



Hassan Sharif

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January 8 – February 8, 2014

Alexander Gray Associates

Hassan Sharif in Conversation

Alexander Gray: In your recent *Objects*, you bring in natural materials, like in *Iron No. 2* (2013), where you have wrapped iron wire around pieces of wood.

Hassan Sharif: I like this natural wood. It comes from a mountain area, where it is used as firewood. Emiratis use these trees and wood for ourselves, it is not valuable to export. The iron is not made here, it comes from somewhere else, because we don't have a factory here to make this wire. I am making this combination. The trees are from here and the iron is coming from the outside, an import-export relationship.

AG: But there's a deficit too. The wood is not leaving Dubai or the Emirates, it stays here, it gets burnt, it gets put in the ground; the wire gets imported and stays here. In your art, you are creating an equilibrium, but it does not describe an equal situation.

HS: Everything is political. A human, any act is political. Whether using wood or iron, it becomes political. It is economic as well. I like the combination between two contradicting materials which both come from the earth. From iron ore, and from the tree.

Each material has some kind of relational or erotic aspect in its combination with another. I think materials carry individual narratives. With some materials you can create a story. The material remains as a wire, it remains as rubber, or cotton ropes, but in the end it is also a vocabulary. It's like an alphabet. When you mix wood and wire it gives you two alphabets together. It's not any more wood, neither is it any more wire.

AG: With the iron wall sculpture, you combine strips of rusted iron with wire. In its woven form, it looks like a basket with grasses growing through the weaving. Back to the wooden pieces, you have this wire, taking on an organic form that's been wrapped around, but it does not feel like a vine or root. It feels as if it has something has been done to the wood. Here too, you've have the same material doing very different things.

HS: Even iron has a life in its material source. The rusted surface looks similar to a tree's bark. It's in nature, for example, and it protects itself. And with iron, if you leave it exposed to the elements, the surface becomes rusted, so rust is protecting the iron. Protection might become the narrative.

AG: You spoke about the fabric pieces making direct reference to the body. You are using pieces of rugs we walk on, towels we dry ourselves with as source materials, but then you are altering them significantly.

HS: Yes, all of these materials have to do with the body, touching the body. I am very particular about how people relate to my body. I don't like someone to wash my clothes, I don't want another person to touch it, because it touched my body. So if someone touches it, it's like they are touching my body. I have always had a feeling that I don't want to share my body, maybe I'm selfish. I don't want to share my body with any other.

AG: Is it a psychological selfishness or a cultural selfishness?

HS: It has to do with the erotic, and what is rejected in society; in essence, what I reject of society. This is my body. When I reject the religious or the cultural, it is my choice. Social conventions say every man has to marry or has to have a wife, or has to have this or that. This is what I don't want. So now, I'm protesting, I'm against this convention. So I'm breaking this kind of utopian thing, or not utopian. Society should not say what is yours, and what is not. If you try to commit suicide you are arrested, you get sentenced, like a murderer.

AG: But, in the framework of art, this action is with self-determination. You are expressing your own agency.

HS: I like some performances where the artist abuses his or her body. Yes, I like this notion of self-abusing. It has a religious impact, because, it is breaking or not believing in the totems. It is taking down the icons. So when I self-abuse my body, it is against the idea of religion. We are told: "No, God creates your body in order to do this, to do that." No, I want my body to do something another way, not the way which convention said you must treat your body. I want to treat my body in my own way. I might abuse my art, my work, my body, I might cut my finger a little bit while working, or making art. One year I might cut off my entire finger!

AG: In most of these works, you are not starting with one object, you are amassing many. You have a unit, a family, social group, a mass of the same towel, or rug, or spoons; a homogenous set of bodies that you've torn up and reconfigured. But it is not an act of violence or violation.

HS: Yes, I am cutting the material. The title of one of my books is *Sharp Tools for Making Art* (1995). I use sharp tools, I use scissors. Scissors have to do with the cutting hair, cutting nails; scissors to do with the body. Cutting also has to do with destroying, disturbing. I think of a small boy; he wants to play, he wants to cut things. I see this in myself, I am a naughty boy!

