

## Khaled Sabsabi and the Infinite

To imagine the infinite is difficult and Australian artist, Khaled Sabsabi (b.1965) knows that. But this is what he strives toward through his media installations. He does this by using an individual language via electronic media. His last ten years have been dominated by these two main flows. For imagining a notion of the infinite, he draws on the Islamic Sufi teachings. His engagement doesn't appear to be some disconnected appropriation of Islamic Sufism but a central belief. This would assume the origin of everything happens via this specific form of Sufism and for Sabsabi it most certainly does. However, he is most concerned with Sufi philosophies that exist outside of hierarchical structures. This is a transgressive view of major monotheistic religions including Islam. These religious belief systems tend to limit and eliminate other non-religious experiences. Sabsabi is reminding the viewer that traditional and modern Islamic Sufism transcends a wide range of beliefs. Today's scholars recognise more than 300 living traditional and contemporary Sufi orders and few dispute that Sufism predates Islam. There is little disagreement that Sufism's spread throughout and was connected to Zoroastrianism. Over many centuries, most Sufi orders have successfully connected to Islam. While other Sufi orders have connected to Hinduism, Buddhism and Hebraism. These centuries of ever expansive Sufi connective-ness are a critical idea in Sabsabi's media work. According to Sabsabi, to connect is also about disconnecting and between these somewhat flowing dualities is an expression to the infinite. Most Sufi scholars state that from the start, a traditional Sufi was centred on the individuals' search for the infinite. Many names have been given to the infinite, including the Allah, Divine and God. Numerous Prophets and Saints have heralded their existence such as Jesus and Mohammad. Various artists have represented their images, prophecies and beliefs. For Sabsabi he claims Prophets and artists are part of a chain like everyone else'<sup>1</sup>. Here Sabsabi perhaps provocatively, connects and disconnects to hierarchical systems. It is these Islamic Sufi inspired dualities that have become a characteristic, intriguing and at times a contradictory feature of Sabsabi's work.

Sabsabi has once again used media installation for his latest project, titled *70,000 Veils* (2014). The title originates as Hicham Khalidi explains from the Prophet Mohammed's teaching that "there are 70,000 veils of light and darkness separating the individual from the divine."<sup>2</sup> Sabsabi's interpretation of the Prophet is a transgressive view. It falls somewhere between being a respectful witness and an outsider to Islamic teaching. His is a continuum between these positions, a notion of the infinite bringing centuries of Sufism spirituality into the now. Sabsabi has utilised this approach before in *Naqshbandi: Greenacre Engagement*

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<sup>1</sup> Khaled Sabsabi in conversation with the author, 14 April 2014

<sup>2</sup> Daniella Rose King, *Where Are We Now? Hicham Khalidi in conversations with Daniella Rose King*, [www.ibraaz.org/interview/121](http://www.ibraaz.org/interview/121), 31 March 2014. This quote by Khalidi originates from Khaled Sabsabi project concept document for the 2014 Marrakesh Biennale that "The Prophet Mohammed says there are *70,000 Veils* of light and darkness separating an individual from the Divine and an individual is drawn towards the Divine according to their relationship with the Divine."

(2011) and *Air Land* (2011) but not to the profound spiritual depths and scale of *70,000 Veils*. Like Colin McCahon, Sabsab's spirituality is not about religion. Most monotheistic religions tend to set rules to contain infinite spirituality. Sadly, most artistic expressions of religious content are didactic and creatively limiting. On this point, Sabsabi, McCahon, Bill Viola and Yayoi Kusama are exceptions. These artists tend to share Viola's view "that everything one does has a meaning in eternity"<sup>3</sup>.

