



# Everything and nothing

## *Khaled Sabsabi*

PEDRO DE ALMEIDA

There are few Australian artists who have displayed such convincing evidence of undergoing a profound and genuine process of artistic, personal and spiritual maturation in recent years as Khaled Sabsabi. I say this from the perspective of a close friend, professional colleague, admirer of the work and admirer of the man, positions and relationships that have been developed in reverse consecutive order since first meeting Sabsabi at Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2008 on the occasion of the launch of Ai Weiwei's *Under Construction*. A hugely impressive survey exhibition of one of the world's pre-eminent figures in contemporary art, it was presented—not without considerable surprise and envy among art world insiders—at a young, developing arts centre in Sydney's western suburbs, the go-to region, where Sabsabi's family and my own had settled, like so many other immigrants to this country, in the days when hip hop mattered most and the street seemed a better canvas for self-expression than anything approximating a white cube.<sup>1</sup> It's utterly platitudinous to state that Sydney's west is as culturally rich an urban social landscape as any other in the world, as endless demographic statistics and bureaucratic government reports will testify with more accuracy, but far less sensitivity than a simple walk down the street or talk with a neighbour. However, even today, more than a decade on from the prescient-minded State government arts' policies

that did so much to develop the arts in the region, its stories are most often told without the amplification of the culture industry on a national let alone international platform, this perhaps in spite of its superior diversity of voices.

Having the world's most hyped artist in town on that extraordinary night in May—an immensely significant period in Ai Weiwei's personal trajectory following his audacious *Fairytale* project at documenta 12, before the unveiling and subsequent disowning of his contribution to the 'Birds Nest' Beijing National Stadium, and just days before the tragic earthquake disaster in Sichuan province that would later prompt the artist's most direct confrontations with Chinese authorities—only heightened the sense of the trite truth behind the proverb, "a prophet is not recognised in his own land". Well, it seemed like that to my relatively naïve eyes at the time. I had been in the job as a curatorial assistant at Campbelltown for a week and was soaking it all up, sponge-like, both wet and green. Surrounded by one hundred of the suitcases used by the participants in *Fairytale*, a work that saw 1,001 Chinese farmers, street vendors, students, office workers and the unemployed travel from China to Kassel, Sabsabi was kind enough to introduce himself to me amongst the din of the crowd spilling out into the centre's Japanese Garden. I bummed a John Player Special and listened.



The past five years have been a thoroughly commanding period of superlative creative output for Sabsabi. The principal credentials are these: he has presented work at festivals and group exhibitions in Brazil, Germany, Poland and numerous group exhibitions in Australia; was awarded the Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship (2010), enabling travel to Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus for a fruitful period of new experiences, research and the creation of material for new work; he was the recipient of the 61st Blake Prize for his work *Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement* (2010), the first work depicting or concerned with Islam to be awarded Australia's long-standing prize for religious art; in 2012 he presented three multimedia works in the 18th *Biennale of Sydney*, a large-scale video installation at Artspace, Sydney, and works in *The Floating Eye* Inter City Pavilion as part of the 9th *Shanghai Biennale*; and most recently, was included in the *Sharjah Biennial 11* (2013). But it's not bullet points in the CV that confer significance alone. Where many of his contemporaries are seemingly self-satisfied in exploring shallow waters further limited in their navigation by their relatively myopic frames of cultural reference, taking as their concerns or absurdly ominous sounding "interrogations" narrow subjects of social, historical or aesthetic inquiry, Sabsabi has continued to dive into deeper depths of the human experience, pursuing a very personal yet paradoxically resounding universal invocation of truth.

I often get the sense that for Sabsabi the terrestrial, tangible and transitory world as it manifests itself in his recent works is at once everything and nothing: he seems to declare, "what you see is what you get", but then "virtue has a veil, vice a mask". For someone whose very presence in Australia is inseparably bound up with the vicissitudes of political failure, religious conflict and civil war experienced first-hand in his native land of Lebanon, Sabsabi is remarkably sage in his engagement with weighty historical and contemporary subjects in his art, resisting the superficial irritant that others only too cleverly scratch in order to be heard today but forgotten tomorrow. He recognises and accepts that lived experience trumps ideology in a full measure of things. Essentially, as someone who came to visual art relatively later in life after a focus on music—specifically hip hop and DJing, as wonderfully energetic archival footage revealed by a simple search on YouTube will attest—I suspect that he might share, but for different reasons and in a vastly different context, the central inner drive of the artist as hauntingly expressed by the modern Persian writer Sadegh Hedayat, who confessed:

*If I have now made up my mind to write it is only in order to reveal myself to my shadow, that shadow which at this very moment is stretched across the wall in the attitude of one devouring with insatiable appetite each word I write... I must make myself known to him.*<sup>2</sup>