AG: With your art, on one hand, you're destroying, but then you are making something new. That's not naughty; you're nurturing, you're creating.

HS: I am doing and undoing, and then undoing and doing. Constructing, deconstructing. I expand. I start cutting something, for example, then I continue, do, and expand it, and repeat. Then I reconstruct.

AG: There's the seriality in your work, which, when thinking about the body, you are also reproducing. With the objects, and the drawings, you're splitting things up, you're making more out of something than previously existed. You are mimicking a natural system but you are interrupting it as well.

HS: Yes, this is what I do: I am imitating and representing the natural, and then doing something else.

AG: With the textile pieces, they will age. Your materials are inexpensive rugs, towels, t-shirts, and the color may fade over time.

HS: I choose the cheapest materials. I want the materials to be honest. Let it be, let it get older and older until it shows colors on the front faded, even if it becomes white. I do relate to my work with the handicraft. But not that kind of handicraft which I make entirely by myself. The objects start with a material used for the society. And then I make it useless, again. Other than art, it hasn't got any other function. The rug is now on the wall.

AG: While I don't want to pigeonhole your work within a strictly Islamic or Arab context, the language is there. With these textile pieces, there is relationship to the rug not only as the material source, but the rug as a transient shelter in the Bedouin tradition, or weaving as a distinctly Middle Eastern tradition.

HS: I like to relate my work to the handicraft, yes. But I am not interested in saying that my mother was doing it and that's why I do it. No, I don't want to give that dimension to this at all. My handicraft-ness is that I'm doing it for now. It is in the present tense. I'm doing things in 2013, which is the beginning of 21st century.

AG: The *Semi-System* drawings source from contemporary information systems; calendars, dictionaries, telephone directories. Your process is circular: you start with a set of rules or formulas, then you let them fall apart, then you embrace the unexpected result, then you edit and present a completed diagram. Many of us search for meaning in our social, political, economic systems, as well as applying systems to natural phenomena, like a zodiac diagram for the constellations. But in the end, it's all a mystery—or a joke! It seems like you're playing with that quest to discern between order and disorder.

HS: I mean, even line, line is abstract. Because again, a line does not exist in nature. You see shadow, or form, and through the light and shade you see depth, but there is no line in nature. In the 1980s, I was making performances and drawings that connected random holes in the wall, or the length of shadows cast by trees, distance between rocks in the desert. It was like playing. If you leave a child, and give them a pencil, they will mark and mark on the wall, then they reach until they cannot reach.

AG: We are back to naughty boys! That's innate curiosity, we have as children: we look up in the sky, we want to understand what's happening up there. You're doing the same thing when you're in school, looking at the marks on the walls and trying to identify and even organize them.

HS: When you see it, and now imagine that you are in the middle of desert, in sky, or a star, a bright light. In the darkness you can see more stars. When you find some, you make a direction.

AG: Your recent *Semi-System* drawings also have an element of painting, or sculpture that acts as a crescendo to the drawings. But they are not perfect moments either. In the painted components, you are showing the pencil tracings that are involved in designing the composition; or leaving messy wood glue in the joints between pine boards that you have fabricated from your linear gestures. Can you describe that process?

HS: With the drawings, which have a sculptural element to them—a relief—I worked with a carpenter. I gave the carpenter this drawing, I say, I want this. But then he might make a mistake with the wooden part, and he gives me another shape, for example. I don't reject his work, I just make a drawing according to what he made. Why not, why should I blame him? A mistake is not a mistake, it's another piece.

AG: Yet, we observe in society that mistakes are erased. You grew up and are working in Dubai, an intense urban environment where you're observing tremendous growth, which is not sustainable—another day, another ski-slope in the middle of the desert! Things get built, then rebuilt. Outside of your studio world, the social force would say, “Throw that out, it's a mistake,” and instead you're saying, “The mistake is the answer.”

HS: Yes, when we look at art, you don't predict what you see, or what I will make. It just happens. I was not expecting an outcome, I had no expectation that I will find this shape, this line. In the broader sense, there is never direction, even, in the middle of the sea, the ocean. How can you find direction? This is the same as in the middle of the desert, it is difficult to find a direction.

