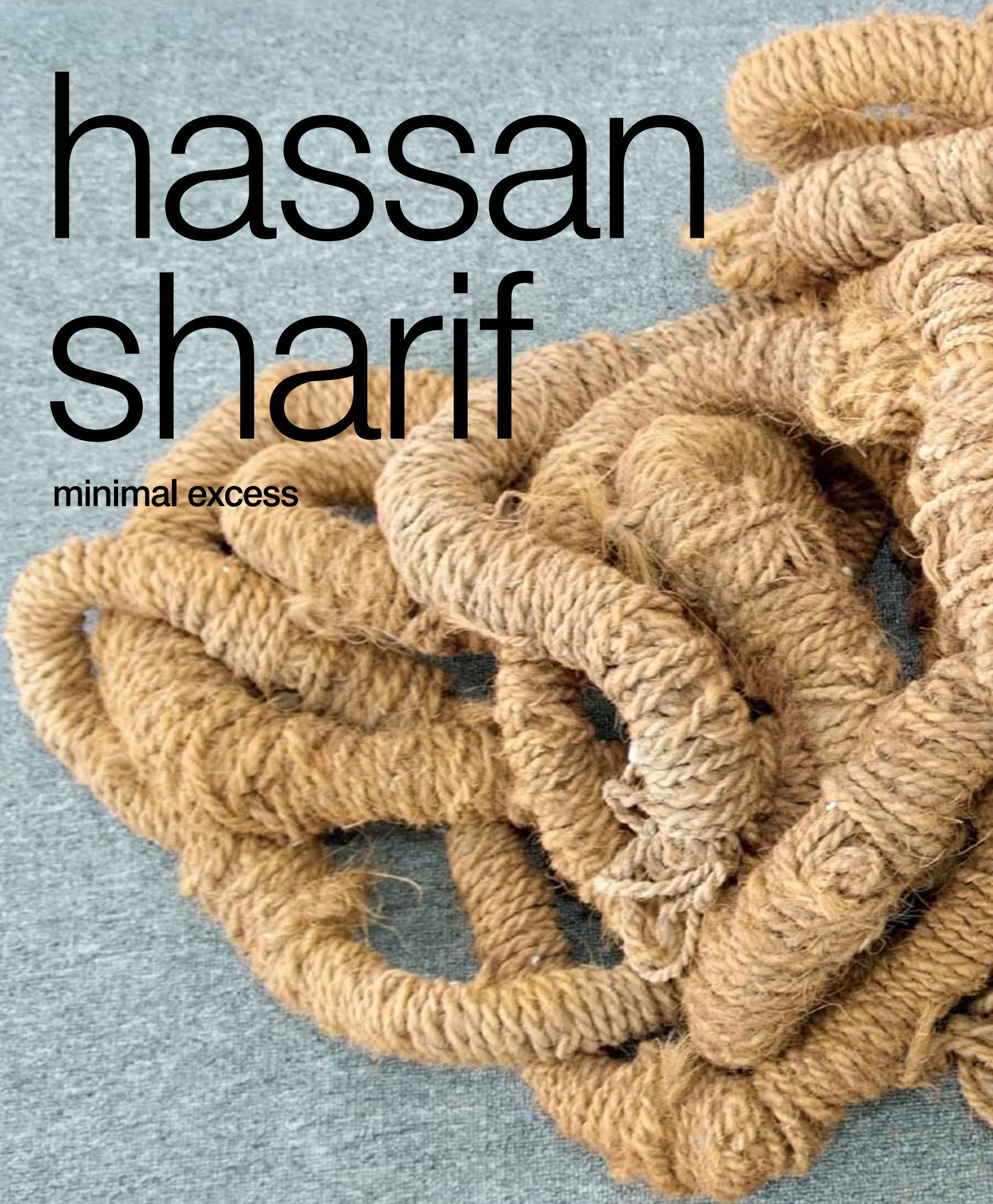


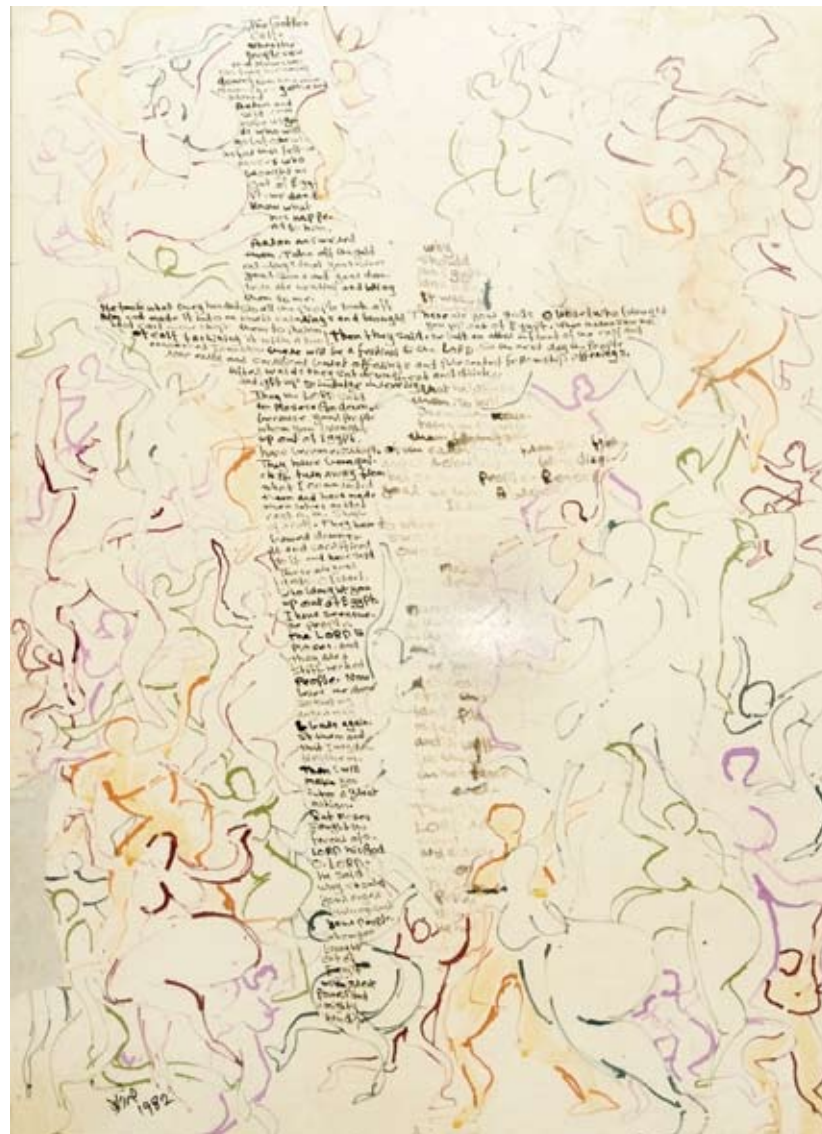
hassan sharif

minimal excess





As Dubai hurtles along at an ever increasing speed, Hassan Sharif sits quietly in the shade of his house surrounded with objects discarded by society. He rips, glues, folds and ties the remnants of 21st-century life in a sequence of repetitive movements; weaving his writings, theories and philosophies until thought and material are one. The intangible essence of his Post-Modern artistic expression has frustrated, angered and confused those who rush to view it. The antithesis of the Dubai lifestyle is finally getting the attention he deserves.



TEXT BY LISA BALL-LECHGAR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW LAZARUS

Previous pages: 'Coir'.
1995. Coir (a type of rope made from palm leaves).
150 x 150 x 150 cm.
Facing page: 'A Dance'.
1982. Ink on paper.
75 x 55 cm.

When Hassan Sharif held his first solo exhibition at the Central Public Library in Dubai back in 1976, just five years after the birth of the United Arab Emirates, there were calls to burn his work and expel him from the country. Now, 36 years later, the 56-year-old artist is seen as the father of the nation's Contemporary art practice.

His works - and those of the 'Group Seven' collective that includes many of his former students - has broken into the mainstream art market.

