



## “I Am The Single Work Artist”: UAE’s Hassan Sharif – artist profile

by Sara Frances Diaz

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Hassan Sharif’s retrospective exhibition celebrates the artist’s career and lifelong connection to the Emirate of Sharjah.

Organised by Sharjah Art Foundation, “I Am The Single Work Artist” features Sharif’s diverse body of work from the early 1970s to 2016.



“Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist”, 4 November 2017 – 3 February 2018, Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

“[Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist](#)” retrospective exhibition, organised by the [Sharjah Art Foundation](#), and curated by Director Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, is a tribute to the artist’s prominent career until his passing in 2016 and a celebration of his lifelong connection with the Emirate of Sharjah, where his first sculptures and artistic interventions were installed.

### **UAE’s most influential contemporary artist**

The organisation of the exhibition began as a collaboration with the artist; however, as [Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi](#), the curator explains,

the scale of the exhibition grew after he passed away, and after looking through nearly 4000 of his works, it became very difficult to explain the career of such a prolific artist with a small exhibition.



Hassan Sharif, 1981. Image courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate.

On this regard, emphasising not only the need to understand Sharif's work locally, but also the importance of the exhibition as a means to celebrate "UAE's most influential contemporary artist, Hoor also adds:

More people are starting to appreciate Hassan Sharif's work now, more museums are interested, but I feel that it should be seen in the context of the local – and that's why it was important that this should be the biggest show of his work.



Hassan Sharif, 'Blue Linen', 2015, linen, aluminium and cotton rope, 198 x 135 x 11 cm. Image courtesy gb agency, Paris.

Hassan Sharif, born in Dubai in 1951, studied art in London at The Byam Shaw School of Art under the direction of artist Tam Giles, Head of the Abstract and Experimental Department. He then returned to the Emirates in 1984, where he worked throughout all of his life, constantly

inspired by British Constructivism and the ideas of chance and order. Widely considered a pioneer of conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East, Sharif's artistic legacy is unquestionable. However, his involvement with art far outstretched his artistic creations.



Central Market  
Sharjah - 1985  
*[Signature]*

Hassan Sharif, 'Central Market, Sharjah', 1985, photographs mounted on cardboard, 59.3 x 41.8 cm each. Sharjah Art Foundation collection.

The artist was also a writer and an art critic, often translating historical art texts and manifestoes into Arabic, establishing a prominent position in the art education of the country. In 1980, Sharif founded the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah, and the Art Atelier in the Youth Theatre and Arts a few years later in 1987, in Dubai, as a way to encourage and promote artists in the Emirates. His work is part of countless prominent international art collections such as the Paris-based Centre Pompidou and Fondation Louis Vuitton, and the Guggenheim Collection in Abu Dhabi. The artist died whilst still in the midst of various artistic developments in 2016.



