

Khaled Sabsabi

One of the earliest memories I have is one of falling. Later in life, I found out that in fact I did fall down a flight of stairs as a baby at eight months old. I was born in 1965 in Tripoli, Lebanon, and spent my early childhood years growing up in this coastal city. My family immigrated to Australia in late 1977 due to the Lebanese civil war and settled in Western Sydney, Australia's highest multicultural area. I was 12 years old. For 30 years I've made work that questions rationales and complexities of nationhood, identity and social change in various media —I personally regard art making as my view of a true reflection of society, attempting to produce a constant movement towards expanding limits and perceptions to contribute to an open and more just world.

During my childhood I witnessed much suffering and hardship living in an uncertain, violent and terrifying place. These times were the early years of the Lebanese militia and civil wars. My story in brief is that my father, Walid, migrated to Australia in 1969 to work, and my mother, Wafa, followed him in 1971. I and my younger brother, Hussam, stayed with my grandmother, Khadijah Al Kurdi. One thing led to another and we got trapped in Tripoli during the war.

I have two memories to share from this experience. The first concerns the militia factions butchering each other in and around the olive groves just outside Tripoli at the edge of the mountains. It's ironic because, in the first instance, the olive branch is a symbol of peace and, in the second, I remember my grandmother telling me and my younger brother while sitting to eat dinner that if you ate 15 olives it would be like eating an ounce of meat. I remember a truck that sat parked opposite my grandmother's apartments which was full of dead bodies piled on top of each other in its open rear tray like a mound. I recall the smell, but most of all I remember the mothers, fathers and families looking for their dead, like searching for lost items in the sand. This was the first time I had seen death.

The other memory was during the civil war when our neighbourhood was heavily shelled and bombarded from factions and the Syrian army in the surrounding areas of Tripoli. This was extreme hostilities and I recollect for days living in the basement of our building with little food or water. After a while we had to leave the building because it was getting unstable and was at risk of collapsing. I clearly remember we had to run across a street which was targeted by snipers; much caution was required. As I was making the crossing I was fired on and could feel the wind and hear the sound of the bullets passing in front of my face—everything shifting into slow motion. After completing that stretch and crossing, at the shelter space between the next sections of crossing I suddenly fell to the ground and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't get back up. I couldn't feel or control my legs. In the panic everyone had moved to the next crossing to safety but I was left there on my own. I screamed and yelled and could hear people telling me to get up and run but I couldn't move. After some time a man ran to where I was, he carried me on his back and took me to the shelter.

Besides these memories of war, violence and hopelessness there were other pleasant memories and experiences of play, love and creativity. Learning to make do with what you have in order to create games using found and common objects such as sticks, rocks and the discarded stones of apricot fruits. The last memory I have of my early life was standing in front of my grandmother and not wanting to say goodbye or to let her go before being taken out of Lebanon.

Coming to a new land I felt out of the ordinary—everything was different and unfamiliar. People didn't understand me and I didn't understand them. In the first three months on arrival fellow school students mocked and teased me and I'd wonder why. I was bashed in the playground and was once abducted by a group of older Anglo-Australian boys who tortured me by putting out their lit cigarettes on my arms while shouting at me, "you fucking wog, go back to where you came from". After a while I started to make friends with other children who were mainly from migrant ethnicities also.

In 1979 I started attending an all-boys high school. Here things became somewhat normal. I learned how to speak English and was starting to fit in. I played sports, mainly rugby league and cricket because I noticed the deputy principal liked both. I quickly became good at these sports, to the point where the deputy principal would no longer discipline and cane me when I was sent to his office; instead he would sit me down and speak about the game we played last week and how the team could improve. In regards to inspirational people and moments of change during high school time, there was an art teacher that saw a sketch I did and asked me if I had made much art before, I said no and she took me to speak with the head teacher of the school's art department, Mr. Roulston. He looked at the drawing and asked me if I liked art, to which I replied, yes, and he said, "I want you to take art as an elective subject next term". This was rare because students were not allowed to change subjects during the school year. He spoke to my teachers and made it happen. I ended up dropping Economics and picking-up Art instead. Mr Roulston supported me greatly for the next three years; he gave me unrestricted access to the art workshop and introduced me to many artists and their work.

My discovery of Hip hop in the early 1980s had a major influence on me and changed my outlook on life. Accepting music was easy because I've always been exposed to it as a child, mainly through classical Arabic music which was played in our home. But when I heard Hip hop for the first time, this was something else all together. It was fresh and could associate with it easily because it was rhythmic, and as everyone knows rhythm and the beat of the drum are primal and universal. What also attracted me to Hip hop was an alternative to the mainstream Australian rock scene at the time which I couldn't connect with or understand whatsoever, maybe because the lyrics didn't reflect what I felt and who I was. I started to attempt making beats and trying to be a DJ, while also writing rhymes, but I didn't quite know how to make Hip hop music because at the time the only references I had were a few video clips and movies. I couldn't just Google "how to make Hip hop"; it was all about trial and error, learning and sharing information from other Hip hoppers doing the same. Soon after these early experiences things changed again: I clearly remember listening to the first Def Jam compilation album and in particular to a group called Public Enemy. This was a revelation and from that moment it was clear to me what I needed to do.

