

Images - Courtesy of the Artist. **Writer** - Madeline Yale Preston, curator and writer.

Steve Sabella: Creative Interpretation or Visual Deconstruction?

Sabella moves beyond the surface of Bahrain to dismantle and reassemble his insights

In the fourteenth century, the artistic practice of preparing frescoes with a dark reddish-brown earthy pigment began to emerge. Known as *sinopia*, this method of under painting or sketch creates the illusion of multi-dimensional, layered depth. Beneath a work's finishing layer of paint and gloss varnish lie accumulations of process and, if it were possible to extract, the arrangement of these deposits form diverse compositional and empirical meanings.

It is no accident that *sinopia* is likewise the title and initial source of inspiration for artist and visual researcher Steve Sabella's commission for the Bahrain National Museum. *Sinopia* was part of the group photography exhibition entitled *Recreational Purpose* initiated by Camille Zakharia in 2014. Yet the suffix '-opia' is equally noteworthy in considering this body of work; its varied meanings include references to visual disorder or, by creative interpretation, visual deconstruction. While the compositional subject matter for the four works in *Sinopia* varies greatly and its visual signatures appear disparate, messages of communication and access remain constant.

During his residency, Sabella created four photographic abstract portraits that could be described as deconstructed observations of a place. Having never before visited the Kingdom of Bahrain, his knowledge of the country was limited to mediated, second-hand accounts. Born and

raised in Jerusalem, Sabella has long since explored themes of exile and outcast in his work—a fitting background for locating existential relationships between artistic output and a particular region.

As if he were a tourist making visual investigations, Sabella observes Bahrain's facades, skyline, and terrain with his camera. Unlike the traditional tourist photographs one might take on a holiday—ones which visually attest to 'being there' by virtue of where one chooses to stand in relation to monuments and noteworthy points of interest—Sabella moves beyond the surface of Bahrain to dismantle and reassemble his insights, building associations between diverse variables to construct new realities. The four works appear almost painted and question one's perception of Bahrain as a location as well as presuppositions about the medium of photography itself.

Bahrain is known for having one of the most vibrant street art scenes. Layers of polarized views cover the city's surfaces, with charged graffiti proliferated on the streets. Much of the politically galvanized street art was censored with new sheets of color deposited atop declarations for a changed reality. These graffiti messages—in all their appearances—are the visual materials for one of the images in Sabella's *Sinopia*, which is the cover of the artist's recent monograph.* This work resembles shredded and restructured strips of wallpaper in an explosion of colors, rising and falling on a vertical plane. Like