**There are many interpretations given to the notion of the *Veil* in western and eastern traditions, all of which tend to converge at a higher spiritual point, where god's presence is fully revealed.** . The 70,000 Veils reference in Islamic Sufi literature tends to appear in the *Hadith*. A Hadith in religious use is often translated as 'tradition', meaning an oral report of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad two centuries after his death. The instructive nature of this Islamic Sufi teaching is rather similar to instructive works of conceptual artist Ian Millis and performance artist Tehching Hsieh. Like Millis and Hsieh, Sabsabi's precise work involves imagination on the part of the artist. He is theoretically enquiring into how to experience the infinite message of 70,000 veils from a physical finite world. He has exploited the physical evidence of his memory to experience the spiritual essences within the teaching of 70,000 Veils. As a realiser of numerous extensive works and projects within an extraordinary short period, Sabsabi maybe accused of not having intensely thought them through. His reliance on actions to understand his enquiries supposes an answer. . Yet from his own admission Sabsab is happy to not receive anything in return.

Without doubt *70,000 Veils* is Sabsabi's most ambitious and successful expression toward his ideas on the infinite. This is the longest production period he has undertaken, taking more than three years to create. The work is articulated as an autobiographical 3-D media landscape. It is the first time Sabsabi has used 3-D technology in his work. It also has Sabsabi's characteristic adaptiveness to spatial context. When *70,000 Veils* was internationally premiered at the 2014 Marrakesh Biennale 5 Morocco (28 February- 31 March 2014) it was presented as a five channel digital HD projection. The projection was on a continuous 15 x 1.7 metre wall. Three weeks after the Moroccan launch *70,000 Veils* was exhibited as a 100 digital HD monitor installation at the Milani Gallery, Queensland. Supporting the monitors was a constructed 13.2 x 2.4 metre wall, in an irregular right angle shape to the rectangular gallery. It suggested the internal space of a cube that referenced Sabsabi's earlier work titled *Mush* (2012). In *Mush* digital projections were on the surface of a floating cube. Accompanying the Milani presentation of *70,000 Veils* in the two upper galleries was *Guerrilla 2007* and 2014. *Guerrilla 2007* was first presented in the exhibition *ON`n` ON* of the same year by Lisa Havilah at the Campbelltown Arts Centre NSW, as part of a major exhibition of nine new and works including seven media and two installations with

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<sup>3</sup> Rachael Kohn, *Bill Viola's Spiritual Art*, ABC Radio National, 24 October 2010. Interview with Bill Viola. This quote by Viola refers to his study of Titus Burkhardt, the religious scholar who wrote about Islam, Buddhism and Christianity.

eight bikes and the other with hundreds of bag images. . Upon reflection, *ON 'n' ON* announced his new ideas about connective-ness and dualities, especially between politics and spirituality. These notions would be explored further in later works including '99' (2010), *Syria* (2013) and indeed *70,000 Veils*. Yet it is *Guerrilla* 2014 that was the surprise inclusion, introducing 33 hand-coloured photographs as a new element in Sabsabi's work. He decided to present the hand-coloured photographs after eight years of gestation.

Contextualisation of *Guerrilla* 2007 and *Guerrilla* 2014 is inseparable from the comparative and contrasting nature of *70,000 Veils*. All 33 images in *Guerrilla* 2014 were shot in 2006, soon after the 2006 Lebanon War and offer another perspective on the representation of the War. Each hand-coloured photograph depicts bombed sites, of which Sabsabi took hundreds. From this archive he symbolically painted and presented 33, to mark each day of the 2006 Lebanon War. The hand-colouring heightens the realism of the coloured photographs. This method dates to the 1840 daguerreotype photographs by Johann Baptist Iserning. Sabsabi's photographs were painted with acrylic, watercolour and gouache on Fujicolor Crystal Archive paper. One of the many features of this paper is its resistance to light fading and long-term dark storage. Sabsabi has selected this paper to build a lasting content. The 'entire' 2006 Lebanese War archive and the sound from *Guerrilla* 2007 have been rendered into *70,000 Veils*. The folding and unfolding sound and animation obscures their identity. The devastation they portray is reconstructed with past and current poetry - English and Arabic, old and new architecture, the dead and the living, all merged into this finite archive to represent the infinite.

