

Art and Yoga: a path to the True Self

An Interview between the artist Steve Sabella and the yogi Anastasia Shevchenko



Steve Sabella – Euphoria 2010 155 x 125 cm Lambda print on diasec 3.5-cm aluminum box edge

I have always intuitively felt an unmistakable connection between visual arts and yoga, a sacred link if you wish. Both engage human beings through the creation of a transcendental space in which time ceases to exist and a direct link to the superconscious is established. This space serves as a setting for both the process of creation, and the action of consuming visual arts, followed by the subsequent emotional and intellectual response. Yoga provides a person with tools to access these states of consciousness from which all art originates, and in which it can be truly grasped, even promising a continuous state in which such access becomes unlimited, allowing the benefit of true emancipation from the self-imposed constrictions of a human mind.

Ever since I was a small child, I have been intrigued by the power of the visual arts, engaging in drawing, painting, and later in the development of black and white photography. Once I fully embarked on my yoga journey, I separated myself from the idea of following the arts as a vocation, but continued to admire it from an intimate distance. Regularly visiting museums and exhibitions, I finally had the chance to touch this sphere in my work at the [ID Festival](#) in Berlin. This is where I first got to know about [Steve Sabella](#), a Berlin-based artist from Jerusalem—a nomad, a person of many talents indeed. He is a visual artist, a writer, a speaker, a social activist, and a recipient of numerous awards.

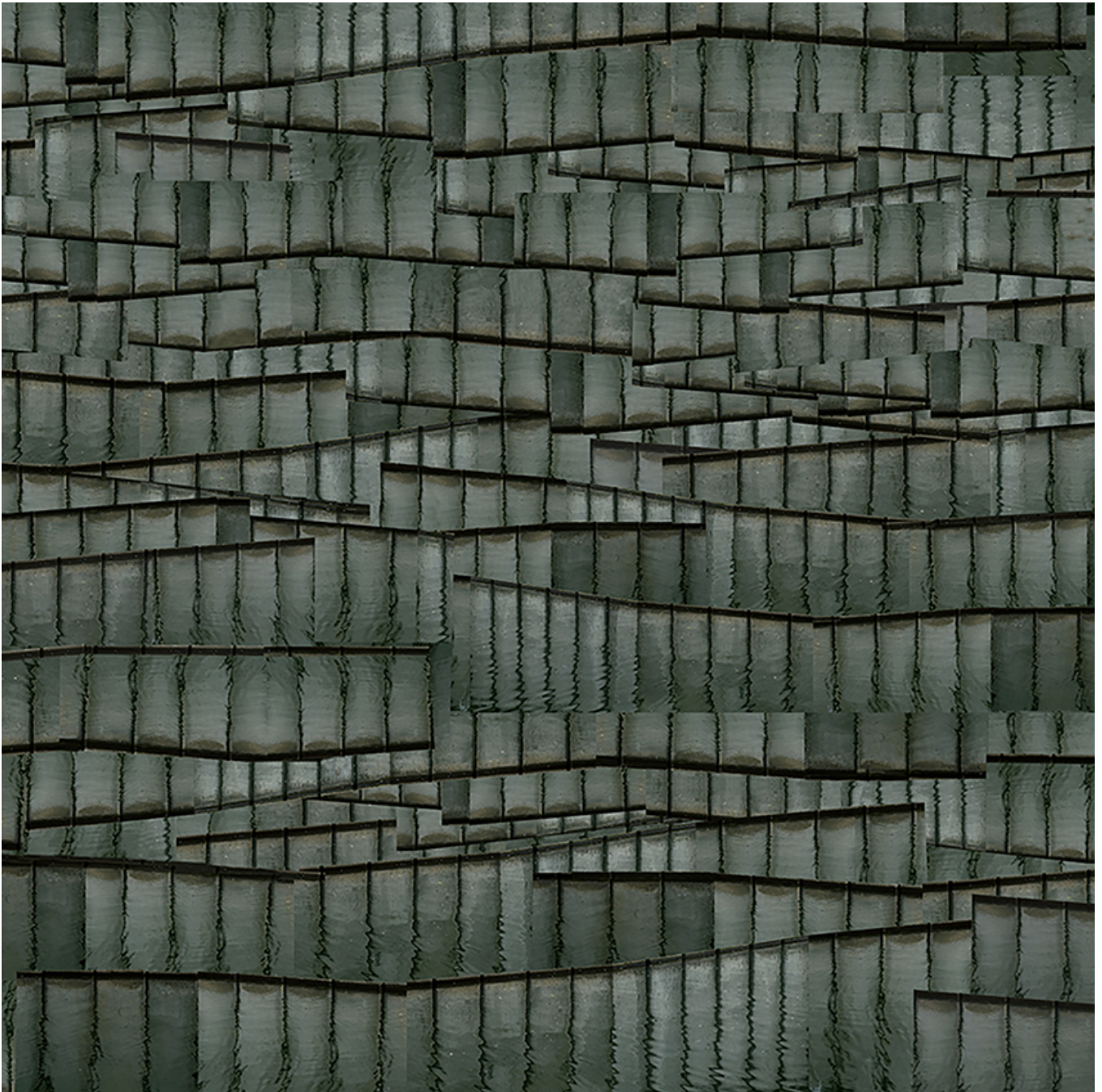
As I was reading Houellebecq's [The Map and the Territory](#), I stumbled upon a sentence that spoke to me directly on the topic of art and yoga being a spiritual path: "To be an artist...was above all to be someone *submissive*. Someone who submitted himself to mysterious unpredictable, messages, that you would be led... [by] intuitions, messages which nonetheless commanded you in an imperious and categorical manner, without leaving the slightest possibility of escape—except by losing any notion of integrity or self-respect" (page 66, original italics).

