

## Syria

Sabsabi's *Syria* (2012) is a provocation to those who hold an entirely reasonable expectation that a label exists to act as a logical descriptor of its referent. Let's be clear: *Syria* is not about Syria. The work signals Sabsabi's fascination with the ways by which beneath the surface of things there can exist a metaphorical structure opposed to that surface. For instance, the way a visually complex abstract image of bustling lines and jostling forms doesn't necessarily convey a buzzing randomness but instead unveils the balance of nature's elementary simplicity, or the symbolic means by which the underlying moral structure of foundational myths runs perpendicular to the chronological unfolding of events. *Syria* is a title that illustrates the inadequacy of words to define that which is beyond them.

Incorporating moving images from the artist's large archive of recordings of Damascus since 2004, *Syria* has the beautiful complexity of fractal geometry of which it shares a self-sustaining system of self-similar patterns that span different points in time. Its degree of formal and aesthetic complexity is enhanced as a multi-channel projection that is reflected onto glass. Undoubtedly a masterwork within the artist's *oeuvre*, *Syria* is a culmination of two decades of an artistic practice tied to a deeply ethical and spiritual enquiry that is remarkable in its consistency of yearning and generosity of spirit. Speaking of this trajectory Sabsabi confesses to a highly focused determination to 'work toward a progressive collapsing of space—the territorial space of nations, of the mind and of the soul.'<sup>i</sup>

Listening to the artist speak I'm always struck by the fact that he never reverts to a dependence on received opinion from the white noise that surrounds discussions about race, religion and politics. In a full measure of things as an artist Sabsabi's achievement is one of moral courage tempered by a deep, sustained and genuine deliberation of the nature of our universal equivalence. Look around you: one is so easily rewarded for accepting the masks of the enemy at face value, safer still to trace familiar lines of separation or unjustly profit from the unchallenged stigmas and prejudices of an inherited world where the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.<sup>ii</sup> Artists, no less than anyone else, are not immune to this, especially in the age of flagrant and unacknowledged privilege that facilitates deliberate or otherwise ignorant misrepresentations. Left unchallenged it can lead to an altogether more suffocating cleansing of what an artist does, creates and, more sinisterly, his very person.

Like the great American novelist, poet, playwright, essayist and political activist James Baldwin, who in 1955 at the age of thirty-one published his first collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son* a few years before the creation of the works that cemented his reputation as a writer and orator of a rare and brilliant eloquence, Sabsabi is an artist and a man for whom vanity is a lie and hubris a prison. In Baldwin's essay *Everybody's Protest Novel* he bravely positioned himself, at a critical historical juncture, as an irreconcilable opponent of the fallacies of social consensus by repudiating the moral foundation of 'good intentions', noting the bitter irony that this in fact amplifies the afflictions of the intended recipients of charity by sustaining their—which is to say, our brothers'—stifling categorisation and captivity. Similarly, in this work of major accomplishment, *Syria*, Sabsabi atomises his own identity, history and geography to the point where the light and heat of this artistic fission is either illuminating or blinding depending, as Baldwin put it, on the question of one's steadfastness toward navigating one's own path:

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this centre will guide one aright.<sup>iii</sup>

In the refractions of Khaled Sabsabi we pierce the surface of things to confront the capacity of our conditioning to bend to another's will or to a power greater than we can know.

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<sup>i</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>ii</sup> The best-known, most oft-quoted line from W.B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* (1919), one of the most iconic Modernist poems, composed in the same year in which the first Syrian National Congress convened in Damascus following the imposed conditions of the Paris Peace Conference after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>iii</sup> James Baldwin, 'Autobiographical in this volume, was first published in *The Partisan Review*, 1949. Notes' in *Notes of a Native Son*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1955, p. 9; 'Everybody's Protest Novel', collected