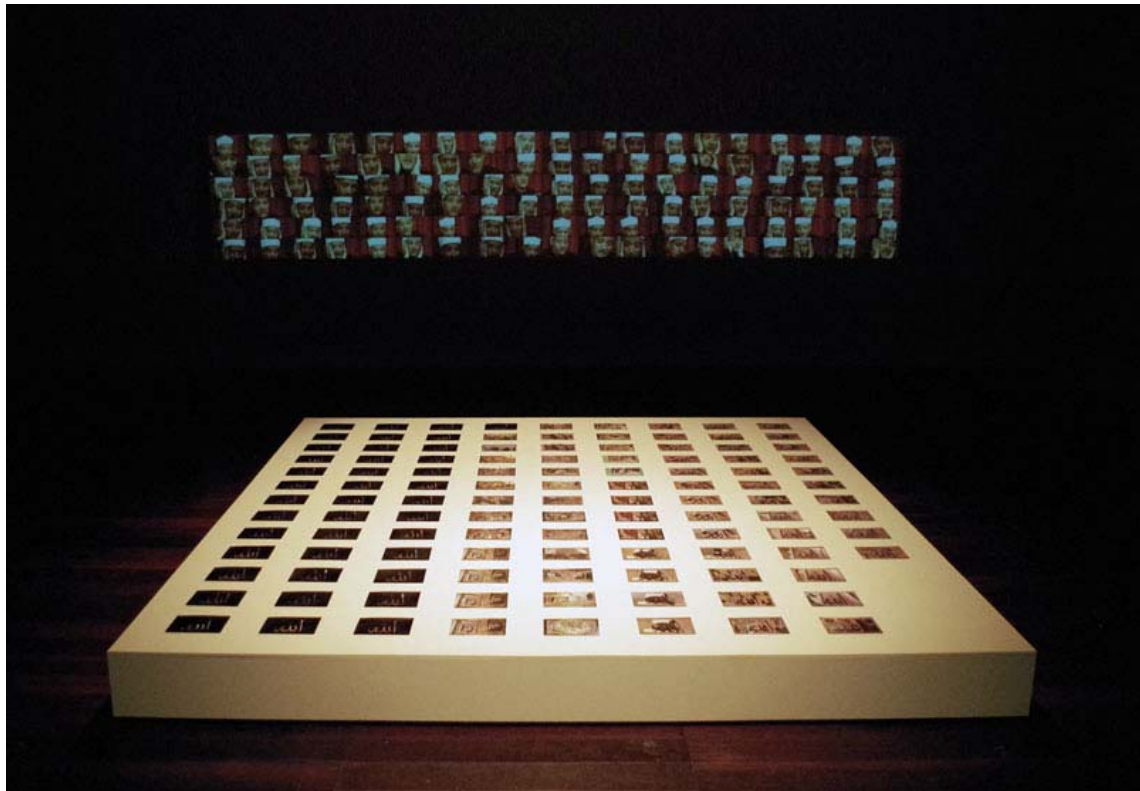


Artlink

Khaled Sabsabi: A Self Portrait

Author: John Mateer 20 August 2018



Khaled Sabsabi, *A Self Portrait*, 2014–18, mixed media. Photo: Khaled Sabsabi. Courtesy the artist and Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

It is remarkable that until quite recently few artists from a Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim background have emerged within the Australian art scene. For some time, the Iran-born Hossein Valamanesh was the only prominent artist from that region. Khaled Sabsabi's national and, increasingly, international recognition should be seen in the context of a number of other artists, among them the painter Khadim Ali and brothers Abdul-Rahman Abdullah and Abdul Abdullah, the latter two born in Australia.

