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The image shows two wooden chairs against a plain white background. The chairs are made of dark, weathered wood. The backrests of both chairs are covered in a thick, textured red material, possibly paper or fabric, which is heavily distressed and peeling away from the wooden frame. The edges of the red covering are frayed and uneven, revealing the underlying wood. The overall appearance is one of decay and artistic intervention.

HASSAN SHARIF

By Kevin Jones



STAYING



ALIVE

(Previous spread)

CADMIUM RED, 2014, mixed media, 98 x 165 x 4 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.

(This page)

COTTON (detail), 2013, still from single-channel HD video, color, no sound: 8 min 26 sec.

(Opposite page, left)

BAKH BAKH, 1985/2015, acrylic and fabric on canvas, 90 x 90 x 12 cm.

(Opposite page, right)

TABLE, 1985/2006, wood, glass, cotton and photograph, 120 x 70 x 102 cm. Collection of Sharjah Art Foundation.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.



It was his first video. There is no sound. A man sits indoors on a white plastic garden chair, framed from the knees up. He wears a ruby T-shirt and streaked jeans. Black-rimmed eyeglasses hover over a broom-like mustache. To his right, a mound of cotton stuffing and a plate of glue lie on a table. The ensuing 8 minutes and 26 seconds of *Cotton* (2013) record Emirati artist Hassan Sharif grabbing handfuls of the fluffy fiber, dipping it in glue and reconstructing another mound on his lap. Throughout, he is absorbed by his task—mouth slightly open, eyes lowered. At the end of the film, Sharif leans into the freshly glued clump, clasping his hand to his forearm in a protective embrace. He stares, for the first time, directly into the camera. The look is somewhere between satisfaction and defiance.

“Provocateur”: the word abounds in the spate of obituaries and commemorative texts following Sharif’s death in September 2016. It is said that the artist provoked an audience into existence in 1980s Dubai when there was almost no appetite for what he called, via Marcel Duchamp, “non-retinal” art. He needled the local society with his slyly subversive “Objects”—ensnared clumps of consumer detritus—at the very moment when the United Arab Emirates was inundated with cheap, mass-produced goods from the global emporium. And he stimulated local discourse around the finer points of conceptual art—through his writings and translations—in an arid cultural landscape glutted with “paintings of camels and horses,” as he famously quipped.

But provocation is also an uneasy word. It ignores the wider cultural dynamics in which Sharif, increasingly confident of his status as an experimental artist after completing stints in British art schools, returned permanently to the UAE in 1984. At that time, his still-forming practice ran the risk of being, at best, irrelevant or, at worst, alienating. Yet art was everything to Sharif in those early years of experimental exuberance. His brilliance lay in his insightful positioning of himself as an artist who was at once a radical and an educator. He was anti-convention, outside the establishment, and yet he used his deep knowledge of philosophy and art history as a tool for his radicalism to seep in. “He knew that a change was required,” said his elder brother, Abdul Rahim Sharif, in a conversation in November 2016. “And that the change never stops.”

Born in 1951 in Dubai as the son of a baker, Sharif was encouraged in his artistic pursuits as a young boy by his art and history teachers who commended his drawings, earning him the sobriquet *fannoun al-Sha’ab* (“public school artist”). He went on to illustrate short stories in the magazine of the al-Nasser Sports Club, before taking a job in 1973 as a caricaturist at *Akhbar Dubai*, a municipality-owned monthly magazine. Lampooning the breakneck consumerism tearing through the emirate on the tails of turbo-charged development—among other topics confronting the Arab world at the time were censorship and *wasta* (nepotism)—he

polished a wry, critical voice that would blossom into the ironic spirit infusing his entire oeuvre. During this period, Sharif was also employed by the UAE Ministry of Youth and Sports, running youth programs in Dubai and Abu Dhabi to promote young UAE artists in artistic events throughout the Arab world, notably in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Morocco and Syria. The role was a foreshadowing of his later work in cultivating the talents of the next generation of Emirati artists.

