

Interview with Asmaa' Azaizeh  
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## Steve Sabella ... Liberating The Imagination From The Poisons of The Occupation

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تتحدث عن ضرورة عن تحرير النفس والوطن من خلال تحرير الخيال. هل تربط هذا الخيال بالضرورة بالمكان المُستعمر؟ وماذا أحدث انتقالك إلى برلين لهذا الخيال؟ هل أجهدته أم حرّره أكثر؟

**You speak about the importance of liberating the self and the homeland through the liberation of the imagination. Does this imagination mainly relate to the colonized place? How did your move to Berlin affect this imagination? Did it exhaust it or liberate it even more?**

The colonization of the imagination is the most dangerous of all, a syndrome that is affecting everyone. Because it is not apparent or hard to measure, it has already infiltrated deep into subconsciousness. However, its roots are more visible when there is an occupation on the ground, as is the case in Palestine. Liberating the land and the self requires the liberation of the mind. Said differently, as long as there is one Palestinian left who imagines a free Palestine, the occupation has no chance.

My awareness of life intensified when I learned the **Be** in **Berlin**—to just be. The moment you land in Berlin, the city's energy and mindset change you, push you deep to break your inner boundaries, and free yourself. In Berlin, freedom is not a theory, an idea, utopia, it is something felt.

على أية شاكلة وبأي منظور تشكّلت علاقتك الأولى مع مدينتك، سياسياً وبصرياً وشخصياً، ولأيّ من هذه التشكّلات كان الأثر الأقوى على أعمالك الفنيّة؟

**In what way and from what perspective was your first relationship with Jerusalem formed, politically, visually, and personally, and which of these formations had the strongest impact on your artwork?**

As a young boy, and not much has changed for the current generation, I became aware that I belonged to a country that was not a country, but a land occupied by Israel called Palestine. We are all born free. But, I guess the right answer as to when my connection developed with Jerusalem started at birth, at that moment when I got detached from the umbilical cord and became bound, tied to an infinite number of other attachments, including the Israeli occupation of the land, self, and mind. Life after that becomes about our endless journey to free ourselves from all things to live the life we imagine for ourselves and not the one forced upon us.

For years, I stated that Jerusalem was the capital of my imagination. And in Jerusalem, there is no escape from politics, a city that consumes one politically, visually, and personally. As an artist, the visual is what intrigues me the most being my formal way of expression. Unfortunately, most of our vision has become contaminated by the occupation. I often transform this toxicity into art, or the opposite, I look for the invisible aesthetics by examining the layers of the polluted visible

تقول إنَّ الخيال هو الجسر الوحيد للوصول إلى الرؤية، ومن الممكن تتبّع وزن الخيال كمفهوم ومساحة في الكثير من أعمالك. لكن إذا ما تحدّثنا عن فنّ التصوير (photography)، فإنّه سيكون في جوهره أداةً للقبض على لحظةٍ من الواقع إذا ما قارناه بالرّسم مثلاً، وبهذا فمن الممكن أن يتضادّ مع الخيال. ما رأيك؟

**You say that imagination is the only bridge to reaching vision, and it is possible to trace the impact of imagination conceptually and in relation to space in much of your work. But if we are talking about the art of photography, then photography, in essence, is a tool to capture a moment of reality in contrast to drawing, for example, and thus it can contradict the imagination. What do you think?**

In my essay, *Archaeology of the Future*, I wrote how the fixing of light on paper and metal plates shocked the world. The resulting images bore the greatest resemblance to the illusion our eyes were able to see, yet they had nothing to do with reality as they created a world of their own. And because pictures create their own consciousness of the world, I wonder if the time has come to a stop focusing on the connection between images and the "real world." Maybe we need to explore the visual components of the world by looking into the image itself—just like in scientific research. We need to study images, the connections between them, their characteristics, and their origins by looking at them directly and not in constant comparison with reality. This may allow us to discover the infinite possibilities hidden in images. My relationship with the image is like being on a space odyssey, in search of understanding image formation. And since an image is part of the imagination, unlocking the code will allow us to see beyond our own reality. And largely, this process helped me find my liberation.

