

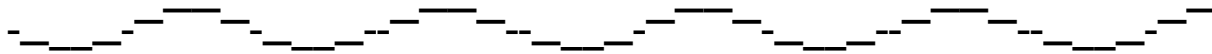
Water is a mirror

When Sab and I first worked together, it was on Google Docs. I was always embarrassingly excited to be in the docs with them. The conversation was cheeky, loose, critical, and intimate.

Maybe I'm romanticizing the experience now but I think their comedic timing and use of language really shone in this space. It makes a lot of sense for our conversation to start here too ~ distant but close ~ from laptops and wifi routers across Gadigal country and Aotearoa ~ a flow of thoughts coming in and out ~

Talia Smith ~ left

Lill Colgan~ right



I google 'abandonment'.

Several graphics appear with words like 'acceptance' or 'insecurity' and sometimes they are illustrated with pictures of pastel coloured flowers or of the back of a stranger as they walk solemnly on the beach.

I get irritated and close the browser tab on my phone.

I've said this so many times before but sometimes the rush of wind through trees sounds like the ocean. Right now I am typing this on my phone, in the dark, with the sound of the wind outside. If I could describe the noise it would maybe sound something like:

KkkkkssshhhHHHHHHHHhhhhhhh

I am pretending I am floating on my back in the water.

We never spoke about the ocean together but it's your birthday today and all I can think of is the way that water sometimes feels like velvet. I like to dip my hand in and try to crush it between my fingers but it just keeps slipping through.

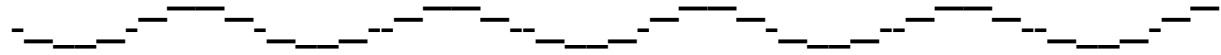
KkkkkssshhhHHHHHHHHhhhhhhh

I think maybe my backup career should be designing graphics for therapists or wellness blogs. LIVE LAUGH ABANDONMENT. Put that on a Tshirt and sell it. THE TALE OF THE LOST MIRROR. Sab & the themserhood of the traveling mirror. Water is a mirror? A mirror is a mirror. A mirror is a mirror is a mirror? Eat pray water love mirror sleep talk Julia roberts an apple a day water ocean sea thirst salt wet water water water water water water.

KkkkkssshhhHHHHHHHHhhhhhhh

Should I keep going? Probably not.

I might ask you 'do you think the sound of inhaling a vape sounds like the ocean too?' You might say 'the ocean isn't ACTUALLY a mirror, what do you expect to find?'



I like that you bring up the ocean... and not just because we're both water signs! It feels natural to make a connection between difficult emotions and bodies of water. The idea of finding safety amongst grief, trauma and uncertainty, key themes within Sab's work, evokes images of trying to stay afloat amongst rough waters. I wonder about the ways of knowing these waters... My instinct is to move slowly, find ways to preserve energy and withstand the push and pull of tides.

Perhaps if I lay on my back or if I paddle my feet or if I bob up and down I can stay afloat long enough for something to change. I hold my breath as a wave rises in front of me, to let the water in would be dangerous. I become aware of the energy in my muscles, a finite resource.

After hearing news of Sab's passing a dear friend lent me the book "Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals" by Alexis Pauline Gumbs. This book helped me think more spaciously about these difficult feelings and visceral bodily sensations that accompanied my grief.

"Marine mammals live in volatile substances whose temperature is changing for reasons not of their own making. Their skin is always exposed, they are surrounded on all sides by depth. What could enable us to live more porously, more mindful of the infinite changeability of our context, more open to each other and to our needs?" pg 61

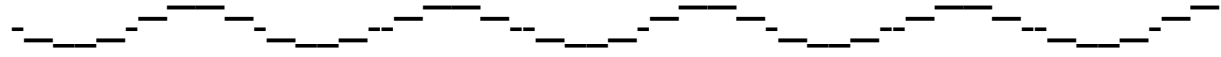
Conjuring the image of a marine mammal within the unruly sea, living porously in a seemingly difficult terrain, helped me reframe how I might relate to grief. What would it be like to deepen my breath and swim into the difficulty? Who else is swimming alongside me? Will the pressure of the sea on my body become unbearable? Or is it simply a reminder of my limits?