Although hard to picture now, Dubai was a barren place in the 1970s. The emirate of Dubai was folded into the newly established sovereign nation, the United Arab Emirates, in 1971. Unlike other Middle Eastern cities such as Baghdad or Cairo, Dubai had no cultural ecosystem yet—no organized network of practicing artists, no arts education institutions, no museums other than those cultivating a national narrative. In the late ’70s, Sharif, who had already defined himself as an artist (“It was boiling in him,” confided Abdul Rahim), had little choice for higher education but to go abroad.

He received government funding to study in the United Kingdom, first at Warwickshire College in Leamington Spa then, in 1981, at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London. “He was like a sponge,” explained Tam Giles, former head of the Abstract and Conceptual Workshop and Sharif’s tutor at the time. “But I realized he was brilliantly subversive—picking up some idea culled from one or several exhibits or -isms and subverting it.” Sharif returned to Dubai in 1984, devoting his energy to inducting whomever would follow him on the journey of contemporary art. “It is my duty to show them what they *must* see,” he once said. “Not what they want to see.”

His decision to come back to the UAE in 1984 was itself fundamentally radical. According to Giles, Byam Shaw offered Sharif a graduate fellowship upon completion of his undergraduate work. What London had to offer a fledgling artist at the time—a potential audience who might have been more receptive to his experimental practice, a community of artistic peers, a stimulating cultural infrastructure—Dubai most certainly did not. “This determination to return entailed a commitment to an uncomfortable situation,” states Maya Allison, curator at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, who when we spoke, had concluded researching her March 2017 show, “But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Underground 1988–2008,” which examines the idea of community in nascent visual arts groups in the UAE.

In the early ’80s, Sharif dug his heels into an uphill artistic climb. He seemed to be on a mission. In his quest to develop—and loyalize—an audience, Sharif deployed a two-pronged “provoke and support” approach. On one hand, there was his artwork: he was consistently making and showing art that, in the spirit of Duchamp’s readymade, didn’t look like art; the pieces were entirely alien to uninitiated, local eyes. On the other, he was generating his own

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for provocation's sake,
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original texts on art and theory and a host of manifestos, while publishing Arabic translations of seminal 20th-century artists' texts by fellow "subversives" such as Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters.

In late 1985, he managed to convince Sharjah's Department of Culture and Information to grant him a space for art-making and teaching. The al-Marijah Art Atelier was a first in terms of UAE cultural establishments: a grassroots hub where art, teaching, discussions, exchanges and daily life all merged. It was here that Sharif organized "One Day Exhibition" (1985), for which he slung large stones on ropes across the exterior walls, mimicking a technique used among gardeners to stabilize trees, in order to attract an audience. These quotidian processes were reframed and reinterpreted by Sharif and, with Duchampian flourish, presented to unsuspecting passersby as art. Drawings and precursors of works using his "semi-systems" method—Sharif's idea about creating a willful disruption of a systemic process to include chance and error—were strewn along the street leading to the building.

A second show in April 1985, this time featuring a small group of artists and held at the Sharjah Central Market, included checkerboard-like "semi-systems" paintings shown on the floor or propped up on plastic water bottles. These humble materials, sprung from the world of familiar items and gestures, were meant to hook viewers into a reinvigorated way of thinking about the resolutely anti-elitist art. Far from provocation for provocation's sake, these shows were sincere attempts to spark a dialogue. Indeed, many works from this early period in the UAE had encouraged viewer participation. *Table* (1985/2006), for example, enticed the audience to bend down and feel the pillowy, cotton-ball-lined underbelly of a table. Similarly, *Bakh Bakh* (1985/2015) is a painted surface of three colors with a cloth placed over its bottom half. Viewers were invited (or compelled) to lower the cloth, as if peeking at something forbidden or revealing something unknown. The works were both rejected from an exhibition in Sharjah for their unorthodox materials.





Recording stones - 1983 - Hatta - Dubai, U.A.E

Alkhalaf
5/9



Photographs documenting of
things in my room 1982
X/9

(Top left)
RECORDING STONES, 1983, photographs
and pencil on mounting board, 73.2 x 56.1 cm.
Collection of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

(Top right)
THINGS IN MY ROOM, 1982, photographs
and pencil on mounting board, 98 x 73.5 cm.
Collection of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

(Bottom)
COIR AND COTTON ROPE, 1987, coir and
cotton rope, 110 x 110 x 50 cm. Collection of
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Copyright the
artist. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New
York, and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.