*Guerrilla* 2007, accompanied by three audio-visual portraits, each giving an account of the war. The footage was recorded in private domestic environments and their opposing perspectives are considered controversial. The projection is gridded into three channels and presented as a landscape approximately 1.2 x 4 metres. However, they are portraits of two women and one male, the youngest female appears to be in her twenties and the others in their forties. . All reveal who they are and speak in Arabic, with English text translations. The structure of the projection is in threes i.e. three channels, three portraits, three scenes. The three subject scenes are mostly the portraits, the aftermath of the bombing and a political pamphlet narration. Each scene moves quickly and the portraits are in profile or face on. The pamphlet depicts historical images. One projection presents a series of stills; the other two present a book changing pages. One projects the book changing pages from left to right, the other changing pages from right to left. The next three projections cut to walking and moving vehicle scenes. Two of three depict strolling in bustling marketplaces, sometimes a gaze to chaotic overhead power lines, contrasting to those familiar in Australia. The other scene shows a moving vehicle in a rural setting, with observation towers, sometimes blurry sometimes clear. All three scenes then show bombed domestic buildings, followed by a female in mid-profile, crying while smoking. Next is a left and right projection fixed on a serene Mediterranean sunsets. Between the sunsets, the artist walk narrow streets, with camera lens at eye level, then to the sky blocked by close-ups of more chaotic

power lines. Sabsabi's lens is again a witness but never reveals him. From there, all the projections move closer to the second female. Her face is revealed but sometimes concealed by the prominent focus of her hands. An excerpt resonates as she declares, "I remember as a child railway tracks and I was told that they lead to Palestine, so I asked my mother is there a train or not. She said no but once there was. So I said why all this fighting when we can all follow the tracks and get to Palestine". The next scene returns to the bombed domestic buildings, showing a boldly defiant Lebanese flag. The last scene has the right and left projection of the artist walking through street markets and driving to the country's borders, again with lens at eye level. The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the destruction of Palestine will take place in 2017. Guerrilla 2007 and Guerrilla 2014 are offering a new way to tell an unresolved history. Here Sabsabi is creating for a new archive, the recordings of devastations. As a young artist, Sabsabi began experimenting with sound and poetry within the hip-hop group COD (Count on Damage) in Granville NSW. He gradually moved to sound tracks for short and features films, his last work were for *Cedar Boys* (2009). Yet it was to be media that eventually connected his sound and images and for *70,000 Veils* is one of the main devices. The sounds and animated images are both separate and united but fittingly reflect the compression of the work in total. They work together to set the mediative hum with the interchanging animated 3-D images. They change every second, 70,000 seconds of sound and equivalent animated images. They have been collected through Sabsabi's day-to-day experiences of local and international places, people, buildings, family and friends. All of the sound and images has been sourced from video, audio and photography recorded over 10 years time span.

To prepare the sound it goes through a process of stripping back high frequencies. It is then layered on top of each other to form the final sound outcome. The distribution of the sound is via each of the 100 monitors on 700 second loops. The connecting sound is from a centrally located sub-woofer where the bass is concentrated. Together they resemble a deep rumbling hum. The animated images have been gathered from 10,000 archival photographs. Each photo is electronically stripped and reconstructed into new images. The images are then processed through a 3-D analog and digital animation. .. Unlike the sound, the images are only presented across 100 monitors. Each monitor contains 700 animated images they loop at a clockwise and anti-clockwise direction. Collectively they total to 70,000 animate images. Between the sound and animated images is another tangible expression of the duality.

Curiously *70,000 Veils* human scale and length is a consistent to a piece. A piece in graffiti terms resembles a large, complex and labour-intensive painting. Piece often incorporate 3-D effects, arrows and many colour transitions. Without the 3D glasses each monitor resembles a sketch for either a block or a calligraphy/graffiti throw-up.