Sharif is a contemplative and unassuming man. After his first coffee and cigarette of the day, he sits in his place and begins searching and thinking. Sharif treats the artistic process and its final product as an exploration into new modes of communication and the interpretation of existing philosophies about life and the world around us. "I don't believe in the word 'creating'. I have no time for creation nor intuition. What there is, is decision," says Sharif. "I am a realist; I don't daydream, I don't possess a romantic nostalgia. The past is gone and we must look forward."

Object in Progress

Walking through The Flying House - the new name for the house that his brother (and agent) Abdul Rahim Sharif has gifted to him and his artist collective - room after room is crammed full of Sharif's 'objects'. Some are presented in gigantic handmade bowls, made by fellow practitioner Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and line the corridors that bear testament to the unbridled

productivity of the Emirati Contemporary artist. "I take a social behaviour and I select one, two or maybe three types of material. To avoid confusion, the title of the work is always the same name as the materials I use. I take raw matter from this society; I mix them together so that they contradict each other."

"I have no time for creation nor intuition. What there is, is decision. I am a realist; I don't daydream, I don't possess a romantic nostalgia. The past is gone and we must look forward."

Combining the conflicting textures of iron wire, silk and cotton, for example, Sharif presents a grating cocktail of emotional and even sensual associations that through an interdependence presents a harsh commentary on the industrialised world.

The quantifying and qualifying of his art is not something that concerns

Sharif. He stands, as he has always done, beyond the realm of imposed meaning. "Anti-definition is the definition of Contemporary art," he says. "Art is not made to be understood; it is not a train that carries you to a specific destination. We, the audience, have to get out and walk into new spaces."

Dubai/London

Sharif certainly embarked on his own journey of exploration when he left the UAE in the early 1980s to take up a scholarship at the Byam Shaw School of Art (now part of Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design) in London. Founded in 1910 as a school of drawing and painting, the institution still prides itself on a close-knit creative environment and an intensely academic and philosophical approach. Yes, he acquired the technical acumen for still life, anatomical detail and exact

“Art is not made to be understood; it is not a train that carries you to a specific destination. We, the audience, have to get out and walk into new spaces.”

perspective, but once he had conquered the demands of the conventional canvas, Sharif intuitively moved beyond it into conceptual art - presenting his work as performance and installation. A set of photos from the early 1980s shows him writing on a London pavement with a tray of water as he plays out a continual sequence of structured moves, like the pieces on a chess board. This surely was (and still is) an artist who is oblivious to limitation.

Three decades later, Sharif continues to impart the learning and experience he acquired all those years ago to his Emirati protégés, who include Mohamed Kazem, the artist and co-curator of Sharjah Biennial 2007, and Ebtisam Abdul Aziz, a leading radical voice on the Gulf’s contemporary art scene. “Life gives you knowledge. No one is born with it,” he proclaims. “Art stimulates and provokes. I came back from Byam Shaw and began teaching others how to grow and how to paint as an artist. I gave them and society what I learnt.”