Just as the sentence above speaks about submission in the life of the artist, in the same way yogis learn to submit ourselves to the mysterious forces of nature, giving up the idea of being able to control and direct our lives in order to achieve countless goals and ideas about what would make us happy, fulfilled, and ultimately, at peace with ourselves. In the process we learn to live life not out of the head, but out of the heart, using both the rational and the intuitive capacities to make sense of the world around us and to navigate through it.

In yoga, we use a much gentler term for this spiritual process of self-discovery: *surrender*. We learn to surrender ourselves to life as it really is, and not as we wish it to be. We teach ourselves, through many trials and errors, to accept the duality of our manifested human experiences, with all of its strange and sometimes very painful paradoxes. In order to achieve this, we usually have to peel off layers and layers of identities, misconceptions, faulty understandings, and resulting ignorance and suffering, accumulated throughout [a] lifetime[s].

Ultimately, both art and yoga seem to put us face-to-face with ourselves and our shared experience of what it means to be truly human: both art and yoga serve as a mirror that reflect back at us our true selves, as well as humanity's general state of affairs.

Here, in the following interview conducted via email, I would like to give the chance to the artist himself, Steve Sabella, to speak about his ideas of what makes art and yoga so similar.



Steve Sabella – Metamorphosis 2012 160 x 160 cm Lightjet print on diasec 3.5-cm aluminum box edge

A: Steve, first of all, how did you become an artist? Is it true that a real artist has no other choice but to submit her/himself to this work, no matter how difficult it usually is, both practically and emotionally speaking?

S: I don't know if I am an artist per se, because we are always in the process of changing. For many years, I was careful not to use this label, but I've come to

understand that we can only relate to the world we live in through categories. I still see these categories as limiting to the human imagination. And probably that's why in the process of yoga we try to dissociate ourselves from our surroundings, and float freely. The more educated we become, the more we realize how limiting our knowledge is.

Regarding art, the eternal question is still looming: *what is art?*—and subsequently, *what is an artist?* Art has that same power as yoga to suspend and even penetrate reality, making us see things in a new way. In terms of the second question, I can only relate to my experience. For me, an artist is an observer, somebody who questions and interrogates the self constantly, somebody who looks at the world from multiple angles.

Art is not about submitting the self to the work, but rather, submitting to the self itself [the true self, Anastasia's guess]. The work is a byproduct, is the end of such a process. This explains why, when I feel a project is finished, I am able to move onto another immediately. The process itself is what I call art.

