

the true life of *khaled sabsabi*



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Khaled Sabsabi has called Western Sydney home since he and his family arrived there in the late 1970s as a result of the civil war in Lebanon. His home in Bonnyrigg is located within one of the most culturally diverse suburbs in Australia and is domicile to large Vietnamese, Arabic and Chinese communities. To understand Sabsabi's practice and how it developed over the years it is imperative that one has an understanding of Western Sydney, a place that is comprised of almost two million people—which is ten per cent of Australia's population—and a region that is the fastest growing, most culturally diverse and the most aspirational in the nation.

Sabsabi's work is innately tied to the contemporary manifestations of suburban Australia, not least the perceptions, both positive and negative, of the suburbs usually described as being the 'outer suburbs', the 'city outskirts', or simply the often pejorative 'out there'. It's a long-standing irony that while we often hear that Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with the majority of us living within sixty kilometres of a major metropolitan CBD, this nation is perhaps one that the broader Australian community doesn't yet quite fully understand in all its cultural, historical, and not least political complexities. But for those that do have a genuine insight into this social and geographical matrix—perhaps artists and demographers to name just two disparate professions—it is the face of the potential future of Australia and what we will all become within the next decade. Sabsabi understands the central issues of contemporary Australian life because he sees them everyday, and experiences the division within his own communities, from Lebanese Muslims in Bankstown to Lebanese Maronites in Parramatta, to name a few. Sabsabi's intercultural, geopolitical and aesthetic understanding of suburban Sydney is encyclopaedic in its detail.¹

Sabsabi's practice has emerged from myriad genres, perhaps most influentially from the emergence of the potent culture of urban hip-hop, a form that moves between sound, dance and the visual. For Sabsabi, hip-hop and turntablism culture in the 1980s would have been a much more fluid and creative place than the 1980s Sydney pub rock scene, which saw the likes of Cold Chisel and Midnight Oil dominate mainstream airwaves and attract a mostly white Australian audience. Hip-hop culture, evolving from diverse urban and suburban environments, allowed and continues to allow greater diversity in its voices and performers. Sabsabi found not only a creative home in hip-hop but also a platform that could support his transition into a community-based practice, allowing his art practice to function as a tool for community engagement which he implemented in detention centres, schools, prisons, refugee camps, hospitals and youth centres, not only in Western Sydney but in his homeland of Lebanon. He used artmaking as an entry point to deal and engage with community issues in a positive way in an attempt to achieve real social change. This commitment also became

a place where he could work his way around fixed binaries—perceptions and misperceptions, communication and miscommunication—in relation to large communities within multiple contexts. By embedding his work within the social and political issues of his own diasporic communities in Sydney and those reflected, albeit in different circumstances and historical arcs, in his homeland of Lebanon, Sabsabi's work investigates the unrecognised and often unchallenged realities which circumnavigate universal concerns facing large suburban areas within a context of international cities. The resulting body of work intertwines an Arabic sensibility with a real engagement with contemporary Australian life—in effect, Sabsabi becoming a transnational community worker.

This strong sense of social responsibility that manifests in Sabsabi's art practice also emerges from his own unwavering belief in duty—in Arabic his *waajib*. Sabsabi's *waajib* dictates his responsibility to be an engaged artist who cannot ignore people's situations. But it is Sabsabi's practice within the gallery space that makes him a unique commentator in Australia. In 1998 Sabsabi made *Where We At*, which was commissioned by curator Kon Gouriotis for the Casula Powerhouse project *Arabmade*. Strangely, I remember smelling this work before I saw it—the smell of the cut grass of a suburban lawn, above it a string of t-shirts on a clothes line, each identical white shirt printed with the face of Osama Bin Laden. It was the face of our future horror of terrorism, right here in everyone's backyard, communicated twelve months before anyone in Australia really understood what jihadi terrorism was. This work, while in some ways foretelling the future, told an international story on a very local level.²

This continual transfer of the global to the local, a key element at play in Sabsabi's work, strongly communicates to audiences the interrelatedness of daily life with broader cultural and political movements. As Juan Salazar outlines:

*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 work, the transversal nature of a multimedia work that in Khaled Sabsabi's case is in permanent transformation.*³

This ongoing transfer is expanded through the development of Sabsabi's major work *Ali or 3li*, which was commissioned by Casula Powerhouse and Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2005. Conceived as one installation, this work was realised over two cultural spaces located in South West Sydney. The central image within the work is a flash of sunrise, a moment that is so fast it can be missed, and thus read as a metaphor for change or transferral. Sabsabi captured this image when he was undertaking a residency at a lighthouse on the mid-North Coast of New South Wales. Sabsabi recorded the sunrise over a period of two months, while living in a semi-isolated environment. Beyond Australia, the work continued to develop through the video recording of a sunset in Lebanon in the city of Tyr. These two video sequences were slowed to force observers to continue to view the work if they wanted a resolution. Adding to the stillness, by pure accident in the sunrise video sequence, a bird flies across and within the frame, highlighting the individual within the grandeur.