The Homecoming

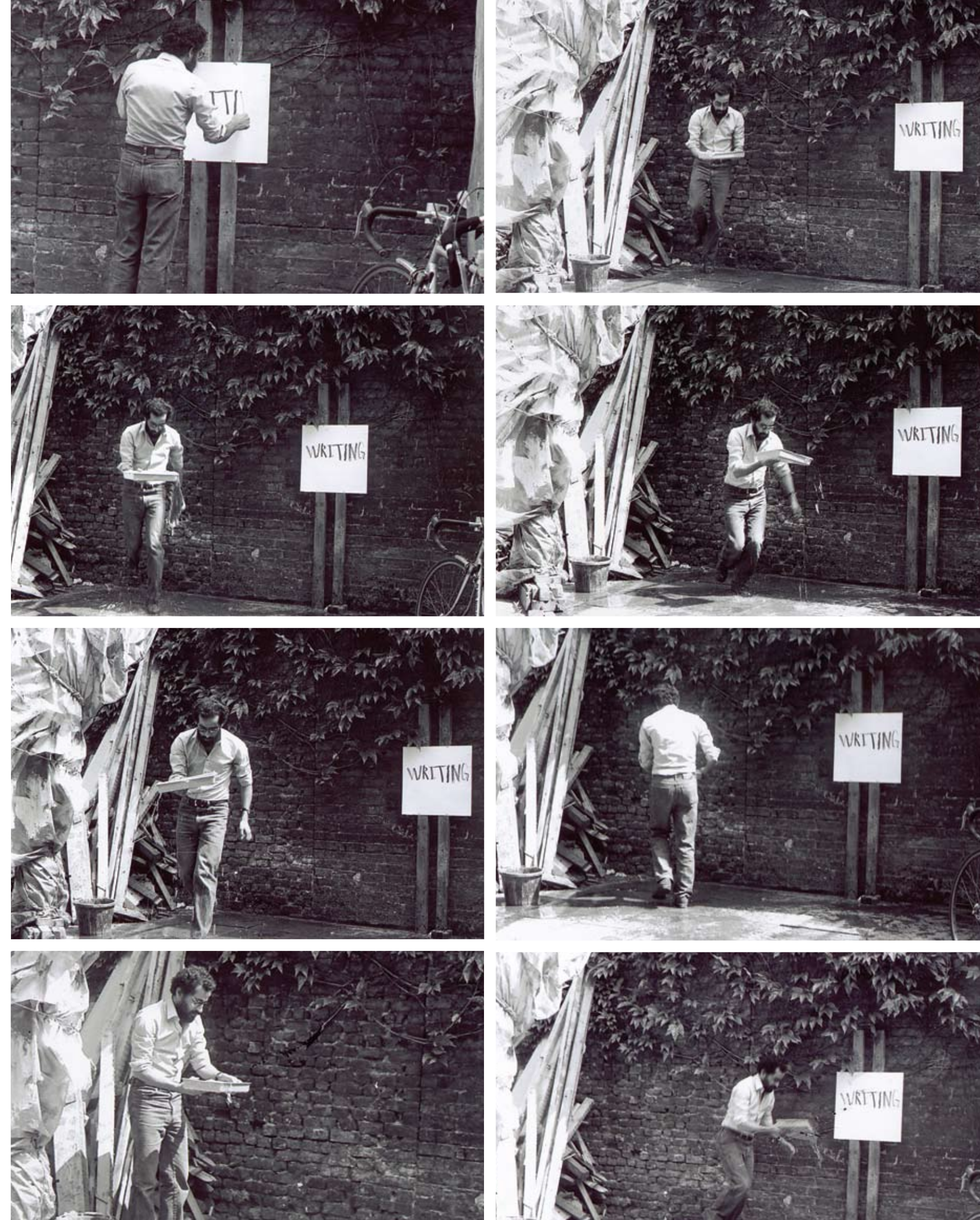
When Sharif returned to his homeland in 1984, his approach contradicted everything the nascent art scene embodied. “Before I went,” he says. “Even Abstract painting was not able to be shown - it wasn’t encouraged. People used to say ‘What is this?’ They had no idea and were unable to accept it. They wanted what they thought was a classical Western idea of art. When I finished my education, artists in Dubai were

oscillating between Realism and Pictorial. So I came back and began writing articles for the newspapers.” Sharif embarked on a quest to introduce new ideas, new concepts and the work of leading practitioners such as Gustave Courbet and Carl Andre. It was also thanks to this collaboration with the Arabic dailies (in which he published over 200 articles) that Sharif started to use not only words but also his art to communicate to the people of the UAE. “I started with caricatures and then moved into painting,” he recalls. “The change from one medium to another came naturally (not consecutively). I never worried about how I was changing; I was just working and making art.”

