

# **"The Era of Essence, Imagination and Hard Work": interview with Palestinian artist Steve Sabella**



**Steve Sabella (\*1975 in Jerusalem, Palestine) is a Berlin-based artist and author of the award-winning**

memoir, *The Parachute Paradox*, published by Kerber Verlag (September 2016) that tackles the colonisation of the imagination. His first monograph *Steve Sabella - Photography 1997–2014* was published by Hatje Cantz in collaboration with the Akademie der Künste, Berlin (2014), with texts by Hubertus von Amelunxen and a foreword by Kamal Boullata.

Sabella received a BA in Visual Studies from the State University of New York in 2007. Through a Chevening Scholarship he earned an MA in Photographic Studies at the University of Westminster, London, graduating in 2008 with a Caparo Award of Distinction. In 2009, through a Saïd Foundation Scholarship, he earned his second MA in Art Business at Sotheby's Institute of Art, London. In 2008, Sabella also received the Ellen Auerbach Award from the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.

Sabella has published numerous essays on the art world and is currently preparing to publish *The Artist's Curse*, a series of epigrams, micro-narratives, tips and concise analyses of the art world as it looked till 2020. And coming to light soon is the artist book, *The Secrets of Life*.

*This is the full interview between Sabella and the Middle East Monitor. To see the original post, 'The Era of Essence, Imagination and Hard Work', [click here](#).*

**“No Man’s Land” is a six-metre-wide photographic triptych, which was also featured in the Palestinian Museum’s show *Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape*. Can you tell us about the creation of that particular work?**

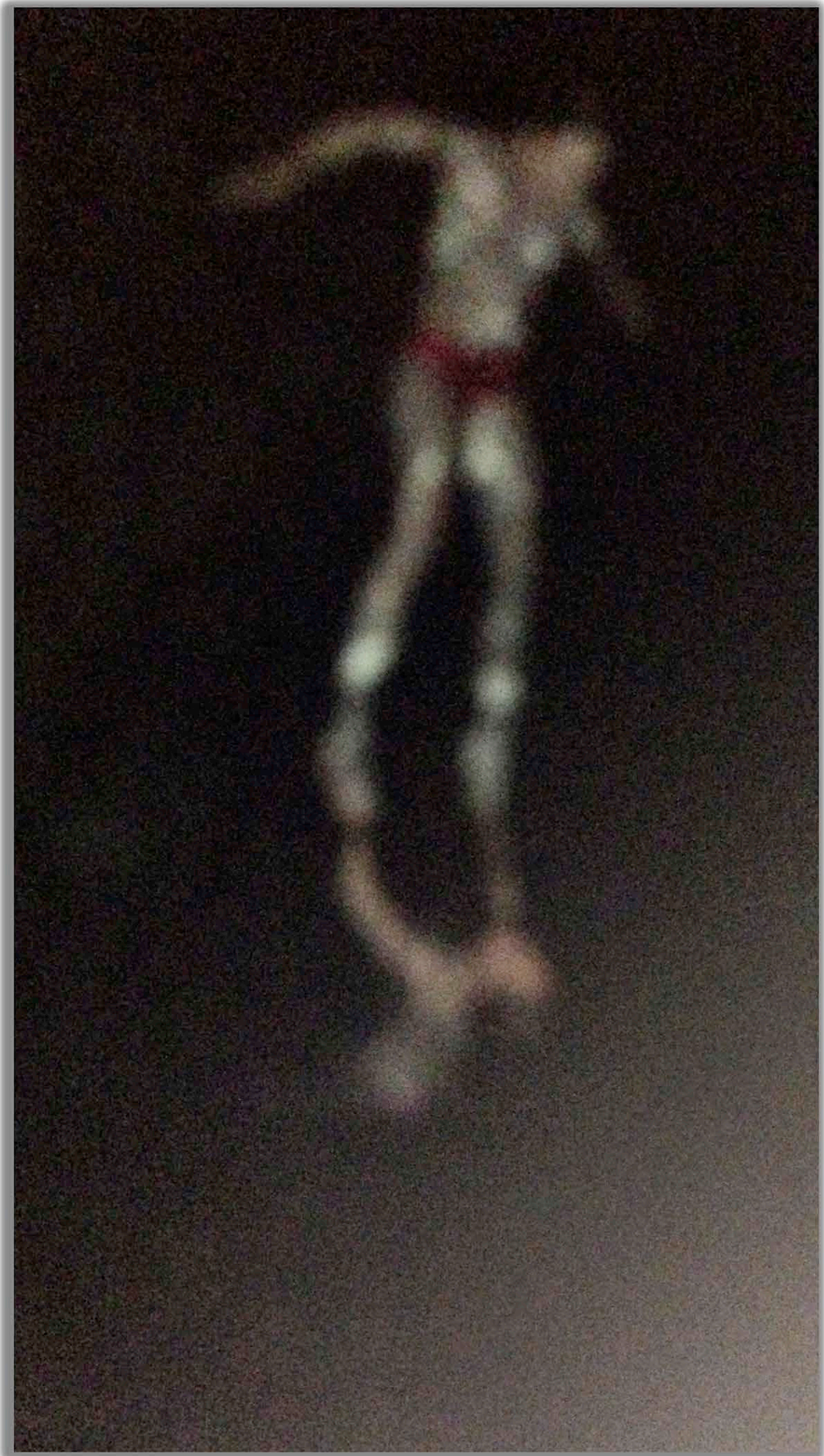
Given the unprecedented and existential urgency we are all living in, my answers to your questions have changed. As we can see, the pandemic is a slow-moving tsunami, and what is at stake is not the life on planet Earth, but human civilisation. Earth is creating its own reset button for life to continue, but possibly not for us. And what might remain in the future will be fragments, traces of signatures and art which will tell our story—hopefully not on cave walls again.