I rented a large house with a garage space for a studio and asked another rhymers, Ilhan Goktas, to move in with me. We formed a crew which included a few other young rhymers from our local area in western Sydney. For several years through to the early 1990s our crew, which we named COD, grew in local support and performance attendance to the point where the garage studio became a hangout for young people like us to sit, listen and get educated about Hip hop. There were many complaints from racist neighbours and the police were regular visitors. Although I had a full-time job, all my existence throughout those years was about producing, performing and recording. Very little headway was achieved in making it into the mainstream music scene but this didn't matter because it wasn't about the fame, it was about lyrical content, phat beats and performing anywhere and everywhere. However, it's important to mention that we also experienced some hate—our house was fire bombed in the middle of the night while we were asleep causing us to flee for our lives. The police said they don't know who did it and no charges were laid.

My introduction into community art was in 1991 when I had a visit from Mouna Zaylah, a local girl who was working for a community theatre company, Death Defying Theatre (DDT), based in the nearby suburb of Auburn. She asked me if I would be interested in meeting with the company's artistic director regarding a production they were putting together for schools. I agreed to the meeting and met with the artistic director (Fiona Winning) and the actors involved in the production. I was asked about the pre-existing music used in the production, the title of the play was *Rap it Up* and it was a production for young people in schools which explored issues around consumer rights. I was honest and told them that the music had nothing to do with Hip hop and I offered to remix it. Fiona agreed and the following day I showed up to their office with a new remix of the music, they loved it.

We kept in contact and nine months later they asked me if I would be interested in facilitating Hip hop workshops with young people; at the time I didn't understand what a workshop was and besides, Hip hop to me was about being hardcore and real. DDT organised a two-week creative development with other experienced theatre practitioners, actors and a performance poet John Komninos. Here I learned how art could be used as a tool for participation. After this two-week period a comprehensive six-month workshop was designed and scheduled by DDT in various locations to harvest stories. The content collected was used for another touring production, *Eye of the Law* in 1993. The workshops were held in youth centres, youth prisons, detention centres, women refuges, men and women adult prisons, as well as in community gatherings and schools. The importance of these workshops to my practice is that they taught me the power of art and of collaboration. I went on to perform and tour *Eye of the Law* to 70 schools, while also working and performing in DDT's major multimedia production, *Hiphopera*, in late 1995.

In 1993 I decided to work as a youth worker and to focus on working with so-called disadvantaged or at risk youth, from diverse cultural backgrounds. The idea for me was simple: use Hip hop as the language and entry point and from there refer these young people into support programs and services that could assist them with the complex issues in their lives. I was offered a position at an NGO called Bankstown Multicultural Youth Service and was Australia's first non-English speaking youth street worker. The irony of the situation is that I was a young person as well. The highlight for me during this time was a project that came about as a result of young people being involved in riots with police at an annual multicultural festival which attracted over of 80,000 people. I was consulted and appointed to find ways to address issues of youth violence. I coordinated a pilot youth music performance stage as part of the 1994 Arabic Day Carnival which was highly effective.

After nearly two years in this job I began working with the Central Sydney Area Health Services, a state institution that operated on a larger scale. The first few years were great because there were like-minded people and staff who believed in a holistic approach to youth health and art being at the core of well-being. I initiated art projects that addressed various important and sometimes taboo subjects such as youth suicide, youth crime prevention, HIV and Hepatitis C education, drug and alcohol education. Also, during this time I was able to realise a full recording studio dedicated to training young people in recording Hip hop and other forms of music. In 1997 a restructure happened and forced people that supported me out of the organisation. Work situations became difficult as my priority were the youth using the centre, but due to new procedures and policies put in place, funding for artistic programs were cut. I got depressed as I was spending most of my time in management, supervision and mediation. I resorted to substance abuse at this point and resigned in 1998. This period was the lowest point of my life. This lifestyle and condition continued until the birth of my first child, Walid, in 1999. At this point I decided to clean up in order to see beyond my self-imposed darkness and broaden my opportunities in life. I think we are all in some sort of exile and torment, whether physical and or psychological. All along this period I continued to make music, sound and site specific installation artwork where possible.

I returned to work at the end of 1999 for another NGO, this time the Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre (LMRC). As an information officer I facilitated a program for newly arrived migrants and refugees as well as broader non-English speaking communities. During my time at the LMRC many art and community projects were designed and delivered. The highlight for me was the establishment of an outreach multimedia van for creative training and teaching. It was early 2000 and the digital revolution had arrived. Video, audio and other digital media production technologies started became accessible and affordable. The project idea for the multimedia van was to refit and custom design a domestic caravan for the propose of making it into a portable digital production training facility which could be moved across different suburbs and neighbourhoods to give access to people who wouldn't usually have access to such technologies and tools. For realising this project I want to give thanks to Gorkem Acaroglu, the LMRC art worker at that time for her shared vision, commitment and support.