The darkness of that shadow, of course, is relative to the quality and clarity of the artist's vision; not for nothing did Hedayat take his own life in sombre post-war Paris in 1951, following decades of social isolation tempered by a soul-destroying appetite for opiates. For Sabsabi, by profound contrast, the social platform has always been his natural habitat in art and in life, as his prolific body of work over the past decade reveals to those with an inclination to engage with it as openly and honestly as one can across cultural difference. Yet this does not make life peachy, as the conflict and violence depicted in some of his works clearly demonstrates. This, in tandem with his significant professional capacities and achievements in the broader community cultural development sector and more recently, curatorial projects for Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre where he is employed, positions Sabsabi as an artist who routinely and fluidly draws on the experiences of the communities around him for his art. Indeed, the work presented in the *Sharjah Biennial 11* in the United Arab Emirates, *Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement* (2011), originates from a Sydney suburb situated between the artist's home and place of work. This three-channel video work with accompanying table, prayer book and incense that gently infuses the gallery depicts a *zikr* ceremony of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order by local faithful in an Australian Scouts hall in suburban Sydney. And yet, put that way, it's a Google Maps idea of community engagement, of which there is a disconcerting variety of projects that seemingly wholeheartedly pursue brownie points, which come with 'outreach' projects that facilitate bureaucratic check-boxing. As two nouns and a verb that conjoin a spiritual order in existence for more than a millennia and an otherwise banal suburban

context with a methodology of artistic practice, *Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement* is much more than the sum of its parts. One of the primary aspects that distinguishes this work from that of many of his Australian peers is its profoundly unelaborated earnestness: forget outreach, look inwards and embrace strangers as one's family of man, which is to say, to embrace Allah. In a stridently majority secular Australian art world this places a heavy demand on audiences. Ask yourself, how many artists in Australia today take as their subject this kind of deeply personal and yet universal spiritual questioning, whilst at the same time producing works that are highly sophisticated within the formal language of the medium, producing wonderment, veneration and revelation in equal parts from sound and image in a genuinely distinctively clear-eyed methodological approach? I think it not an overstatement to say that given time Sabsabi may well prove a touchstone in Australian art not dissimilar to that formerly embodied across the Tasman by New Zealand's great modern painter Colin McCahon, sharing a preternatural ability to conjoin religious and aesthetic enquiry in works of exceptional and forceful impression.

Sabsabi's publicly exhibited work of the past five years has, I would posit, stood for three central themes: the vanity and hubris of the white noise of political theatre as a necessarily separate social sphere to a faith in a shared humanity; the indispensable meditative qualities of stillness that the acceptance of the transitory world of the everyday has on our self-knowledge; and the central transfigurative power of ceremony. The latter theme is particularly present in *Naqshbandi*, but also in the earlier work *Biripi* (2006) that was presented as part of the *Biennale of Sydney's* Cockatoo Island contingent of works in 2012, as well as *corner* (2012). *Biripi* comprises a wash of sound and image abstracted by a palette of saturated reds, glowing yellows and shifting shadows that combined has the rolling, percussive propulsion to drive the viewer to the metaphysical, almost

hallucinatory ceremony by the Aboriginal language group of that name from New South Wales' central coast. Interestingly, for all the wallpaper thin articulations of the previous *Biennale's* curatorial premise of "All our Relations" – as non-committal a statement of social relations as one might find – *Biripi* actually represented an instance of an unusual engagement between differing spiritual contexts for Australian art. Sabsabi's *corner*, moreover, collapses geographical and thereby geopolitical boundaries in the same fashion: two distinct but related multi-media installations first presented at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and at Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, as part of the three-year project *Edge of Elsewhere* in 2012, which each presented invocations of religious ceremony, communion and sacrifice in the artist's home city of Tripoli in Lebanon and the northern village of Danke, both equidistant from each other as 4A is from Campbelltown.<sup>3</sup> Recent works *MUSH* (2003-12), *Airland* (2010-12) and *Syria* (2004-12) form a triumvirate, which extols the alienating virtue of the camera's eye that redeems itself by standing in for the artist as an extrasensory organ inherently dispassionate in its recordings. *Airland* for instance, which was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, as part of the *Biennale of Sydney* last year, presents a gridded strip across adjoining gallery walls of hyper-saturated images of suburban homes under clouds with almost imperceptible motion synched to ambient sounds of a breeze. The work's strength lies in poetic intimation, packing a grounded, weighty experience of the world and the underlying spiritual substance beneath the surface of things into shifting, airy, incorporeal imagery.