If we don't wake up, we are all going to end up marching to No Man’s Land, the work I hung up at The Palestinian Museum. We are in an era of something new—change, opportunity, creativity, imagination—and we must bid farewell to the age of war and hatred. And post-Corona apocalypse, any leader in the world, if there are leaders left, who does not endorse pure awareness to protect the planet first, followed by equal welfare to all its citizens, will eventually have no chance.

In my No Man’s Land, you see a kaleidoscope of the residue of life. Rotting leaves, feathers, pollen and flying dust create a new landscape. The location is unclear, whether we are above water or in the depth of the ocean,

in space, underground or above the surface of fossilised burnt land. And then there are the white forms in No Man's Land, almost human-like figures that seem lost, drowning. In many ways, this is the physical and mental state in which many Palestinians live—even those who remained on the land. And now, this is a reality that might hit everyone in the blink of an eye.

“No Man's Land” inspires us to imagine the beauty of our world and see beyond its surface, especially now when everything is in flux.



**YYou now live in Berlin, having chosen exile for many years now. The concept of colonised imagination has been the focus of your art practice and writing. Can you explain to us what it means?**

As you know, I was born in Jerusalem's Old City and remained there till 2007. I was living in exile while being at home. And this state of alienation intensified when I moved to hectic London. It was in Berlin, in 2012, when I finally liberated myself from what I believed was a permanent state of exile. I experienced first-hand how the occupation paralyses and controls the body. I felt the extreme psychological impact of what it means to be born under occupation and to later live in a trapped reality.

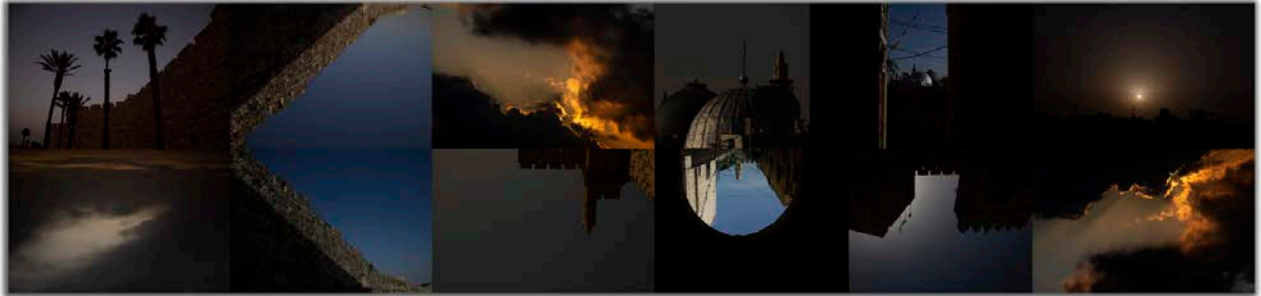
Over the years, it became clear to me that the Palestinians have reached a point where they cannot even imagine living in freedom, so how could anyone liberate the land? I came to realise that what was stopping liberation of the land was that the people were occupied in their imagination. They reached a dead end, limited capacity of finding new ways out of their confinement. So, I cleansed my imagination, declared my independence and had a rebirth—something I believe every Palestinian, every Israeli and every other citizen in the world should do.

