

THE INFINITY OF KHALED SABSABI

Khaled Sabsabi and I are sitting together in a garden in the shade. It's one of those really hot 40 degrees Western Sydney days and we are drinking hot tea in an effort to cool down. Sabsabi is recounting a story and showing me video footage from his most recent time in Lebanon of a particular trip to Nabatiya in the south of Lebanon. Nabatiya is a mainly Shiite area and in what is normally a small town, over 100,000 men, women and children gather annually in for the commemoration for Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib. This religious ceremony is called Ashura and is a 10 day period of mourning for Shia Muslims. Hussein is exalted by all Shia Muslims as a martyr who fought tyranny and as a consequence was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680 on his return from exile. The mourning and deep regret of the community participating in the ceremony is expressed through women tapping their chest and calling out their regret and by the men cutting and tapping on their forehead until the roads that they are walking through are heavily stained by their blood. This large mass of people continuously or seemingly infinitely circle the town square of Nabatiya describing the moment when Hussein was murdered and continuing to express their deeply held regret that they weren't there to aid him. There is the constant sound of ambulances. There are children. It is December 5 2011. It was a really hot day.

The incredible rallying cry of the Shia women in mourning from Nabatiya that Sabsabi describes in this story is the raw material for Sabsabi's new work *MUSH*. The word *mush* can mean many things. It's a word you say when you want your dog to pull a sled faster, for some it's a way of preparing food and it is also the breaking down of something that is tightly constructed. Presented in Artspace *MUSH* is a tightly constructed four-sided projection that manifests as a cube that appears to be levitating in the centre of the gallery with infinite images disappearing through it. The images projected onto the cube represent North Africa, West Asia and suburban Sydney. They provide a constantly collapsing corridor. The sky is the earth, the earth is the sky. Alongside the cube is an eight-pointed star that collapses and expands from four stars to eight stars to four stars endlessly. We are immersed in the sound of Sabsabi's international mix of contemporary urban and suburban life juxtaposed against the calls of the Shia women from Nabatiya. It is a city soundscape of everywhere.

Sabsabi came to Australia with his family in the late 1970's as a result of the civil war in Lebanon. His home in the Western Sydney suburb of Bonnyrigg is located within one of the most culturally diverse suburbs in Australia and is home to large Vietnamese, Arabic and Chinese communities. Sabsabi's practice is innately tied to his own geographically and culturally expansive definition of home. Whether it's a suburb in Lebanon or a suburb in Sydney he has deep family and cultural links that tie him to suburban life.

Sabsabi's practice emerged from a myriad of genres but started from the hip-hop and turntablism culture of the 1980's which was prevalent in Sydney at the time and for which he became internationally renowned as an Australian pioneer. Hip Hop provided a cultural refuge for Sabsabi from the heavy pub rock scene dominated by Midnight Oil and Australian Crawl. Sabsabi found his creative home in Hip Hop and also a platform that supported his transition into community engaged practice. This in turn allowed his art practice to function as a tool for community engagement which he practiced in detention centres, schools, prisons, refugee camps, hospitals and youth centres in both Lebanon and Western Sydney. This commitment also became a place where he could work his way around fixed binaries, perceptions and misperceptions, communication and miscommunication. It was through this practice that Sabsabi developed the ability to relate and engage with large communities in multiple contexts. It was through embedding his work within the social and political issues

of his own diasporic communities in Sydney and those reflected in his homeland of Lebanon, Sabsabi's work has become a great translator of otherness through the consistent lense of suburban life not matter how traumatic or mundane that may be on any given day in any given city.

Sabsabi's work has consistently investigated the unrecognised and often unchallenged realities and universal concerns facing large suburban areas within international cities. The strong sense of social responsibility that manifests in Sabsabi's practice also emerges from his own unwavering belief in duty. In Arabic duty is described as *waajib*. Sabsabi's *waajib* dictates his responsibility to be fully committed and not to ignore the situations of the people around him. This commitment manifests across Sabsabi's work which continues to show the interconnectedness of everyday life with broader culture and politics. Dr Juan Salazar describes this connectedness as a constant transference; *Sabsabi's work is always being transferred from one medium to the other, transposed from one culture to another, transported from one place to another, translated from one language to another. His works are about the transitive nature of art, the transactional nature of community, the transversal nature of multi-artform practice that in Sabsabi's case is in permanent transformation.*

Although Sabsabi bases himself in Western Sydney he has recently returned from a year with his family in Lebanon after being awarded the 2010 Helen Lempriere Travelling Scholarship. Sabsabi was able to experiencing again firsthand over an extended period Lebanon as a place that is constantly faced with the pressing problem of creating a functional state, a civic space and a sense of community in a region with hostile neighbours. It was not long after winning the Helen Lempriere Travelling Scholarship that Sabsabi was awarded the Blake Prize, an Australian Prize for religious art and spirituality for his work *Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement*.

Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement was commissioned for the project *Edge of Elsewhere* and emerged from Sabsabi's development of an extended and ongoing relationship with the Naqshbandi Sufi Order of Australia. The work reveals to us a view into the spiritual and communal gatherings of the members of the Greenacre Order who come together each week in the local Scout Hall in Greenacre in Western Sydney for spiritual meditation in the form of Zkir ceremonies. The members of the Greenacre Order are from a range of cultures Bosnians, Lebanese, Indians, Turks and Anglo-Australians. They granted access to Sabsabi into their ceremonial setting allowing both the artist and the viewer to witness a part of contemporary suburban Australia that we rarely have access to. Sabsabi remembers the first time he walked into the Scout Hall with the three Scout flags; one green, one yellow, one black, colours that Sabsabi associates with the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah. Sabsabi describes seeing these flags as immediately deconstructing the space of the Scout hall for him. For him the Scout hall and the practice of the Sufi Order in the Scout hall directly reflected the diversity of social, cultural and religious practice that is occurring in Scout halls and other community spaces across Australia.

There is strong emotional turbulence in the stillness of *Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement*. The camera from its set point captures the Sufi Order in their practice. Children move in and out of shot. It is calm in its everydayness. People get comfortable. The prayer finds its own end point naturally and starts up again as naturally as breathing. It's like Sabsabi and his camera aren't there. This level of access not only comes from Sabsabi's professional history in cultural development practice but from his own demeanor as an artist. Sabsabi has lived and continues to live with and experience the divisions within his own communities on a very localised level from the Lebanese Muslims in Bankstown to the Lebanese Maronites in Parramatta to name a few. Sabsabi's intercultural, geopolitical and aesthetic understanding

of suburban Sydney is encyclopedic in its detail. As an artist he has had to continually find a politician like balance within his communities while also being uncompromising in the construction of his work. It is from his own strongly held Muslim faith and his interest in faith, its histories and its intimacies that expands his capacity to move beyond any of these issues to engage with our humanness. It is in this way Sabsabi communicates so articulately that our histories and religions are intricately linked.

Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement was the precursor to MUSH. But both works collapse cultures, religions and geographies although completely different ways. Across the four walls of the cube in MUSH we are witness to how domesticity and worship are intricately interlaced. That difference is a suburban norm. It is through the form of the cube that Sabsabi has the ability to distill a culturally and socially complex narrative into simple form. Behind the cube is a projection of the eight pointed star. The eight pointed star has been created by two overlapping projected squares. The star is constantly collapsing between four points and eight points. The hard edge lines of the square appear both modern and ancient and provide a dichotomy for MUSH in its entirety. The eight pointed star is significant to the many cultures that utilise it. There are eight paths in the way of Buddha; eight immortals in Chinese tradition however its universal symbolism is one of balance, harmony and cosmic order. Its pattern is associated with early astronomy, religion and mysticism. Out of alignment from four points to eight points, it communicates the idea of balance and counter balance. In Islamic culture it represents completion as it is the perfect number. In the Muslim context the eight pointed star is used on flags, mosques and in Qurans and was used to help keep track of Quranic recitations. It's the number for completion, the number for balance and the number for infinity.

It is the sound of the women of Nabatiya that creates balance in MUSH. The retainment of that balance comes from Sabsabi's creation of a distinctive figurative language and from his demeanor which is transcendent of nationality or spirituality although deeply feeling of both. Both balance and repetition has been an ongoing counterpoint in Sabsabi's work. It is through this that he communicates that through the collapse and fall of order, that there is an innate order in everything, an order that is achieved through everyday routine. Whether that routine is a prayer, a meal, some music, remembering the 99 names of God, Sabsabi has the ability to distill all of it for us while at the same time connecting it into the narrative of our own lives. Lives that won't be infinite but lives that hopefully will contribute to a broader infinity.

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