Two other works from the same year conflated Sharif's desire to confront the viewer with the recontextualized quotidian object and the artist's use of complex, systemic thought to create art. *Barrel* (1985/2011) is a red-and-white-painted cardboard and paper version of the traffic barrels (originally oil drums) used to line roads. Random and arbitrary analysis of the number and colors of cars in traffic determined the shape of the actual artwork. Another sculpture, *Wooden Column* (1985), based on the simple, three-legged wooden pole used to reserve a space in a parking lot, was cunningly exhibited on the threshold of the Emirates Fine Art Society in Sharjah. Sharif was "reserving" his place in the artistic landscape.

The works that Sharif made and showed in the mid-1980s in the UAE stem from what Giles described as "the growing conviction and confidence of direction" the artist had displayed in experimentation during his London years. Typically, the artist's oeuvre is divided into four groups. For "Semi-Systems" (1979–85), he produced mathematics-inspired drawings. In the "Experiments" series, begun in 1981, he deconstructs familiar, material contexts and systems—such as the photographic works *Ruler* (1981), consisting of three images showing different lengths of a ruler, and *Things in My Room* (1982), which feature catalog-like photographic shots of banal items found in his Dubai apartment. His Fluxus-inspired "actions" are realized in the "Performances" series (1982–84), where he performs tedious or ordinary acts in a specific setting. Although initiated at art school, many of these performances blossomed in the Hatta desert. *Walking No. 1* (1982), *Jumping No. 2* (1983), *Throwing Stones* (1983) and *Recording Stones* (1983) were performed there, with the artist initiating simple actions, with only an intimate band of friends as audience. Later, toward the end of his studies in London, he would perform far more daring works for clusters of students. In *Staircase* (1984), for example, he removed a piece of clothing on each descent of the stairs until he was naked, then reversed direction, picking up his garments. In *Hair and Milk Bottle* (1984), the artist, after having plucked a pubic hair from inside his trousers, attempted to toss it into a bottle, which was sealed upon the act's success. Finally, the "Objects" series, begun in 1984, are assemblages of commonplace, readymade materials that are cut, bound or tied together with rope or wire, and thus stripped of their original function.

"I was looking for the rejection," Sharif told me back in 2015, referencing the reaction his works garnered in the UAE. Rejection opened up a space of exchange for the artist with his audience, and very often that space started with skirmishes in the local press, which was already facilitating a cultural breakthrough happening in literature. "The revolution had started with the poets," explained Adel Khozam, a close friend of Sharif's and a poet who was part of a group of writers breaking the rules of accepted literary forms. They published their unconventional words in the supplements of three local newspapers, and continued to ruffle cultural feathers throughout the 1980s and into the '90s. Khozam added, "We thought our battle was poetry. Then someone [Sharif] came along who was writing something else. His show [1985's "One Day Exhibition"] was a big shock. He was refused and attacked. In 1993, with the first Sharjah International Art Biennial, people started to see that this was happening all over the world. Suddenly, the departments of culture were 'in between'—they accepted, but at the same time, they didn't."

Sharif received more than just rejection. Sharjah authorities forced the al-Marijah Art Atelier to close in 1985 on the grounds of "disorderly behavior." As a reaction, Sharif devised an artwork

in which he would bury a brand-new truck outside the center as a "memorial." Adhering to "semi-systems"-like rules, strict instructions guided the truck's provenance: how many kilometers it should be driven before its "burial"; the route it should take; the type of dirt used to fill the pit; the shape and material of the tombstone; and so on. Although the work was never executed, as an idea it was a strong statement on waste and misuse, in its "shaming" of authorities' lack of vision.

