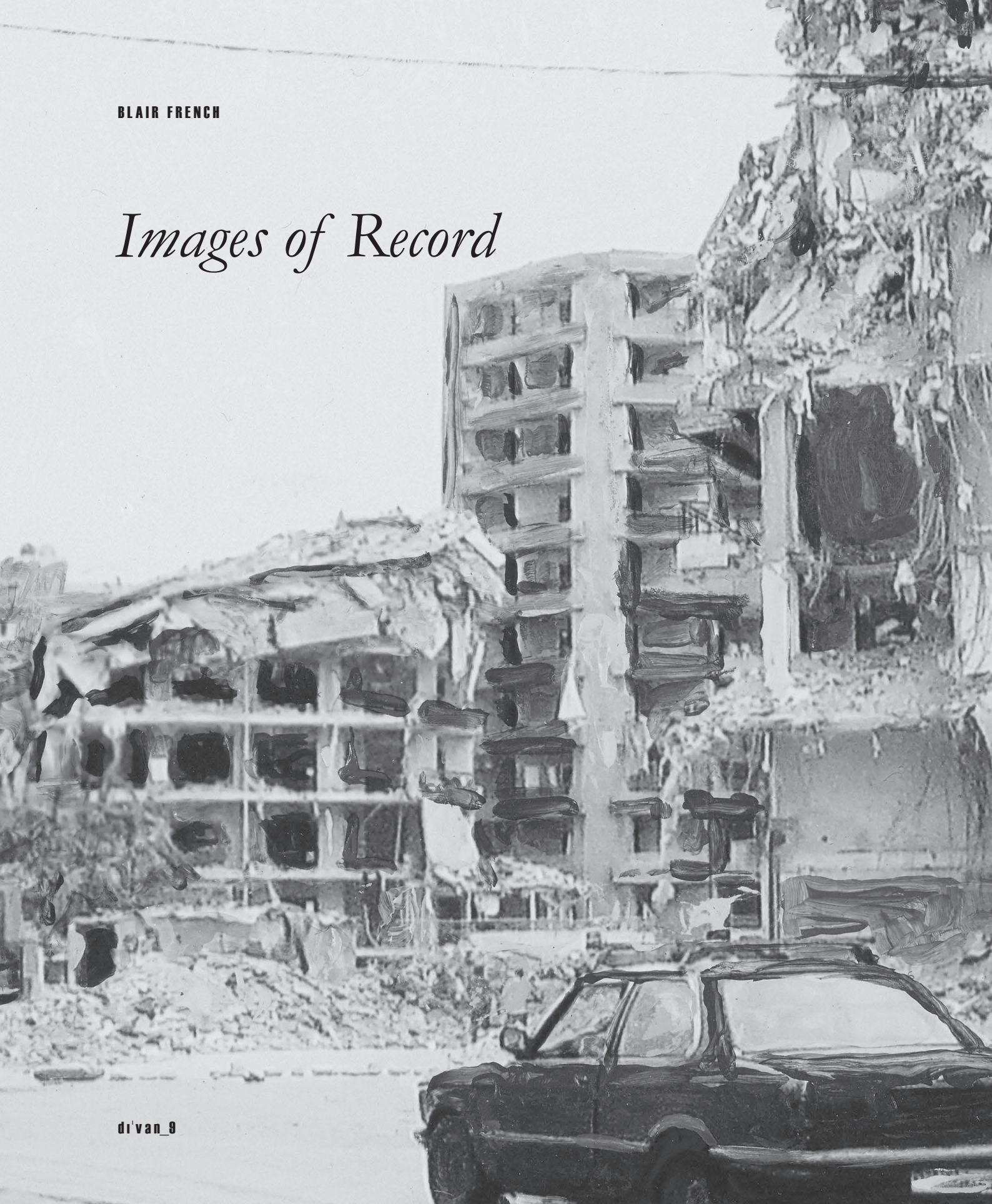
BLAIR FRENCH

Images of Record



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Immediately following the thirty-three day 2006 Lebanon War (also referred to as the Israel-Hezbollah War) Western Sydney-based artist Khaled Sabsabi was in Beirut on one of his regular visits to Lebanon. Moving through the city he took photographs and video footage of the destruction he encountered, documenting an environment that in little over a month had been rendered unrecognizable by Israeli bombing. On returning to Australia the resulting images were added to a burgeoning personal archive of visual material gathered on these visits.

