



Steve Sabella in conversation with Sara Rossino

SR: Steve, I know you are a careful observer of the reality both inside and outside of yourself. Did you foresee or somehow expect the recent events in the Middle East? What was your reaction when you realized what was happening? Was there a specific event or image that made you realize that something really shaking was happening?

SS: There was a state of mental stagnation present in the Arab countries that was clearly felt in the last decade. It seemed that people gave in and felt powerless. I did not, and I guess many people did not foresee the current events. The Tunisian revolution created two iconic voices that have entered history. These two voices have penetrated and shook me during the creation of *Beyond Euphoria* (2011). The first one is the voice of the man who went in a dramatic scene shouting in the

street the moment he heard that Ben Ali 'fled away' (Ben Ali Hrab). The other is the voice of an older man with white hair (Harimna, Harimna), who was speaking with a voice that, like the first one, condensed one hundred years of Arab history. Both of their voices recapitulated the agony, the pain, the anticipation, the frustration, the joy, the sadness, the revelation and the euphoria of how every Arab felt. In Paris, I had the utmost honor of having dinner in the most astonishing and unforeseen manner with the first voice. His name is Abdennaceur Aouini.

My state of transition and euphoria preceded the Arab revolts. My journey of interrogation and introspection has been leading me to self-liberation. To achieve it, I had to confront myself, journey to my core and question my 'beliefs' and everything in my 'reality'. The journey starts



from within and once it starts, change is inevitable. It is possible, that this is what people in many different countries realized. *Beyond Euphoria* was created at a time when I was absorbing the dramatic changes in the Arab World. The unfolding events influenced this artwork and shifted it from its original conception.

SR: I noticed an important change both from a formal and conceptual point of view in your production after the recent events. You used to be very self-oriented in your analysis and your works were always visually hooked to external reality because of the use of recognizable photographic details. Now I can see an inversion of this tendency: your *Beyond Euphoria* body of works became much more abstract and they shifted to a new visual form that reminds one much more of abstract painting than photography.

It seems that your works reflect on the external reality you see around yourself. How much aware of this change have you been while it was happening?

SS: Even though *Euphoria* (2010) and *Beyond Euphoria* (2011) share a similar collage technique with *In Exile* (2008), the visual appearance is very much different. *In Exile*, was constructed of windows which shaped my immediate London cityscape. It was about the state of mind of living in permanent mental exile – in a state of fragmentation, disorientation, confusion and dislocation. I tried to give a visual form to my life as exile and alienation are at the core of my life and accordingly my art. It seems that I have been managing to slowly glue my fragments so that they appear complete in a healthier way. Before, they were torn apart in every direction, where now they

make some form of a unity. Hence, I feel more stable.

I think at this stage of my life, I managed to transcend that state of mind. Just like my journey to penetrate my psyche to give a visual form to my fragmented state of mind, it occurred to me that I should journey to the beautiful side of my brain and unlock the aesthetic and beauty buried there and give these a visual form.

This is when I broke my bones and changed my skin. Blood was flowing again in my veins; a spark hit me, ignition and a rebirth. This is when the euphoric explosion occurred and which was followed by the sprinkle of stars - I am free. Hence, with Euphoria, the form had to change and shift. Instead of solid windows, I looked for something more organic - trees; a form that gives a feeling of movement, change, and revival. I was uprooting myself.

While working on Euphoria I felt that there was something beyond, and this is when Beyond Euphoria came to light. The form had to look more abstract. The work might resemble paintings but this was never the goal. In fact, what makes it stand out is probably when people realize that the collage is made up of photographic images. That is, the work resorts to photography to achieve its effect. Photography has that unique artistic quality

that can create an immediate connection with the viewer. It has to do with the image that has an uncanny resemblance with the world. After years of working with the photographic medium, it seems that my images lost that uncanny resemblance and are now pushing for a newer understanding of the exhausted photographic image. My images are constructions of a fictional world or space. They are starting to obtain their power from the adjacent cut fragments that are giving them a new form and identity.

Yet, if you have a general look at my work from the mid 1990s, you are bound to notice that my photography has a painterly quality. I paint using my camera.

SR: In the Beyond Euphoria works I thought to see the emerging of a new kind of aesthetics in your production, or one that was already present but in a less visible way. The shapes and movements of the images you created in this body of works look very "Arab", they sometimes remind one of the Islamic calligraphic tradition and others recalls the colors of the Arab kefiyyah. Do you think your aesthetic taste was influenced by the "Arab" character of the recent revolutions?

SS: To say they look 'Arab' is a wide statement. What does Arab mean these days in art? However, I have become more aware of Arabesque patterns in my work, espe-

cially in *Beyond Euphoria* even though one could see a beginning of this in the formation of *In Exile*. Unlike traditional *Arabesque*, the rhythms I create fluctuate and are not consistent or uniform. This is in my attempt to make the work much more dynamic.