Sabsabi's circumstance is perhaps closest to Valamanesh, as both immigrated to Australia in the 1970s to escape war. While Valamanesh had the advantage of beginning his career during the rise of the policy of multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s, Sabsabi began working as an artist comparatively late in life and has only become prominent in the last decade. He has always lived in the western suburbs of Sydney, with its extraordinary mix of immigrant cultures. The sense that his world was part of a naturally cosmopolitan Australia was shattered by the violence of 9/11 and the ensuing wars, both the US invasion of Iraq, assisted by the Coalition of the Willing, and the local conflicts that have followed the Arabic Spring.

Sabsabi's reaction to the unfolding of these wars appears to have itself triggered memories of his own conflict-ridden youth in Lebanon.

It is in light of this interplay, between personal trauma and cultural memory, between the wars of the past and those of the present, all within the unique circumstance of Australia, that Sabsabi's work should be contemplated. While his work addressing Islam, the Middle East, Arab identity and the conflicts of that region can be regarded as topical, relevant to an understanding of contemporary geopolitics, unlike other artists who are his peers—even Valamanesh, who like him refers to Sufi religious practices and concepts—Sabsabi has dealt with the rupture of his experience by developing an artistic language that is deeply grounded in Sufism, harbouring an intense, spiritual critique of the Image and the Word.

In this exhibition, the first survey of Sabsabi's work, the curator Eugenio Viola has presented only a small selection of works from the past eleven years. Yet Viola has managed to give a good sense of the artist's engagement with the more easily discussed subjects of the Middle East and its politics, while also conveying the inner logic of Sabsabi's Sufism. Sabsabi is unusual in that he foregrounds the inner life of his religious practice in his work, using its theorisation to critique contemporary political and media cultures.

For those completely unfamiliar with its philosophy and iconography, appreciating the relevance of a mystical practice like Sufism to the language of contemporary art may be daunting, as any understanding of Sabsabi's work does require at least the basic knowledge that Sufism is a mystical form of Islam that can integrate both sides of the sectarian divide—that between Sunni and Shia, in a religious sense, and between the geopolitical blocks of Saudi Arabia and Iran—and further, that its contemplative practices are driven by the ambition to transcend the conflictual circumstances of selfhood and ordinary daily life.



Khaled Sabsabi, *Corner*, 2012 (detail). Installation view, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Photo courtesy the artist

At the doorway of PICA's main gallery Sabsabi has hung a *sanjaq*, originally a component of a work titled *Corner* (2012). It is a ceremonial, embroidered banner, and was sewn by the women of the family of the Sufi teacher of the sect to which Sabsabi belongs. This banner functions as an illustrated declaration of the lineage of the sect, and it is Sabsabi's intention that this serve as a kind of welcome and farewell to the show. Interestingly, it can also be regarded as a primer for the visual language of his work because it foregrounds the key visual element of Islamic culture: the sacred text, as a calligraphic or simply graphic sign. Unlike Western culture that is Christian and Greco-Roman in origin, in which translation played a role so central that the act of translation remains largely naturalised and invisible in its cultural inheritance, in Islamic culture the sign of the Arabic script is clearly a marker of untranslatability and singularity.

In his work *A Self Portrait* (2018), Sabsabi presented a number of small photomontages—one group displayed on the wall, the other larger group on a large, low table—and facing them was a wall-length video projection of footage of many images of a chanting man. The montage works consist of layered photographic images that seem to have been cut away, like stencils, often producing abstractions, although at other times leaving the images intact. These photographs were taken over the course of Sabsabi's eleven years of travel. On the surface of all of these montages is the calligraphic sign which reads as "Allah". If the montages can literally be regarded as the Sacred overlaying our memories of everyday life—the layers as the "Nafs" or selves that need to be peeled away through Sufi practice—then the video may be regarded as a subtle recollection of the unity, the very singularity, of the visual and the conceptual, of the calligraphic sign and its phonemes.