دائمًا ما نربط الخيال بالمستقبل والذاكرة بالماضي. المعادلة عندك أكثر تعقيدًا وتداخلًا. كيف يمكن لهذا الخيال الذي تدافع عنه أن يتوظف في الماضي وكيف يمكن للذاكرة أن تُسعف المستقبل، فنيًا طبعًا؟

**We always associate imagination with the future and memory with the past. Your equation is more complex and overlapping. How can this imagination that you defend be employed in the past, and how can memory aid the future artistically?**

To answer you artistically, I will refer to the writing of my memoir, *The Parachute Paradox*, that explored the colonization of the imagination. Often people have this misconception that when you write an autobiography about the past, the writing is about facts only, truth per se. And then I dare anyone when I ask, can you write anything without imagination? When I looked into my history, the pages of my past, imagination was the base that weaved all of the scenes together. This is why readers of my memoir feel transported from one dimension to another, from the past to what needs to be done for our future.

يُسال المبدع دائماً عن الأنساق التي توضع فيها هويته الجغرافية السياسية، وبالتالي التوقعات التي تُبنى منها، حين يقدم أعماله إلى ثقافات أخرى. هل لا زلت تواجه هذه الأنساق؟ وكيف تتعامل معها؟ وهل يمكن أن يصل الفنان إلى وضع يتم فيه تلقي أعماله بنقاء كامل بعيداً عن هويته؟

**The creator is always asked about the labels in which his geopolitical identity is placed, and thus the expectations that are built from it when presenting art to other cultures. Are you still facing these formats? How do you deal with them? Can artists reach situations in which their works are perceived in complete purity, far from identity?**

Where one is born, and to which culture are facts of life. They cannot be changed, only embraced. I understood a long time ago that the best way forward is to embroider the canvas of my life with my threads that come with unlimited colors. My personal views and thoughts about life, nurtured by observing its details, make up my true identity. I never saw my identity as a label, but as a process—fluid, changing every day. Maybe, this explained why I struggled in the past when people asked me where I came from, expecting a direct, simple answer relating to a geographic location. I wanted my answer to be true to what I felt.

As for the artist's identity and the context of art by extension, does the listener of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" symphony need to know about its creator, or the inspiration behind it to enjoy it or relate to it? We seem to have a clear understanding of this concept when it comes to music, but somehow it gets lost in the appreciation of visual art. We ought to be looking at art and engaging with our eyes rather than finding meaning in its commentary. In other words, we should look like we listen. Enjoy what comes, disregard what we don't like, and go deeper into the rhythms and layers of what we see.

في عملك **mentalopia** قمت بإنشاء طوابع بريدية لبلدان تحمل صور فنانيين لا ينتمون لها. يعني أنك لعبت في خيوط الانتماء المفهومة وخلقت غربةً مكانها. وفي حين أنك تشعر بهذه الغربة في مدينتك، أين تشعر في البيت إذن؟ وهل هناك ضرورة للبيت والانتماء أصلاً؟

**In your artwork *Mentalopia*, you created postal stamps for countries carrying photos of artists they don't belong to. It means that you played with the conceptual threads of belonging, creating an alienating space instead. And while you felt alienated in your city of birth, where do you feel at home then? Is there a need for home and belonging at all?**

I coined the word *Mentalopia* to refer to the ideological or utopian space we construct in our minds. *Mentalopia* tackled issues of cultural differences, identity, national pride, and borders. I asked ten known participating artists to bring postal stamps from their respective countries, and I subsequently merged the artists' portraits on stamps other than their own. I wanted to destabilize the photographic surface by having these people reside in 'foreign' space. Appearing lost and confused, I wanted the viewer to question notions of identity and identification. When I enlarged the stamps, the inscribed text revealed different connotations like the low price we suddenly have on our heads when representing others.

For clarity, I no longer feel in exile in Jerusalem or anywhere else. As the philosopher and theorist Vilem Flusser wrote, Exiles become free not when they deny their homeland but when they come to terms with it. And that is what I achieved. I looked at the exile from many angles and found my way through it. When *Everland*, the collage of Palestinian embroidery, came to light last January, I wrote: "To be born in Jerusalem or anywhere else, always means you are becoming a citizen of planet Earth. We are all from everywhere and nowhere. Poetically, we are all from elsewhere. And that nowhere is the everland we are all searching for. Getting there is an extraordinary journey of endless discovery.

نلاحظ في مشاريع كثيرة مثل **Metamorphosis**، **Euphoria**، و**In Exile** صخبًا بصريًا يتكى على تكرار أشكال (patterns). أية معاني منحتك هذه التقنية؟

**In many of your projects, such as *Metamorphosis*, *Euphoria*, and *In Exile*, we observe a visual clamor hinging on repeating patterns. What does this technique offer you?**

The patterns come from collaging photos taken from different angles. But my patterns are never in symmetry. I never follow a mathematical equation to put my form together. I engage with visceral geometry, geometry by intuition. Photographing things from multiple angles allowed me to look at life from various perspectives, widening my horizon, granting me opportunities to look beyond the surface, deeper into reality. And I am obsessed with the creation of art not seen before or, more precisely, the creation of unique visuals intrigues me. Because I use hundreds of images, with different time codes, and angles, it is impossible to recreate the work using the same photography technique.

