

khaled sabsabi and the infinite

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To imagine the infinite is difficult and Australian artist, Khaled Sabsabi knows that, but this is what he strives toward through his media installations. He does this by using an individual language via electronic media, the last ten years of practice dominated by these two main flows. For imagining a notion of the infinite, he draws on the Islamic Sufi teachings. This engagement doesn't appear to be some disconnected appropriation of Islamic Sufism, but a central belief. This would assume the origin of everything happens via this specific form of Sufism. However, he is most concerned with Sufi philosophies that exist outside hierarchical structures. This is a transgressive view of major monotheistic religions, including Islam — such religious belief systems tend to limit and eliminate other non-religious experiences. Sabsabi reminds the viewer of his work that traditional and modern Islamic Sufism transcends a wide range of beliefs. Today's scholars recognise more than three hundred living traditional and contemporary Sufi orders and few dispute that Sufism predates Islam. Over many centuries, most Sufi orders have successfully connected to Islam, while others have connected to Hinduism, Buddhism and Hebraism. These centuries of ever-expansive Sufi connective-ness form a critical platform for his media work. According to Sabsabi, to connect is also about disconnecting and between these somewhat flowing dualities is an expression to the infinite. Most Sufi scholars state that from the beginning, a traditional Sufi was centred on the individual's search for the infinite. Many names have been given to the infinite, including Allah, Divine and God; numerous prophets and saints have heralded their existence, such as Jesus and Mohammad, and various artists have represented their images, prophecies and beliefs. Sabsabi claims these prophets and artists are part of a chain like everyone else.¹ Here he perhaps provocatively connects and disconnects to hierarchical systems. It is these Islamic Sufi inspired dualities that have become a characteristic, intriguing and at times a contradictory feature of his work.

Sabsabi's latest project is titled *70,000 Veils* (2014), which originates, as Hicham Khalidi explains from the Prophet Mohammed's teaching, that "there are 70,000 veils of light and darkness separating the individual from the divine".² Sabsabi's interpretation is a transgressive view. It falls somewhere between being a respectful witness and an outsider to Islamic teaching. His is a continuum between these positions, a notion of the infinite bringing centuries of Sufism spirituality into the now.

Sabsabi has utilised this approach before in *Naqshbandi: Greenacre Engagement* (2011) and *Air Land* (2011), but not to the profound spiritual depths and scale of *70,000 Veils*. Like Colin McCahon, Sabsabi's spirituality is not about religion. Most monotheistic religions tend to set rules to contain infinite spirituality. Sadly, most artistic expressions of religious content are didactic and creatively limiting. On this point, Sabsabi, McCahon, Bill Viola and Yayoi Kusama are exceptions. These artists tend to share Viola's view "that everything one does has a meaning in eternity".³

There are many interpretations given to the notion of the veil in Western and Eastern religions, all of which tend to converge at a high spiritual point, where god's presence is fully revealed. The 70,000 veils reference in Islamic Sufi literature tends to appear in the *Hadith*. A Hadith in religious use is often translated as "tradition", meaning an oral report of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad two centuries after his death. The instructive nature of this Islamic Sufi teaching is rather similar to the instructive works of conceptual artist Ian Millis and performance artist Tehching Hsieh. Like Millis and Hsieh, Sabsabi's precise work involves imagination on the part of the artist. He is theoretically enquiring into how to experience the infinite message of 70,000 veils from a physical finite world. He has exploited the physical evidence of his memory to experience the spiritual essences within the teaching of 70,000 veils. With the realisation of numerous extensive works and projects within an extraordinarily short period, Sabsabi may be accused of not having intensely thought them through. His reliance on actions to understand his enquiries supposes an answer. Yet from his own admission Sabsabi is happy to not receive anything in return.

Doubtless, *70,000 Veils* is Sabsabi's most ambitious and successful expression toward his ideas on the infinite. At more than three years, this is the longest production period he has undertaken. Articulated as an autobiographical 3D media landscape, it is the first time Sabsabi has used 3D technology. It also has Sabsabi's characteristic adaptiveness to spatial context. When *70,000 Veils* was internationally premiered at the 2014 *Marrakesh Biennale 5 Morocco* (28 February-31 March 2014), it was presented as a five-channel, digital HD projection, on a 15 x 1.7 metre wall. Three weeks after the Moroccan launch *70,000 Veils* was exhibited as a one hundred digital HD monitor installation at Milani Gallery in Brisbane. Supporting the monitors was a

