



I AM LOYAL TO COLOUR*

28 APRIL 2019 MARIA MUMATZ



(* Title of the gallery dedicated to colour in Hassan Sharif's retrospective at the Sharjah Art Foundation in November 2017)

“I do not use colours in my works to give various indications, whether symbolic, social, psychological, expressive, and so on. Instead, I only use coloured materials because they are available in the market,” said the artist in an introspective series of essays from 2005. Named after a set of three works skilfully treading between an Object and a painting, created using tissue, glue, and oil paint in classic Sharif fashion, *Blue* examines the artist's highly individualistic approach to colour: his irrelevant engagement with colour reduces its property to yet another material he uses in the creation of his works.

Featuring works as early as 1983 to Objects created in 2016 – before his passing on 18 September of that year – the show retraces Sharif’s four decade-long artistic practice, and focuses on his use of colour in his paintings, Objects, and Semi Systems, to create a complex narrative around contemporary art making. So how should one perceive colour in Sharif’s practice, since the artist has used it to both elevate, and discard, its material properties?

Maria Mumtaz speaks to Mohamed Sharif, the artist’s nephew and guardian of his Estate, to discuss how the understanding and reception of Sharif’s work has changed over the years.

Maria Mumtaz: How did the show, and the name of the exhibition, come about?

Mohamed Sharif: Hassan did not discard colour. Colour meant a lot to him, just not in the way it means to us. Colour was just another material, like copper or aluminium. He dealt with colours as an accumulation of things — he liked to dump them together, which is what you see in *Flowers* (2015), *Butterfly* (2015), *Venus and Fish* (2009), or what you see in the *Jelly Fish* (2011). He didn’t use colour to transmit symbols, and he didn’t believe in any of the romantic meanings associated to colour.

In *Blue*, there are works from the 1990s in which Hassan did not even use colour on Objects. He decided to honour the colour of the material instead, and this is one aspect of his work. Around 2009, he began to question why he wasn’t using colour. “Why am I becoming so dogmatic about colour?” he thought. “I am not a dogmatic person, so why am I contradicting myself?” But he was a person who contradicted himself in everything he did. And therefore, he brought colour back as a material in his works.

MM: This is Hassan’s first solo show in Dubai at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde after his passing, having staged *Approaching Entropy* in 2013 and *Images in 2015*. How do you think Hassan would have defined this show?

MS: The show has been in the works for quite some time and came about naturally. Perhaps it branched out after the retrospective at the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2017, and brings out one of the many elements that Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, who curated the show, tapped into. *Blue* showcases Hassan’s treatment of colour. Colours were not feelings; they were materials to Hassan. *Coloured Squares* (1983), for example, explains how colour meant nothing more than its physical materiality.

I don’t like to give an explanation or influence people’s views because I will define the work and, in the process, kill the work. Hassan wouldn’t give a meaning to the work either, but there was usually a

meaning when he first created the work. He had a contradicting relationship with the dictionary, where he would pick a copy, find a word and say ‘I haven’t painted elephants in a long time’, or, “I need to do justice to butterflies.” In this respect, Sheikha Hoor did a fantastic job with the retrospective by naming it *I am a Single Work Artist*, because when you put everything together, only then do you understand Hassan. She [Sheikha Hoor] dedicated a gallery to colour and used the retrospective to highlight that there is more to Hassan than accumulation.

MM: This is where the show cleverly articulates how Hassan’s practice was more than accumulation. In the past, people were so eager to see ‘beautiful’ works, and he fulfils this narrative by using colour — albeit only as a material, in an even more visually stimulating and provocative manner.

MS: For Hassan, being provocative was conceptual. He saw aesthetic beauty in chaotic structures and randomness. To him, that was more genuine than influencing it with logic and rigidity. This is why he rejected order and system in hanging and installing his works, just so that each time, the work could be seen differently. In doing so, the works have a new form every time they are installed. Hassan didn’t want his works to be dead corpses.

MM: I remember his hesitation to exhibit draft papers with his Semi Systems, which were basically the inner workings of the final work. However, we see them exhibited with all Semi Systems now. Did he eventually change his mind?

MS: During the retrospective, we went through the draft papers and realised that we have to have them as part of the work, otherwise the works would be considered minimalist. Semi Systems are Hassan’s way of rejecting the rigidity of the system. As he was absorbed in the process of creating draft papers, a mistake would happen. This mistake would propel the work in a different direction and eventually, paint a different picture. He was interested in finding out what that picture would be. Sometimes, you see the mistake clearly marked with an ‘X’, and sometimes he built on that mistake to lead the work in a different direction. When we were discussing draft papers with Sheikha Hoor in preparation of the retrospective, it became a significant part of the work. Draft papers are a window to Hassan’s mind.

MM: Hassan’s practice has been classified in four different aspects, Objects, Semi-Systems, Paintings, and Books & Boxes — which overlap. While Hassan did not want to influence anyone with his works, it is evident that he made a big impact on the contemporary art landscape through his multidisciplinary practice.

MS: A curator once said to Hassan, “you’re a genius.” And Hassan said, “Don’t say that. I hate these associations.” Hassan was an avid reader, if he wasn’t reading his dictionary, he was reading philosophy, poetry, or fiction. How I see this is, if you’re not an avid reader, anything will wow you and anyone can convince you with whatever they say. He didn’t want to be known as a painter, a sculptor, or the father of conceptual art. I would in fact tell him, “you’re not an artist - you are a blacksmith who is also a philosopher. People see your work as art, I don’t. I am not undermining it; I am seeing it as more than that.” If you truly want to understand Hassan’s works, you should read his texts and what he was thinking at each stage of his practice. His writings were the product of the time. The Hassan who wrote them was different than the Hassan who passed away.

MM: What were Hassan’s plans for his works in the future?

MS: Hassan said, ‘Don’t make a foundation.’ In his eyes, we would be advertising him and for him it was wrong. I think the new generation is using him the right way: they are inspired by him and use him as a reference. In his writings, he asked: “at what point can an artist say this is art?” It was an important question for him, and kept him searching for more throughout his life. There are now plans to show his retrospective at Castello di Rivoli in Turin in November this year, which will then travel to KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin in Spring 2020, followed by Moderna Museet Malmö in Sweden in the Fall of 2020.

MM: I have personally had quite a difficult time explaining Hassan’s works to collectors, friends, and colleagues. A collector once asked me the price of Hassan’s early *Experiment* from the 1980s. When I gave him the price, his reply was, “What is he, Jean-Michel Basquiat?” I feel the upcoming retrospectives in major European museums will offer everyone a chance to discover, and thoroughly understand his practice.

MS: You can’t understand Hassan’s practice from a single work. The retrospective is extremely important, and I hope it will make a difference and show Hassan as a person, and not just as an artist. It was very important to understand Hassan as a human through his writings, his works, and his overall thought process. You can only understand the entire breadth of his practice through his words. That is what the Estate is working on: a fresh translation of his texts, because the best person to talk about his works is Hassan himself, and we hope that his writings will communicate that to the new generation, here and elsewhere.

Blue runs at [Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde](http://alserkalavenue.ae/en/neighborhood/isabelle-van-den-eynde.php) (<http://alserkalavenue.ae/en/neighborhood/isabelle-van-den-eynde.php>) in Alserkal Avenue until 6 May 2019.