Almost eight years later Sabsabi exhibited a first set of artworks derived from these photographs under the title *Guerilla* (2014). The presentation featured thirty-three individually framed photographs, simply printed at 15x10cm snapshot-size, then painted by Sabsabi. They sat within a larger solo exhibition at Milani Gallery in Brisbane, centred on his then new video installation work *70,000 Veils* (2014)—composed from 70,000 still photographs—that had just premiered at the 2014 Marrakesh Biennial. The Brisbane exhibition also included a version of the earlier (2007) three-channel video work sharing the same title, *Guerilla*. Given the apparent basis of his work in moving image, sound and to a lesser degree installation over the previous fifteen years, the presence of these thirty-three subtle, but intensely concentrated painted photographs was not only a surprise to audiences familiar with Sabsabi's work, but suggested new pathways into the artist's process, his relationship to the country of his birth and his tussle with the volatility of images as conduits between the known and unknown, the physical and the metaphysical.

In his own way Sabsabi had documented the visually apparent, physical damage to sections of Beirut caused by a conflict that had killed over a thousand civilians (the vast majority Lebanese) and between three hundred and five hundred combatants and resulted in the destruction in Lebanon by Israeli forces of some fifteen thousand homes, nine hundred businesses, more than seventy-five bridges and over thirty utility plants, as well as some three hundred buildings in Israel. (It is also estimated that around one million people were displaced within Lebanon, and between a third and a half of that number within Israel.)[1] There was no specific intention behind Sabsabi's process, other than the ongoing impulse to personally document the impact of evolving regional tension and conflict on the place of his birth, its history, culture and the experience of its people. Having migrated to Australia from his home city of Tripoli aged twelve in 1977, a few years into the devastating 1975–1990 Lebanese Civil War, Sabsabi only first returned in 2002. He has made numerous subsequent visits and has spent time working in Lebanon both as an artist and as a facilitator of music, theatre and art projects with local organizations (including Shams Beirut Theatre, AL-JANA Arab Resources Center For Popular Art and the International Arts Academy in Beirut). Moreover, his visits to Lebanon have been critical to his engagement with Sufism and his own family's long history with this mystical strand of Islam.

In 2006 he was in Lebanon working on his video work *Guerilla*, featuring three protagonists detailing the experience and impact of the Civil War. Sabsabi's memories of the violence of that war remain strong. If he began *Guerilla* (the video work) with a restorative impulse, focused upon finding a connection across divergent experiences that might point to paths of healing, his encounter with the brutality of the 2006 conflict flipped this process into an experience of recurrent violence and trauma at both a personal and collective level.

Guerilla (the series of painted photographs) was comprised wholly of images of urban destruction—awkward arrangements of broken concrete slabs, collapsed structures, remnants of political signs and graffiti, exposed twisted reinforcing steel, strands of wiring, blown up streets, buckled vehicles, and more. While clearly photographic in origin and composition, the prints had

been meticulously worked over in watercolour and acrylic. Certain paint colours not only highlighted features and gave political emphasis but also triggered emotional responses to the scenes: red cloths and flags; green forms of plant life amongst the ruins; yellow bands of emergency incident tape. But equally important were the less demonstrative treatments of the general scene of each image—the prevalent browns, greys and fawns overpainting rubble, the skeletal forms of eviscerated buildings, dirt craters and pieces of pavement. While less demonstrative in terms of colour or painterly touch, the care with which Sabsabi had also picked out and worked over this tangled detail of destruction—detail otherwise prone to being overlooked in images of a type so prevalent in the contemporary mediascape—called it and the viewer to attention. Painting the photographs had the effect of slowing them: while relatively informal, non-professional and private in their snapshot quality, such photography is nowadays the commonplace model for online global media where the role of either participant or witness is non-distinguishable from that of the reporter. These are the type of photographs as likely to be seen on social media feeds as in print media.

So how did such apparent care, and touch, on the part of the artist shift their register? And what did it ask of a viewer in the act of looking? This apparently new aspect of Sabsabi's practice involved a generative impulse to redirection through two mediums less visible in his work to this point, painting and photography—painting as an interpretation of the photograph lying below, but also as a reconstruction of our encounter with the photographic more broadly. The works have on some occasions been referred to as paintings, on others as photographs, pointing to an oscillation between medium-specific frames of reference (including that of video) that is important to understanding their potency, and to approaching Sabsabi's drive to produce the work.