The man in the video is a legendary memoriser and reciter of the Koran, also famous for being the first modern person to have his performance recorded. The profundity and the radicality of that act of recording is difficult for non-Muslims to appreciate in that it contradicts the embodiment of the Koran as a *hafiz*, that is someone who has memorised the entire Holy Book. In this work it seems that Sabsabi is presenting, as his own self-portrait, a highly self-reflective meditation on the Self as cultural and spiritual artefact. He seems to be asking us: "Who am 'I' in relation to these profane images and sacred words?"

Key to the concerns of the socio-political dimensions of the exhibition and located in the centre of the gallery's three-storey high space was *We Kill You* (2016), a large video installation on three suspended screens. In Viola's description in the floorsheet: "This poetic work engaged with sensitive issues connected to contested geographies, histories, ideological movements and realities that are specific to Arabs and Muslims. It was inspired by a poem of the same title written by the revered Syrian poet and diplomat Nizar Qabbani. It is a kind of mourning elegy in memory of Gamal Abdel Nasser, an iconic (and disputed) figure in the Arab world. Nasser is both a symbol of Arab unity and dignity, and a thorn in the side of the Arab Spring, ideologically used by Pan-Arab movements as well as by authoritarian and repressive Arab regimes."

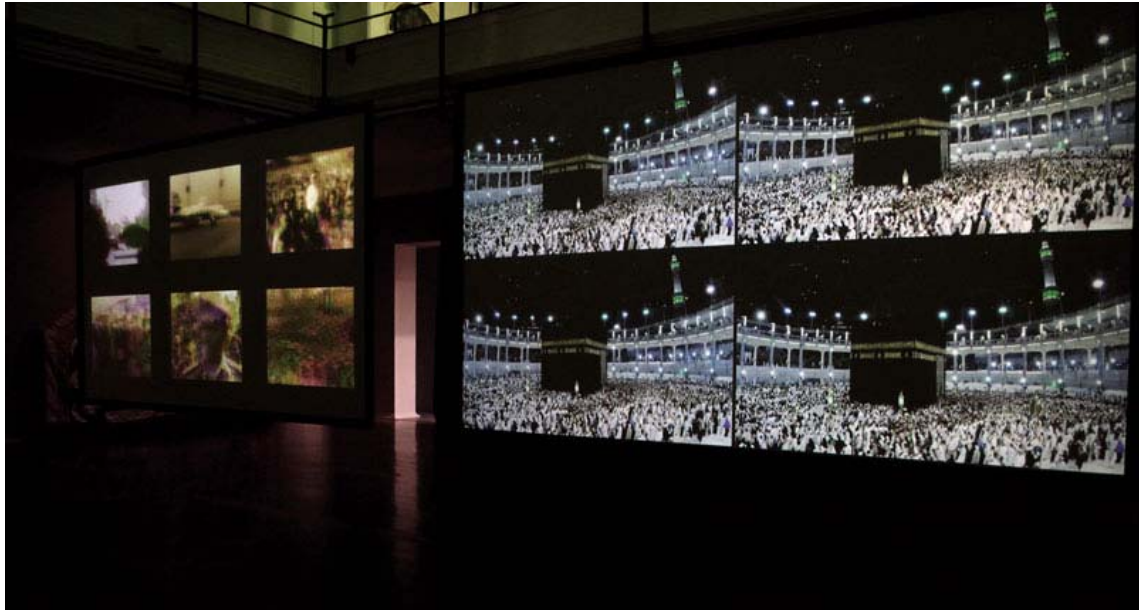
Clearly, *We Kill You* is a challenging work, as multi-layered as any of Sabsabi's photomontages, with its reference, through the text that is spoken by an actor, to political and historical circumstances that would require a very considerable knowledge of Middle-Eastern history for the viewer to be able to comprehend and then articulate them. Yet, it is significant that Sabsabi has the actor recite the text both in Arabic and in English, even if the words are hard to discern.

The face of the actor, highly emotive and appearing personally moved by the content of the text, is almost like that of the generic television newsreader who faces us while behind and beside him or her a range of images march, or flash, past.