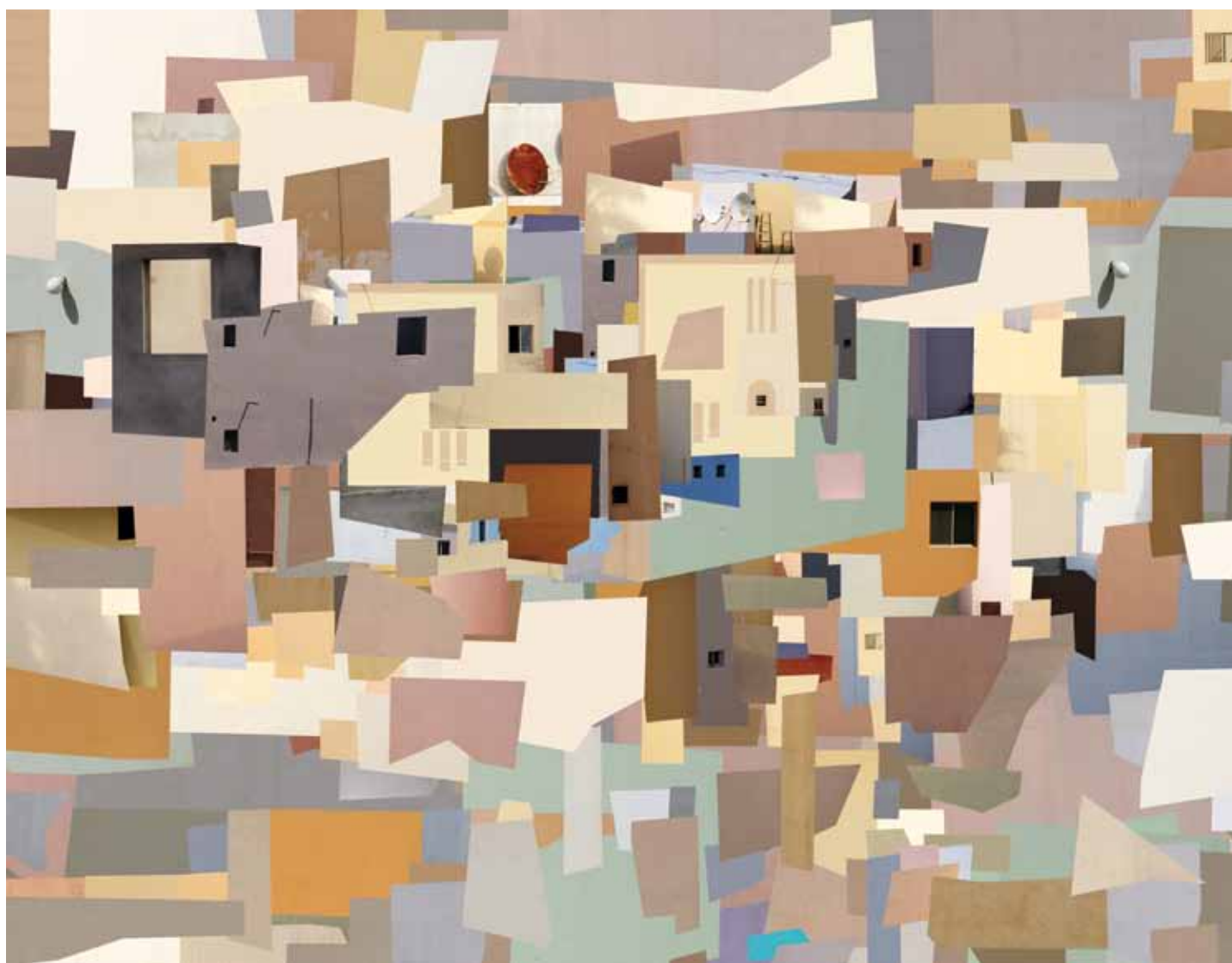
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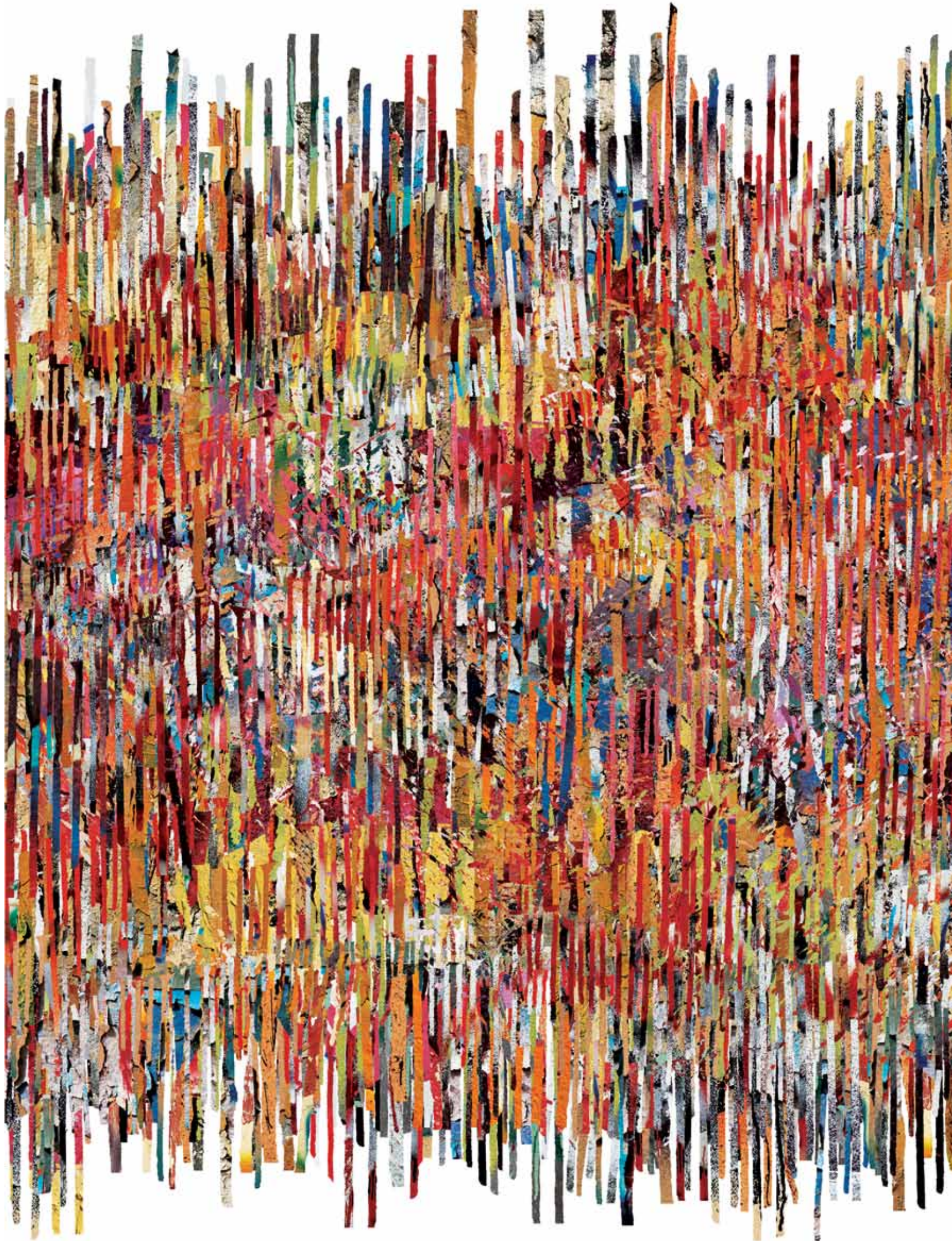
a seismographic reading set to a musical score, its staccato composition galvanizes diverse voices, translating dialogue into a rhythmic visual form.