The original 2006 photographs are largely unpeopled, although according to Sabsabi not consciously so.[2] Perhaps the impulse was to focus on the shattering effect of human action, to mirror the intent of the distant protagonists with consequential images, not of individualized pain but the ruination of place. Perhaps social reportage as a genre of conflict photography was simply never his interest. Or perhaps people were simply largely absent from these scenes in this stunned moment of relative quietude following the relentless battering of shelling, rocket and bombing attacks.

This unpeopled quality nudges the photographs towards the field of ruins photography, particularly that twentieth and twenty-first century strand documenting and holding for time the present and immediate human destruction of cities across the globe (as distinct from ruins pictured for the aesthetics of decay and entropy formed in their slow dissolution through time). However, very few of Sabsabi's images are formally framed to give the degree of visual clarity and concentration associated with this genre. Their informality of composition resists this aesthetic convention. Any encouragement to the viewer towards empathic identification with an experience of pain, loss or trauma is to be found in the rapid snapshot sensibility of the images. And also, perhaps, in a recognition that a sense of violence repeated, of an inescapable cycle of conflict is being paralleled in the recurrent rhythms of return of the migrant home, entering and exiting this sphere, carrying with them not only the embodied and psychological imprint of the situation but its documentation in images, notes and recordings.

These source photographs veer dramatically from close-up details—the cracked and splintered surface of a single structure hard up to the surface of the image—to complete, full-view but abandoned and now tenuous structures at mid-distance, often at odd angles and placement within the frame (leaning to one side, revealing a patch of blue sky to the other, for example). A single scene might be photographed more than once but at a slightly different angle. The larger

document is therefore comprised of fragments, its impact felt in an accumulation, one that conversely provokes a similarly fractured, distressed mode of viewing flitting back and forth, unable to settle on any single view. The photographs may trigger trauma for some. They certainly induce restlessness, anxiety even. Their taking is political. They picture the destruction wrought by political antagonism. They mark history. There is a quiet but insistent tone of protest in their being. But their generation and fundamental impact is derived and felt most immediately as personal, inferred in the informality of their composition that highlights a personality at their centre, the sense of the photographer as a person moving through this place; observing as an artist certainly, as a witness and as a citizen.

On Sabsabi's return to Australia the photographs sat with many others in his studio. Tucked away they were certainly not forgotten. They troubled him. An assumed correlation between them as records—as images—of violence and the very acts of violence they indirectly depicted gave him particular concern. If an image identifies an agent of violence—that is, gives to that violence an irrefutable identity—then beyond providing a focal point for disengaged compassion, or alternatively prompting more traumatic reverberations for a viewer, what effect might it be expected to produce other than an equally violent response? The protagonists behind these particular acts of violence are of course clear to Sabsabi and there are enough small signs of time and place across the images to locate them historically for most viewers. But to what end this forensic scrutiny, both by and of the image, whether drawn into narratives of historical record or simply impelled by an impulse towards truth? Is there any meaningful response to the evidential beyond a counter claim to truth, a counter act of violence? Can the image of violence truly generate understanding, reconciliation, peace?

Sabsabi has a long relationship with hip hop as an artist and producer. Back in Sydney when looking over these photographs he was informed also by the words of New York based Peruvian hip-hop artist and activist Immortal Technique (Felipe Coronel), who drew just this correlation between the agency of images and violence. ("Destroy the image, and the enemy will die", from Immortal Technique, 'Open Your Eyes', 2008). Sabsabi was initially compelled to try and destroy prints of the images he had taken in Beirut. Beginning with the impulse to destroy an image in order to similarly obliterate the violence it pictures—this could also be described as an act of erasing the chain of signification and therefore denying the originating action (violence) itself—Sabsabi cut, shredded, scraped and attacked the images in various ways, including applying acid to them. The image of violence begetting an act of violence. However, so far as Sabsabi could make out, the image always lingered in certain forms, the stain of violence indissoluble.[3]

Eventually he turned to a completely different approach, placing each photograph under a magnifying lens, scrutinising and carefully painting it, not to erase or cover over the source image but to treat it, to invest it with a different energy and to redirect its agency. (And it might be added here, to redirect his own relationship to each image.) Every one of these images is different, every work unique, with evident differences in technical and conceptual approach as the process extended across years. The 2014 Brisbane exhibition marked the first public display of works resulting from what to that point had been a largely private, personal process. The project continued. Across new series different elements of the photographs were highlighted, different stylistic approaches undertaken. In some sets the handling of paint is particularly fine and detailed. In others the treatment is looser, more expressive. In some paint dominates. In others the colour quality of the instant lab photos is allowed more prominence. In some the density of architectural structures is intensified by slabs of acrylic paint sitting off the surface of the photo. In others paint is watercolour thin, almost translucent as it disappears into the image.