In 2001 the world changed and in late 2002 I decided to return to Lebanon after 24 years living in a foreign country. My rationale to travel back was both professional and personal, professional as I was exploring Arabic Hiphop through an Australia Council for the Arts Fellowship I received in 2001 and personal because I was overwhelmed with the portrait of Australian Muslims in local media and needed to face these demons elsewhere.

On arrival in Beirut I felt a strange duality of familiarity and uncertainty. I recall being in a taxi on my way to Tripoli gazing through its windows at the scenery of landscape and people that quickly brought the realities of this place back to me. I saw a large image, a mural of a militia faction leader which jolted my memories. I sarcastically asked the driver, "Are these people still here?", and he responded, "They never left". From that moment I felt that coming back to this place will challenge all my ideologies on my identity.

There was another instance in a taxi in Beirut where I received a remark from a frustrated but honest driver, who added a few extra sentences to the usual small talk you receive. I'll never forget: he said to me, "Well, if you like it here so much, why don't you live here and try to earn a living, then come back and tell me if you still like it here". His remarks at the time made me confused and angry, because I was directly confronted with the realities that I was just another privileged tourist, high on romantic notions of belonging and childhood memories. Also because here I was working my life away in another place and land for art, social awareness and justice, forgetting my people's situations and their suffered hardships. So over the duration of my visit I extended and exhausted myself to reconnect with my land, people and forgotten family members. I visited Damascus and reconciled troubled childhood memories of the Syrian army's invasion of Tripoli during the civil war.

After my stay of three months in Lebanon, I left to Turkey and in that month away I had time to seriously reflect on the motherland and its people. What I felt was a void that was much deeper than before. I questioned my own ability to be effective and functional if I stayed in Lebanon and didn't migrate in the '70s. Also, I wondered would I have been able to achieve the work I've done in Australia in Lebanon, so I decided that I needed to return back to Australia to try to find what I was looking for.

In 2003 I was determined to work and strive locally. I think at that time this was the only way to deal with my struggles of belonging and being misplaced. With this focus, situations and emotions now became different, sometimes difficult, always amplified. Regardless all were important experiences as they constitute what and who I am, as an artist, as a human being. The art work I was personally making at the time was a cross between sound art, performance and video installations. While working in Lebanon and Syria I connected with various NGOs, thinkers and teachers to learn and where possible train and collaborate with likeminded artists working specifically around audio and video production possibilities.

I utilized and adopted what I had learned in my Australian community cultural development experience to create a multimedia training and documentation studio room in Beirut with the aim of engaging Lebanese and Palestinian people and their communities so as to document their own stories and histories while building their skills and mentoring others in multimedia production technologies. These experiences had an enormous impact on the kind of work I would go on to make in my Western Sydney studio as I came to the realisation that there is no separation from the self and the identity it carries; like hooks entrenched in memories, land and people.

What's also notable during this time was meeting my wife to be and the love of my life, Yamane Fayed. I'm forever grateful to her as she instilled in me the important role education and cultural institutions play in society, especially viewed through an historical perspective, and not to take these opportunities for granted. Yamane gave me the strength to confront my own definition of who I was and redefine my practice; prior to meeting her I had always operated on the outside or on the fringes of these institutions. In 2004 we married, and the following year I completed a post-graduate degree in Arts at the University of New South Wales. Soon after we were blessed with two daughters, Haneen, born in 2006, and Yasma, in 2010. All my three children are a major source of influence and gentleness on my physical, creative and spiritual wellbeing. They've taught me both how to live life simply and have helped me to see what life can offer in its many faces. I remember on two separate occasions – once with Walid, my eldest some years ago, and more recently with my youngest, Yasma – occasions where I would be lying next to them as I was putting them to sleep, gazing into their wide and bright eyes, and in a moment of enlightenment could see the entire universe in those eyes; something truly remarkable and beyond comprehension.

For us as a family there is no separation from art and the everyday. We attend art openings together, and regularly collectively travel while I'm exhibition around Australia or overseas. Our home is in the culturally diverse western suburbs of Sydney and my studio and workspace is a single garage attached to our home, an unglamorous yet practical and purposeful work space in which I have realised many works that have shown in museums and galleries from Sharjah to Shanghai. The important thing is this: a long time ago I made a conscious decision to remain, live and work within the cultural richness of Western Sydney which I believe has truly enriched my work as an artist

On that note, from 2006 until the present day I've worked full-time as the Community Cultural engagement creative producer at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, a public institution that was established in 1994 within a grand former industrial building owned by the State Electricity Commission. Throughout this period I've continued extending my practice between a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary flow of ideas and outcomes, which includes community cultural partnerships, music, video, film, theatre, sound, media, installation and curating. I'm an artist and cultural producer who fluidly but respectfully draws on the experiences of the communities around me to inform what I do. The social platform has always been my natural habitat and what keeps me motivated is a deep commitment to voices being heard and to raise awareness of the often unappreciated and undervalued worth of cultural expression and creative freedoms.