Gray, Alexander. Interview with Hassan Sharif, Dubai, UAE, November 16 – 17, 2013



Hassan Sharif, Dubai 2013



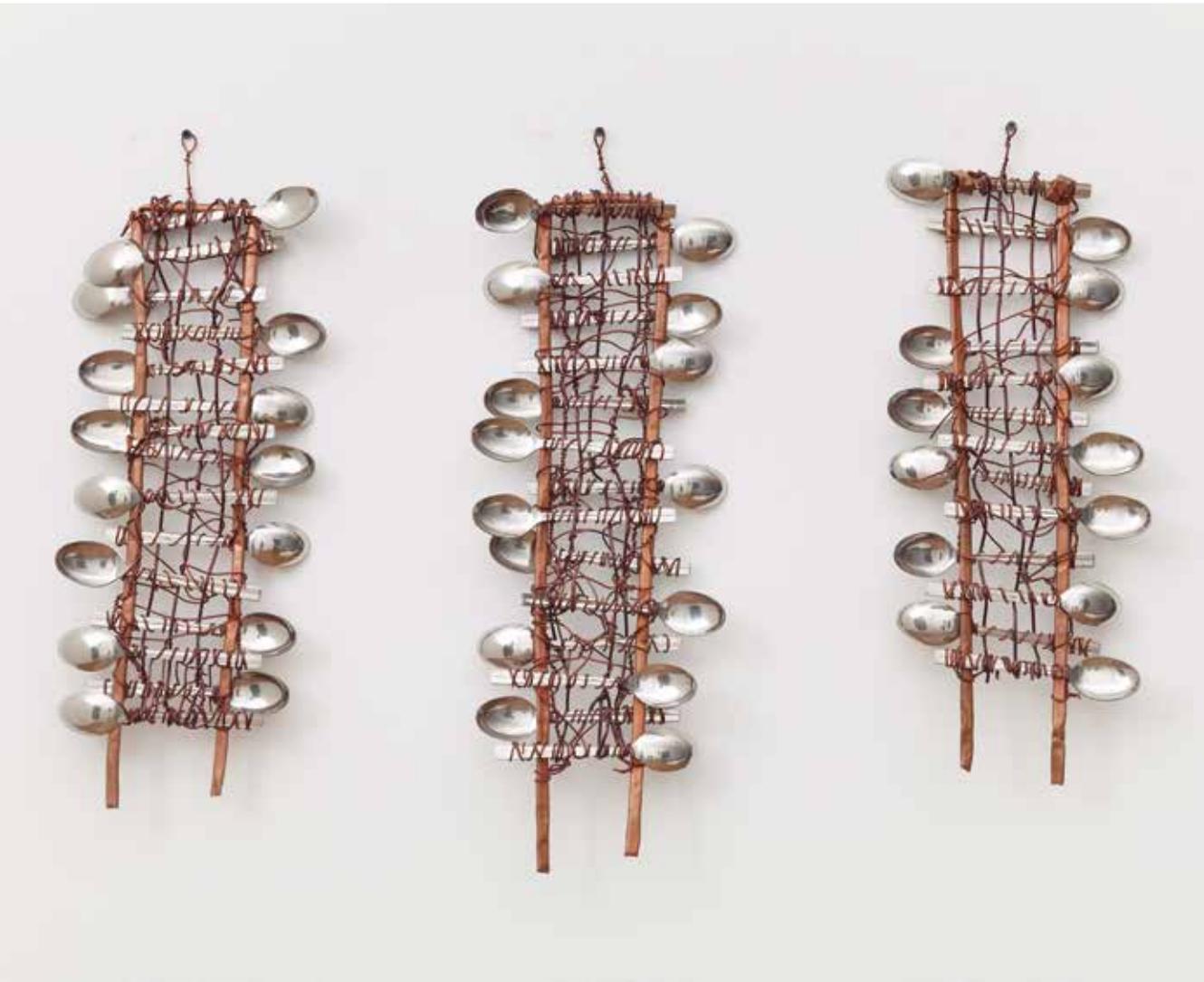
Rug 4, 2013



Seven Points Angular Lines – Part 2, 2013, 2013



Spoons No. 5, 2012



Spoons No. 3, 2012



Weave 1, 2013

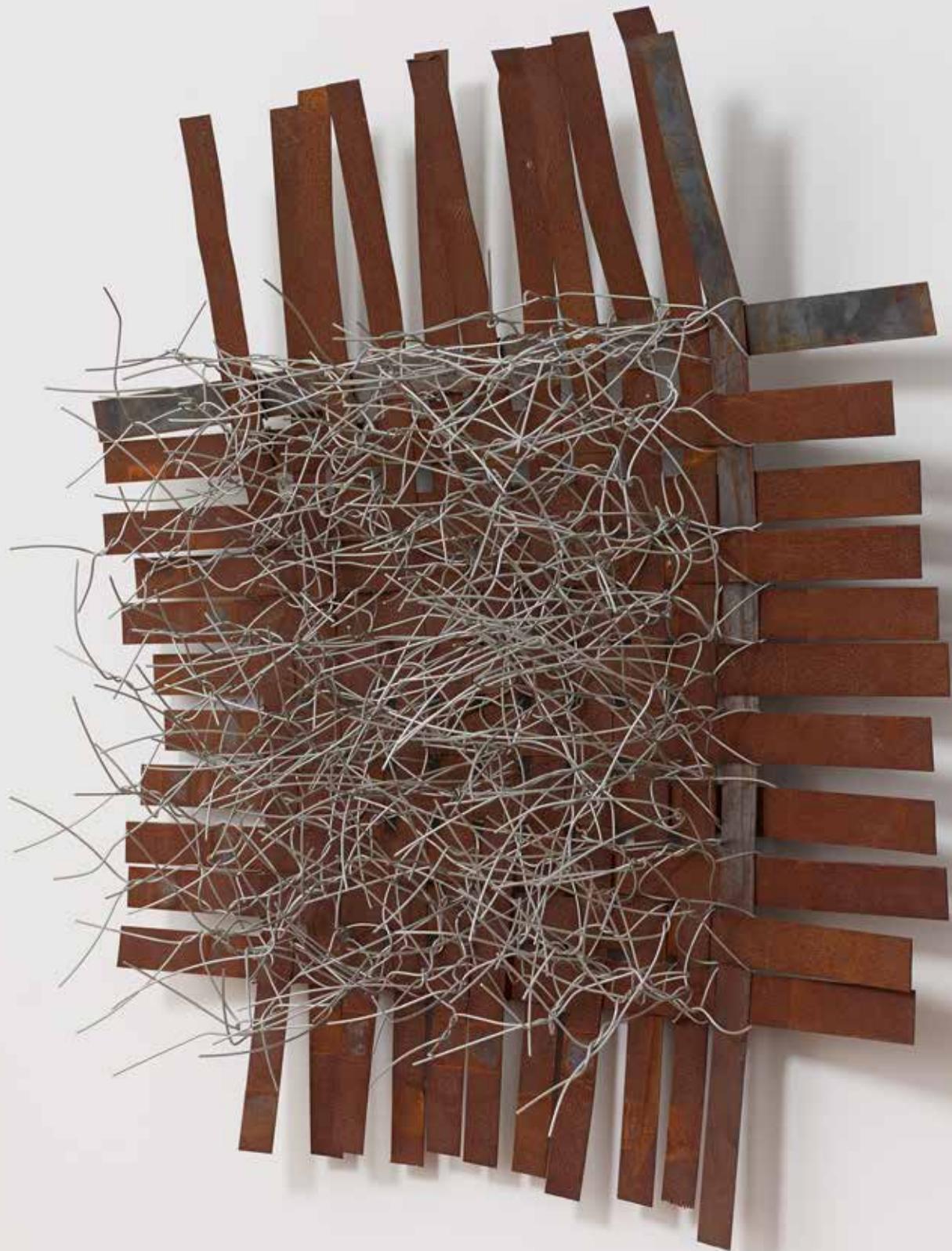


Copper 2, 2012





Iron No. 3, 2013





Iron No. 2, 2013



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, 2014



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, 2014



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, 2014



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, 2014

Hassan Sharif (b. 1951, Dubai, United Arab Emirates) lives and works in Dubai. Recognized as a pioneer of conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East, Sharif's artworks move beyond the limits of discipline or singular approach, encompassing performance, installation, drawing, painting, and assemblage. Since the late 1970s, he has maintained a practice as a cultural producer and facilitator, moving between roles as artist, educator, critic, activist, and mentor to contemporary artists in the United Arab Emirates.

