

Steve Sabella: Photography, 1997–2014, edited by Hubertus von Amelunxen, texts by Hubertus von Amelunxen and Kamal Boullata. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2014. 208 pages. 162 illustrations. \$75.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DOROTHEA SCHOENE

Steve Sabella: Photography, 1997–2014 is a survey of the oeuvre of Palestinian artist Steve Sabella. With over 160 illustrations, the book gives a full account of both his photographic practice as well as an insightful characterization of Palestinian art and the troublesome experience of exile and migration. The publication was produced with funding from the prestigious Ellen Auerbach Scholarship of the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, which Sabella received in 2008.



Recent scholarship as well as curatorial practice have aimed for a globalized language and all-encompassing approach to artistic analysis—an honorable, yet utopian attempt. While there is no such thing as a global terminology—due to multiple factors like the impact of global ideological conflicts, national and regional traditions, the impact and aftermath of colonialism, the dominance of dialects over one another, and the nonexistence of the written word in some languages leading to a different mode of cultural trajectory, to name just a few—there is still an important path to take: building bridges by comparing, combining, and juxtaposing theoretical frameworks of artistic practice. The value of such an attempt is clearly revealed in *Steve Sabella: Photography, 1997–2014*. Two essays offer the reader different, yet complementary readings of Jerusalem-born and Berlin-based artist Steve Sabella.

Kamal Boullata's long foreword—a full essay contribution of its own—gives an intimate portrait of both the Palestinian art scene in the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries as well as of the artist himself. Boullata, an internationally renowned artist and scholar, has known Sabella and his work for years. In his introductory words, Boullata goes beyond just an iconographic characterization of Sabella's oeuvre. For the author, the artist's photographs bear witness to a peculiar, unique aspect of Palestinian art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—when Sabella is forced into exile, his art tends to become more and more abstract. When Boullata encountered the photographer's early work in 2002 for the first time, Sabella was still into realistic portrayals of the local landscape, with a good eye for meaningful and symbolically charged details. By 2007, he had created his first abstract series, which he entitled *In Exile*. Two years after leaving his home city and country, the artist had given his sentiment of estrangement and alienation a powerful visual translation. While there was no focal point in these new series, the clear attempt to structure and compose as if to bring order into a photographic world still remained, which was and is so closely linked to Sabella's own biography.

The main essay in the book is by the German scholar Hubertus von Amelunxen, president of the European Graduate School, who is most known for his numerous publications on the history and theory of photography. Von Amelunxen admits that he was not familiar with Sabella's work when he was approached to contribute to the book. This openness, a rare statement, is to the advantage of the reader. Von Amelunxen provides a sophisticated perspective, and yet his is a gaze of an outsider from a different culture. By comparing Western and Middle Eastern scholarship and theoretical frameworks for artistic practice, he nevertheless builds a profound framework for possible perceptions, analysis, and understandings of Sabella's work: *After the Last Sky* (part 1), *Disentanglement* (part 2), *Cut* (part 3), *Palimpsest* (part 4), *Translation* (part 5), and *Counterpoint* (part 6) provide six different angles from which the work can and/or could be seen and analyzed. In each discourse, writings by Martin Heidegger are as much taken into consideration as those of Mahmud Darwish, René Descartes as much as al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham, Edward Said as much as Achille Bonito Oliva or Vilém Flusser.

Between each chapter of von Amelunxen's elaborate analysis, series from Sabella's body of work are interspersed. *Exit* (2006), *In Exile* (2008), *In Transition* (2010), *Euphoria* (2010), *Beyond Euphoria* (2011), *Metamorphosis* (2012), *Independence* (2013), *38 Days of Recollection* (2014), and *Sinopia* (2014), among others, are reproduced in sumptuous quality. They do not only show the various media the artist engages with and his stylistic development, but also reveal his very personal, biographical background. Sabella is an "artist whose life is intimately entwined with his work," as von Amelunxen rightfully states in his introductory paragraph (p. 36). Born in 1975 in Jerusalem to a Christian Arab family, the artist moved to London at the age of thirty-three and is currently residing in Berlin. In 2006, he began consecutive series of photographic works to document his experience of exile in its various stages of adjustment and emotional perception. In a way, the visual language of Sabella's work helps to entangle the complexity of exile and exiled art. But as the publication is about art after all, each image and each series speaks for itself, leaving the reader and spectator contemplating the impact of color, form, and structure.

This midcareer survey publication furthers our general knowledge of art in exile in the twenty-first century as well as of the complexity of Middle Eastern art, in particular Palestinian art, since the mid-twentieth century and simultaneously provides the reader with an intimate insight into the artist's oeuvre and possible ways of understanding it.

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