

The precariousness of placemaking

A place for everything and everything in its place; a seemingly innocuous turn of phrase that harbours one of humanity's greatest obsessions – the need to categorise, to organise and to feign control when faced with the reality of the unknown. Our insatiable need to create places has seen rivers of concrete coerce land into grids, an act of demarcation that sees space become place. It is as if we feel this thin smear of cement divides us from the uncontrolled and the unimagined. But it doesn't. The idea of place is proving to be the contemporary utopia, a Xanadu that is perpetually just out of reach but remains achingly oh-so-near. This ache runs hot under our skin. Intertwined with ideas of comfort and ownership and integral to our sense of belonging, the need to create place is primal. We need to find our place.

In perhaps humanity's most triumphant of ironies is the fact that our places are not distinct, they overlap. After painstakingly crafting a place we find that it is not solely ours but, in fact, shared. My place is your place. It is at this point of convergence that utopia is at its closest. In this moment we should be able to recognise a shared love, a shared idea of belonging and a shared sense of ownership – of even perhaps community – but we don't. This point of convergence also becomes a point of rupture as forceful as a magnetic field. While essentially the same we repel each other with unwarranted ferocity. For we, as Joanna Bourke so aptly states, “are a warring people.”ⁱ

As warring people our need to create and demarcate has also seen us include and exclude - a process that has seen us create a place for us that is distinct from a place from them. The long history of mankind is punctuated by bloody tales and epic wars fought in the name of place and placemaking. Khaled Sabsabi's work examines this underbelly of humanity; it looks deftly and steadfastly into the heart of why when faced with the possibility of utopia we are continuously repelled.

Wonderland (2014) places the viewer in the exact moment where places converge. A two-channel video depicts jeering crowds at a soccer match, the fans cheer and sledge in uncanny similarity; they wear the same colours, sing the same songs, hold the same banners and are both supporters of the Western Sydney Wanderers. However, while their allegiance is aligned, Sabsabi forces the viewer to discriminate between the two. In *Majority/Minority* the sound for *Wonderland* is overpowering. Standing between two speakers the cheers melt into an unbearable dissonance

where the only relief is to move towards one side and, in essence, to pick a side. Despite their similarities their passion does not converge to be united but rather proves to be untenable.

The second video work, *Tawla*, was filmed in Beirut and depicts a series of six backgammon games played simultaneously at a frenetic pace. The sheer speed of gameplay makes it almost impossible for the viewer to follow a single game, let alone six. Hands reach across the frame disrupting its clear geometry as they move to place pieces and, as time progresses, there is evidence of sleight of hand - of fast but deceitful play – as each player seeks to bend the possibilities of chance in their direction. The need to conquer and to control space continues in the most simplistic of pastimes.

The complementary series of paintings, *Martyrs and Followers* (2016) sees Sabsabi's hand directly engage with the act of placemaking. Just as the raising of the flag is an act of territorial claim the modern poster has become a social means of inciting allegiance. Traditionally in southern Lebanon these posters appear from poles at the entrances to villages and cities announcing their cherished martyr; a process that has become hijacked by political and social persuasions that mimic such proclamations in an attempt to galvanise support. Their faces seek to usurp the martyrs inserting themselves in their place and littering the urban streets with unsubstantiated promises. Sabsabi renders their faces to a mere outline, faintly visible underneath the veneer of white paint he applies to obliterate their campaigning. It is an act that seeks to negate the claim to place.

Majority/Minority examines our claim to place presenting it as a precarious and impossible pursuit. Condemning our need for ownership Sabsabi dares the viewer to consider the impossibility of the utopian place and challenges us to occupy moments of discomfort rather than retreating.

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ⁱ Joanna Bourke. *Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-play invade our lives*. London: Virago Press, 2014. p.3.