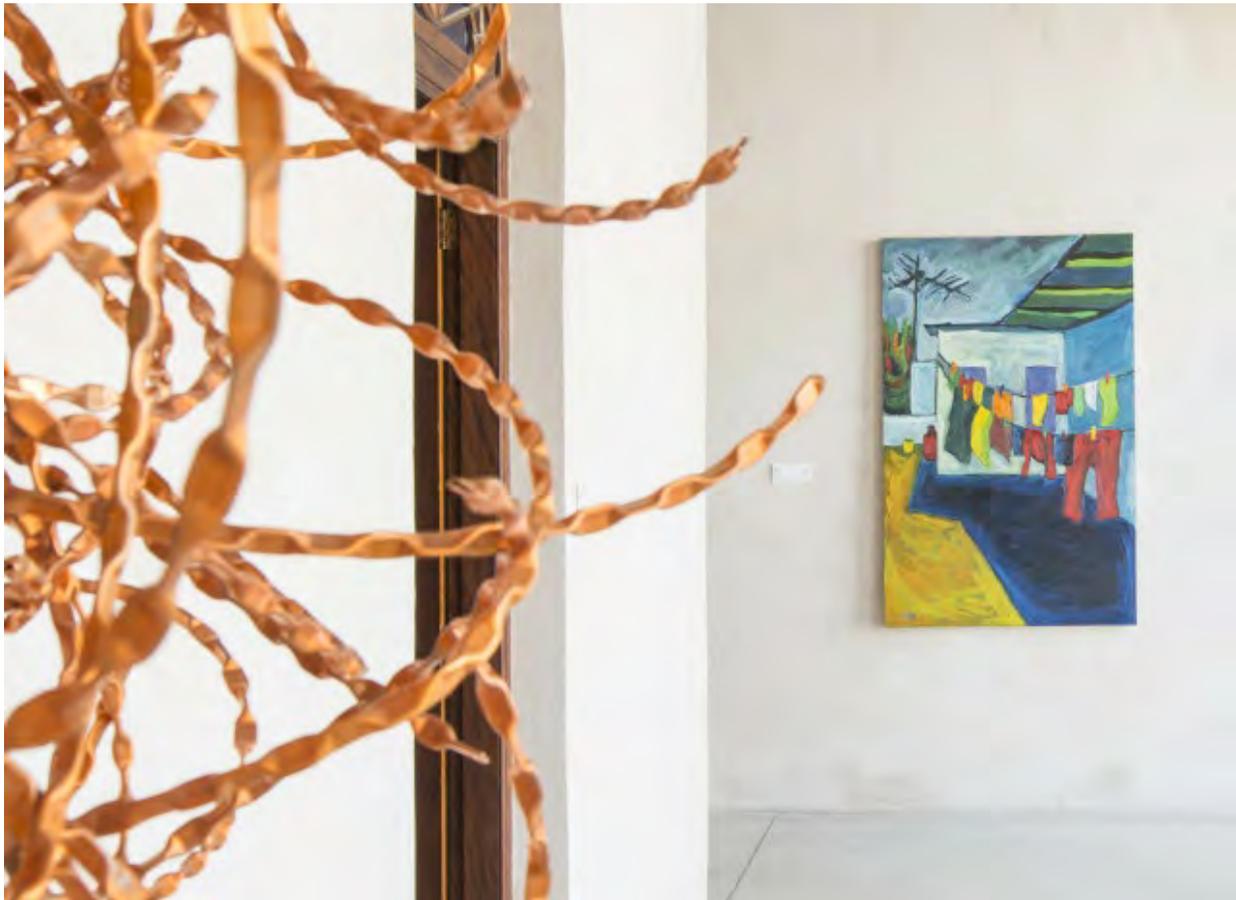
"Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017, installation view at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.



"Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017, installation view at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

**The comic, the conceptual and the political**

Several of his works, including his last creations, can be seen at the retrospective exhibition in Sharjah, installed in two distinct areas, a contemporary gallery style space and a 19th-century house entitled Bait Al Serkal. The show features examples from Hassan Sharif's vast career, from his early artwork of the 1970s, including his newspaper caricature and comic strip drawings, to the 2010s' large scale sculptures. The retrospective exemplifies the artist's wide artistic contribution in various fields and media, and his constant exploration of a conceptual artistic dialogue. Highly revolutionary at the time, Sharif followed an assemblage approach to creation that references Duchamp's conceptual art.



"Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017, installation view at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.



"Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017, installation view at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

With almost 300 of his works, including installations, paintings, large sculptures and even "urban archeology" objects, the works all illustrate the artist's lifelong devotion to art as a vehicle for questioning and as a means to understand and question the world around us. The selection of works was based on the artist's own concepts and classifications, grouping them according to theme and subject.

In general, all the works reveal Sharif's fascination with repetitions and playfulness. Playfulness especially is present not only in his predominant use of colour, which the curator tried to group in one single large space, but also in his overall approach to art. For Hoor, this was a fundamental aspect that she also wanted to bring forth through the exhibition.