The opportunity to present at Sharjah was a direct outcome of the impressiveness of these previous works. During the period of last year's *Biennale of Sydney* Sabsabi met with Yuko Hasegawa, chief curator of Tokyo's Museum of Contemporary Art and curator of the then forthcoming *Sharjah Biennial 11*, as he did in Brisbane a few months later with H.E. Sheika Hoor Al-Qasimi, President and Director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, who attended the launch of Sabsabi's solo exhibition at Milani Gallery the night preceding the opening of the *7th Asia Pacific Triennial*. Recounting these meetings, Sabsabi speaks of his admiration for both women that seems more than the platitudes expected of an artist towards curators who present an opportunity such as this. Of Hoor Al-Qasimi, Sabsabi recalls her deep interest in *corner*, literally spending an hour in front of the work absorbing it in silence, a decidedly uncommon commitment to experience new work that one might reasonably expect of jet-setting delegates.<sup>4</sup> Hasegawa's artistic direction of *Re:emerge-Towards a New Cultural Cartography*, which included work by fellow Australians Alfredo and Isabel Aquiliza, Angelica Mesiti and Tintin Wulia, is regarded by Sabsabi with a particular respect for the curator's sensitivity in creating layers of meaning by presenting works in an annular design. It elucidated her central theme of the courtyard as a space, where "the private and the public intertwine freely, as the 'objective' world of politics merges and overlaps with the subjective space of introspection".<sup>5</sup> *Naqshbandi* was presented on the ground floor of the Collections Building, one of the principal exhibition sites across Sharjah's heritage area of open-air courtyards, rooftop terraces and permanent and temporary spaces, surrounded by works by Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle, Marwan Rechmaoui, Anri Sala, Ana Torfs, John Akomfrah and Charwei Tsai.<sup>6</sup> As Sabsabi recalls:

*All the works were open to each other following the theme of the courtyard. But this is the interesting thing: if you had walked to the right as you entered this level of the building to begin to circumnavigate the works, as is natural in this context given Arabic script is read from right to left, you would have understood her [Hasegawa's] sensitivities in really considering the works and their content, stitching them up beautifully. I was blown away – the way you passed from representations or ideas of historical perspectives and periods from the eastern and western worlds, advancing one by one, concluding with Naqshbandi. But you got a very different narrative if you had navigated the space from the left, beginning with my work, then experiencing this totally disparate idea of history.<sup>7</sup>*

Furthermore, Sabsabi says of *Naqshbandi*:

*I was a little anxious about showing that work in Sharjah, specifically because it's Australian-made, it's five or six families doing a zikr ceremony and it's a really family-oriented ceremony that's happening with the kids around it; audiences might view it in such a way that it might be mocking, too informal, potentially blasphemous. But they got it! I mean they got it! They got this idea that this division that's going on between Shia and Sunni shows through clearly in the work and the essence is those kids, and having the men and the women in the ceremony together. It's not about fanatics. It's not about extremism. And this is what true Islam should be. It didn't matter if it was in Australia or Lebanon anymore.<sup>8</sup>*

Clearly, for Sabsabi the dichotomous idea of acceptance and resistance is key. Or, ironically, to put it more bluntly yet doubly eloquently, as Sabsabi himself summed up his experience of the stark qualitative difference between the platforms for contemporary art presented in Sharjah for the *Biennial* and in nearby Dubai for its art fair: "Art without context doesn't mean shit". Our conversation continues. These days I've quit smoking, but I'm still listening, still learning.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Ai Weiwei: Under Construction* was curated by Dr Charles Merewether and produced by Campbelltown Arts Centre (CAC) and Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF), presented across the two venues comprising a major survey exhibition of 45 works at CAC and a commissioned, large-scale installation at SCAF from 2 May–29 June 2008

<sup>2</sup> Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl* (روک فوب), D.P. Costello (trans.), Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997: 2

<sup>3</sup> *Edge of Elsewhere* was a three-year project produced by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Campbelltown Arts Centre that received significant support from the Australia Council for the Arts Visual Arts Board and Community Partnerships. Three exhibition outcomes were presented in early 2010, 2011 and 2012 as part of the Sydney Festival, comprising both existing works and the results of projects commissioned from Australian, Asian and Pacific artists working with Sydney communities. The author was project manager and associate curator of the project for the first two years

<sup>4</sup> *Khaled Sabsabi: Recent Works*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane, 6–22 December 2012

<sup>5</sup> Yuko Hasegawa, *Re:emerge: Towards a New Cultural Cartography, Sharjah Biennial 11* (catalogue), Sharjah Art Foundation, 2013: 23. The *Biennial* was presented from 13 March–31 May 2013

<sup>6</sup> *Sharjah Biennial 11 Exhibition Guide*, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2013. See: 232-233 for Collections Building exhibition floor plan

<sup>7</sup> Khaled Sabsabi in conversation with the author, 6 April 2013

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

Khaled Sabsabi participated in *Sharjah Biennial 11-Re:emerge Towards a New Cultural Cartography*, 13 March–13 May 2013