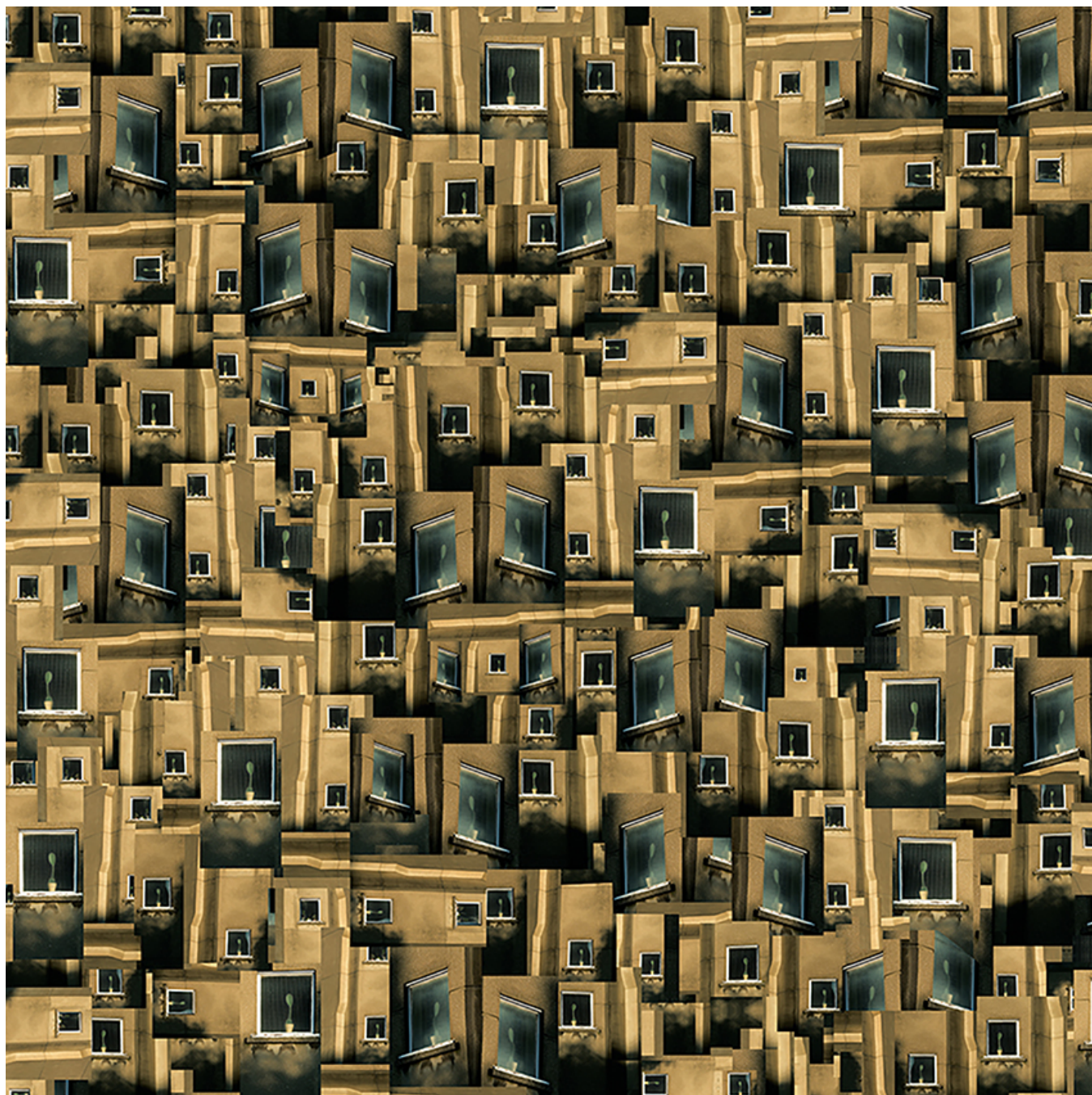
Submission and surrender could be accurate terms for describing the artist's underlying theme in life. I would add to these two also the word "honesty," which is the key ingredient to the process of yoga and the creation of powerful art. Artists who lie to themselves can never produce works that touch the hearts of people.

A: What is for you the most crucial role that art plays in the society?