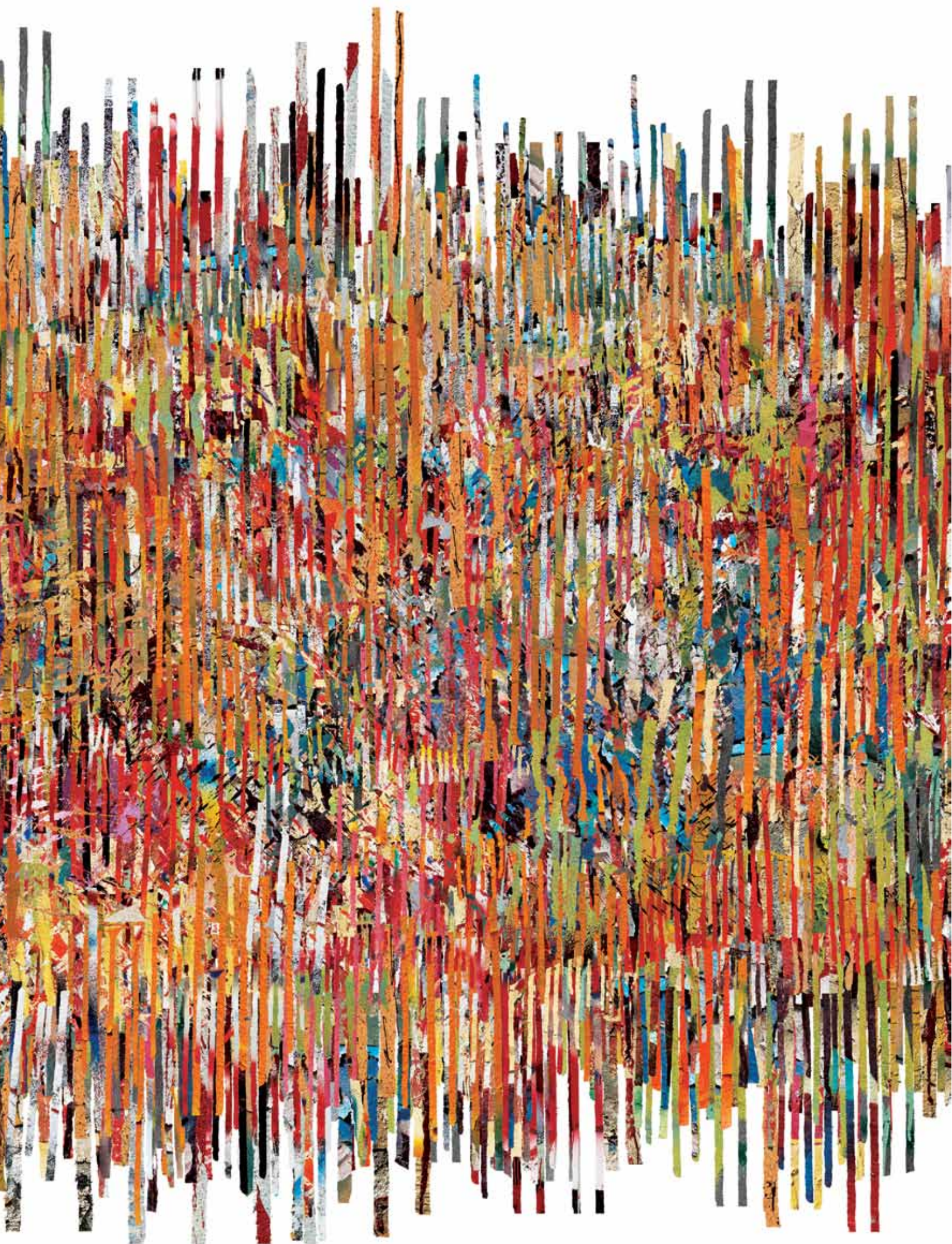
The repetition of sound made visual is also evident in Sabella's image of Manama's skyline. Perceiving a location's imprint as it meets the sea and sky, the work decodes and repeats fragments of information as if a register of sound. The Khoury Project set a musical score to the work, breaking expectations of photographic form. The compilation returns us to the image of Bahrain, and how layered constructs of a place that are visually entrenched in systems of representation can unfold.