To collage images, I withdraw from the world for hundreds of hours. In conversation with myself, I dig deep into my psyche. The window images of *In Exile* looked into my past. In the process of layering them, I reflected long enough until I found ways to glue the fragments of myself together and become more stable—the stones I carried on my back got lighter. I found a route towards liberation, one that starts from the inside. The change was happening, and my altered state of mind created space for new roots to grow.

It was with *Euphoria*, the collage of tree branches, that neuronc explosion, the awakening when I expressed how I uprooted myself, and planted my roots in the clouds to always remain in transition, free.

في معظم أعمالك الفوتوغرافية لا نرى بشرًا، عدستك تميل أكثر إلى الطبيعة والعمارة. وحتى عندما تلتقط شيئًا بشريًا، مثل اليد، نرى فيها من خلال عدستك القريبة ما هو أكثر من عضو بشري. وكأنَّ اليد تُصبح جزءًا من تضاريس طبيعية. كيف تراها أنت؟

**In most of your photography, we do not see people; your lens is more oriented towards nature and architecture. Even when you capture something human, such as a hand, we see through your focused look beyond human bodies. As if the hand becomes part of a natural landscape. How do you see it?**

I guess for many years, I avoided human beings in my work, but when they did appear, their role was dominant. In *Exit* 2006, I photographed the hands of older people in a hospice, home care for terminally ill people, days, maybe weeks before their death. In those years, I lived in what I felt was a permanent tormenting state of exile and looked for a form to portray the dislocation, the fragmentation, the scars that we all carry living the Palestinian experience. I photographed their hands as if dismembered from their bodies. Their surfaces mirrored an exilic landscape. The hands look like monuments, statues.

Never forget the installation *Settlement—Six Israelis & One Palestinian* (2008), when I photographed six Israelis who served in the Israeli army stripped to their underwear standing in a line next to each other, and facing them in a visual confrontation was one Palestinian.

In *Independence* 2013, I photographed two human figures who appear floating in darkness, in cosmic, celestial, or oceanic space. During this work, I conceived my *Declaration of Independence* when I wrote that "All we need is the imagination to find who we are and what we are searching for. It is the individual's responsibility to stand up and free themselves from the new form of colonization that people are affected by yet are unaware of—the colonization of the imagination. Palestinians do not need the UN, the EU, the United States or any other country in the world, and especially not Israel, to declare to them that they are free. We are all born free. Every Palestinian should wake up today and say, I am a free person. Freedom is not something granted. Freedom is something felt. We cannot set a date for the independence of Palestine. That Independence Day is today. Everyone should declare it."

*The Great March of Return* 2019, a collage including over one thousand photographs of Palestinians captured by five journalists from Gaza of the crowds who have gathered every Friday since March 2018 to end the Israeli occupation, I contrasted the photos with



images of outer space. I merged the hermetically sealed Strip with infinity, creating a monumental "present-day fresco," demonstrating a nation's eternal fight for liberation.

ما هو انشغالك أو ربّما هوسك الفكريّ وبالتالي الفنّي في هذه الأيام؟ وماذا سينتج عنه؟ وهل أنت راضٍ عن العلاقة بين الانشغال الفكريّ والحسيّ وبين العمل الملموس الذي يُنتجه؟

**What is your preoccupation or your intellectual and artistic obsession these days? And what will result from them? Are you satisfied with the relationship between the intellectual and sensory preoccupation and the produced concrete work?**

I have created art in the last months I usually achieve in five years. With every finished project, I gained more clarity. In addition to Everland, Endless, A Short Story, and The Sound of Jerusalem, I am wrapping up *Palestine UNSETTLED*, a liberating photo journey to Palestine that once was, to the Palestine that thrives in our spirit. *Palestine UNSETTLED* is a voyage between image and imagination by looking directly at reality. The visuals float between painting and photography, revealing layers of history, where it becomes felt how the Palestinian culture was embroidered together by people who embrace life.

I am also publishing *The Secrets of Life* volume I, II & III, my newest books on the awareness of being. The trilogy is also a study on the art of deletion, and the removal of visual layers, stripping language, prose, and poetry, to their absolute essence.

And in the spirit of The Great March of Return, I am working on a new monumental collage using historic photos recreating Palestine.