

Hassan Sharif

April 7 – May 14, 2016



Hassan Sharif, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates (2016)

Alexander Gray Associates presents recent work by Hassan Sharif (b.1951), featuring sculptures and woven assemblages. Recognized as a pioneer of conceptual art and experimental practice in the United Arab Emirates over the past four decades, Sharif has transgressed traditional frameworks for art making by extending his practice to performance, installation, drawing, painting, and assemblage that integrates ordinary objects as the primary medium. The tapestry-like works in this exhibition are conceptually linked by their relationship with the human body and social structures.

In Sharif's body of work, the rhythmically repetitive act of weaving echoes the involuntary functions of the human body, such as swallowing, breathing, and blinking. At the same time, the materials deployed to create the works in this exhibition, including combs, nail clippers, masks, and gloves are traditionally used to modify or cover the body.



Artificial Leg, 2014
Mixed media
59.8h x 15w x 12.2d in

Artificial Leg is a sculpture that hangs from the wall, in which Sharif wrapped a crutch in metal wire. Following in the tradition of readymades, the artist repurposes an existing object, shedding its functionality as a medical device. While a person would typically lean on the crutch for stability when injured, the metal wire that encircles the central form like a cocoon makes it impossible for the viewer to use the crutch. This device becomes the support structure for the artwork, rather than for a human body.



Cadmium Red, 2014
Mixed media
38.58h x 64.96w x 1.57w in

In this work, Sharif has repurposed three wooden folding chairs to create a sculpture that combines papier maché and red paint. Sharif's palette centers on predominantly primary colors. During the 1980s, while studying at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London (now Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design) he was exposed to the palette of artists such as Alexander Calder and Piet Mondrian. The linearity of the chairs recalls both the modernist grid and Sharif's interest in creating logical and mathematical systems using abstract formal elements. Through his use of mass-produced chairs Sharif responds to the landscape of material culture in the world and specifically that of his native Dubai, a city-state that has undergone rapid social and economic changes since its independence in 1971. As he explains, "I do relate my work with the handicraft, but not the kind of handicraft which I make entirely by myself. The objects start with a material used for society. And then I make it useless, again. Other than art it hasn't got any other function."



Nail Clipper, 2014
Mixed media
53.15h x 12.99w x 3.54d in

Nail Clipper is an example of Sharif's "Objects," a series he began in 1982. In this work he weaved nail clippers, cotton rope, ribbon, and copper wire to create an assemblage. For Sharif, the repetitive act of weaving echoes the involuntary functions of the human body, such as swallowing, breathing, and blinking. For the artist, this process is a means of "doing and undoing, and then undoing and doing. Constructing, deconstructing." The materials in *Nail Clipper* generate a strong visual contrast between the softness and pliability of the woven cotton rope, against the sharpness and rigidity of the nail clippers. Sharif's choice to incorporate ordinary objects used in personal and intimate activities that generally touch and modify the human body emphasizes the connection between art and physical existence. As the artist explains, "people depend greatly on objects to keep up with their daily routines and activity, and so long they are alive, they keep using, exhausting, and relying on them as if they are, in one way or another, part of their own bodies."



Punching Bag, 2016
Mixed media
96.46h x 23.62w x 21.65d in

Punching Bag is an irregular oblong assemblage that hangs from the ceiling, and is constructed out of woven rope, cotton thread, socks, dresses, wool, nail clippers, razors, acrylic paint, cardboard and paper. Sharif culls these inexpensive and mass produced materials from local markets and stores in his native Dubai, becoming both a consumer and producer. As he explains, "I'm imitating consumers, but I'm using the materials to make art," and he does so in order to critique the hyper-industrialization impacting everyday life. For Sharif, there is also an element of humor and irony implicit in his choice of title. While *Punching Bag* is shaped and hung in space in a way that recalls a punching bag, the sharp objects that he affixed to the surface paradoxically inhibit the viewer from touching or striking the work.