Following the first exhibition of *Guerilla*, a further set of thirty-three works under this title was presented in *The National 2017: New Australian Art*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in Sydney, and ninety-nine works included in the artist's solo survey exhibition *Self-Portrait* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2018, where they formed a line around the walls of the main space, bounding and enclosing the larger exhibition.[4] Ninety-nine of these works were also exhibited in the 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art under the title *99 Names*, a designation shared with an earlier video work comprising ninety-nine screens, each presenting a whirling figure in front of still images of urban destruction.[5] The overall body of work is now complete—eleven sets of thirty-three works each, with prints of all the photographs taken over those few days in 2006 painted and included. Three of the eleven sets are held in public collections. The eleventh set will remain unseen, stored away in the artist's studio until his death.

These works, under their various exhibited titles constitute a slow, almost arduous reconstitution of imagery captured in haste. As an action, painting becomes a visual manifestation of processes of attenuated study, of close looking, of scrutiny. The technological image of photography was so often aligned with revolutionary, disruptive political energy and with memory given incarnate form through the twentieth century. It remains equally allied to the colonial project of cultural appropriation and deployed as means of public revelation and critique of the violent acts of hostility, invasion and inevitable resistance that colonial avarice fuels. While produced in the early decades of the twenty-first century, Sabsabi's photographs highlight the present-day continuance of nineteenth and twentieth century traumas rooted in colonial imperatives of occupation of land and in battles over borders, political and economic power and claims to the ascendancy of one faith or belief system over another. Sabsabi's process of tracing over, recolouring and remaking the photograph with paint is correlative to a suturing together of this blasted, fragmented history. It is fuelled by a reparative impulse.[6] For this is also a concentrated act that while acknowledging the historical specificity of the images, attempts to connect them to a contemplative, metaphysical sphere.

Their grouping in sets is important. They do not form narrative sequences, but as aggregations they create a substantial impression of Sabsabi's experience of place. They are autobiographical. There is a personal investment in these images, of a particular place and time as if the conjoined condition of both being there (in Beirut) and not (being in Western Sydney working back over the images) turns them into ciphers of migrant experience. In the late 1980s another migrant—the philosopher Vilém Flusser—wrote of the urgency for the migrant to maintain a condition between the past location and the current, foreseeing in the figure of the migrant the idea of the coming future world.[7] This experience may be transformational. But also potentially debilitating in its multiple responsibilities across place and time, constantly functioning between memory and the current moment—as Sabsabi described it, this stuttering back and forth, in and out of violence,[8] which could also be thought of a stuttering back and forth, in and out of memory. It is no surprise that an important touchstone for this work is that of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, specifically his book of short prose texts *Memory for Forgetfulness* (1987, English translation 1995) that describe his passage through the streets of Beirut similarly damaged by shelling and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.[9]

Other new works by Khaled Sabsabi utilizing this process of painting over small snapshot photographic prints have begun to appear. A collection of collaged and painted photographs working with his own silhouette featured in his *Self-Portrait* work for the large group survey exhibition *Australia: Antipodean Stories* at the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan in 2019–20. Forty-eight small paintings under the title *Prophet* featured in his solo exhibition *A Promise* at the AGNSW (2019–20), each a schematic, almost abstract image of an individual or groups of figures gathering, rendered primarily in red, blue, white and black. Highly decorative and reminiscent of Arabic mosaic forms and mid-twentieth century European abstraction, the paintings are partial homages to both Islamic miniature traditions and to the famous 1923 Kahlil Gibran book, *The Prophet*, pointing to Sabsabi's own interest in connecting the everyday of his material practice to spiritual interests.

The Prophet works fundamentally differ from those of *Guerilla* and related series in that the photographic prints—still drawn from the artist's archive of imagery from Lebanon—have been almost entirely painted over and rendered invisible. The photographs here are basic grounds for the paintings, however their material quality as photographic prints is still apparent on close inspection and their provenance clearly significant to Sabsabi's overall project.

