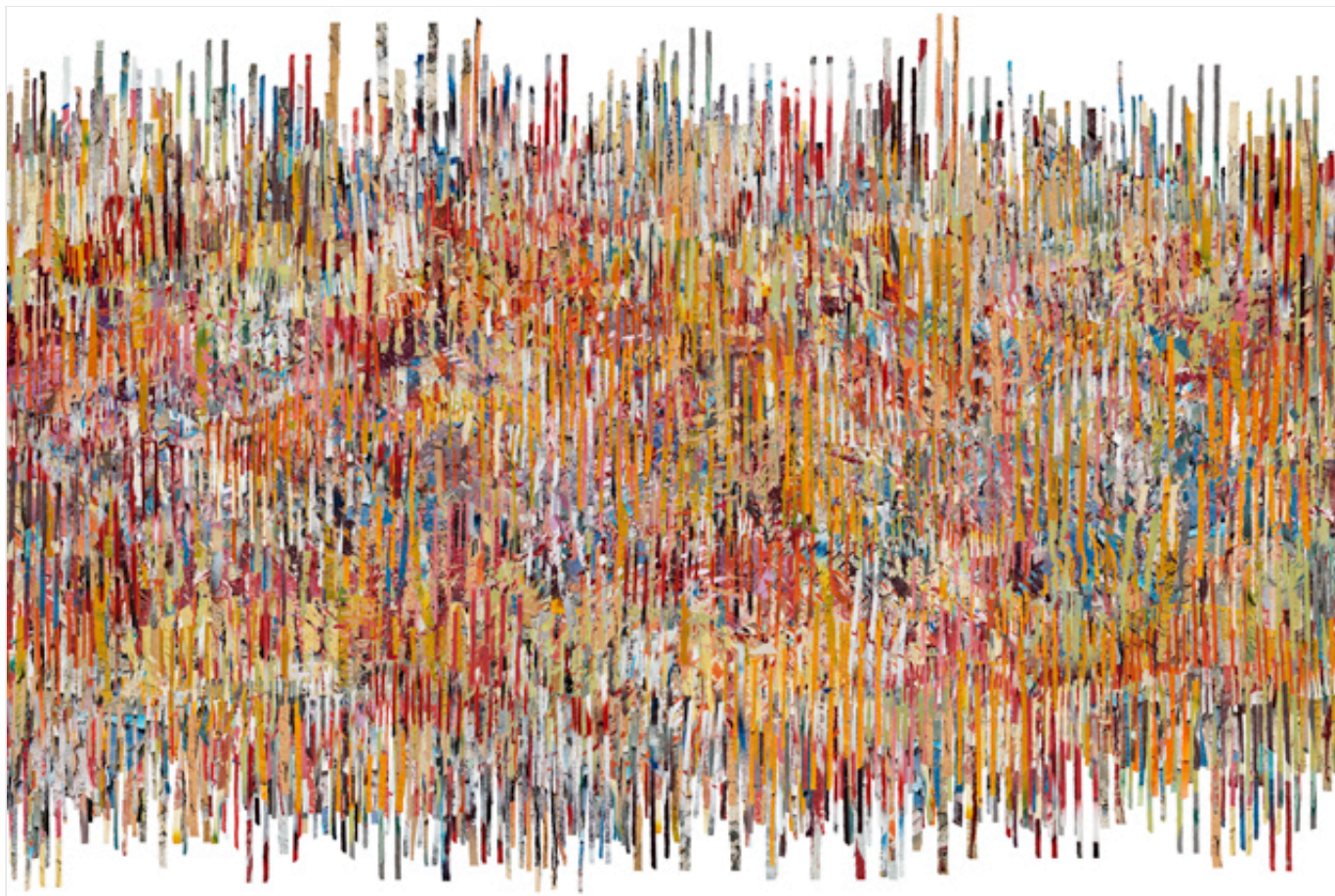
More about the artist

Steve Sabella (b. 1975) holds degrees in Photography and Visual Studies from the Musrara School of Photography in Jerusalem (1997), the Empire State College of the

State of New York (2007) and the University of Westminster in London (2008), where he earned the Caparo Award of Distinction. In 2009, the artist earned a second Master's Degree in Art Business from **Sotheby's Institute of Art**.

Sabella's work is found in public collections, including the **British Museum** (London), the Contemporary Art Platform (Kuwait), **MATHAF: Arab Museum of Modern Art** (Qatar), the **Salsali Private Museum (Dubai)** and the **Samawi Collection** (Dubai). His work is also held in select private collections worldwide. Several TV documentaries and short films have featured his work, including *Jerusalem in Exile*, *Kan Yama Kan* and *In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella*. In addition to being a visual artist, Sabella is a writer and has published essays. His autobiography, *The Artist's Curse*, is forthcoming.

Through the end of the year, Sabella is involved in a number of art fairs, solo shows and monograph launches. The artist's work can be seen at The Contemporary Art Platform in Kuwait (21 September to 21 October 2014), **ArtInternational** Istanbul (24-25 September 2014), the International Center for Photography Scavi Scaligeri in collaboration with Boxart Gallery and Berloni Gallery (8 October to 16 November 2014) in Verona, and also in London, Dubai, Berlin and Miami.



Steve Sabella, 'Sinopia', 2014, LightJet print mounted on diasec with 3.5-cm aluminum box edge, 270 x 180 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Lisa Pollman

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