S: Art often mirrors society, inviting us to question our beliefs and mental constructions—that is, to question ourselves. If we look at the history of humanity, we often use art as a reference. Almost everything we know about our past comes from our study of artifacts, visual representations—and this goes back to art from our settlement in caves. The question is, due to the abundance of images with which we're faced today, does the art we create also have a function for future studies of our present time? Contemporary societies have become more image-oriented than ever before, and less influenced by text. This explains why societies feel lost, but I don't see this as negative, but rather as a natural process of evolution.

Many people fail to understand that everything around us is art, or a derivative of art. From architecture, to the many forms of design, to the food we eat, it's all produced and experienced with our senses. There is the misconception that art is merely visual. It's somehow true, but art's roots are everywhere, and it is the most underlying and important aspect of human existence. This might explain why we get agitated when we see ugly architecture, or anything ugly for that matter. Could it be that the architect

her/himself did not see art as a vital part of their practice and therefore the end-result of the work turned out “ugly”? The ideal society of the future is one suffused with art, permeated by it in all of the aspects of our existence, from its hidden roots to the perceived world.



Steve Sabella – Metamorphosis 2012 160 x 160 cm Lightjet print on diasec 3.5-cm aluminum box edge

A: Like the hero of Houellebecq’s book, throughout your prolific career, you have also had a few twist and turns in your life, both in terms of change of artistic direction and in terms of establishing yourself in a new place. How would these changes be initiated and how did you know what to do in the process? In other words, what was your process of submission to the mysterious?

S: What you call submission to the mysterious, I call journeying to the unknown. And in that process, one has to inhabit the moment, let go, and try to be in sync with the energy of life. Resistance to this keeps us in the pages of the past, locking us in time. A good way out is to come to terms with who we are and what we think we are, and only then can real change happen. That's why I don't believe in psychiatric medications, because they often mask people's realities. They deal with side effects, rather than root causes. We are all born inheriting a "problematic" reality, and I see our quest as one of discovering new realities as we live.

In my case, the process of submission felt like torture, as I had to stitch my wounds with barbed wire. For many years my art was inextricable from my life, my alienation from both mental and physical exile came through in my work. Over time, I came to terms with my exile through a process of self-interrogation and introspection. Once a cycle is completed, this introspective journey is rewarding, and it gives you more awareness and prepares you for the next challenge in life.

A: How do you get inspired to produce a work of art and what is your way to get into the creative zone? In yoga, for instance, in order to become more in touch with our true selves, we practice asana and meditate.

S: The written and spoken word has always inspired me more than the created image. I'm a selective reader, and I actively engage with ideas that can transport me from one theorist or philosopher to another. I read to extract images, to unlock doors for my visual research.

I'm also very inspired by hyperrealities and the relationship between image and the imagination. I feel connected to photography that claims no semiotic relationship to the 'reality' we perceive. Photography creates a 'reality' of its own. It is from this assumption that I like to explore the medium.