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Amongst the 700 image rotation within every monitor was unexpected accidents. Approximately every 30 seconds one or sometimes two of the monitors would revert to a blank monitor. This would happen across the entire 100 monitors. Perhaps these accidental moments suggest finite and infinite movements. Here the artist acknowledges the new possibilities of others engaging with the work. They also highlight a new interaction between energy and non-energy. According to Sabsabi the control of this random energy “depends when the work is switched on and in what order this sequence happens according to the one who has the remote”<sup>5</sup>. By allowing these blank monitors, he is perhaps connecting his ideas to the dualities of the visible and invisible. In addition, there is a slight time difference between each monitor in the loop time.

When Sabsabi introduced 3-D technology it added a new emotive element to his media work. He decided on a ‘passive’ 3-D technology as opposed to ‘active’ 3-D technology. To be ‘passive’ is to contradict. Thereby he is resisting hatred for love; resisting violence for peace; and resisting greed for generosity. The other emotive element of this technology is that the images are interleaved in space as opposed in time. Single images are collected in parallel lines for both the left and right stereo images. The monitors LCD panel also have polarising filters. The 3-D glasses used contain polarising filters, one over each eye. The 3-D glasses feed different images into the eye. Each monitor is displaying two images simultaneously. Without glasses the images appear out of register. The red and blue filters on the glasses separate the two different images. This ensures each eye receives each image separately; together the 3-D effect is created. With this passive 3-D technology the parallel resolution is halved limiting the pixel image. That is why the image is low and colours are a minimal palette of yellow, blue, green and red with white and black tones. This diminution of colour from the images contributes to the overall compositional harmony of *70,000 Veils*.

Unlike the five channel projection in Marrakesh, the 100 monitors in Brisbane offer a deeper 3-D visual experience. The projection even with the 3-D glasses flattens the 3-D occurrence more. These monitors created heat where the projections didn’t. The heat added another new emotional element to Sabsabi’s work. This heat created warmth to and around the work. Like a body. The closer the viewer came to the work the greater the warmth. This warmth relied on the electrical energy. Without this energy the monitors would go cold quickly. There is a vulnerability to media that cannot be said to painting or sculpture. The hot and cold or the life and death are controlled by one switch. Its physicality is temporary as is a finite life.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter McKay in conversation with the author, 29 March 2014

<sup>5</sup> Khaled Sabsabi in conversation with the author, 29 March 2014

The 11<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar Al-Biruni speculated that Earth's rotation of time and longitude could be connected. The monitors and projection in *70,000 Veils* create a natural grid formation, to form an orderly association with time and longitude. Rows and columns of the monitors are unevenly numbered. The monitors are stacked in rows of five, with contrasting columns of thirteen and seven. The significance of uneven numbers five, seven and thirteen in Islamic culture directly link to the belief in the Divine. In the Quran there are approximately 25 references to the number seven, including seven heavens and seven periods of creation, etc.<sup>6</sup> This symbolic use of mystic numbers has long been a connective signature in Sabsabi's work. For Plato, "where there is number there is order; where there is no number there is nothing but confusion formlessness and disorder"<sup>7</sup>. In Sabsabi's work *Mush (2012)* he emphasised the importance of the number eight on ancient living cultures. He did this to connect Sufism and other cultures to traditional Aboriginal women's ceremonies. In his sound-sculpture *Sale (2007)* eight yellow bikes with adopted cylinders that looked like rocket launchers on bikes, played on the never-ending resistance to violence.

One of the most absorbing visual aspects of *70,000 Veils* is how the 3-D image adjusts to the viewers changing positions. Without 3-D glasses the image remains in 2-D, with no marked change. With the glasses, the 3-D perspective changes according to the viewer's position. The depth of space between the moving positions and changing images are sublime experiences in Sabsabi's work. Depending on the animation of the image plane, this depth often creates vanishing points, lending another possible impression of the infinite.