constructed 13.2 x 2.4 metre wall, in an irregular right angle shape to the rectangular gallery. It suggested the internal space of a cube that referenced Sabsabi's earlier work *Mush* (2012). In *Mush* digital images were projected onto the surface of a floating cube. Accompanying the Milani presentation in the two upper galleries was *Guerrilla 2007* and *Guerrilla 2014*. *Guerrilla 2007* was first presented in the exhibition *ON 'n' ON* of the same year by Lisa Havilah at the Campbelltown Arts Centre, in Sydney as part of a major exhibition of nine new works, including seven media installations, and separate sculptural and photographic installations. Upon reflection, *ON 'n' ON* announced his new ideas about connective-ness and dualities, especially between politics and spirituality. These notions would be explored further in later works including *99* (2010), *Syria* (2013) and indeed *70,000 Veils*. Yet it is *Guerrilla 2014* that was the surprise inclusion, introducing thirty-three hand-coloured photographs as a new element. Sabsabi decided to present these photographs after eight years of gestation. Contextualisation of *Guerrilla 2007* and *Guerrilla 2014* is inseparable from the comparative and contrasting nature of *70,000 Veils*. All thirty-three images in *Guerrilla 2014* were shot soon after the 2006 Lebanon War and offer another perspective on its representation. Each hand-coloured photograph depicts a bombed site, of which Sabsabi took hundreds. From this archive he symbolically painted and presented thirty-three to mark each day of the 2006 War, the hand colouring process heightening the realism of the coloured photographs, a method that dates back to the 1840 daguerreotype photographs of Johann Baptist Isenring. Sabsabi's photographs were painted with acrylic, watercolour and gouache on Fujicolor Crystal Archive paper. One of the many features of this paper is its resistance to light fading, and its long-term, dark storage. Sabsabi has selected this paper to build a lasting content. The 'entire' 2006 Lebanese War archive and the sound from *Guerrilla 2007* have been rendered into *70,000 Veils*. The folding and unfolding sound and animation obscures their identity. The devastation they portray is reconstructed with past and current poetry – English and Arabic, old and new architecture, the dead and the living, all merged into this finite archive to represent the infinite.

Guerrilla 2007 is accompanied by three audio-visual portraits, each giving an account of the war. The footage was recorded in private domestic environments and their opposing perspectives are considered controversial. The projection is gridded into three channels and presented as a landscape approximately 1.2 x 4 metres. However, they are portraits of two women and one male, the youngest female appears to be in her twenties and the others in their forties. All reveal who they are and speak in Arabic, with English subtitles. The structure of the projection is in trios – three channels, three portraits, three scenes. The three subject scenes are mostly the portraits, the aftermath of the bombing and a political pamphlet narration. A pamphlet depicts historical images, one projection presents a series of stills, the other two present a book with turning pages. One projects the book changing pages from left to right, the other

changing pages from right to left. The next three projections cut to people walking and moving vehicle scenes. Two of the three depict strollers in bustling marketplaces, with sometimes a view of chaotic overhead power lines. The other scene shows a moving vehicle in a rural setting, with Israeli observation towers, sometimes blurry, sometimes clear. All three scenes then show bombed domestic buildings, followed by a female in mid-profile, crying while smoking. Next is a left and right projection fixed on a serene Mediterranean sunset. Between the sunsets, the artist walks narrow streets, with camera lens initially at eye level, shifting to a sky blocked by closeups of more chaotic power lines. Sabsabi's lens is again a witness, but never reveals him. From there, all the projections move closer to the second female. Her face is revealed but sometimes concealed by a prominent focus upon her hands. One excerpt resonates, as she declares; "I remember as a child railway tracks and I was told that they lead to Palestine, so I asked my mother is there a train or not? She said no, but once there was. So I said why all this fighting when we can all follow the tracks and get to Palestine"? The next scene returns to the bombed domestic buildings, showing a boldly defiant Lebanese flag. The last scene has the right and left projection of the artist walking through street markets and driving into the country's borders, again with the lens at eye level. The seventieth anniversary of the destruction of Palestine will take place in 2017. *Guerrilla 2007* and *Guerrilla 2014* are offering a new way to tell an unresolved history. Sabsabi is creating for a new archive, recordings of devastation.

