

EIGHT ABOUT ALI OR ELI

KHALED SABSABI IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNA BAZZI BACKHOUSE ON 15 SEPTEMBER 2005

ABB: Khaled Sabsabi, multimedia artist, hip hop artist, community artist, artist of Arab Muslim or Lebanese background, born in Lebanon raised in Western Sydney. Are these titles appropriate or emblems of identity politics steeped in problematic Western discourse?

KS: For me these are titles are placed on our backs like the shirt we wear or the flag we fly. I see my role as using the arts and its creative approaches to work with communities. In my case they have been young people from a "NESB" or in today's word "CALD" (*culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds*). Most of the time I don't differentiate between my conceptual approach to community arts and the production of my own artwork. I give myself, and others like me, the title of "left/over". What is a left/over? It is an artist who is left out of the main menu of sanctioned artists. It is a people's artist who understands that their own art making complexities are pushed to new places through their engagement with artists or communities of people who are more on the margins than themselves.

ABB: So when you use the term "Arab" or

"Lebanese" to either describe yourself or your artwork how do you contextualise these complex, similar or disparate identities?

KS: The purity of race or a single breed of people, "uninterrupted" genetically does not exist in the Middle East; everything is hybrid, people and place. It is a region that has and will witness the rise and fall of many previous and coming empires.

The term Arab-ness is a subject and not a biological state, but a mind set; like a cause or a movement - it is like the veins that pump blood in and around a living body, connecting body to life. There is no separation between the two, like chains with hooks, clinging and entrenched to a memory and a land. The only time when this stops is when a body dies - these are symbols of my identity.

ABB: There is a prevailing thought that the term Arab as Fatima Mernissi points out "is a political, not a racial claim"[1]

KS: I agree and suggest that at this point in history, art has a duty, a *waajab*[2] to make a statement and to be responsible, this *waajab* extends to the artist; an artist engaged in political art can't just ignore their background in this context. Community arts activism as a form should never be out to please the majority - it should question majority politics from its

own position, which is people speaking their stolen wisdom and fighting for their own survival. You can't empower people through projects – you can only attempt to create spaces and places, equipment and backup and you meet with people where you can by establishing collaborations that work and maybe sometimes they don't work.

I work with the so-called isolated, marginalised or at risk. When I meet with people I do so by imagining and creating a context by which we are all artists and/or people with ideas that are coming together to create a piece of artwork. There may be some technical skills to teach or to share but conceptually I work towards making artwork that is original and finds a new language. This language or form and the concerns of the artwork should be relevant to the people and the place I'm working with. The question of cultural relevance must be addressed in any context. Therefore, I think the artist or worker must have an ability to absorb, understand the issues in the workspace in order to be relevant and useful.

Too many times projects, with communities are used to put people and their cultures on display in accordance with current threats and trends. This can be avoided by linking with grassroots artists, organisations, people and communities, only then is the work truthful - expressing the concerns and issues relevant today.

ABB: You have been back to Lebanon several times to produce work and develop projects in partnership with communities. How do these experiences impact on your current work and Ali or ʿli? [3]

KS: Returning to the Middle East after being away for twenty-eight years challenged the way I construct my identity. What got the ball rolling, was the idea of competing locally for survival. This idea, came about one day while in a cab, from a frustrated but honest cab driver, who added an extra sentence to the usual questions you receive, like, where are you from? And do you like it better here or there? He

added, well, if you like it here so much, why don't you try to earn a living here and then come back and tell me if you still like it here.

At the time his honesty made me confused and angry – confused because I realised that I was just another tourist, high on cultural belonging and childhood memories. Angry, because of the hardships of people's situations, suffered from the dollar equation, screaming survival of the fittest format.

So after a three-month stay in Lebanon and Syria and having completed all the work I set out to complete, I left the Middle East. In Australia I spent a month reflecting upon my three months in the Middle East.

What I felt was a cultural void, much bigger than it ever was previously, so I decided to return to the region and to try to find a trace of what I was feeling.

I made a decision to go back and compete locally for survival. You might not agree with this rationale, and yes I did have a passport and a return ticket with an option and the luxury of leaving at any time, but this was my way of dealing with the struggles of belonging and of being misplaced.

Here situations and emotions are very different and difficulties in relation to life in the Middle East are to put it mildly, amplified. Since my first trip in 2003, I have gone to the Middle East five times. I think a decision has to be made by the individual as to whether she or he wants to be in exile. In my opinion nothing stops the individual returning to their memories.

ABB: What about being an exile living in the West? Is that not part of a bigger problem about the pressures of postcolonial and even colonial societies? [4]

KS: I think we as individuals are all in some sort of exile, whether it is physical or psychological and the result of personal experiences which reflect greatly on the subject of identity. The impact

of postcolonial or even colonial expansion world-wide has to be evaluated and measured, it is not good enough seeing bodies being blown up each day on the screen in Iraq and Afghanistan and standing around not doing or saying anything.

Living in South West Sydney is about being confronted with universal issues about migration, displacement and the language of exiles – of diasporic communities searching for their sense of place and most importantly purpose. This is multiculturalism today, the ripping or legal theft of people from their lands, with the temptation and promise of a better life, away from political and economic unrest. Who is causing and who has caused this political and economical unrest, in the first place? I have to add the term misplace to the displace, as a result of mass migration, labour resource relocation, people and their removal like sheep from one region to benefit another. This may be an evolution of one type but it is also de-evolution of another - one benefitting from the other.

ABB: How has your residency at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre assisted with the development of Ali or ʿLi?

KS: Having the luxury of the residency, means the ability to work at anytime without the pressures and with very minimal external distractions. The residency, being right next to the work means, instant workability.

ABB: Can you talk about Ali or ʿLi and how it developed between the two sites - Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre and Campbelltown Arts Centre?

KS: *Ali or ʿLi* is symbolic of the two spaces; it refers to personal experience, in a way, a migrant one, as being or living in one place but continuously getting overwhelmed by another space, to simplify this is to, imagine you are two separate people, totally different but who are chained together, for life, forced to share in each others realities.

Ali or ʿLi developed as a unique partnership and collaboration between the two venues - each site radically different from the other. Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre is a former power station, located on the banks of the George's River, which has a very different feel to the newly developed Campbelltown Arts Centre. This was both challenging and exciting to work with. *Ali or ʿLi* I believe resolves those differences in a very poetic way.

ABB: What really matters to you as an artist?

KS: When I work with communities I do not aim to normalise or to fix the people I work with. Engagement with an interesting and dynamic project will create its own changes and new journeys in people's lives. This is material to work with.

In today's world, an artist has no choice but to remain useful. I've accepted that when you're part of a minority group the road is different. There is no formula to what I do.

¹ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, p.16.

² *waajib* is derived from Arabic and means duty.

³ "Ali or ʿLi" is spoken as "Ali or Ali". The transliterated interpretation of the Arabic letter ʿ is ayn. In using the letter ʿ in the title of the work, Sabsabi is challenging the use of the common English language by turning and inserting a number in resistance. Thereby using language as a way in which to 'talk back' to the colonialisers, whose politics to date has led to the unwilling migration of millions of Arabs from their ancestral homes in the Middle East to other parts of the world.

⁴ Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*, p.14, The University of Texas Press, 2003.