SR: Well, I agree with you when you say it is difficult to define what the word or concept of “Arab” means or represents today. But I think that each cultural and historical context brings with it a kind of aesthetical coherence; let’s call it “flavor”, and I think that it is sometimes unconscious and unaware for those who were born in that context. Or it is simply the way the others perceive and look to that context from outside that gives it this character. I think I can see a tendency which is not only visual, but goes deep to the wider and bigger sense of what aesthetics means. I’m talking of music, literature, art, decoration, architecture, and I could define this tendency with the latin expression *horror vacui*, summed up as the tendency of filling space, both physical and virtual, dividing it in smaller portions, with elements that get more and more complex and articulated the smaller they are. But I may be wrong...

I have noticed that *In Exile* (2008), adopts a square format, *Euphoria* (2010) is more a rectangle, and *Beyond Euphoria* (2011) looks panoramic. How do you

decide the size and shape? What are your motives?

SS: Given that *In Exile* had a square format and was formed from solid static windows, it was natural that in my liberation I use something organic - trees, something that grows and changes. The format had to get wider - no more a square but a rectangle. I needed more space, to create a form that is more fluid - I needed enough space to ignite the core. *Beyond Euphoria* had to go even beyond the rectangle! It required more space and the breaking of the square concept that entrapped me for years. A square like the square segments of Cecile Elise Sabella artwork (2008) clothes did not leave much room for my breathing. *Beyond Euphoria* went out of earth, to a new galaxy - the form had to be even more fluid than *Euphoria* and its components were mainly from clouds, skies, grass and trees. The geometry of *In Exile* was solid, stuck in its own space, euphoria was circular, and beyond had to be scattered, spread, hundreds of small details, stories, scattered in the open galaxy where I reside now. There these fragments embarked on a new odyssey. Since then, I have been out of earth and will try to remain there until my *DISTURBIA* visits me again.

SR: Talking about odysseys, you left Jerusalem because you felt it was and is a city in exile, as you once said, “to escape

the rapid changes in it and its transformation into a city which is foreign to its own inhabitants”. Could you imagine yourself living in a condition of limited or conditioned freedom again? If you lived in Egypt, or Tunis, or Libya, could you have seen yourself living in an overcome regime for another 5, 10, 15 years?

SS: The question of where to locate myself is constantly on my mind. Living currently in Berlin, I sometimes truly wonder when will be the day of my breaking point. Limited or conditioned freedom, as you refer to it, is a condition that exists in every country in different shapes and forms. The question is what one is willing to live with!

On the other hand, I guess I am becoming ‘English’ or ‘German’ as I want to live in somewhere warm! Who knows where the journey of my life might take me. I might end up living where my ancestors came from, in Sicily, Italy. It might be that everything I have been going through was life’s mission to entice me to return there. Kamal Boullata once wrote:

“The city [Jerusalem] considered a bridge between heaven and earth may be absent in Sabella’s photographs, but everything in these frames indicates the manner by which this native photographer has rebuilt his own Jerusalem. And yet, it is in Sabella’s conscious avoidance of photo-

graphing Jerusalem that the visual artist has managed to recreate the universality of a place with which he identifies. In that respect, his search for his true self may be likened to those monks who, drawn by Jerusalem, came from distant lands only to spend the rest of their lives in bare and desolate landscapes. Only there could Sabella find a Jerusalem where he might breathe fresh air”.

Maybe I have been marching back. In these desolate landscapes, I lost my identity and I freed myself from what has been forced upon me. I cleansed my skin, defied mental dictatorships and uprooted myself to reach a new level of the realization of the self. My imagination refused to be colonized since I was a very young child.

I wrote in 1997: “I created myself a New World, My World”. Today, I feel more like I have created myself a New Self. In Jerusalem, I never breathed fresh air. I had to exit to the skies to survive, but one sky was not enough. I needed to journey to the galaxies. There, I found Euphoria and Beyond Euphoria. For the first time in my life, I feel I have a break and I can breath some fresh air.

SR: Do you think that this important transformation going on in the Middle East will reach Palestine as well? What do you think will happen in Israel after

this widespread shaking?

SS: I am now more convinced that if liberation is to hit Palestine change needs to happen in the Israeli society. As a reminder, the first Intifada in 1987, which lasted six years, was bullet free – that is the Palestinians revolted through mainly non-violent demonstrations. This led to the Oslo Peace process where Palestinians are suffering from its catastrophic effects.

To liberate Palestine, Israelis need to move to the streets in their masses and demand an end to this horrific occupation. True change only comes from within. They need to exert pressure on their government. However as you may know the Israeli society has become so indifferent about the occupation that it is hard to see change coming to the Palestinian reality in the foreseeable future.