In the end, it is one world, one heart.

**Are you still engaged with the art scene in Palestine?**

I never left the art scene in Palestine. I indeed had 11 solo

exhibitions between 1998 and 2007. After I left Jerusalem, I became an ambassador of my origins—one who doesn't hide the truth. Artists are the most equipped to feel the pulse of nations and later transform these vibrations into great art without identity, so that everyone can relate to it. Such art only can survive the pages of time.



**What do you think the Palestinian art scene needs the most to keep growing? What's the role of Palestinian artists living abroad in this regard?**

My 2009 thesis for my second masters at Sotheby's Institute of Art was on reconsidering the value of Palestinian art and its journey into the art market. I detailed the dynamics that enable the development of art scenes, including political stability, education, government policies, museums, collectors, galleries, auction houses and art fairs. Palestine lacked all of these, which paved the way for the UAE and its rich resources to become the main channel to support the growth of Palestinian art. However, a lot has changed in the last decade, requiring

new study.

And it is clear to me that in post-Corona times, everything has to be redrawn, as the survival of artists, especially those without a strong backbone in the art market, will see a crash. It should always be remembered that the crash is in monetary value, not in art's intrinsic value, even though there is a correlation. With the new reality we all face, channelling art will definitely become more challenging. Artists will pay a considerable price. But by no means will they become less creative. The time has come for clarity and for cleansing and for all creatives to become super creatives.

A few months ago, I wanted to partner with local influencers to create a sustainable corporate art collection in Palestine, an initiative I briefly wrote about in my second master's thesis at Sotheby's. If we establish 10 collections within leading companies of 10 artworks each per year, this will result in the sale of 100 artworks (as a humble start). Those 100 artworks would advance organically the art economy, generating income for a number of artists while shedding a positive light on these companies. Now is the time of synergy, of the creation of the bigger picture, of the realisation that we are all a tiny part of a big drawing that we all create together.





**A recent show from 2019 was *The Great March of Return*, which included over 1,000 photographs captured by five Palestinian journalists from Gaza contrasted with photos of space. Can you tell us about the genesis of that work?**

I combined these images to create new realities, a new world. I merged the hermetically sealed Strip with outer

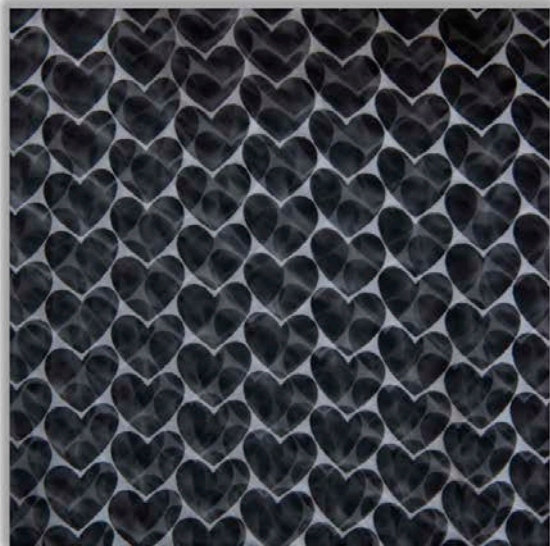
space, with infinity, resulting in a monumental “present-day fresco,” demonstrating people’s eternal fight for liberation. The work is a reality within a reality, a journey to the beginning and the end. Life in Palestine feels like a loop, just like in the loop we are all suddenly subject. And like never before, Palestine has fallen off the map of the world—side-lined. The struggle of the Palestinian people lost its centre. I wanted to create a story where every scene matters, where every life is connected to the bigger picture. The work is inspired by Renaissance art, a word which literally means “revival.” And what scares me now is the death of the Palestinian story as it becomes a religious icon without light.

