

HASSAN SHARIF

IMAGES

A soft wind of nostalgia has been wafting over the United Arab Emirates of late. In the land known for projecting itself into the future, many in its art world have been casting their gaze back to the past. For the 56th Venice Biennale, curator Sheikha Hoor bint Sultan al-Qasimi's National Pavilion—a survey of exhibitions that have been held in the UAE from 1980 to the present—unearthed older artistic practices unknown even to local initiates. Meanwhile, at the Art Dubai fair in March, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde chose to highlight the historic work of Emirati artist Mohammed Kazem, a student and acolyte of Hassan Sharif, whose own roots were simultaneously showcased in the cunningly titled exhibition “Images” at the gallery’s Dubai space.

Side-stepping a sanctifying “best of” approach, “Images” offered a glimpse into the making of a provocateur, while also raising questions about the genesis—and longevity—of Sharif’s singular, ironic voice. Here, past and present rubbed shoulders. “Images” was a tour through entirely new Sharifian inspirations, signposted by familiar experiments from earlier years in his career. For example, the artist’s hallmark “semi-systems”—or logical, codified patterns—cropped up in his 1981 “experiment” (the term used by Sharif to refer to his performance-based works) entitled *Dictionary*. A series of photographs shows Sharif on a London street, holding a piece of cardboard on which appears a page from a dictionary. The sum of the individual digits of the excerpt’s pagination determined the number of paces by which he would distance himself from the camera: when he was holding page 233, for example, he would be 8 paces away. Nearby was a separate work also entitled *Dictionary* (2015), a voluminous, wall-mounted cascade of torn-out dictionary pages strung together by rope. The installation is an updated expression of Sharif’s dictionary fetish, but also references the “object” works that he is known for now—tied, bound, woven and knotted sculptures made from the flotsam and jetsam of consumer life.

At the back of the gallery, a wall of caricatures from the 1970s—most of which satirize Dubai’s fast-tracking of its socioeconomic development at breakneck speed—functioned as a valuable pivot to understanding Sharif’s evolution as a social commentator. Today, the artist vocally distances himself from these early works. “Caricatures are like jokes,” he told me in a March interview. “But my objects are more powerful, more ironic. They make people angry.” The excesses of consumer society have long been Sharif’s critical target. *Images No. 2* (2014) takes as its raw material the invasive advertising leaflets and flyers typically stuffed into mailboxes or slipped under residential doors and gates. The artist glues them together into log-like rolls, which are mostly the size of paint cans and positioned like a still life on the floor. Ironically,



none of the relentless advertising is visible. Instead, the rolls themselves—as an artwork—have become images that are oft reproduced and distributed. The ads within, as well as their promotional bellowing, are suffocated under the densely amassed layers of their replicated copies.

If irony is the outcome of many of Sharif’s works, repetition is the means by which they achieve that sensibility. *A Pillar of Images* (2015), a towering column of pages taken from various magazines, loomed over the entire gallery space like some overwhelming onslaught of pictures that was about to engulf the floor. The irony in this gesture—mindlessly repeated, “garbage” images appearing as a fundamental supporting structure—is lost on no one.

Sharif is quick to deflect any accusations of being judgmental toward society. “I am just portraying [Dubai] and how it has changed,” he maintains. “My discourse of society is, ‘Let them do it.’ I’m not saying to stop.” One of the works that was exhibited in “Images,” comprising wall-mounted sculptures of shredded paper on cardboard (*Shredder*, 2015), included the shredding device itself—as if the artist, removing himself from the creative process, is saying, “The machine did it, not me.” By taking such a stance Sharif craftily de-skills himself, underscoring a willful rejection of virtuosity in his Duchamp-like probing of what authority one has in making art.

KEVIN JONES