* Von Amelunxen, Hubertus. *Steve Sabella: Photography 1997-2014*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz.

Sinopia (2014), Lightjet print mounted on matte diasec
3.5 cm aluminum box edge, 54 x 70 cm

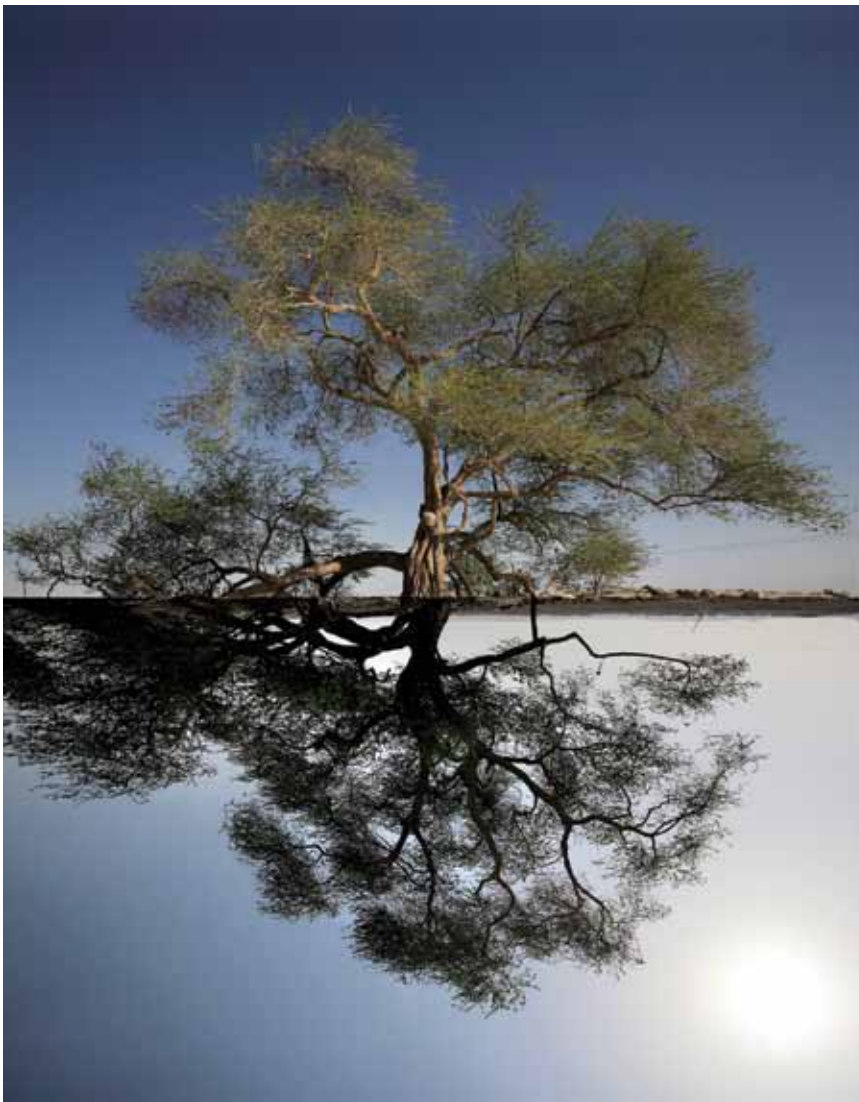


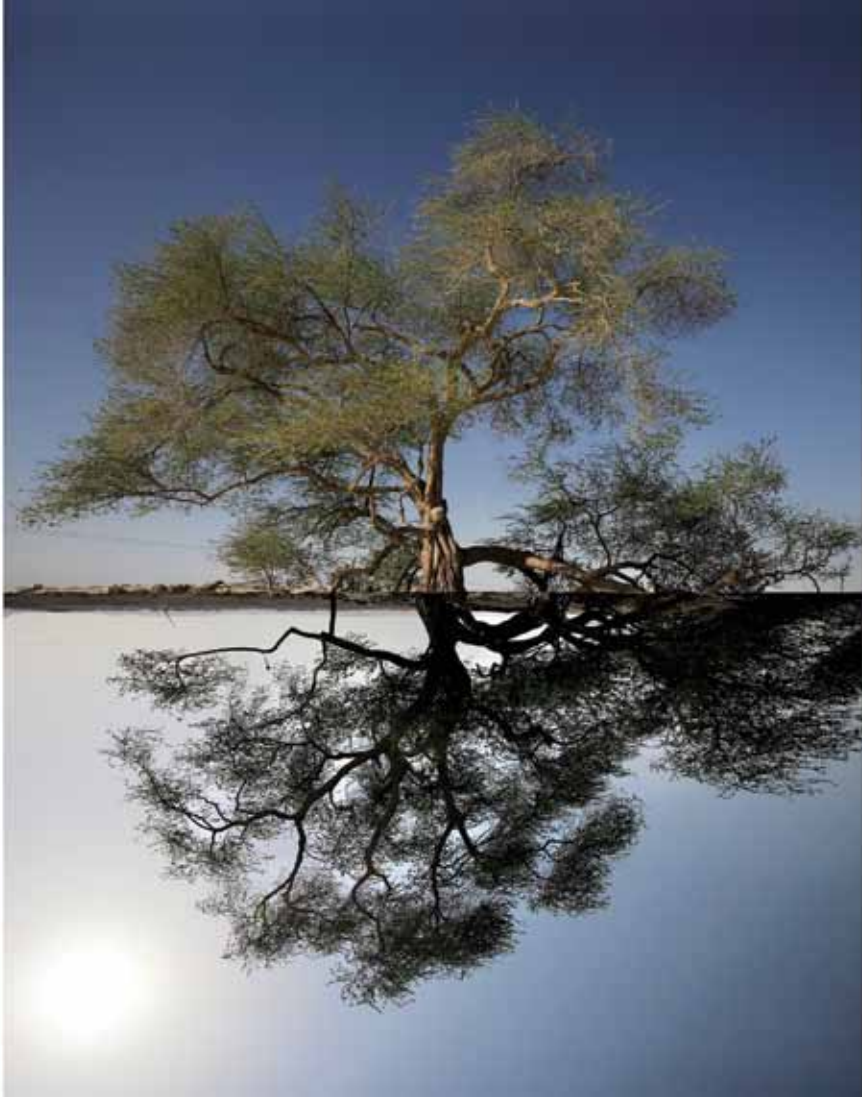




Previous page: *Sinopia* (2014), Lightjet print mounted on matte diasec
3.5 cm aluminum box edge, 180 x 270 cm

Sinopia (2014), Lightjet print mounted on matte diasec
3.5 cm aluminum box edge, 31 x 100 cm





Sinopia (2014), Lightjet print mounted on matte diasec
3.5 cm aluminum box edge, 60 x 270 cm