I sometimes say that I use my camera like a brush, but maybe in this great march, I use the colour of these images like paint. Yet the base of the paint will always be photographic, triggering the imagination to jump from one dimension to another—from Gaza to the world and beyond.

The first time I saw The Great March of Return on television, it looked surreal and apocalyptic to me. People were drowning in smoke, undeterred by fire, captured in photos in poses that looked biblical, as if peeled from the frescoes of an old basilica. I made the collage in over 800 hours, sitting day and night—many times in darkness save for the light that emanated from the images. I pieced people together, always searching for space where they would blend. I often discovered minute details after

looking at the same image for the 300th time. In those many hours, the last thing I wanted was to become numb to these images. And now the whole world has become trapped and collapsed on its own image.

These are people with endless stories. Our human story. Even though the reality looks grim, many viewers feel hope. I was happy that some picked up the Renaissance feel of the march, dubbing it the "Sistine Chapel of Palestine." It stirred people's emotions, shedding new light on this impossible reality. Palestinians are entrapped within their own story, and this work questions and challenges the mechanisms needed to escape—to break free. And the answer to this is in all of us. The time has come to listen to the heart.



**You are also a writer. What new possibilities has writing opened for you?**

I guess the perfect way to express it would be to use

Kamal Boullata's words when he was asked this same question. He said, "Writing is a way to go home, painting is being at home." I can add that there are many ways to find that home. I wanted to write my memoir, *The Parachute Paradox*, in three months. It took three more years because I learned a lot about the essence of life by drawing it with letters. I embraced the journey. At this point, every image, every word, every comma matters. All creation is, in essence, an act of deletion, reduction, the removal of layers that obstruct clarity, vision and, ultimately, awareness.

## **Can you tell us examples of how you tackled writing in your practice?**

I learned to process life without filters. To look at reality, see it as it is and go deeper and beyond. This can only be done when we focus, eliminate all clutter, noise and distortion, in our journey inwards in search of the minerals of our essence, our soul. And because the soul does not like to be lied to, I quickly learned to be honest with myself and not waste time processing superficial things.

## **We are seeing the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting the world as we know it. What is the role of artists in this unique time in history?**

It's the end of something or the beginning of something else! And no one has a real clue what this else will be like!

So we might as well, imagine and create this new reality together. The time has come to stop drawing borders and start drawing our future. And the future is now. We must become aware that we are a speck of nothing in the equation of the universe. But we should never forget that the state of nothing is also the state of everything. We are all interconnected, part of a much larger picture. And if we are to still remain on it, we must inject into ourselves the image of a better world, and this time not having it as a dream, a vision, a utopia. We are in the era of the essence, of hard work, like never before.



**Are there any new projects you are working on at the moment?**

I have created in the last few weeks a volume of art I

usually do in five years. I believe that as long as you do what you love, the universe will always carry you. And maybe I was feeling the urgency to create a body of work on the essence of life and being. And this is what came to light: "Everland," "Endless," "A Short Story," "Palestine UNSETTLED" and "The Sound of Jerusalem."

And soon, my newest book, *The Secrets of Life*.

Out of all of these, I want to quickly talk about "Everland." In my journeys on the roads of Palestine, I took photos of Palestinian embroidery. The result looks and feels like every other culture. "Everland" celebrates all this beauty. To be born in Jerusalem or anywhere else means you are 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. The ground we are looking for is right there under our feet.

I also see these works necessary in our times as they liberate art from the norm, physicality and form. Each time "Everland" is put on display, the squares will be laid in a different constellation, including their orientation on any side. This way, "Everland"—just like "Endless" and "The Sound of Jerusalem"—will have endless placement possibilities, creating new visuals and forever changing. How we put the earth-pieces together, it is up to our collective imagination.

**Any parting words you'd like to leave us with?**

As long as there is one person left who imagines a better world, life has a chance. There is an Other in all of us. Each Other.