

On the Arab-Jew,
Palestine, and
Other Displacements



Selected Writings

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On the Arab-Jew, Palestine and Other Displacements

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Extract from the foreword on the works of Steve Sabella:

Displacement as metonym (in the sense of actual movement from place to place) and as metaphor (in the sense of comparable displacements) forms a binding thread that runs through *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements*. For this reason, I found Steve Sabella's "38 Days of Re-Collection" (2014) to suggestively convey the thrust of this book, and selected it for the cover. The basic material of Sabella's "Re-Collection" series -- B & W photo emulsion spread on swashes of color paint scraped from the interior walls of houses in Jerusalem's Old City -- strangely parallels this book project itself, also composed of fragments gathered from several decades of work and now "housed" in this collection. The stand-alone materiality of the piece, literally extracted from a wall, conveys a layered history through palpable layers of paint. The scraped paint with its several strata of color, forms a literal palimpsest, testifying as it were to the various hands that had painted each one. The turquoise in particular evokes the greenish shades of the wall paint color commonly preferred by indigenous communities of the region (whether Muslims, Christians, or Jews) to protect against the evil spirits. Scraping thus becomes both an act of excavation of the buried substrata of forgotten lives, as well as a means to visualize again intermingled lives.

At the same time, the beige and the brown, in conjunction with the jagged shape of the fragment, generate a strong impression of a map. As objects of visual representation, maps are premised on some correspondence to the "real" of land and sea and so forth. Yet the shape of the "map," in this instance, portrays a country nowhere to be found. Here the map becomes a signifier without a referent, a simulacrum of simulacra, a token of powerlessness and the arbitrary nature of maps. In a kind of premonition about the overpowering force of maps, the scraped fragment evokes both roots and routes. The partially discernable colors of the fragment re-present the adorned walls that wrapped generations of the living in a modicum of continuing at-home-ness. Sabella's artwork in this sense inhabits at once the present (the actual paint-piece) and the past (the inter-generational layers of paint.) Similarly, the superimposition of the image of the kitchen -- the window and hanging pots and pans and even a decorative cat figure -- on the scraped paint suggests quotidian domesticity. The kitchen becomes the privileged site of food preparation both as digestive necessity and culinary tradition, while also redolent of sensuous delights and communal rituals. But in contrast to the materiality of the scraped paint, the black and white kitchen has the immateriality of a superimposed image, thus forming a simultaneous presence-absence that inscribes the quotidian life haunted by a ghostly past.

The black and white kitchen image in this sense evokes all that was left behind in the lives of those displaced, wandering across land and sea. The kitchen superimposed on the "map" also suggestively turns routes into a form of rootedness, as the dishes are passed on and forge home-ness even in-transit. At the same time, the paint fragment and the black and white kitchen together register a vision of scattered lives, while underscoring a possible state of exile even when literally at home. The artwork suggests a displacement of a place and particularly of Jerusalem as "a city exiled," in Sabella's words, "from itself." The black and white image, furthermore, is reminiscent of archival footage-- of the photos and films associated with of Jerusalem dating back to the nineteenth century. And this archive, which today is circulating in digital space, has become a visual testimony to a Palestinian existence prior to the "settling in" of a new order. The fragment object is a remainder but also a reminder of the kitchen's nourishing role of preserving and transmitting sentient life.

By literally interweaving two spaces — paint extracted from one house and the image of the kitchen of another— Sabella’s artwork itself condenses and displaces, precisely the processes which psychoanalytic theorists find typical of the “dream work.” In this sense, the artwork captures the desire for at-homeness for those experiencing alienation, fragmentation, and estrangement. The same paint-fragment that facilitates the coming-into-existence of the (memory) of the kitchen, is now transposed into a hospitable space of creativity. “Re-collected” memories come to form aesthetic objects, now resignified as “art” in their new home. Old paint from walls is recycled to generate new forms of beauty, expressive of a desire to escape a claustrophobic situation. The out-of-place fragment now becomes an *aide-memoire* for Jerusalem, an object which has literally crossed from the Middle East into Europe, and in this sense it is reminiscent both of the displaced artist himself and of diasporized communities in general. Physically dislocated from Jerusalem, shorn of its functional beauty, the fragmented paint/kitchen now reflexively bears witness to exile, carrying unspoken tales of border-crossing.

Today, the word “displacement” conjures up news of the obliteration of cities, towns, and villages, as refugee camps make old refugees new refugees all over again. Camps in the Middle East, Camps in Europe; past dislocations resonate with the present, simultaneously foreshadowing and reflecting back. Displacements become each other’s ghosts. The memory of life projected on the wall is now superimposed on the ghost of the home, the kitchen, the quotidian—that is no longer. The series interweaves various lives, as each paint-fragment is taken from a different place, and as each black and white image represents another fragment of a home—tiles, floors, etc. In this sense, the various fragments fused together enact an imaginary threshold encounter of the living and the dead, of those who remain and those who have departed, thus blurring the boundaries between times and places. Off-balance, the photographed artwork on the book cover, furthermore, provokes a sense of disorientation, or perhaps, reorientation, in the viewer / the reader. In its metaphorical dimensions, “displacement” is, after all, a way of seeing, reading, listening, and re-membering.

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