Ladies and Gentlemen, 2014
Mixed media
108.27h x 181.1w x 17.72d in

For *Ladies and Gentlemen*, Sharif assembled mass-produced and inexpensive female and male shoes into a tapestry object that emphasizes seriality and the dislocation of functional objects. He attached the shoes to one another along with hand-painted papier maché and ropes. His chosen material speaks to an interest in sexual politics across centuries and geographies; as the artist notes some “cultures found elements of beauty in ladies feet. In ancient times, here in the east, men considered ladies heels as a sign of beauty... Today, with the rapid changes in the world, individuals would select their shoes based on personal preferences that are influenced by some internal need to look attractive and desirable.” While the choice of shoes by individuals may come from the consumer’s personal style, the shoes incorporated in Sharif’s work are chosen for their age and wear. On this he states, “I like this cheapness. I like ugly, I like the bad side of whatever society says is good... It’s this kind of irony that I was searching for in these materials that get disregarded. By bringing them into my studio, I give them back to society.”



Masks, 2016
Mixed media
112.2h x 94.49w x 17.32d in

In *Masks* Sharif creates a grid of red, blue, and gold face masks that cascade towards the floor, tied to one another by their black ribbons to ultimately form an irregular fringe at the bottom of the sculpture. The artists notes that masks have “an important historical role. In the Middle East, women cover their faces with veils. In Africa [masks are] used in dances to ward off evil spirits. Hiding one’s identity has become increasingly important.” By weaving together, in the ancient tradition of tapestry making, ordinary objects consumed by today’s society, Sharif points both to the hyper-industrialization impacting everyday life and the abandonment of old traditions that were key to building strong bonds among the members of communities in the past. On his interest in unifying aspects of both the ancient and modern, the artist explains “I want to nurture new ways out of the old and present these in a contemporary visual and artistic context.”



Back to School, 2015
Mixed media
114.17h x 96.46w x 15.75d in

For *Back to School* Sharif culled inexpensive children’s backpacks to create a large sculpture that hangs from the wall as a tapestry. By creating a singular artwork that accumulates objects whose main function is to help children carry books to school, Sharif aims to explore how information is shared in today’s society both explicitly and implicitly. As he explains, “the work is based on the idea that children carry the knowledge which they will use for their future,” though they may not yet be “aware how important the content is.” His use of alternating pink and blue bags exposes binary sexual politics as modeled for children in the visual gendering of retail objects, an issue he obscures by adding splashes on green throughout the woven items.



Gloves, 2015
Mixed media
104.33h x 96.46w x 14.96d in

Sharif created his large woven drapery *Gloves* by weaving together industrial work gloves with cotton rope. The work is an example of the process that art critic Kevin Jones describes as Sharif “painstakingly threaded together the props and refuse of daily life...into labor-intensive but immobilized, defunctionalized and useless creations.” Sharif thus renders the defining characteristics of mass-produced utilitarian materials as political and socioeconomic commentaries on present-day society. On his choice of material, the artist explains, “gloves have so many different uses and reflect different cultures. Some women protect their hands from the sun, others hide them. Thieves don’t want to get noticed, and museums use them to keep the works clean.” Sharif, who associates his own practice with handicraft, selected work gloves in particular because to him, they serve “the most important role, due to what [they offer] from great safety and some sort of pain relief to workers.”



Combs, 2016
Mixed media
108.27h x 78.74w x 27.56d in

Sharif’s interest in visual accumulation, and in systematic production, calculations, and geometric permutations are apparent in his choice of medium for *Combs* (2016). For this work, he assembled plastic combs in a variety of bright colors, which jut out from the wall at irregular angles creating a haphazard visual rhythm. For the artist, combs, widely used to tidy hair, exemplify the use of logic necessary in mass-production of consumer goods. As he explains, “the number of teeth, the distance between them, their length and thickness, all seem to be well calculated, and they have been so for thousands of years.” Sharif echoes the geometric precision of the combs by organizing them in a meticulous gridded pattern in space, following a calculated mathematical model of his own invention, to create a hanging tapestry.