

Interview With Hassan Sharif – Qantare Magazine - July 07

Qantara : You studied art during five years in Great Britain. Then, you chose to return to Dubai. How was at that time the situation of the contemporary art in the Emirates?

Hassan Sharif: While I was studying at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London, I used to come to Dubai in summer holidays and teach youngsters drawing and painting in the Emirates Fine Art Society in Sharjah, I involved in organizing group exhibitions for painting, drawing and experiment works, beside that I published articles in the local newspapers. I emphasized on modern art and its concepts, plus some articles about important artists of the 20th century. I start from Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, Expressionism, up to Minimalism and conceptual Art...I am still writing about contemporary and Experimental Art, Performance, Contemporary Music and other subjects related to Art.

In 1983 we held an exhibition in “Al Ahly” sport club in Dubai, Hussain Sharif and myself exhibit some experimental works, audience and media starts talking and writing against us. We continue working, organizing seminars, writing without any hesitation. People’s demands was that an artist must paint what society can understand, that was very obvious in the 80’s because the society started to develop itself in various fields, specially education which provoke generations to understand and search for more knowledge.

In 1984 I and some of my friend like “Khalid Al Bodor”, “Hussain Sharif”, “Ahmad Rashid Thany”, “Nojum Al Ghanim” and others. They are poets, writers, artists and they are very important activists in the field of culture up to now, we insisted to have an art atelier in order to work and do some experiments in contemporary works of art. We got an official permission to open an art atelier in “Al Mirajah” area in Sharjah through Department of Culture and Information – Sharjah, U.A.E.

At the same year we held an exhibition at the “Al Mirajah” atelier and latter on we held an exhibition in the Central Market in Sharjah. In 1985 we organized larger exhibition in the same Market, beside we distribute booklets contains photocopies in which we wrote our ideas about contemporary art in various matters.

In 1987 we found an art atelier in Dubai supported by official permission from Ministry of Education, I was teaching till 1999 and since then Mohamed Kazem is teaching there up to now.

In 1997 Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim found an art center in Khorfakan supported by official permission from Department of Culture and Information, Sharjah, U.A.E.

Qantara : What did you do to create an artistic dash in Dubai (confer the group of five, for example)?

Hassan Sharif: As a group of five artists its happened that we meet each other “Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohamed Kazem and Abdullah Al Saadi” in 1985, Hussain Sharif is my brother, we felt that there is something we share with each other and at the same time each of us has his own individuality, we noticed that we are more than just friends. Five of us are in a journey to nowhere, we are confident that our act of moving forward is more important than reaching our target. Through our journey each one of us has his own habit, one stands in front

of the sea for a period of time just watching waves, other one only collects snakes and insects, third one collects small stones...and so on. Even if our aim is one which is “Journey”, each of us has his own identity.

Unlike conventional groups we don't have manifesto nor we suggest name for our group, people in the society and media named us “Five U.A.E Artists” Plus audience spoken and wrote through media lots of things whether negative or positive, so this is people's and media's “society's” reactions and we accept this reactions as our manifesto.

Another feature of the group is that all of us failed to obey or follow any dogma or taboo, therefore through our works of art we emphasis on Pluralism and belief in Hybridization, taking from multicultural sources and through deconstructive them and then put them again next to each other “recoding” them on a horizontal space, “more than hundred nationalities are living in the U.A.E”. So we are living and making art in a cosmopolitan contemporary space.

Qantara : What did the Biennial of Sarjah, which was a pioneering in the United Arab Emirates, bring to the countries contemporary art ? Did it stimulate a new generation of artists ?

Hassan Sharif: Although Sharjah Biennial started in 1993, but in 2003 Hoor Al Qasimi-Director of the 6th Sharjah International Biennial gave Biennial a new dimension and contemporary perspective through involvement of government departments and many of the private companies, by doing this she socialized works of art, everyone in the society must support art in order to create a “socio economic – art”. Because art is important as any other things in a contemporary features of life. Through Sharjah International Biennial we met many important personages and great figures of art world in our time “artists, curators, theorists, media, dealers, collectors” and so on.., the result was that U.A.E artists has been invited to participate in many international events, beside that Sharjah Biennial stimulate many students in the schools and colleges from different subjects to be curious to know about contemporary art, this curiosity provokes young artists to search and experiment in various fields of today's art such as video, installations, conceptual and minimal art, new image paintings, performance, using up to date technologies. One of positive feature of 2007th Sharjah International Biennial was that “Mohamed Kazem – born – 1969- Dubai – U.A.E” was one of the curators of this Biennial.

Qantara : Your work combines traditional and contemporary techniques. How do you reconcile these influences? What does this heritage to you?

Hassan Sharif: I distinguish between “heritage-tradition” and contemporary way of thinking, through my “objects”. I emphasize on recomposing contemporary with prehistoric and primitive acts of man, “archetype”...I am definitely sure that my works of Art and my way of thinking inherently concrete with “pre-heritage” and “pre-tradition”, I receive qualities of man's mind from grounds of knowledge which goes back thousands of years before “Venus of Willendorf”.

For me art is not about expression, nostalgic, feelings, romantic or utopia, but art is a decision, i decide when and how to work.

Qantara : Is your work inspired by Dubai In what way ?

Hassan Sharif: I remember that as a child I was living in “Al Bastakia” area in Dubai and I was studying in “Al Shaab” School and that was the only boy’s school in Bur Dubai. As school children we used to walk early morning in order to reach school in time. In our way we used to walk through the old souq “old market”. There were goldsmith workshops that make objects out of gold, we used to call them “Banyani”, and they were from India. I used to hear the repeated sounds of little tiny hammers beating on the small pieces of gold. I still remember these sounds they were similar to repetitive melodious. So this childhood inspiration is intrinsically celebrated in my objects “work of Art” by the act of contemporary visual repetitious.

Furthermore there were cloth shops; they used to display lot of colorful textiles in front of their shops. One of the essential features of my “objects” is that they consist of multicolored materials. I don’t paint or add colors to materials I use because they already colored.

I must clarify that everyone experienced a childhood period, but not everybody has ability to visualize these events and memories in a context of contemporary Art. Because one must be aware of present and archaic discourses and manipulate them in order to recode present space. Between 1970 up to 1979, I was a cartoonist in weakly magazine called “Akhbar Dubai” my caricatures were ironic and provocative and popular between inhabitants of Dubai’s city. I documented the history of daily life and the development in Dubai and U.A.E, in various fields step by step in a caricaturist manner.

So I am confident that my works of Art from 1970 up to today 2007 all has link with each other, my caricatures, drawings, paintings, photographs, performance, experiment, objects, articles and my life are all like a chain connected to or fitted in to one another without any hesitation.

Qantara : Which projects are currently yours today (exhibition...)?

Hassan Sharif: In March 2007 I participated in “The Emirates and its Renowned Arab artists” exhibition – Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Center – Mall of the Emirates, and during this exhibition I gave a lecture for polytechnic collage students about the group of five. In April I held exhibition in Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah U.A.E. and I have many activities till coming December.

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