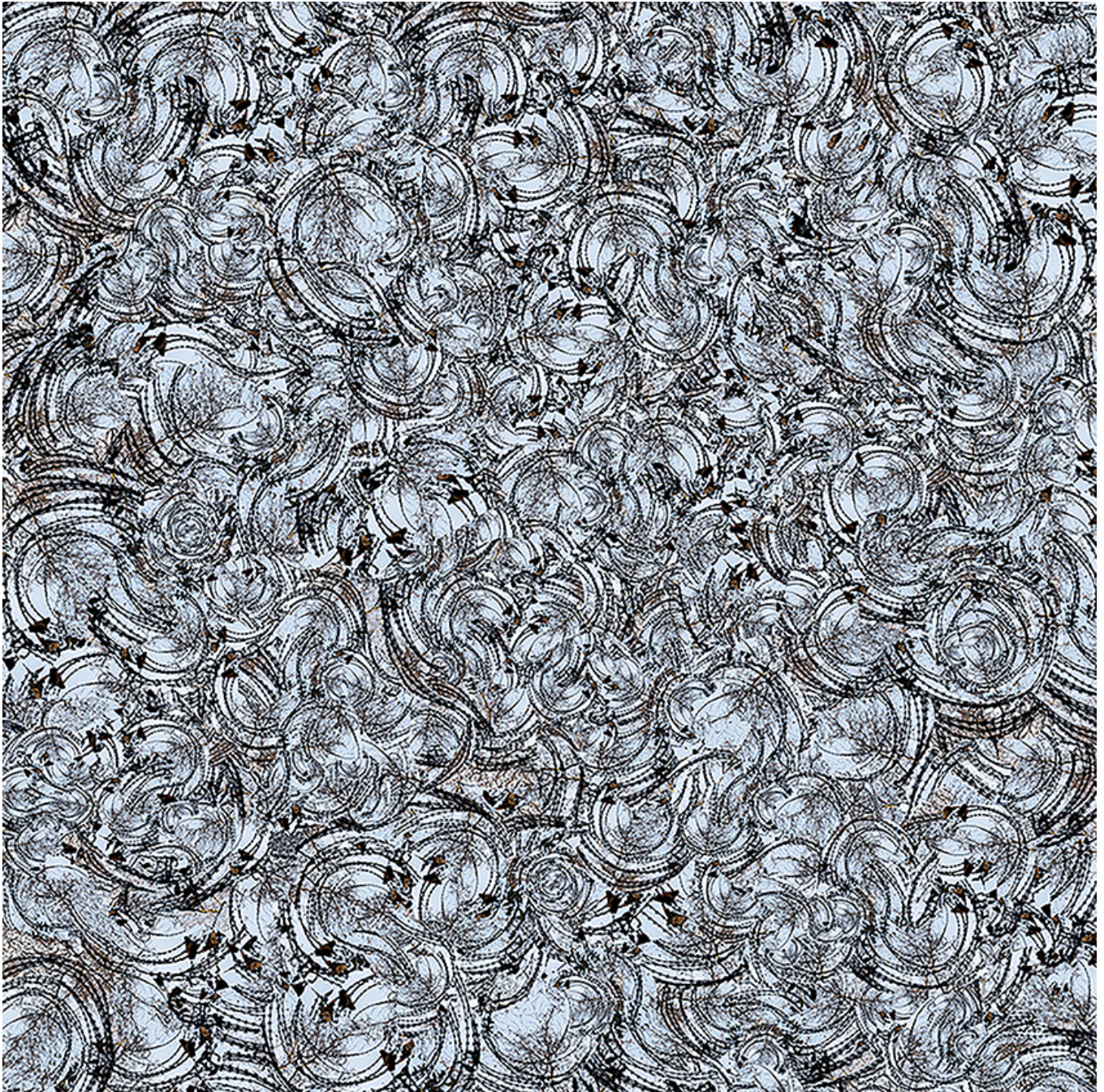
I can imagine that yoga is a process of discovering the self, getting deep into the fabric of thought, or the mind. And once you reach a higher level of consciousness, there is no way back. Art can conform to a similar process. I see myself as a visual investigator, and once I unlock a visual code, many windows into life become lucid. I often imagine myself in a chamber with codes scattered all over its walls. Being there for weeks, months, sometimes years, I try to decode their essence, as I see them mirroring a personal dilemma in my life. And once I decipher the dilemma, this is when I give it a visual form. Putting the codes together, they become art. This allows me to open new door to my next chamber. You can think of these chambers as housing different levels

of consciousness. And it gets more and more difficult to find the key to the next stage. This search is maybe the human quest. It has no end, and possibly this is why it will always be rewarding [Anastasia's note: ponder for a moment this beautiful metaphor!]

A: What do you find particularly challenging about your work and life in general? Many yogis, for instance, struggle with the issue of control, fearing to truly surrender to the unknown and mysterious forces of nature.

S: I believe in the power of the self, the power of the mind. There, we are able to imagine, and for me, imagination is the strongest vehicle for liberation. But let's make it clear—there is no absolute freedom.

What I find challenging is my assumption that I have been stuck in a chamber of my mind for longer than needed. But then I realize, retrospectively, that such a period was necessary to become who I am at this moment. I no longer believe in failure. The perception of failure is the malady. Just like imagination and reality are two sides of the same coin, success and failure have equal value. It's because we have been programmed to live with categories and labels— society only perceives success as triumph [Anastasia's note: and we punish ourselves for failure]. All of Thomas Edison's failed experiments were relevant, necessary even, for the creation of light.



Steve Sabella – Metamorphosis 2012 160 x 160 cm Lightjet print on diasec 3.5-cm aluminum box edge

A: What are your aspirations for an ideal world?