Hassan Sharif, 'Toshiba No. 2', 2014, suitcase, papier-mâché, cotton rope, coir, and acrylic, 108 x 65 x 13 cm. Installation view, "Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017. Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

Since the artist donated the full contents of his studio to the Sharjah Art Foundation, the exhibition also features part of his studio just as he had left it, allowing the viewer to catch a glimpse of his ongoing work process and his complex artistic environment.

Through the exploration of form, time, colour, three-dimensionality and experimental sculptural approaches, using common materials, in an "accumulation" process, Sheriff developed a contemporary art style that also aimed to promote complex social and philosophical discourses.



"Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017, installation view at Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.



Foreground: Hassan Sharif, 'Slippers and Wire', 2009, slippers and copper wire, dimensions variable. Back (Left): Hassan Sharif, 'Towel 3', 2013, towel and copper wire, 274 x 150 x 28 cm. Back (Right): Hassan Sharif, 'Rug 6', 2014, rug, tempera, glue and copper wire, 304 x 195 x 32 cm. Installation view, Sharjah Art Foundation, "Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017. Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

## Exposing socio-political 'monsters'

*Broken Toys and Copper Wire* (2012), composed of rubber and coloured plastic toys, and *Slippers and Wire* (2009), both greatly epitomise the artist's most iconic language and the inherent political and social significance he aimed to draw awareness to. In *Colours* (2016), countless threads of cotton rope painted with acrylic paint in varying rainbow colours, organised in a horizontal manner, evoke a sense of estranged particularity that aim to expose the negative aspects of consumption in modern day life. On this regard, the artist once explained (PDF download):

Despite the fact that my works are based on a sequential, industrial mode of creativity, they also demolish the sequential autonomy of an industrial product. I inject my works with a realism that exposes this socio-political economic monster, allowing people a chance to recognise the danger of over indulgence in this form of negative consumption.



Hassan Sharif, 'Broken Toys and Copper Wire', 2012, rubber, plastic toys and copper wire, 150 x 150 x 100 cm. Installation view, "Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017. Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.



Hassan Sharif, 'Colors', 2016, cotton rope, acrylic paint, and copper wire, 240 x 535 x 10 cm. Installation view, Sharjah Art Foundation, Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist, 2017. Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

[In another interview \(PDF download\)](#), the artist also emphasised the political and social

“connections” between consumerism and his artistic oeuvre:

[...] they’re losing something vital—his or her own hold over their identity. This is consumer capitalism and it is a sickness. If you drive down Sheikh Zayed Road, there are massive billboards all the way along it. I like to look at these, to watch them change every month or so, they are like those mirrored sunglasses. You stare out through a filter, and the thing in front of you is yourself; each image holds the potential of a new self. This is everywhere, not just the UAE, but perhaps here the billboards are more present or numerous than in other cities. So there is this cycle, you work in order to buy, you spend and then you need to work again. I don’t criticize this per se, but I am keen to show or remind viewers that this is now our reality.



Hassan Sharif, 'Iron no. 5', 2013, iron, 170 x 610 x 140 cm. Installation view, "Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017. Olivier Mestelan collection. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.



Left: Hassan Sharif, 'Cardboard No. 1', 2015, cardboard and glue, 46 x 75 x 65 cm. Right: Hassan Sharif, 'Tissue Paper No. 3', 2014, tissue paper and glue, 47 x 61 x 54 cm. Installation view, "Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist", 2017. Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation. Right

It is this despising of materiality that greatly defines his body of work. However, insisting that "nothing is wasted", his work also brings in dialogues of artistic and personal re-discovery, evoking new possibilities from "abandoned" fragments, and allowing for imagination to take over the harsh paradigms of day to day life. By recycling concepts and approaches, the artist also introduces the possibility of changing and growing of the self. Although he claimed that he had a "sarcastic outlook of life", this beautiful poetics greatly outlives him.

**Sarah Frances Dias**

***"Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist" by Sharjah Art Foundation is on view from 4 November 2017 to 3 February 2018 at Al Mureijah Square and Bait Al Serkal, Al Mureijah and Al Shuwaiheen Areas in Sharjha, UAE.***

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