KHALED SABSABI

INTEGRATION, ASSIMILATION AND A FAIR GO FOR ALL

SCARRED SPACES

Frailty stares at me. Glass reflects my vanishing self. My body is pixilated right before me. Ageing lines draw me. They draw me in closer. I see strangers. I feel uneasily at home. These remnants complete me. I am the point of their becoming. This is my phenomenological unravelling. I integrate these shards into my soul. I assimilate these carnal surfaces into my consciousness. I am beholden by their trapped lives. I listen to their incomprehensible modalities. I hear their anguish as they limp around dumbly from 'smart bombs'. I bathe in their blood. I watch them as they pick up the pieces of their deaths and I wonder where do they go next?

In an interview a week after the gruesome massacres of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was asked: "You are the philosopher of the 'other'...and for the Israeli, isn't the 'other' above all Palestinian?" Levinas' response is unnervingly clinical and empathetically barren: "My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbour who is not necessary kin, but who can be? But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour what can you do?"[1]. Levinas was not just considered the philosopher par excellence of the 'other' but also theoretically mused on the 'face' as being the corporeal basis for the start of an ethical relationship with the other. "The face" he says "is what forbids us to kill"[2].

When juxtaposed, Levinas' statements are perplexing but they fundamentally shed light on abstract understandings of the self and its concrete other. In his exhibition at Gallery 4A, Khaled Sabsabi visually confronts these notions.

On the ground level of Gallery 4A, twelve television screens are mounted in tetris-like formations on imposing metal frames. Each screen flashes phenotypic panoplies of eyes, noses and mouths, challenging the configuration of the Australian bodypolitic by presenting a kaleidoscopic flux of facial fragments, which have to be organised by our minds. Sabsabi's installation captures the profound aesthetics of beauty, ugliness and all what lies in-between, revealing the inherent polycultural nature of Australia. But much more than that, there is

1 Levinas, Emmanuel. (1999). Ethics and Politics in Sean Hand ed. *The Levinas Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp-294.

2 Levinas, Emmanuel. (1985). *Ethics and Infinity*. trans. R.A.Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. pp-86

a meaning that can be grasped when one gets too close to the close-ups. Each screen is sovereign. It embodies its own facial allocation as well as seamlessly being part of a face. This is what Frantz Fanon calls the "racial epidermal schema" that genetically makes up the nation[3]. Encoded within this cultural DNA are the mutations, abnormalities, aberrations, and most of all, uniqueness that shape the political geographies and trajectories of each citizen, resident, visitor, asylum seeker and those in juridical limbo who call Australia home. Each fragment is laden within its own historically convoluted marks, gashes, spots, cuts, hair and so on, which become enmeshed within the discontinuities and connections of this digitally sensate experience. Their porosity punctures the viscous veil of anxiety associated with intercultural relations. They fuse the bodily and the political through the myriad of combinations and interminglings that flicker across otherwise disparate entities. There is a plasticity that is felt when touching the screen creating an affective and ethical space of tactile engagement. These vulnerable parts entreat us to look. They request never to be switched off.

Upstairs on the main floor of the gallery, the smooth white walls dotted with brazen symbols of Arabic and English letters quickly turn into a chilling theatre of war. Darts of lightning pierce a blurred and blackened landscape. The grainy footage projected on the wall evokes an 'on the ground' perspective. Sabsabi captures the mundanely spectacular effects of nature striking random points on the suburban sprawl of Newcastle through a prism of geopolitical awareness. Newcastle eerily resembles the territorially ravaged and ruinously savaged spaces of Baghdad, Beirut, Colombo or Gaza. Newcastle as a site of violence is not such an anomaly if it is situated within Australia's genocidal archive. Up until 1823, the biopolitical technologies of population control were at work through the establishment of a major penal colony in Newcastle[4]. However, Sabsabi turns our gaze to the vertical politics of occupation. The sky affords an open terrain from which to terrorise those below. Visual mastery, translated into military might, is attained through the maintenance of distance from the ground. Carpet bombing here does not mean an explosion of threaded beauty. Instead, intricate layers of human deaths, dust and debris are weaved in haphazard patterns that furnish these vanishing cities' disorientated demography. With an optic force that is fortified through light, this installation

3 Newcastle City Council. (2009). 'Discovering and Founding of Newcastle'. [http://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/discover_newcastle/visit_our_libraries/discovery_and_founding_of_newcastle]

4 Fanon, Frantz. (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*. trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press. pp-112.

frighteningly personifies Milan Kundera's 'unbearable lightness of being'.

Opposite this installation, dead tree branches sit haplessly. Our cosmic view shifts to the realities of walking on unsettled ground. Sabsabi raises the complexities of stepping through a bombarded topography. He alerts us to the immediate imbrication of our bodies, which imbued with power and agency, are roaming within built and natural environments. These branches are spectral instantiations of different memories and temporalities of conquest, co-operation and co-existence. They are present but only in the past tense. They are fractions of the whole. They cannot give life because theirs have already been taken. Timber on timber flooring. Skin on skin. They enfold and delineate our presence to lead us to an urn full of velvety red dye that blends in with the dark brownish hues of this urban desert. There is a sequence of the urn filling up slowly with the dye to the sound a camera shutter. Painfully and patiently, these veins of silence are emptied out. The theologico-political bind of sovereignty is illustrated through the subtle and wrenching droplets of blood that the 'wretched of the earth' endure, only to be told FUCK OFF WE'RE FULL. Emblazoned in black block letters on black walls, this emphatic declaration of statist hubris re-affirms the disregard for life that characterizes the modern nation-state. Far from being inflammatory, it has become normalized within the everyday vernacular of violence that has characterized Australian social life. These words unite the nation in its collective phobic disdain of its other through a comfortable coercion. The mantra morphs involuntarily into a short anthem of relaxed racialisation through its ubiquitous usage. Each hostile word horrifically materializes Fanon's aphorism "The settler's work is to make dreams of liberty impossible for the native"[5]. Khaled Sabsabi's work though, as sublimely illustrated through this timely exhibition, is to make these dreams possible for all.

Farid Farid
University of Western Sydney.

5 Fanon, Frantz. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Weidenfeld. pp -93

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Published to coincide with the exhibition

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INTEGRATION, ASSIMILATION
AND A FAIR GO FOR ALL

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GALLERY4A
181-187 Hay Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Telephone: 9212 0380 Fax: 9281 0873
info@4a.com.au

WWW.4A.COM.AU

Director: Aaron Seeto
Program Co-ordinator: Summar Hipworth
Gallery Assistant: Yanping Zhang and Yuye Wu
Inters: Mirna Indra, Scott Wark, Annette Wiguna

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