Undaunted by the closure, Sharif continued to innovate—and to criticize—with "Objects." Sharif responded to the consumer culture overtaking the Emirates by knotting, weaving, folding and stringing. He threaded together the props and refuse of daily life—cardboard boxes, plastic cups, Made-in-China metal plates, Made-in-Italy rubber buckets, stainless-steel spoons and foam slippers. Unlike the caricatures, from which he later distanced himself, considering them "negative irony," the artworks of the "Objects" series had more impact. "They make people angry," he once told me, his eyes lighting up with the same glint of defiance as in the final frame of *Cotton*.

This anger was also ignited whenever Sharif interacted with artists working in the traditionalist veins of desertscapes and ebullient calligraphy, which he is said to have dismissed as "decorative." His rhetoric was sometimes inflammatory. "He spoke his mind," explained Allison. "But his mind wasn't always what people wanted to hear." Emirati artist Ebtisam Abdul-Aziz, a student of Sharif acolyte Mohammed Kazem, concurred: "Hassan was sharp, but sensitive at the same time. He was clear about his opinion. He didn't sweeten his words." Consequently, there was pushback from certain sectors of society, as well as bouts of door-slammings. One artist allegedly rescinded his membership to the Emirates Fine Arts Society, which Sharif had co-founded in 1980, protesting that what Sharif was exhibiting was not art. Sharif himself almost decided to leave the group at one point; another tale has him being unceremoniously kicked out.

Against the backdrop of critical salvos in the press—Sharif and the poets in one corner, the traditionalist artists in the other—the artist nonetheless managed to foster relations with a new generation. "He held up a beacon to anyone who wanted to follow him," said Allison. After the closure of al-Marijah Art Atelier, Sharif received authorization from the Ministry of Culture in 1987 to open the Art Atelier at the Youth Theater and Arts in Dubai, where he continued his work of transmission—of techniques, of sensitivity to the "non-retinal" artistic mindscape—to future generations.

Part of Sharif's ongoing struggle with the local community consisted of being brushed off as too "Western," or for not developing supposedly Emirati or Arabic forms of visual expression. His refusal of the notion of "Arabic art" was vehement. In a 2014 interview for *Harper's Bazaar Art Arabia*, he railed against the early proponents of the regional zeal for identifying under the Arab banner. "They found, ultimately," he explained, "that you cannot make 'Arabic painting,' nor is there 'English' or 'American' painting. There is just painting. So let us be with art." This tension became deeper as international curators increasingly courted him and, ultimately, gallerists in Paris and New York represented his work. It became an issue: How much of Sharif's backstory should be meted out to international art audiences? And does such a narrative pigeonhole Sharif into a category of art from the Middle East?

There is no clear resolution. "The [Dubai] context is additive rather than descriptive," suggested Alexander Gray, founder of New York's Alexander Gray Associates, which represents Sharif



in the United States. “He has a global conceptual language.” Gray relishes inscribing Sharif in a wider art history and beyond the regional framework. He sees parallels with another gallery stalwart, Luis Camnitzer, a Latin-American conceptual artist who emerged around the same time as Sharif in an entirely different context. “When talking about the work with American audiences,” he explained, “it’s fascinating to bring the Middle Eastern political context to the work. It opens up conversations.” Gray mentioned his booth at a recent Art Basel Miami Beach, in which he showed Sharif’s *Ladies and Gentlemen* (2014), a giant wall piece composed of women’s shoes. “It was exciting to facilitate and witness people crossing the threshold to ask, ‘What does this mean, what is it saying?’” Conversations ensued about political refugees and borders, and about gender fluidity.

Similarly, Nathalie Boutin, co-founder and director of Paris’s GB Agency, representing Sharif in Europe, attempted to write the artist into a more global art history. In 2012, GB Agency presented its first Sharif exhibition, for which Boutin took a survey approach. “In Paris, nobody knew him,” she recalled. “So we showed everything: ‘Semi-Systems,’ ‘Objects,’ ‘Performances,’ ‘Experiments.’ The French audience understood it rather quickly.” In 2014, she showed what she calls “correspondences” between Sharif’s experimental performances and the work of Fluxus-inspired Czech artist Jiří Kovanda and others, in the exhibition “Parallel Forms.” A year later, in 2015, GB Agency devoted a show to Sharif’s use of the body as a unit of measure, titled “The Physical Is Universal.” Newer paintings, such as the grotesque, expressionistic portrait of a Western-looking politician, *Press Conference No. 5* (2008), reminded viewers that

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(Opposite page)

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, 2014, mixed media, 275 x 460 x 45 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.