As a young artist, Sabsabi began experimenting with sound and poetry within the hip-hop group COD (Count on Damage) in Granville, Sydney. He gradually moved to soundtracks for short and feature length films. It was to be media that eventually connected his sound and images and for *70,000 Veils* is one of the main devices. The sounds and animated images are both separate and united, but fittingly reflect the compression of the work in total, working together to set the mediative hum with the interchanging animated 3D images. They change every second; 70,000 seconds of sound and equivalent animated images, collected through Sabsabi's day-to-day experiences of local and international places, people, buildings, family and friends. All sound and imagery has been sourced from video, audio and photography recorded over ten years. The preparation of the sound involves a process of stripping back high frequencies, and distribution through each of the one hundred monitors on seven hundred second loops. The connecting sound is from a centrally located sub-woofer, where the bass is concentrated. Together they resemble a deep rumbling hum. The animated images have been gathered from ten thousand archival photographs, each photograph electronically stripped and reconstructed into a new image. These images are then processed through a 3D analogue and digital animation. Unlike the sound, they are only presented across one hundred monitors. Each monitor contains seven hundred animated images, which loop at a clockwise and anti-clockwise direction. Collectively they number seventy thousand animate images.





Curiously *70,000 Veils*' human scale and length is consistent with a 'piece', which in graffiti terms resembles a large, complex and labour-intensive painting. A piece often incorporates 3D effects, arrows and many colour transitions. Without the 3D glasses each monitor resembles a sketch for either a block or a calligraphy / graffiti throw-up. The throw-ups' characteristic outline and minimal one or two fill-colours look like *70,000 Veils* nominal colour palette.⁴

Amongst the seven hundred image rotation within every monitor there were unexpected accidents. Approximately every thirty seconds, one or sometimes two of the monitors would revert to a blank monitor. This would happen across the entire one hundred monitors. Perhaps these accidental moments suggest finite and infinite movements. Here the artist acknowledges the new possibilities of others engaging with the work. They also highlight a new interaction between energy and non-energy. According to Sabsabi, the control of this random energy "depends when the work is switched on and in what order this sequence happens according to the one who has the remote".⁵ By allowing these blank monitors, he is perhaps connecting his ideas to the dualities of the visible and invisible. In addition, there is a slight time difference between each monitor in the loop time.

When Sabsabi introduced 3D technology, it added a new emotive element to his media work, deciding upon a 'passive' as opposed to 'active' application. To be 'passive' is to contradict. Thereby he is resisting hatred for love; resisting violence for peace; and resisting greed for generosity. The other emotive element of this technology is that the images are interleaved in space as opposed in time. Single images are collected in parallel lines for both the left and right stereo images. The monitors' LCD panel also has polarising filters. The 3D glasses used contain polarising

filters, one over each eye. The 3D glasses feed different images into the eye. Each monitor is displaying two images simultaneously. Without glasses the images appear out of register. The red and blue filters on the glasses separate the two different images. This ensures each eye receives each image separately; together the 3D effect is created. With this passive 3D technology the parallel resolution is halved limiting the pixel image. That is why the image is low and colours are a minimal palette of yellow, blue, green and red with white and black tones. This diminution of colour from the images contributes to the overall compositional harmony of *70,000 Veils*. One of the most absorbing visual aspects of *70,000 Veils* is how the 3D perspective changes according to the viewer's position. The depth of space between the moving positions and changing images are sublime experiences in Sabsabi's work. Depending on the animation of the image plane, this depth often creates vanishing points, lending another possible impression of the infinite.

Unlike the five-channel projection in Marrakesh, the one hundred monitors in Brisbane offer a deeper 3D visual experience. The projection even with the 3D glasses flattens the 3D occurrence more. These monitors created heat where the projections did not. The heat, which created warmth to and around the work, added a new emotional element to this work, the closer the viewer came to it the greater the warmth. This warmth relied on electrical energy, without which the monitors would quickly go cold. There is a vulnerability to media, that cannot be said about painting or sculpture. The hot and cold or the life and death are controlled by one switch. Its physicality is temporary as is a finite life.

The eleventh-century Islamic scholar Al-Biruni speculated that Earth's rotation of time and longitude could be connected. The monitors and projection in *70,000 Veils* create a natural grid formation, to form an orderly association with time and longitude. Rows and columns of the monitors are unevenly numbered. They are stacked in rows of five, with contrasting columns of thirteen and seven, uneven numbers, which in Islamic culture directly link to the belief in the Divine. In the Qur'an there are approximately twenty-five references to the number seven, including seven heavens and seven periods of creation etc.⁶ This symbolic use of mystic numbers has long been a connective signature in Sabsabi's work. For Plato, "where there is number there is order; where there is no number there is nothing but confusion, formlessness and disorder".⁷ In his work *Mush*, Sabsabi emphasised the importance of the number eight in ancient living cultures, connecting Sufism and other cultures to traditional Aboriginal women's ceremonies. In his sound-sculpture *Sale* (2007), eight yellow bikes with cylinders which looked like rocket launchers, played on the never-ending resistance to Israeli violence.

