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Remembering a singular vision: Hassan Sharif - I am the Single Work Artist

Curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, the new retrospective at the Sharjah Art Foundation charts the career of the UAE's most influential contemporary artist



Hassan Sharif's Slippers and Wire. The exhibition features almost 300 of his pieces. Willy Lowry / The National

In 1985, a crowd gathered outside Sharjah's Blue Souq to inspect a series of everyday objects that had been left on the pavement, an unassuming tableau that might have been rubbish if it wasn't for the obvious care with which it had been arranged.

As they stood and stared at the four plastic water bottles, the two lines of stuffed and knotted plastic bags and painted panels that looked like oversized crossword puzzles, some smiled; some looked to others for a clue as to what was going on; others simply stared, cross-armed, waiting for something to happen.

What the crowd probably didn't realise was that they were witnessing Sharjah's first contemporary art exhibition to be held in a public open space, an event that is now relatively commonplace thanks to the work of the Sharjah Art Foundation and Biennial, but was totally revolutionary at the time.

The man responsible captured the crowd's wry smiles and bemused expressions in a series of photographs that can now be seen alongside the original chequerboard panels and some newer Masafi water bottles in the new exhibition that bears his name.



Hassan Sharif at work in his studio, the contents of which have been donated to the Sharjah Art Foundation. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation/ Estate of Hassan Sharif

Containing almost 300 works, *Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist* charts the artist's career

from 1973 to 2016, and opened at the Sharjah Art Foundation on Saturday. Curated by the SAF's president and director Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, the show stretches across all of the foundation's exhibition spaces, a biennial-sized tribute to the most influential and important artist the UAE has ever produced.

He died, to the shock of the art world, at the age of 65 in September last year.

"More people are starting to appreciate Hassan Sharif's work now, more museums are interested, but I feel that it should be seen in the context of the local – and that's why it was important that this should be the biggest show of his work," the curator says. "When we tour this show, we won't be able to tour at this scale. It will have to be smaller, but that doesn't really matter.

"This scale is important locally so that local people and a lot of people who knew Hassan and his work can see it and appreciate where he went with his career – and for me, that was very important."

As a young artist who grew up in Sharjah attending the organisations and events that Sharif helped to establish, Sheikha Hoor readily admits that it was an honour to curate a show that she began planning several years ago, in collaboration with the artist.

"We actually started working on the exhibition with Hassan, but the scale of the exhibition grew after he passed away, and after looking through nearly 4000 of his works, it became very difficult to explain the career of such a prolific artist with a small exhibition," Sheikha Hoor says.

A pioneering artist, critic, writer and educator, Sharif not only created his own work, but also served as an inspiration to others. He exerted a gravitational force on a community of artists, writers, filmmakers and poets that spanned generations, who would gather at his ramshackle house in Satwa.

Sharif helped to dispel the myth that there was no such thing as a contemporary and critical art scene operating in the Emirates, and his work, along with that of his contemporaries Mohammed Kazem, Hussain Sharif and Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, began to be exhibited internationally from the late 1980s onwards.

As well as establishing influential organisations in Sharjah such as the Emirates Fine Art Society and Al Mureijah Art Atelier, Sharif also founded an art atelier in his native Dubai and The Flying House. A gallery space and archive organised by Hassan's elder brother, Abdulraheem, The Flying House was dedicated to the promotion of artists working in the UAE, and now serves as Sharif's archive and estate.

"Art covered every surface of the house – the doors, windows, steps, walls, and trees," wrote Maya Allison, the founding director and chief curator of the New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, in the book that accompanied her show, *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community 1988-2008*.

"The house was also an experiment in form; it sustained a collection and housed an exhibition, but it was not a gallery, nor was it a foundation. But now curators could locate and see their work year round: they were on the map."

For Sheikha Hoor, cementing the reputation of an artist whose work is already in the collections of major museums such as the Centre Pompidou and the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is one of the key objectives of her show.