Some of the images in the work have been appropriated from the media, others are from Sabsabi's own travels. At least once there is footage of what appears to be a peaceful rural area. In his talk following the opening of the exhibition, Sabsabi pointed out that on one side of the fence there was cultivated land, while the fields on the other uncultivated side were full of land mines, not solely to prevent access, but as form of psychological warfare. So in this work, even straightforward images contain the Invisible and its dangers. At one point, dramatically, all the screens go dark and gradually fill with flame.



Khaled Sabsabi, *We Will Kill You*, 2016, 3-channel HD video installation with audio (detail). Courtesy the artist and Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts



Khaled Sabsabi, *We Will Kill You*, 2016, 3-channel HD video installation with audio. Courtesy the artist and Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

On the three walls around the central space in which *We Will Kill You* was displayed were hung the 99 small paintings of *Guerilla* (2007–18). This work grew out of an earlier project. Where the initial work consisted of 33 images, each representing a day of the July War that took place in Lebanon, the current work represents the 99 names of Allah. Although it is foremost a visual work, thanks to this numerical symbolism, it also becomes an evocation of the verbal, of naming and of the Sacred. Looking closely at the individual works, it is ironically hard to say what they are. They seem to be over-painting, that is paintings made over photographs, painting made over and of the photograph to copy, replicate and efface the original. Sabsabi seems to be using his painting to hide the traumatic, photographic image, or at least to transform it in some way. That a vast majority of the images are of bombed and ruined buildings and other sites, giving them a poignancy, a strange and melancholy ache of injury. It is as if by transforming them into paintings that Sabsabi has taken them from being objective and blunt, like technological media images, and made them into personally haunting, eidetic memories. It is a series of works that, despite their detail and beauty as paintings, convey what I imagine to be the artist's sense of muteness and shock. This is for him a doubled trauma, even if dulled by the years since the wars depicted, the Israel–Hezbollah, or July War of 2006, and the earlier conflict which led to his own family's displacement.

Although in much that has been written about Sabsabi emphasis is placed on the socio-political aspects of his work, but this personal religiosity, only partly explained by the trauma of his early life in a conflict zone, also powerfully haunts his work. Connecting both the politics of his practice and this tendency through Sufisim is the meta-analysis of Image and the Word. This more personal dimension in which Sufi practice undoes the image is exemplified by the work *Lefke Morning* (2012). It has as its centrepiece a screen on which the video image is entirely out-of-focus. Viewers were required to pass around this screen to enter the small, darkened gallery containing the other elements of the work, its audio recording of chanting, the single calligraphic painting on a side wall, and, on the floor, a carpet. The video and audio was recorded by Sabsabi at a Sufi ceremony in Cyprus. Distinct from all the other works on display, *Lefke Morning* represents, as closely as is possible without actual

participation, the experience of ritualised, predawn Sufi chanting, as low-intensity entrancement. That the screen shows no clear image is in keeping with the ambition of that practice, its ideal of the realisation of that state beyond the Image.

At the opening of the exhibition it was suggested to me by Viola that Sabsabi may not previously have been given a survey show of this kind because of Australian Islamophobia. But that may be to simplify the difficulties viewers experience in encountering this work. Rather, it could be that the “provocations” of his work are exceptional in today’s global artworld because they are those deep and perennial questions of spirit, history and the appalling, eternally-recurring reality of war. Sabsabi’s personal engagement with these concerns has produced a remarkable body of work that, justifiably and inevitably, breaks down the norms of the insular, still-largely Western and nationalistic, Australian artworld. After this powerful survey of a selection of eleven years of work, we should await an appropriately large retrospective.



Khaled Sabsabi, *Lefke Morning*, 2012, installation view, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Photo courtesy the artist.

John Mateer is a writer, curator and poet. His latest projects are the exhibition *Invisible Genres* (John Curtin Gallery, 2016) and the accompanying book *Invisible Genres: Two Essays on Iconoclasm*, with the Dutch art historian Arvi Wattel.