In their application for "There is no fire" Sab writes 'grief, if unaddressed, only expands in scale.' I'm hoping that this show gives those around Sab some ways of meeting the scale of their grief - perhaps shifting how they relate to the size and harshness of its waters.

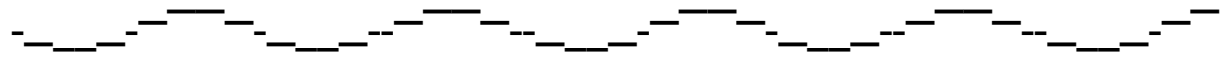


I have been thinking about the idea of 'no safe space' and I keep coming back to the mirror. When I was about eighteen I saw my first therapist and she encouraged me to look into the

mirror each morning and say out loud positive affirmations such as 'You are kind' 'You are beautiful' 'You are worth it'. It is called *Mirror Therapy* and I truly hated the exercise because it all felt so empty. I didn't believe a word I was saying and I certainly didn't want to study myself in the mirror each morning. I know that some have had success with this therapy but I struggled to connect with the concept.

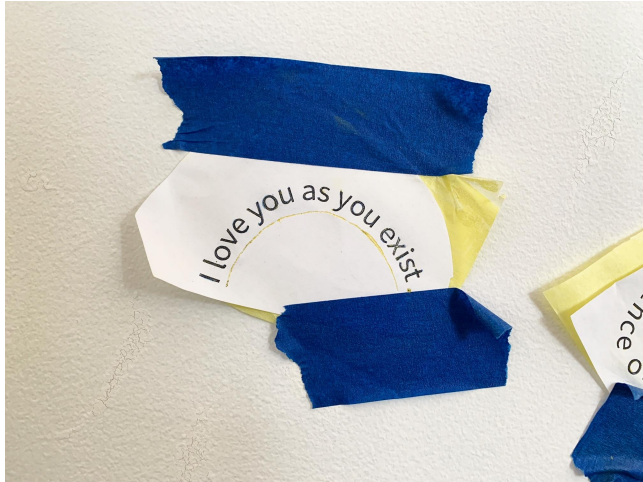


I like this phrase 'No Safe Space' too. I think it speaks so strongly to Sab's general ethos. I also remember them talking about 'empathy being fake'. When I first heard this I found it really provocative and alluring. Both of these statements are sharp, full of grief, and disillusionment but simultaneously full of potential and hope. For example, if there are no safe spaces how might we better inhabit the spaces we have? If empathy is fake, then perhaps other tools can help bridge the distance between you and I.



*If empathy is fake. (I like what you said here) (it makes me think of how having empathy for oneself is almost impossible. Google tells me that it requires a lot of dedication and work. Just reading the short description I tuned out.) (I guess I'm built differently, aka not made for self empathy).*

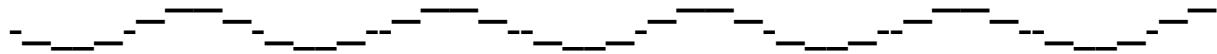
I only have my interpretation of Sab's intentions with their use of mirrors and text. There are multiple ways to read the works but I like to think that they are a play on reflection and therapy 'culture', a little tongue-in-cheek. I also like to think that it was a way of being at their most vulnerable in the 'safest' possible way. The words are like a mantra and I cannot help but hear them in Sab's voice, it makes me feel as though they are saying them directly to me even though it is only my reflection I see in the mirror. I feel somehow closer and also further away from them...I don't think that makes sense and maybe I am reading too deep into this (I can imagine Sab's face now) but a mirror is a mirror is a reflection is a surface is an ongoing loop of self.



