

A Review Of Hassan Sharif's Monumental Retrospective 'I Am The Single Work Artist'



Artist Hassan Sharif

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Considered the godfather of Conceptual Art in the Gulf, it was during the 80s after studying at the Byam Shaw School of Art, today part of Central Saint Martins (CSM), that Sharif would regularly head out into the desert where he would jump around and tie ropes between rocks—all part of his artistic processed-based practice. In London, he had come under the influence of artist Tam Giles, head of the Abstract and Experimental Department at CSM. Soon he developed his 'semi-system' way of working, based on arbitrary or elaborate systems that he followed to create his Fluxus-influenced performances in Dubai and Constructivist drawings. One such work even saw him meticulously record sentences read in a newspaper at points along a journey to Sharjah. "For instance, I speak while my mouth is full of bread. I take a sip of water. I eat more bread, speak, drink some more water, and so on, recording all the sounds. All the while I'm talking about serious things like politics and art, but it's an ironic delivery, imitating politicians and lecturers," he said in an interview with David Ebony for Art In America magazine in January 2014.



Book of Numbers. 1982 (inside sheets) and 2006 (cardboard work)

An art historical figurehead for a region that is largely overlooked by the mainstream art world as a place for experimentation, the late Sharif is now the protagonist in a monumental exhibition at the Sharjah Art Foundation. Curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, the exhibition has been six years in the making and will take over all exhibition galleries of the Foundation to showcase the artist's diverse body of work from the early 1970s to 2016. For example, Al Mureijah Square and Bait Al Serkal, Arts Square, will display Sharif's early newspaper caricature and comic strip drawings, 'semi-system' works, performances, paintings and 'urban archeology' objects. "Our curatorial approach is grounded in the title of the exhibition: I Am The Single Work Artist. Sharif asserted that the artist who engages in repetition comes to create a single work over his entire lifetime," says Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi.

I Am the Single Work is more than an art exhibition—it is a tribute to the artist's long and storied history with the Emirate of Sharjah, where he first staged his interventions and art exhibitions. After Sharif returned to the UAE in 1984, he moved frequently between the roles of artist, educator, critic and writer.



Colourful Notebook. 2006

Through his work the artist championed Emirati audiences to engage with contemporary visual art as well as Arabic text, through his translations of Arabic historical writings and manifestos. His was an art that was avant-garde in vision but which never forgot the heritage from whence it came. “He singlehandedly shaped the local contemporary art scene through his research, his translation of art texts into Arabic and his establishment of arts institutions that have nurtured emerging local talent,” adds Sheikha Hoor.

Sharif also founded or co-founded institutions, including the Emirates Fine Arts Society, Sharjah (1980); Al Mareija Art Atelier, Sharjah (1984); Art Atelier in the Youth Theatre and Arts, Dubai (1987) and The Flying House, Dubai (2007)—all which have continued to support interdisciplinary approaches to contemporary art in the UAE. As the artist said in his 2014 interview, “I think of these markings as more of an engagement than an arrangement [...] The important thing is the process.” A process it is to uphold all such creative endeavors.

I Am the Single Work runs until 3 February 2018.