Sabsabi did not know that *70,000 Veils* was to begin development in 2003. During this time of the Iraqi invasion, he first travelled to Morocco, Turkey, Syria and to his birth land Lebanon. He was 12 years old when he left with his family for Australia and Lebanon was already five years into a civil war. This war lasted another 13 years, until October 1990. In 2003 two crucial and alternating events took place. From Sabsabi's own accounts these events would transform his practise and life. The first was in Tripoli Lebanon, where he visited a sacred site and witnessed origins of his Islamic Sufi lineage. This lineage originated from Iraq in the seventh century AD. The other was in Morocco, where he came in contact with the Sufi teachings of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240). Arabi established the Akbarian Islamic tradition that is embedded in the Quran. Arabi's scholars' espoused his universal philosophy including "that each person has a unique path to the truth"<sup>8</sup> and "that woman and man are absolutely equal in terms of human potentiality".<sup>9</sup> These teachings would have resonated deeply with Sabsabi, especially an individual's right to imagine the infinite. Some

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<sup>6</sup> M. Sahibzada, The Symbolism of the Number Seven in Islamic Culture and Ritual, wadsworth.cengage.com, 1 March 2014.

<sup>7</sup> A. Herman, The Cave and the Light, Pub. Random House, pp. 29. 2013

<sup>8</sup> Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi 1165 -1240 AD, The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/ibnarabi.html> 17 February 2014

<sup>9</sup> Souad Hakim, [Ibn 'Arabi's Twofold Perception of Woman - Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle](#), First published in the Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Volume XXXI, 2002, pp. 1-29

scholars identified Arabi's legacy as the school of knowledge in Islam. However, the school of love in Islam was attributed to Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273). Historically these two master Sufi's had overlapping lives and knew each other's works but unclear if Arabi and Rumi ever met. Rumi's well known passion for music, poetry and dance as a way to the Divine is an inspiration to Sabsabi. The mystic's philosophy that an individual can express the infinite through creativity appears to be a source of inspiration for *70,000 Veils*. However, unlike Rumi, Sabsabi questions if the accumulated memory of life can represent spiritual essence as a way to imagining the infinite.

By 2013 Sabsabi had visited Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Morocco several times. He also visited China, Cyprus, Germany, Holland, Malaysia, Poland, and the United Arab Emirates (Sharjah and Dubai). In Cyprus (2011) he met the Sufi Shekih Nazim Al-Haqqani (b.1922), a controversial Sufi teacher of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order and currently exiled in Cyprus from Turkey. Al-Haqqani inspiration the *Naqshbandi: Greenacre Engagement* and *70,000 Veils*. Al-Haqqani's website features many audio recordings and transcribed interviews. A stand out quote from his reflections and contemplations, translates everyday observations into philosophical statements about life, "...use it (life), so that you do not come to this world as a colt and leave it as a donkey".<sup>10</sup>

Some who experience *70,000 Veils* may be disconcerted that Sabsabi doesn't lay everything out openly. All those monitors with fragments of Sabsabi's memories make some viewers feel like they go beyond the artists' stated 10 years of archival images and sound. The avoidance of definition and lack of narrative-ness can register as a form that is too direct. Yet the knowledge and experience that has enabled Sabsabi to reach this place, is also mournful because they are moments of change, regardless of their emotional openness. In *70,000 Veils*, much of what is experienced is distorted. In this ever-changing twirl of memories from the finite to the infinite, the details of Sabsabi's community engagements, cannot be realised but only imagined. This includes his work in Palestinian refugee camps and with young Arabic and Aboriginal children in suburban Miller, Sydney NSW. *70,000 Veils* highlights the awakening relationship contemporary orthodox Islam has with traditional Islam. How polarised these views are and how desensitised we have become to their difference. Then there is the ease to disconnect then connect to a living human being. Ironically from the very discipline that Sabsabi uses. *70,000 Veils* will ask us to explore questions we are sometimes afraid to ask. This inspiring work is humbling in its omission to the finite experience of art to the infinite.

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Kon Gouriotis

8 May 2014

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<sup>10</sup> Sheikh Nazim Al Haqqani Al Qubrusi An Naqshibandi, [www.saltanat.org/](http://www.saltanat.org/) 10 March 2014