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ABDULRAHEEM ON HASSAN: MY BROTHER, MY FRIEND, MY TEACHER

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By Myrna Ayad

Hassan was my friend more than my younger brother. We shared everything, told each other everything, we never kept secrets from each other. We respected each other's opinions; of course, we had different opinions, but at the end of the day, we stuck together.

I felt he was unique from when he was about 10 years old. It was when we played together — though he was very content with what he had, and never complained — he wanted to create different things, he got bored of the rules of the game and wanted to change them.

Our father died when I was 13, so my elder brother and I had to work and Hassan continued his education. In his early secondary school years, he drew and painted, and was dubbed the 'school's artist' by the art teacher. Before he graduated from school, Hassan had the opportunity to work at one of the ministries or with the police, both options which provided good salaries. I remember we sat in a restaurant and he asked me what I thought; I told him he needed to decide for himself and he said he didn't want to be in uniform. At the time, the government funded art study abroad and he applied to universities in Italy, France and the UK. My mother insisted that he work, that art doesn't pay, that it wouldn't help the family, that it isn't a job. I didn't have to defend him, he did that well on his own.

In 1979, when he got the acceptance from the Byam Shaw School of Art (now part of Central Saint Martins), he took it immediately. I used to visit him regularly. Those days were fun and beautiful, I remember them so well. One of the places he took me to was the then-called Tate Gallery, where Joseph Beuys had a solo show. Hassan gave me a list of places I should visit while he went to classes, and when he came home, we'd talk about what I saw. Those discussions gave me a lot of insight into the way he thought. I always say he was my art teacher.



Hassan Sharif's photo by Maaziar Sadr

I remember very clearly having a conversation with him as his London days were coming to an end. He said he had an opportunity to stay and I told him why not; there was nothing in Dubai at the time for him and no one would have recognised what he was doing. He said he knew that, but that he had to go back to pay back, that it was his duty to return. "I am needed there, not here," he said.

When he came back in 1984, I could see that there was a big change from the boy in Dubai to the student in London. His psyche, outlook and the way he saw things had changed. He felt that he couldn't communicate with his old friends anymore and cut off ties with them. There are times when you look back and don't recognise yourself and I think he saw that. With Hassan, it was a totally radical change.



Hassan Sharif's photo by Sueraya Shaheen

His show at the Sharjah Central Market in 1985 was something totally new and unexpected. I laugh when I remember his visit to the municipality to secure permission for the show; they didn't understand why — this was where people asked for plots of land or jobs and he wanted to stage an exhibition! Despite people not understanding what he was doing, he never resented coming back. Never ever. Despite everything he suffered. These things don't pay off and they did not pay off until his final years. He never did this for money.

Hassan didn't leave the Emirates between 1984 and 2010, he just never wanted to. To him, vacation had no meaning. In 2015, he exhibited as part of Adventures of the White Square at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and had a talk with his teacher Tam Giles. She was over 80 at the time, and told me that she had advised him not to return to the UAE, to stay in the UK where he could have a better future; she said he was so stubborn, but looking at his life and career, she thought he did a good job leaving.



Hassan Sharif's works, courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

He was always ready to give talks, to explain what he had done, to discuss the art scene in the Emirates. All he wanted was art, to have time to create art and he was always busy. Many times, I would tell him that he was working too hard, and he would always say that he had no time, that he had to do more. He was not attached to anything, not even me. Love and attachment are different things; he loved living, he enjoyed his life, loved me, my kids, loved everybody, but he was not attached. There's a big difference. I think that is real love. When a person is attached, it's not love, it's attachment. He gave me a lot and he was my only friend. Art is life, you need to live it, he would say. The beauty wasn't in others or in objects, it is in oneself and in nature. I realised that things that you don't like teach you a lot. Your enemy teaches you much more than your friend does.

The slowness of the art scene in the Emirates bothered him and he was happy when he saw changes. Sometimes I get up at night and I feel like I can't wait for his call. It's difficult for me to believe that he's gone, but he is and it's tough. It makes me happy to talk about him and his work and it is my wish that his work gains greater recognition. Hassan shouldn't be a memory — his work and philosophy should be taught. I am so happy about his show at the Sharjah Art Foundation. He never wanted a retrospective when he was alive; he would always say, "I'm still alive and working." And he worked until the very end.