

Khaled Sabsabi: Peacefender

Artlink [Issue 35:1 | March 2015](#)

On his return to Lebanon in 2003 for the first time since escaping the civil war with his family in 1978, Khaled Sabsabi was struck by déjà vu. Along the route from Beirut airport to Tripoli he saw the familiar roadside murals of the Maronite Phalangists competing against propaganda from Islamist parties. “It was like I never left”, he recalls, “I actually remembered that mural that was on the wall. It was still there, the same thing as we escaped out of the place. Nothing was changed”.^[1] But while his own childhood memory had been rekindled, in Lebanon he found “a country and a region that was living in amnesia. Its senses and its ability had been bashed to numbness”.

Sabsabi’s return to Lebanon was also a form of escape – a reprieve from a Western Sydney Muslim community deeply scarred by virulent anti-Islamic sentiment in the wake of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. These journeys (he has since returned five times) from one landscape of trauma to another bring into focus the porousness of national borders and cultural identities in the 21st century.^[2] The discovery of a propaganda magazine in Tripoli, written in French but produced in China, led him to explore the complex geopolitics of contemporary war. He has continued to pursue these ideas in his art practice that interweaves documentary with his own deeply personal responses.

In *Guerrilla* (2007), for example, Sabsabi adopts a documentary-style approach, giving three former guerrilla fighters a chance to voice their experiences of the civil war. He revisited the work in 2014, subtitling it in English and exhibiting it alongside a collection of 33 photos – some of which were cut into the original video – that had been over-painted and partially destroyed. He took these photos in 2006, documenting the destruction of Beirut during the 33-day war against Israel. They were not originally conceived as works of art, but were the result of a personal process of reconciliation. “I had this idea that if you destroy the image, the image will die”, he recalls, “the essence of the image, the core of the image, what the image represents, not the physical picture, but that image of violence and hate, then it will die”.

Sabsabi does not aestheticise war, nor does he take sides, but at the core of his diverse artistic practice (which encompasses hip hop, theatre, new media installations and community projects) lies a commitment to social justice. His art reflects both his background as an immigrant Australian as well as his professional work with youth communities in Western Sydney, in which he often deals with issues of violence, racism and discrimination.

It is difficult not to read Sabsabi’s deeply-empathetic artistic practice as a manifestation of his community work; indeed the power of his art often comes through a disquieting confrontation with the communal. In *Oversite* (2007) for example (produced in collaboration with Salah Saouli), visitors walk over a room full

of discarded shoes, symbolic of the social trauma of war in general but perhaps in particular the deaths of Lebanese civilians during the 2006 war.^[3] It is through this form of empathetic suggestion that Sabsabi challenges Australian audiences to reconsider the social responsibilities of a country whose national mythology has been constructed around a century of wartime conflict in the Middle East.

1. [^] *All quotes from the artist are from an interview with the author, 17 November 2014.*
2. [^] *This was a theme that Sabsabi and co-curators David McNeill and Phillip George addressed in a 2008 exhibition by Lebanese–Australian artists, *The Resilient Landscape*, for the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW College of Fine Arts*
3. [^] *See Uros Cvorovic, 'Oversite: Walk with me', *Oversite: Khaled Sasabi and Salah Saouli*, Sydney: Casula Powerhouse, 2007, pp. 10–21.*

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