

Integration Assimilation and a Fair Go For All: Khaled Sabsabi

Gallery 4A, Sydney
13 June – 25 July 2009

Khaled Sabsabi's latest exhibition at Gallery4A raises more questions than it answers. His politically engaged multimedia installations address issues about identity, ownership, war, trauma, and racism.

Characteristically Sabsabi dismantles the comfortable distance between artwork and viewer, forcing a visual and sensory engagement. The ever-present rumbling and percussive whips emerging from the three-channel video installation *Left-Centre-Right* (2007/2009) pervade the entire upper level of the gallery. In *Left-Centre-Right* the stormy night skies of Newcastle are transformed into the battlefields of war-torn nations. The foreboding silhouette of the city is fractured by slow motion lightning bolts which mimic the trail of bombs used to light a city during military incursion or the flashes of burning white phosphorus as it is dropped from the skies, terrorising those below. The prolonged exposure of the film captures street lights which dance across the foreground, creating a haunting beauty incongruent with the site of trauma. Reminiscent of news footage which could be Lebanon (Sabsabi's birthplace), the Palestinian Territories or Afghanistan, to name a few, the place itself becomes secondary, losing significance to the overriding metaphor of the destruction, terror and futility of war which can strike indiscriminately at any moment. Sabsabi makes his work of the time and yet timeless, revealing just enough context to provoke a discussion about the current issues plaguing the world, and yet not enough specifics to confuse, or limit, the discussion.

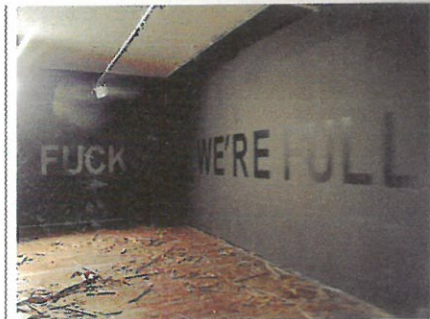
While *Left-Centre-Right* is skilfully nuanced, the mixed media installation *Fuck off we're full* (2009) is, as the title dictates, arresting. Oversized glossy black vinyl letters spelling out the title gleam in the dim lighting against a matt black wall. The darkness, and the fact that one of the channels from *Left-Centre-Right* is projected onto the first two words 'fuck off', forces the sentence to be read backwards, right to left, as if in Arabic. The black on black of the blunt phrase makes it visually modest but no less palpable, directly speaking about



the history of Australia's conservative immigration policy, and also about the ingrained racism Sabsabi experienced after migrating with his family to Australia in the 1970s.

In addition to the effect of the lettering, strips of dead bark are strewn across the floor, crackling underfoot, as the dusty smell permeates the airless space and mingles with the sound from *Left-Centre-Right*. On the edge of the bark a small image of dripping water is projected onto the floor. Bathed in blue and red the image transforms from water to blood, evoking discourse about lands under occupation.

Less confronting is the twelve channel video *Australians* (2006/2009). A strobe-like melange of eyes, noses and mouths. Oversized facial fragments flash across the television screens, forming three giant faces which light the glass-fronted gallery twenty-four hours a day. More than a billboard for multiculturalism or a topographical portrait of 'Australianness', *Australians* speaks to an understanding of cultural diversity and the identity of a nation. Every pore, hair and wrinkle shares a silent snippet of personal history which forms part of the bigger picture. The close-ups of faces remain on the screen just long enough to question what the people behind the snapshots are thinking, saying, and feeling. The absence of sound in *Australians* is unnerving. However, the outside noises become the soundtrack. Traffic, voices and the hum of



Khaled Sabsabi TOP: *Australians* 2006/2009, 12 channel video installation. ABOVE: *Fuck off we're full*, vinyl on wall. Images courtesy the artist and Gallery4A. Photos: Gary Thick.

the light rail confuse the line between art and life, allowing the work to exist in a site specific state of change.

In an inversion of the black on black of *Fuck off we're full*, the pseudo-scientific white vinyl letters on white walls of *Accent* (2009) are placed like white flags throughout the exhibition. A combination of Roman and Arabic script the small-scale lettering, while easily missed, alludes to the process of 'assimilation', specifically to Sabsabi's experience of integrating his Lebanese and Australian life.

Sabsabi's works are intentionally direct, relating candidly to Australia, but also to the world at large. On the surface each work has an immediate message, but the more time you spend with the works the more Sabsabi's complex political melting pot makes you think.

Eliza Garnsey