Colors, 2016. Cotton rope, acrylic paint, and copper wire. 240 x 535 x 10 cm in. Courtesy of Hassan Sharif Estate. Willy Lowry / The National

"Hassan deserves to be in the history books with a lot of great artists, but for that to happen, people need to see the breadth of his work and how he used to think in terms of conceptual art," the curator says.

"He was doing the same things that other artists of his time were doing – Yoko Ono and Joseph Kosuth – and he really was an artist on that level, he just happened to be from the UAE, and that's why he hasn't received the same level of recognition."

To help with the selection of works, Sheikha Hoor turned to Sharif even after his death, using the artists' words, concepts, titles and classifications to organise the show, which groups the works conceptually and according to their theme.

As a result, the exhibition has sections dedicated to Sharif's studio, performances, drawings, objects and colour.

Some of the earliest works featured include Sharif's newspaper caricatures and comic strips from the early 1970s, which he produced before he left the UAE for art college in the United Kingdom, an experience that resulted in a radical shift in the artist's practice towards the experimentation and conceptualism that would define his later career.

Dating mainly from the 1980s, Sharif's semi-systems reveal his fascination with self-imposed rules, repetitions and playful procedures, many of which resulted in drawings or performances that were captured on camera and are displayed in ... *So I created a semi-system.*

"... *So I created a semi-system* comes from a longer quote," Sheikha Hoor says, remembering Sharif's words. "I am not a systematic person. If somebody tells me this isn't a system, I'll say: 'This isn't a system, it's a semi-system.'"

Another quote illustrates Sharif's sense of humour and inherent playfulness.

"He said: 'I am just a man from the East who heard there was a system and liked it.' And I think that kind of playfulness of him talking about his work is really important," Sheikha Hoor says.

"I want that to come through in the show more than my words. I put the show together, but it's his work and they are his words shining through."



Hassan Sharif in 1981. Courtesy of Hassan Sharif Estate

Those words include the show's subtitle, *I Am a Single Work Artist*, which is taken from one of Sharif's many texts in which he says that an artist only ever really makes one work throughout their whole career.

Nowhere is the shining quality of this work more evident than in the galleries dedicated to what Sharif once described as his "loyalty to colour"; beautifully-lit rooms whose paintings and assemblages – of common combs, slippers, zippers and towels – sing against the galleries' white walls, with a ready-made nature that attests to the influence of Marcel Duchamp.

"When I was looking at Hassan's works I kept seeing the names of colours as titles – French ultramarine, cobalt blue, cadmium yellow – and so I knew it needed its own dedicated space, but the big challenge was not to make the room too colourful.

"I had to take works out because it was visually too much, my eyes were hurting," says Sheikha Hoor, who like Sharif went to London to study art and even had one of the same tutors as the artist, Jean Fisher, who taught Sheikha Hoor when she was studying at the Royal College of Art.

"There's a lot of similarities between the way we were both influenced by our time at art school.

"Hassan went to the UK and then came back and felt that he had to make a change to the arts scene, so he set up the Emirates Fine Art Society and other things. I felt the same thing when I went to study in the UK and came back to work on the Biennial."



Hassan Sharif, *Combs*, 2016. Copper wire, hair combs, 275 x 200 x 70 cm. Courtesy of Hassan Sharif Estate

After curating major exhibitions for 15 years, such as the Biennial and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: Two Suns in a Sunset (which was exhibited at the Jeu de Paume in Paris and the 2015 UAE National Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, as well as in Sharjah), Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist feels like a turning point for Sheikha Hoor and the Sharjah Art Foundation as a whole.

In January, the SAF will publish its first monograph, dedicated to Sharif, and work is currently under way to develop more exhibition spaces that will allow the foundation to have its permanent collection, library and archives on display. These will include a permanent room dedicated to the artist that will house the contents of his studio, which has been donated to the SAF by Hassan Sharif's estate.

"Hassan loved the idea of people being curious about his work," Sheikha Hoor says. "He wanted them to come and ask questions – that was the whole point, to create an interest within people.

"It's important for future generations to see artists who were brave enough to do things even though society wasn't always supportive."

Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist runs at the Sharjah Art Foundation until February 3.