

‘Convergences—spiritual&political: the art of Khaled Sabsabi’
by Safdar Ahmed

It is often claimed that Khaled Sabsabi’s art supplies a counterpoint to the shallow clichés surrounding the Arab world and Islam so routinely trotted out by the mainstream media and our political establishment. This is no doubt true but only to a minor point, far beyond the screen of representation (and arguments about how Islam is perceived in Western eyes) is a quiet, introspective search for points of genuine cultural, political and religious convergence.

Sabsabi’s latest exhibition at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art ranges across painting, hand cut and stencilled photographs, embroidered cloth, and video installation.

We Kill You (2016) is a 3 channel video work showing partial landscapes filmed across Saudi Arabia, Australia, Morocco, Lebanon and Syria, including the Shiba farms — which is disputed territory under Israeli occupation. The imagery accompanies a eulogy written by Nizar Qabbani, (*We Kill You*) lamenting the failure of Arab states to achieve an idealised vision of cultural unification and independence from Western power. The work points to a crisis of meaning that has haunted Arab nations, which are ‘imagined communities’ at best, beset with internal fractures and the ongoing burden of Western imperialism.

Sabsabi’s family moved to the Western suburbs of Sydney in 1978 as refugees fleeing the Lebanese civil war. He retains vivid childhood memories/‘flashbacks’ of urban warfare, of dead civilians, which I imagine informs the search for cohesion in his work.

Guerilla (2007-2017) made up of 99 hand painted works on photographic paper, continues this exploration of the regions political history. Viewers are met with a line of photographic images showing southern Beirut in 2006, shortly after Israeli forces had decimated the city. The painted surface lifts these images from their documentary context, which Sabsabi describes as an act of refusal — an attempt to disown the brutal reality of the conflict and it’s arbitrary logic.

Yet the work suggests a more enduring, metaphysical reality, the choice of 99 images in this sense connoting the ‘beautiful names’ of God in Islamic spiritual cosmology. Perhaps the psychic wounds of modern wars and sectarian collapse cannot so easily erase centuries-old traditions of religious humanism and cultural cooperation?

Sabsabi documents communal elements of Islamic practice, which inspire an internal, aesthetic, if not religious, response. *Corner* (2012) is a large, hand embroidered cloth (*sanjaq*), used with permission, from the sacred shrine and

gathering place of the Riffai sufi order to which the artist's family belongs. Woven into its fabric is the profession of faith in Islam, the names of the Prophet and his family, the early caliphs and sheikhs of the order, who are connected in a spiritual chain that threads back to revelation.

Lefke morning (2012) is a video piece that invites visitors to sit in a cushioned space and become observers to a congregation of Naqshbandi Sufis who the artist visited in Cyprus. It is before dawn in an unlit room. In the penumbral, green-soaked screen of Sabsabi's lens barely visible, silhouetted figures sway gently as they sing a remembrance of God (*dhikr*) in lilting, introspective tones. Though we're invited into an intimate, culturally specific milieu, the point of the work is accessible to anyone with an aesthetic sense, meaning you do not need to understand the Arabic of the Quran to appreciate its sublime effects. There is a generosity of spirit to the work which reflects Sabsabi's own experience as a cultural practitioner conducting hip hop workshops with young people in Sydney's Western suburbs during the 1980's and 1990's.

Whilst there is a critical-deconstructive process in Sabsabi's work it gives way to a sensibility of repair, in which there is no final distinction between you and I, Muslim and non-Muslim, this and that sect. Indeed I would argue this critical element is informed as much by sufi thought as it is by contemporary theory.¹ Sufism frequently raises binary categories which are then held up and dissolved. There is the communal law (*sharia*) and the individual path (*tariqa*). There are the seen (*zahir*) and unseen (*batin*) worlds, the distinction between a human lover and the divine beloved, all of which yield to an experience of unity that would make such distinctions seem meaningless.

In Sabsabi's practice this impulse is employed to question the regressive binaries that foster nationalism, tribalism, religious sectarianism, and the shallow, instrumentalist reasons for bigotry and intolerance. To engage with Sabsabi's work is to witness a search for meanings and categories that pertain as much to the spiritual world as to the despair of our political moment. Underpinning this is a belief that these domains are indeed related and that art may light up and connect the spaces between them.

¹ Ian Almond demonstrates strong parallels between the deconstructive approaches of Derrida and Ibn Arabi, which is not to assert an anachronistic historical link between these traditions.