

## Khaled Sabsabi *A Promise*

The Sufi poet Shaikh Abu Saeed Abil-Kheir (967–1049) urged his contemporaries: “To your mind feed understanding, to your heart, tolerance and compassion.” In the last few decades, Islam has been portrayed in the West as violent, warring, and extremist, its diverse sects and tenets of peace and community overshadowed by fundamentalism. Khaled Sabsabi explores conflict, identity, and faith through contemplative installations, videos and paintings underpinned by the practice of Sufism, a form of Islamic mysticism that emphasizes an inner search for divine love and knowledge through renouncing the material. Surveying the past 20 years of the artist’s oeuvre, “A Promise” at the Art Gallery of New South Wales invited all who entered the space to embark on a journey of interconnection.

A polyphony of artworks traced the complex web of connections surrounding notions of self and other, faith, transcendence, perhaps even redemption. Born in 1965 in Tripoli, Lebanon, Sabsabi arrived in Western Sydney in 1978 after fleeing the civil war. His birthplace and adopted home have both informed his practice, creating a space in which the cultures, beliefs, and politics of the two entwine. This sense of multiplicity was present in Sabsabi’s latest show, where the artist-as-mystic guided viewers through darkened halls evoking chambers of worship. The artworks were buoyed together by a

distant rhythmic incantation: energetic, melodic, connective.

This was the devotional call of the Western Sydney Wanderers’ football fans in the video installation *Organised confusion* (2014), the heartbeat of the show. Sabsabi’s musicality, developed during his years as a hip-hop artist in the 1980s, is present in the sonorous beat used to lead viewers around the space until they are accosted full force by the humming energy of the tribal cry—in the exhibition’s center, two opposing screens reveal brazen supporters facing off, baring tattooed torsos, their communal song of worship invoking the pounding hearts of a team going to war.

In this work one finds oneself in the middle ground of conflicting energies: the aggression of sports fanaticism overcome by the hypnotic calm of the repeated beat. Affixed by a thin rod to an adjacent plinth was a spot-lit wooden mask that appeared to float—silent, watching. Opposite, a six-channel black-and-white video portrays the masked Javanese dancer Agung Gunawan writhing in torment or ecstasy, his connection to the spiritual realm accessed through embodied gestures, each movement deliberate yet utterly free. Cast adrift within this diamond-pointed composition, a liminal space between two states of being, two cultures, two quasi-religious actions, the viewer was called to accept the artist’s proposal of divine togetherness or to make one’s own.

This eloquent and measured selection of artworks kept a harmonious pace, felt not only in the beating timbre of *Organised confusion* but in the

exhibition’s gentle unfolding. Sandwiched between two powerful video pieces were a group of beautifully intricate works, including the ceremonial banner *Sanjak* (2002–12). Delicately embroidered with the names of God, prophets, and saints in black Arabic script, inscribing markers of faith and community upon fiery moons, stars, and suns—symbols of time and eternity—*Sanjak* offered a quiet moment of introspection among the audio-visual works.

On the opposing wall, in *The Prophet* (2020), 48 miniature paintings in acrylic and oil portray contemporary manifestations of ancient Islamic paintings. Their vibrant blood red and brilliant blue allude to the exquisite illustrations of sacred stories in manuscripts. In these miniature vignettes, abstracted white figures walk to worship, partaking in imagined rites as the precision of ancient drawing gives way to tiny, charged brushstrokes. *The Prophet* is a tableau of unframed and raw vistas, abstracted to become hints of time past, of faith experienced. Overhead, the drum-call to war or prayer continued.

The true magic was in the nuanced details: each stitch of embroidered thread sewing a history; each minute gesture of painting compounding in a definitive message. It was up to the viewer to tease out the thread, to formulate a promise, to accept the artist’s invitation of a universal prayer for all.

**VICTORIA SCOTT**

**KHALED SABSABI**, *The Prophet* (detail), 2020, 48 miniature paintings, acrylic paint and oil stick on photographic paper, 4.8×10.2×15.2cm each. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

