

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

By: Steve Sabella

If an archaeologist looks at the pieces from my new series *38 days of re-collection* 2014, it could be assumed that these are found objects, unearthed artifacts. Yet, upon careful inspection the archaeologist is bound to find that these fragments are created by an illusion. Black and white images are printed with Black & White photo emulsion onto colorful paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's Old City home walls. Decoding these pieces would require a new approach to traditional archaeology, since the 'artifact' came to light through a photographic process. Our understanding of images, their origins, formation and perception is still at its infancy. To decode this artwork requires us to understand images.

What came first, the world or its image? In order to answer this question, we are led towards the genealogy of the image. And if the world has always been an image, as philosophers have stated time and again, then our search reaches to infinity. But, we can solve several visual puzzles along the way, adding to our understanding of the world we live in. The first cave images were probably our early known attempts in being able *to image* and eventually decode the images we imagined of ourselves. Studying them is visual archaeology. Where did our image come from? Perhaps it was then that we discovered our first visual genome. Its genes contained DNA made of light - or mirrored from light - an illusion. By drawing on stones, we fixed the illusion of sight perceived in our imagination. A few millennia later, we fixed this light on paper and metal plates - photography came into existence. The still images shocked the world. They bore the greatest resemblance to the illusion our eyes were able to see, yet they had nothing to do with reality. They created a world of their own. I wonder if the time has come to stop focusing on the connection between images and the 'real world.' Maybe we need to explore the visual components of the world by looking into the image itself - just like in scientific research. We need to study images, the connections between them, their characteristics, and especially their origins by looking at them directly and not in constant comparison with reality. This may allow us to discover the infinite possibilities that are hidden in images. My relationship with the image is like being on a space odyssey, in search of understanding image formation. And since an image is part of the imagination, unlocking the code will allow us to see beyond our own reality. Liberated from time, floating freely in our imaginations. Image editing, for example, allows an image to change from one form to another. The 24 still images that make up one second of video can also be rearranged and displayed so that the first image becomes the 24th, and the 24th can become a part of another time constellation, creating a new story or reality. When these images are moved out of their original sequence, they have travelled in time. Images constantly time travel, or to be more precise, images can go from one state to another at any given moment.

In my work, I take photographs from several different angles and then I create a collage to bring forth new forms. I ask myself whether I am creating

"We need pictures to create history, especially in the age of photography and cinema, but we also need imagination to re-see these images, and thus, to re-think history." - Georges Didi-Huberman



38 days of Re-collection, 2014. International Center for Photography Scavi Scaliqeri in collaboration with Boxart Gallery, Verona. Photo by Davide Papetti

or unveiling something that is already out there waiting to be discovered. I have started re-looking at my work, and getting rid of all the text, thoughts and concepts that have been fixed to it. I am learning how to unveil new readings beyond the original intentions of the works (intentions that had more to do with context rather than the artistic images themselves). I started to perceive the work in the form of a visual palimpsest, where what is hidden is far more than what is visible. For my next work, I will project the image of Jerusalem onto a wall in one of its Old City caves. I will effectively transform the cave into a darkroom, spreading light sensitive photo emulsion on the wall and projecting the light of the image onto a surface that may have never seen light before. Even after fixing the image using a chemical process, it is bound one day to disappear. Perhaps after many years the emulsion will dry out, wither and peel off. Yet, even though it will physically disappear from the cave, it will survive in other endless imagined forms such as photographs, films, and even in memory. The image never dies, it simply changes form. We need to research what came before the cave - the genealogy of the image. The visual history of the image in the cave did not start with my projection of it on the wall. Let us try to trace back where that image came from. The projection is an image. The source of that projection is a photographed image of Jerusalem. Did what the image depicts ever exist in a physical form? What guarantees that Jerusalem is not an image that was created or revealed, just like the one on the cave's wall? What is the source of all these images? Image and perception are multilayered, and we might be living in a world with an infinite number of visual palimpsests. Furthermore this project does not require me to physically go and seek out this cave in Jerusalem and turn it into a darkroom. I might. The imagination has already materialized the project and made it a reality. These written words give it legitimacy. We can already speak about the project's connotations and meanings. People have already reacted to the project regardless of its manifestation. The mind can explore location without location. This is the archaeology of the future. It is an expedition through image and imagination. Can we break free from our image? I came to terms with my exile after a process of self interrogation and introspection. As Vilem Flusser writes, *"Emigre become free, not when they deny their lost homeland, but when they come to terms with it."* I did not want my DNA to change, I would always come from Jerusalem, but what could change is consciousness and perception. By examining exile from different angles and perspectives, I was able to dig deeper into the relationship between images and the reality they create. I freed myself. Decoding fixed systems that are constantly at work to entrap people in bordered spaces, led me to see the bigger picture. Each series I have created began with a visual question, which, once solved, would lead me to a new visual challenge. Looking back at my work, I see that I was unfolding palimpsests that explore the multiple layers of my past, and the influence perception had on my 'reality.' Today my images gain their independence from my narrative. Their hidden layers begin to reveal themselves through new readings. It is time to engage further in the process of looking, where meaning resides only in the mind of the viewer. My aesthetic struggle is to create art with a connection to visual history. My illusions are imagined bridges, map-like structures, that connect us to our past with an eye to the future.



Till the End, 2004, photo emulsion on Jerusalem stone, International Center for Photography Scavi Scaligeri in collaboration with Boxart Gallery, Verona. Photo by Mauro Fiorese.