Sabsabi has produced hundreds of new works in recent years through painting over 15 x 10cm and 13 x 18cm photographic prints. The vast majority of these have yet to be exhibited. It is possible many never will. They are produced in series or sets to quite different purposes, utilizing a variety of approaches. There are sets of work that like *The Prophet* veer towards abstraction —towards an array of associations slipping back and forth between graphic design, architectural forms, figures and jewellery—and in doing so cover over the photographic image below. Two of the most complete series, however, while more thickly overpainted than the *Guerilla* works, build up the original images below to render them anew as paintings. Both constitute forms of historical reckoning and acts of remembrance.

8.4.9.1. (2020) (note the historical reversed date reference in the title to invasion and displacement) comprises eighty monochromatic paintings (white, black, grey) over black and white photographs sourced from an early 1970s magazine on the PLO scenes of fighters in training and related scenarios reworked in relatively thick acrylic lend a sense of heft and veracity to these historical records, which are also communications tools. (The magazine was in French, its production funded through Chinese sources, and bought by Sabsabi in the early 2000s in the renowned Maktabat al-Sa'el [The Pilgrim's Bookshop] in Tripoli that was subsequently burned out in an attack in early 2014.)

The works in *Tripoli* (2020) have been produced using photographs taken on Sabsabi's last visit to the city in 2018. Largely architectural and street scenes, he has painted over the images with a limited palette selection (blues, browns, white—some black oil stick outlining of forms to highlight architectural structure and the composition of the image). The paintings cover the surface of the photographic print but serve to emphasize recognizable architectural scenes—shopfronts, the entranceway to the central mosque, street views that lead to a family shrine, or the cemetery (always the everyday and the spiritual, the material and the sacred). These are images of places that Sabsabi regularly returns to—sites that are not only key to his history in the city, and that of his family, but to his ongoing relationship to the place. They are sites frequently recorded, aiding memory but also activating present and future relationships. And while sites with personal meanings—associated with family members or friends—they are also central to the collective identity of place.

While continuing to produce major video installation works this practice of overpainting photographs has become increasingly important to Sabsabi. As video requires increasingly meticulous levels of planning and investment and generates new challenges for artists in terms of identifying efficacious territories in a video-saturated mediascape, this focus upon the review and remaking of still images into painted objects provides Sabsabi with a conceptually more open and consistent process-based outlet for his thinking.[10] There is even quite importantly a different physicality to the practice, an act Sabsabi can return to again and again in his studio. This sits within a broader compulsion to produce objects that can be arranged back into the material world in different situations and evolving configurations.

The underpinning of photography to these objects locks them firmly within a mnemonic realm. Yet, for all photography's basis in verification and record, ultimately it is the practice of painting reworking the images, adjusting their material being and in doing so shifting the way in which they are looked at that produces both the historical heft of the works and their will to memory. These are images of record. And in an unassuming way, also richly iconographic history paintings.

Notes

[1] Figures drawn from Helena Cobban, 'The 33-Day War: Hizbullah's victory, Israel's choice', *Boston Review*, 2 November 2006; bostonreview.net/cobban-33-day-war and *BBC News*; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5257128.stm; last updated 31 August 2006

[2] Conversation with author, 4 February 2021

[3] Ibid.

[4] This installation highlighted their relationship to a location defined by contentious and contested borders as well as to the migrant experience of border crossing

[5] *99 Names* refers to the ninety-nine names for Allah in Islam. Numbers and numeric references are deeply important to Khaled Sabsabi's practice: 99; 33 recalling the thirty-three day war; eleven referencing the eleven principles of Naqshbandi Sufism; seven referencing the seven layers of the Nafs or self; and three, the relationship of the divine, the soul and the physical realm

[6] In this last regard the work shares an impulse with that of Kadia Attia for example, if focused less specifically on the body as object of imperial violence and vessel for attendant collective trauma

[7] Although Flusser's text has a certain utopian ring to it that seems increasingly dated, perhaps even naïve, in its assumption of shared migrant agency given the gathering horrors of mass forced migration in the decades since it appeared. See Vilém Flusser, 'Taking Up Residence in Homelessness', *Writings*, Andreas Ströhl (ed.), Erik Eisel trans, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, pp. 91–103

[8] Conversation with author, op. cit.

[9] As is the case with Sabsabi's work, if using a very different media, Darwish's texts move beyond description to the author's meditations on memory and forgetting–two of the dominant concerns of twentieth century literature–and his own experience of time and place more broadly

[10] This concentration on the still image has in fact always been central to his work, rendering video works out of literally tens of thousands of individual still frames, or alternatively breaking video footage down into component stills in order to electronically restitch a work