I also believe that Palestinians (by large the Arabs and this already started happening) need to free their imagination first. Israel has not only colonized the land, but also the mind and imagination. I have never experienced how people felt self-defeated more than in the last years. The self-defeat extended to the rest of the Arab World. But it seems the long anticipated change has finally set in.

SR: Let's make a funny experiment.

Let your “ego” free to expand itself and imagine you as a superhero (remember it is just game...). What power would you have or would you like to have and how would you use it during this transition?

SS: I want to have the ability of speed-reading, where I can finish and understand a book in minutes (preferably seconds!)! Knowledge and the ability to transform that knowledge into practice would be a major asset in any transition.

SR: As an Artist Citizen, do you feel you have a responsibility towards the rest of the world? What is the change that you would hope, wish and put effort in willing to do for the world you live in?

SS: As far as I remember, even as a child, I always questioned the essence of being or life. It was inevitable that art becomes an inseparable part of my life. I do not think I have a responsibility towards the rest of the world; I do what I do because I feel I have to. I mean, when I make an artwork, I do not think it is targeted towards anyone except myself.

I do not remember once creating art to satisfy the needs of anyone or in support of anyone. I create art because I always feel a need to create and this need ‘gets pregnant in me’ and it suddenly explodes. That is why it is important to have art historians, critics and even curators who





Euphoriá (no.3), 2010
155 / 127 cm
lambda print + diasec mount
Limited edition of 6 + 2 AP
Image courtesy of the Artist.

try to put things in context, as artists are often acting as mirrors of bigger concepts or as interrogators of concepts. The artistic individual journey is not really an individual one, especially when the artwork is exposed to the public which starts to have a life of its own and becomes prone to endless interpretations and contexts that many of them were not in the artist's intention.

The world is entrapped in its own image. Any change that any country, nation wishes to undergo has to start with the nature of that image. That is, people need to understand image formation and the mechanisms that manage to change global perception. At a time where conquering the world physically is no more considered a viable option, it seems that conquering the image of the world is becoming or has become the New World Order. In other words what we are witnessing is the conquering and or the 'Colonization of the Imagination'. What I wish is for people to understand how to liberate themselves from that colonization.

Furthermore, if I would perceive art as a mechanism to communicate messages, I would not have engaged myself in it. I perceive art as a mechanism of discharge first and second as a tool of self-liberation.

SR: As an artist, what is the principle obsession that leads your practice? Do you think it changed in your artistic development? Is it likely to change under the current circumstances?

SS: My life is what leads my practice. All my artworks since the mid 1990s are like a narrative and it is enough to go through the titles to develop a picture of my life. Since that time, I have been going through endless stages of self-introspections. Notice the title of my first major artwork in 1997 was Search, then Identity (2002), End of Days (2003), Till the End (2004), Jerusalem in Exile (2005), Exit (2006), In Exile (2008), Settlement Six Israelis & One Palestinian (2008), In Transition (2010), Euphoria (2010), and Beyond Euphoria (2011), to name a few. Any reader would notice that there is a narrative unfolding which is personal, and in many ways my work acts like a visual novel.

SR: What are your projects for the future, or, if you like, the next chapters of the novel? Are you working on something new?

SS: I am collaborating with artist Jeanno Gaussi who originally comes from Kabul and lives in Berlin. She deals with found objects where she tries to construct hybrid space, and I deal with collage where I try to express my state of mind of living

in exile and its consequences.

Knowing her in person, we both deal with similar issues but in different forms. The work we intend to create is basically two large glass installations. Jeanno and I would collect from many houses in the Old City of Jerusalem loose or falling wall plaster that comes in many colors and various shapes. These fragile fragments would then be sandwiched between thin glass plates and placed in an installation. As you can imagine, the work has many cultural, political and personal aspects.

RESIDUE

Having voluntarily left Jerusalem 'for good' in 2007, especially after I conceived that my city of birth disappeared and went into exile (jerusalem in exile 2005), I find in collecting wall fragments an opportunity for me to re-discover the place, as it directly implies entering many houses there including my birth place in the Old City.

I feel there is still much residue in me that I have to deal with, especially after dealing for many years with the consequences of alienation. The collage itself will resemble in many ways my process of creation, especially my collage works, and my efforts to re-construct myself, yet, the difference being that the collage is formed of tangible residue and not a mental state created by photographic im-

ages. It seems, it is inevitable that I have to visit the capital of my imagination again – Jerusalem.

SR: Thank you Steve, it was a pleasure, as usual.

SS: Thanks for taking the time and next time we should fly to 'Jerusalem' and for once experience what we discuss in practice!