(Image taken in Sab's studio at Parramatta Artists' Studios, taken by Talia)

It has me thinking about the examples of famous paintings that use mirrors as a pictorial or symbolic gesture such as Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* and Velazquez's *Las Meninas* *The Family of Philip IV*. In the former, there is a small convex mirror on the back wall that can be seen between the sitters. In the mirrored reflection there is a man, believed to be Van Eyck, staring back at the couple, the perspective then implies that as the viewer we are seeing a replica of what the artist saw when creating this work. In Velazquez's painting however it is reversed, we do not see the sitters but rather the perspective of the viewer has become that of the sitters themselves. From the viewer's perspective we see Velazquez and the back of his canvas, the princess and maids and a dog looking towards the viewer (or sitters). The only glimpse we actually see of the sitters are in the reflection of a small mirror on the back wall where they appear only from the shoulders up.

It is the way that perspective / reflection / and the mirror are explored in their paintings that remind me of Sab's work. You are looking in but you are also looking out, it just depends on what angle you view it from.

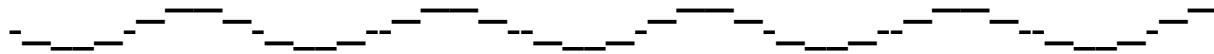


I think you're right, there is a tongue-in-cheek quality to Sab's mirror works. They feel very self-help/ therapists office/ boomer home decor but I think they're doing more than just adopting this aesthetic. These works create a performative relationship between the viewer and the text on the mirrors surface. Like the painting by Velazquez, the viewer is forced into a relationship with the works content by simply viewing it. The artist's perspective becomes imprinted onto ours and from this vantage point we can fantasize about the other and imagine what they might think or feel.

This makes me think about how empathy is deployed in mainstream identity politics, as a way of 'putting yourself in someone else's shoes'. This way of connecting to someones

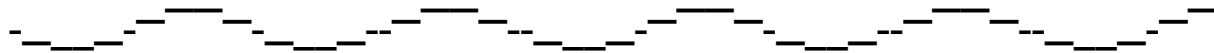
feelings/experience by projecting your self (virtually) onto the surface of another person and making sense of what \*you\* think of this experience. Etching words onto a mirrors surface for me playfully speaks to this limpness of empathy as a tool for connecting across different intersections of identity. In fact, it feels like they highlight a sense of disconnectedness - space between people - a yearning too. The text in your reflection appears to float across your body, but in actuality it's an augmented image - a virtual reality. It feels hopeful but also sad.

Whilst writing this I am revisiting Sab's tiktok videos and I think generally about how social media functions like a hall of mirrors - giving us the ability to project onto each other different ideas and feelings. I'm amazed by how much I'm still learning from their content. .



"Eventually I confess to a friend some details about my weeping—its intensity, its frequency. She says (kindly) that she thinks we sometimes weep in front of a mirror not to inflame self-pity, but because we want to feel witnessed in our despair. (Can a reflection be a witness? Can one pass oneself the sponge wet with vinegar from a reed?)"

- Maggie Nelson 'Bluets'



Perhaps everything is a 'mirror', a way to not feel alone — or to feel witnessed as Maggie Nelson said. This Google doc has been a collaborative experience for Lill and I, witnessing each other writing in real time, seeing the words we don't like being deleted and then appearing again as we edit. *Delete, rewrite, delete, rewrite.*

To say that I am currently attempting to write a 'conclusion' when that word is so heavy and final seems wrong. If I could I would hold up two giant mirrors that would face each other and so whatever is in between them (for this impossible example it's the world) is reflected back so it's almost like there is no actual end just infinite reflections.

I fully realise the absurdity of this but I guess what I am trying to say is that endings are always hard.

Sab's work meant a lot to many different people, the text Lill and I have put together speaks volumes of what it (and they) meant to us. It is a joy to delve in and get lost for a little while as Sab's thoughts mingle with mine and then come up for air when I'm ready and chat excitedly through this Google doc convo.

This isn't an end and it's not a goodbye so instead I'll say this:

LIVE LAUGH ABANDONMENT