S: I'm sure yoga or meditation or visualization (which is art) ultimately aim to be at peace with the self and the mind. This goes back to the basics of "do no harm" and respect. To fix the world, we must imagine new realities. At the moment, it seems we have agreed to live in an era of colonized imagination, one in which we are told how to think, feel, and imagine.

I see an ideal world governed collectively. We would have no countries, no borders. People would share equal rights, live wherever they want, and resources would be

distributed evenly among them. And since everyone would enjoy the same quality of life, migration crises would become a thing of history. In this harmonious world, people would be free to focus on their own well-being, creativity, and of course, yoga :).

A: If you believe in a world governed collectively, that would imply that each person in this world would have the exciting – and at the same time, very difficult – task of evolving their own consciousness. Do you believe everyone has the need, strength, and desire to engage in this process, as well as the ability to take the responsibility that comes with it?

S: To answer this question, I need to resort to a cliché – aren't we all in the same boat? If the boat is sinking, what options do we have here? Planet Earth is our vessel, and we are all responsible for maintaining it. The only way to keep sailing is to put our minds together. This can only happen if we realize our common cause, one that affects us all. Don't you agree that if you asked anyone, they would tell you they want to live in peace and be happy? The question is, why aren't we? We all have the understanding of wanting to live in peace and harmony with ourselves and the world around us. Sadly, not all of us act on this understanding. This is the root cause of the problem. However, I've also learned that if we exclusively think of the problem, it remains an obstacle. Our only alternative is to think of the solution.

In this century, we've been seeing a trend of people breaking free from structures that limit their imagination, aiming for the expansion of their consciousness and will. For example, schools in Finland no longer adhere to a standardized curriculum, and let students delve into their own minds to find their way of looking at and perceiving the world. The practice of developing one's consciousness is something that can be taught, and must start the day we are born.

A: You say you believe in the power of the self and individual mind. Do you also believe in the existence of a universal or collective mind, the spirit – or in other words, god?

S: I do believe that the universe and our existence in it is a puzzle, and somehow, our actions and thoughts contribute to unlocking the mystery we call life. Is there someone up there, a superpower that holds the codes to everything? I guess it's equally impossible to answer with a definite yes or no. One should always leave room for doubt, as no thought can remain fixed forever. So I leave this answer to the imagination, and as long as we keep the imagination freed, we're always on the right track. Above all, I do believe (at least for now) that a journey to discover the universe

begins within the self – with the search inwards.

Conclusion:

It is without a doubt that an artistic journey is very similar to that of the path of yoga. I believe anyone reading this interview can now find many parallels between the path of the artist and a yogi, as well as personal insights in how to proceed on their journey, despite the perceived obstacles and difficulties. Our existence is not an easy one, and there is a lot of work to be done when it comes to solving the afflictions that plague humanity. Sometimes we despair, but we should never give up. Each one of us carries a key to unlocking our human potential, each one of us has the power to face our true selves and take responsibility for our actions. Just as Steve Sabella, I too imagine the world where each human being becomes an active agent in the creation of our shared reality, a platform for the evolution of human consciousness, and a true messenger of gods.



Steve Sabella – No Man's Land 2015 200 x 200 cm Lightjet prints mounted on matt diasec 3.5-cm aluminum box edge

Resources:

Steve Sabella Bio:

Steve (born 1975 in Jerusalem, Palestine), is a Berlin-based artist. He holds a MA in photographic studies from the University of Westminster and a MA in art business from Sotheby's Institute of Art. He received the 2008 Ellen Auerbach Award from the Akademie der Künste Berlin, which included the subsequent publication of his monograph Steve Sabella—Photography 1997-2014. In September 2016, his memoir

The Parachute Paradox was published by Kerber Verlag.

His work has been exhibited internationally and is held in collections including the British Museum in London and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, where he was one of the artists commissioned for the inaugural exhibition. He has published essays on the art market, was a speaker at TEDx Marrakech (2012), and has been the subject of several documentaries, including In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella (2014).

Social Media Links:

<http://stevesabella.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Steve-Sabella-Artist-Page-431231943612942/>

Disclaimer: An edited version of [this article](#) first appeared in the [Yogi Times](#) and is written by me.