Sabsabi did not know that he was to begin development of *70,000 Veils* in 2003. At that time of the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, he first travelled to Morocco, Turkey, Syria and to his birth land Lebanon. He was twelve years old when he left with his family for Australia and Lebanon was already five years into a civil war which lasted for fifteen years, until 1990. In 2003 two crucial and alternating events took place. From Sabsabi's own accounts they would transform his practice and life. The first was in Tripoli (Lebanon), where he visited a sacred site and witnessed the origins of his Islamic Sufi lineage which originated from Iraq in the seventh-century AD. The other was in Morocco, where he came in contact with the Sufi teachings of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240). Arabi established the Akbarian Islamic tradition that is embedded in the Qur'an. Arabi's scholars espoused his universal philosophy including "that each person has a unique path to the truth"⁸ and "that woman and man are absolutely equal in terms of human potentiality".⁹ Some scholars identified Arabi's legacy as the school of knowledge in Islam. However, the school of love in Islam was attributed to Sufi mystic Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273). Historically these two master Sufis had overlapping lives and each knew the work of the other, but it is unclear whether Arabi and Rumi ever met. Rumi's well-known passion for music, poetry and dance as a way to the Divine is an inspiration to Sabsabi. The mystic's philosophy that an individual can express the infinite through creativity appears to be a source of inspiration for *70,000 Veils*. However, unlike Rumi, Sabsabi questions whether the accumulated memory of life can represent spiritual essence as a way to imagining the infinite.

By 2013 Sabsabi had visited Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Morocco several times. He also visited China, Cyprus, Germany, Holland, Malaysia, Poland and the United Arab Emirates (Sharjah and Dubai). In Cyprus in 2011, he met the Sufi Shekih Nazim Al-Haqqani (b.1922), a controversial Sufi

teacher of the Nasqshbandi-Haqqani Order and currently exiled in Cyprus from Turkey. Al-Haqqani was the inspiration for the *Naqshbandi: Greenacre Engagement* and *70,000 Veils*. Al-Haqqani's website features many audio recordings and transcribed interviews—a standout quote from his reflections and contemplations, translates everyday observations into philosophical statements about life; "use it (life), so that you do not come to this world as a colt and leave it as a donkey".¹⁰

Some who experience *70,000 Veils* may be disconcerted that Sabsabi doesn't lay everything out openly. The avoidance of definition and lack of narrative can register as a form that is too direct. Yet the knowledge and experience that has enabled Sabsabi to reach this place, has an element of sadness, because they are moments of change, regardless of their emotional openness. In *70,000 Veils*, much of what is experienced is distorted. In this ever-changing twirl of memories from the finite to the infinite, the details of Sabsabi's community engagements cannot be realised but only imagined. This includes his work in Palestinian refugee camps and with young Arabic and Aboriginal children in suburban Miller, in Sydney. *70,000 Veils* highlights the awakening relationship contemporary orthodox Islam has with traditional Islam, how polarised these views are and how desensitised we have become to their difference. Then there is the ease to disconnect then connect to a living human being, ironically from the very discipline that Sabsabi uses. *70,000 Veils* will ask us to explore questions we are sometimes afraid to ask. This inspiring work is humbling in its omission to the finite experience of art to the infinite.

Notes

¹ Khaled Sabsabi in conversation with the author, 14 April 2014

² Daniella Rose King, 'Where Are We Now?', www.ibraaz.org/interview/121, 2014. This quote by Khalidi originates from Khaled Sabsabi's project concept document for the 2014 *Marrakesh Biennale*: "The Prophet Mohammed says there are 70,000 Veils of light and darkness separating an individual from the Divine and an individual is drawn towards the Divine according to their relationship with the Divine."

³ Rachael Kohn, Bill Viola's Spiritual Art, ABC Radio National, 24 October 2010. Interview with Bill Viola

⁴ Peter McKay (curator Contemporary Australian Art, QAGOMA, Brisbane) in conversation with the author, 29 March 2014

⁵ Khaled Sabsabi in conversation with the author, 29 March 2014

⁶ M. Sahibzada, *The Symbolism of the Number Seven in Islamic Culture and Ritual*; see: www.wadsworth.cengage.com, 1 March 2014

⁷ Arthur Herman, *The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization*, London: Random House, 2013: 29

⁸ Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi 1165-1240 AD, The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/ibnarabi.html>; accessed 17 February 2014

⁹ Souad Hakim, Ibn 'Arabi's Twofold Perception of Woman-Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle, first published in the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, Volume XXXI, 2002: 1-29

¹⁰ Sheikh Nazim Al Haqqani Al Qubrusi An Naqshibandi, www.saltanat.org/ 10 March 2014