(This page, top)

IMAGES NO 2, 2014, printed promotion images, glue and cotton rope, set of six works, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.

(This page, bottom)

CLOTH, PAPER AND GLUE, 1987, cloth, paper and glue, dimensions variable. Courtesy Qatar Museums, Doha.



Sharif remained a satirist of global affairs, rather than just a commentator on developments in the Emirates.

“He was always at the frontier between the West and the Middle East,” said Boutin. “In the way he wrote about Duchamp, or how he takes an element from the West, like the Venus de Milo [in his essay of the same name, published in 2000], and mistreats it, only to transform it in his way. He was always ‘in between’ East and West, but tries to give energy to this ‘in between.’ It is never neutral, but productive.” More locally, Isabelle van den Eynde, Sharif’s Dubai gallerist since 2012, described the artist as “identity-less.” “He had no nation,” van den Eynde insisted.

Many of his supporters believe that Sharif’s trailblazing efforts are still underappreciated by government authorities in his own country. “Hassan should have his own museum!” exclaimed Abdul-Aziz. “The sad part is that most of his work is owned by foundations and collectors from outside the country.” While the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority and Sharjah Art Foundation has been deeply supportive in recent years, with the latter purchasing some of Sharif’s seminal early works including *Table*, there are still very few artworks by Sharif in local government collections. One cannot help but wonder if the country is still “in between” in their commitment to support what is still perceived, perhaps, as radical work.

Sharif never thought he would be celebrated in his lifetime—which perhaps explains the verve with which he cultivated the next generation, whom he was prepping for recognition. But recognition came, first through the engagement of international curators such as Jos Clevers from the Sittard Art Center in the Netherlands—an equally radical thinker and early supporter of the so-called Group of Five, a handful of like-minded artists who banded with Sharif in the ’80s. In 1993, at the first Sharjah Biennial, Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali al-Thani, of the Qatari ruling family, bought the first Sharif piece in what would become a substantial collection. Sharif’s reputation was later consecrated by a 2011 retrospective in Abu Dhabi, co-curated by Mohammed Kazem and Catherine David, artistic director of Documenta 10 in 1997 and current deputy director of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, in Paris. Dozens of Sharif’s works from al-Thani’s collection, including *White Files* (1986), the complete documentation of Sharif’s early forays into performances and “Experiments,” were displayed in the March 2016 exhibition “Hassan Sharif: Objects and Files” at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha.

Though there is concern that his impact might diminish further in the years after his passing, several initiatives are afoot that may help ground his legacy. Maya Allison’s exhibition at NYU Abu Dhabi places Sharif and the Group of Five at the exhibition’s nucleus. Poet and artist Noujoom al-Ghanem, a contemporary of Sharif’s, will release her biographical film *Sharp Tools for Making Artists* later this year (the title riffs off Sharif’s 1995 publication *Sharp Tools for Making Art*) and his work will feature in the international section of the 2017 Venice Biennale. The Sharjah Art Foundation is planning a retrospective in late 2017 or early 2018, and GB Agency will host a September 2017 show taking a single work as its point of departure.

If Sharif’s artistic force continues to be felt both locally and internationally, it may be due to one simple fact: he stayed restless. In his work, he never settled into repeating a successful style or replaying his greatest hits. In his life, he continued to advocate for creating challenging art, flying in the face of resistance. He was eminently quotable—like many mentors—with lines such as: “The goal is not to please the audience, but to punch it.” His provocations sprang less from a need to confront people than from the desire to play. Standing in the midst of his 2015 exhibition, “Images,” at van den Eynde’s Dubai gallery, he replied to my question about his take on the future with a nugget that crystallized this playful restlessness: “I don’t want to grow up.” For those who have had any degree of intimacy with Sharif, the feeling seems to be that not only did he never grow up, but, somehow, that he never died. ☺