Presented as large-scale projections within the vast turbine hall of Casula Powerhouse, *Ali or 3li* embodied a kind of certainty of the potential to bridge borders—the certainty of a sun rising and a sun setting on all of us, wherever one may be as an individual. The work was presented every night at sunset with both suns rising and setting. The sound within the work was the primary essence reinforcing the narrative that was almost spiritual in its form. The spirituality that is referred to is not the feeling of spirituality in relation to grandeur or of even indefinable sublime, but spirituality in simplicity. Without any other reading, seeing the sunset and rise connects directly to our humanness.

As presented at Campbelltown Arts Centre, the work took the form of a grid of eighteen monitors locked behind a fence of barbed wire and integrated with images of the work of the late Palestinian cartoonist and writer Nagi Al-Ali. In his work Nagi Al-Ali draws the figure of Hanzala in every cartoon as a witness with his back turned to the viewer. The young barefoot Hanzala in Al-Ali's cartoons is a symbol of Sabsabi's childhood. Sabsabi was the same age as Hanzala when he left Palestine, and the character of Hanzala became an icon that protected Sabsabi's soul from falling, whenever he felt he was failing in his duty.⁴ Engaging with *Ali or 3li* for broader Australian audiences presupposes a commitment to developing an understanding of the histories and



contemporary realities that Sabsabi enters into, a process almost too complex to decipher, particularly from the position of primarily culturally stable Australia. It is too easy for audiences to assume that the intention of Sabsabi's work is to communicate separateness, discord and war, when really the primary focus is on harmony and humanness, and an attempt of an articulation of frustration that the artist's own communities and wider diasporic communities cannot navigate a way forward.

Sabsabi uses smell almost in the same way that he uses sound. When I enter into *Integration, Assimilation and a Fair Go for All* at Gallery 4A in Sydney's Chinatown (June, 2009), I can smell eucalyptus before I can feel it under my feet. Freud said that wishes are immortal. Strangely, we are almost as bad at recalling the impression of smells as we are at remembering physical pain—it's easy to recall the shape of a lemon, but almost impossible to conjure up its scent.⁵ It is the smell of eucalyptus combined with the repeated flash of lightning over the Newcastle skyline, or, a skyline that could be anywhere, but abstracted to the point where it's difficult for the viewer to decipher whether the image is a man-made or natural phenomenon. Sabsabi's work is never really a response to a one-off event, more a response to the general condition. The shadowy text in the work *Fuck Off We're Full* (2009) specifically references previous government policies, but also reinforces the separateness of immigration and the ongoing polycultural nature of Australia. This is further reinforced in *Australians* (2006-09), which is a pastiche of interchanging face parts, eyes, noses and mouths which oscillate over twelve monitors. Sabsabi's installation captures the profound aesthetics of beauty, ugliness and all that lies in between, which doesn't allow a separate and defined cultural reading of an individual.⁶ Yet another barrier to enabling a fixed or translatable reading of Sabsabi's work.

At the time of writing Sabsabi was focused on a new commission for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. This new work *Co-existence* engages with the ideas of diverse ethnic groups based on faith, language and ideology within Lebanon and its four million population. Sabsabi sees the tragedy that emerges from disunity. In *Co-existence*, the flags that represent each group will come together—in effect

unify—in manner not yet possible in reality. The irony is that at the same time there is an innate interdependency where one group cannot exist without the other. This work will cause controversy by its very existence, as so often is the case with images of national and cultural emblems, in particular flags, which have the capacity to represent both meaning in relation to a person's mortality, as well as how they translate their own understandings of nationhood. People will care that Sabsabi has done this, as it is a carefully intended breach of protocol that will both offend and placate at the same time.

The words of the Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Sabsabi's video installation *You* (2007) illustrates the key intent in his work. "O most honourable, pure, and generous people, may God's peace, mercy, and blessings be upon you..." The unending repeating of these words is not so much a promise as a hope, but within these words I see both openness and foreboding and we are left as the viewer entering the psycho-geography of a place, about to enter into the understanding of something, but not having the knowledge to fully engage. Sabsabi makes us strangers in our own territory, reminding us that all is not steady underfoot and that a fair go for all is in the end not a plea, but an unachievable irony.

Notes

¹ Peter Droege, *Post-Suburban Sydney: Community between Global Commodity and Local Autonomy*, University of Newcastle School of Architecture and Built Environment

² *Arabmade*, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, 1998

³ Juan Salazar interview with Khaled Sabsabi, Sydney, 12 October, 2005

⁴ See Ian Hobbs, 'I Wish This Paper Were Sound', *Ali or 3li*, Casula Powerhouse and Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2005: 12

⁵ See Adam Jasper & Nadia Wagner, 'Notes on Scent', *Cabinet* 32: 38

⁶ Farid Farid, University of Western Sydney, 2009