An acute awareness of his environment led Sharif to embrace constant experimentation and embrace all types of materials. In addition, in his body of work focused on experiments and semi-systems, which emerged in 1981 and continues through today, he utilizes the grid structure to draft constructivist structures. The semi-systems organize geometrical forms in space, in which Sharif follows complex mathematical models of his own invention, discovery, errors, and chance.

Sharif's main interest is to create art that is linked to society and speaks of universal aspects of daily life. This interest has manifested through his use of ordinary materials. He uses cotton, textile, metal, wood, plastic, and ordinary objects in order to create a variety of objects that reflect contemporary concerns such as consumerism, manufacturing, and commercialization of handicrafts.

Sharif is a founder of the Emirates Fine Art Society and of the Art Atelier in the Youth Theater and Arts, Dubai. In 2007, he was one of four artists to establish The Flying House, a Dubai institution for promoting contemporary Emirati artists. The first Emirati to have his work shown in the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Sharif was also selected to be the debut artist to represent the U.A.E. during its first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. In 2011, Sharif was the subject of a retrospective exhibition, *Hassan Sharif: Experiments & Objects 197–2011*, curated by Catherine David and Mohammed Kazem and presented by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage/Platform for Visual Arts. Sharif's artwork is included in the collections of the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar; the Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah, U.A.E.; the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah; the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; and the Sittard Center, The Netherlands.

Checklist

Rug 4, 2013

Rug, tempera, glue, and copper wire
126h x 72.05w x 12.6d in (320h x 183w x 32d cm)

Seven Points Angular Lines - Part 2, 2013, 2013

Painting: acrylic and graphite on canvas; 31.5h x 15.75w in (80h x 40w cm)
Drawings: ink and graphite on paper; 23.43h x 16.5w in (59.5h x 42w cm)

Spoons No. 5, 2012

Spoons and copper
18.9h x 19.7w x 55.1d in (48h x 50w x 140d cm)

Spoons No. 3, 2012

Spoons and copper
27.6h x 31.9w in (70h x 81w cm)

Weave 1, 2013

Rubber and cotton rope
92.52h x 45.28w x 5.91d in (235h x 115w x 15d cm)

Copper 2, 2012

Copper
34.06h x 30.71w in (86.5h x 78w cm)

February 2013, 2013

Painting: acrylic and graphite on canvas; 23.62h x 11.81w in (60h x 30w cm)
Drawings: ink and graphite on paper; 23.43h x 16.5w in (59.5h x 42w cm)

Iron No. 3, 2013

Iron and wire
46.85h x 47.24w x 16.53d in (119h x 120w x 42d cm)

Iron No. 2, 2013

Wood and iron
7.87h x 157.48w x 39.37d in (20.1h x 400.1w x 100.1d cm)

Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

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ISBN: 978-0-9897408-2-1

Cover image: *Iron No. 2*, detail, 2013, wood and iron
7.87h x 157.48w x 39.37d in (20.1h x 400.1w x 100.1d cm)

Photography: Muhammad Kashif Khan, Jeffrey Sturges
Printing: Bedwick & Jones Printing Inc.

Alexander Gray Associates:

David Cabrera, Ursula Davila-Villa, Alexander Gray, John Kunemund
Victoria Pratt, Lenora Rigoni, Chad Seelig, Peter Vargas, Rebecca Wolff

Alexander Gray Associates
508 West 26 Street #215
New York NY 10001
United States

Tel: +1 212 399 2636
www.alexandergray.com

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