Dubai Detritus

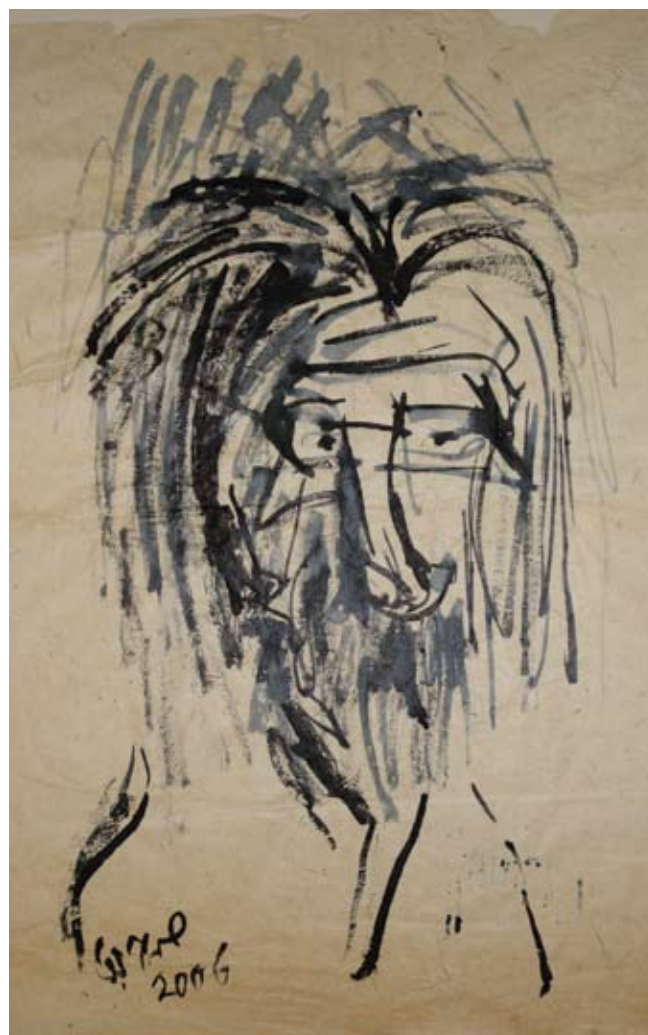
Irony plays a major role in Sharif’s work, the seeds of which were probably sown in his newspaper cartoons. In the rapidly changing environment of the UAE, where sand has been replaced by towering concrete skyscrapers and eight-lane highways, modernity hits hard and fast. Don’t misunderstand, Sharif welcomes progress, but the ultra-capitalist, super-consumerism social behaviour is a consequence that concerns him greatly. His disillusionment with 21st-century Dubai feasts upon the endless detritus produced by a wasteful society, during what he has described as a single-minded “devastating and reckless march.” Through his use of found objects - from ‘Made in China’ plastic jugs to clothes-pegs, industrial wire and serving spoons - Sharif’s installations evoke the same monumental intensity as the city that now surrounds him.

Facing page:
“Writing”. 1982. Stills
from Hassan Sharif’s
performance at
Byam Shaw School
of Art in London.



The overbearing and suffocating detail of his work is testament to the voracious gluttony of a society whose appetite is never satisfied; the fallout from its unfaltering ambition could be the very thing that drowns it.

Repetition of structure and form as a means of expression is key. Mounds of rope, ribbon and wire twisting python-like around symbols of bacchanal consumerism echoing the cloning that is taking place in today's society. Take a stroll around any of the megashopping malls in Dubai and one will see the same bags, the same shoes, the same brands adorning the soulless hoards of shoppers - eradicating true individual expression and nurturing the asphyxiating cult of sterile consumerism. "My aim is to destroy the continuous monotony of the industrial producer. I do so by overloading my work with realism," says Sharif.



to that which is in front of them - the reality of the work itself. In this sense, the artist is just a catalyst - not a gifted individual channelling his personal expression which can be perceived

as distracting and ultimately destructive. Like the objects themselves, Sharif the artist remains unassuming and almost neutral, so that our reaction to the work remains as pure as possible. This non-referentiality within a specific time and space equates the minimalist piece in the literal present, and no more.

Although his work still may not be fully understood, Sharif is content that at least there is a sense of respect today for what he does and a general acceptance of the need for free artistic expression. "In any art, when it is shared, there is something called communication," he says. "People are beginning to respect us. They still don't understand but they cannot refuse us."

Sharif once wrote, "New art can only spread when society has established itself." In a country that is just 36 years old, Sharif is content to patiently sit in splendid isolation. "We in Dubai are living in a horizontal space. Walk into a shopping mall and you see row upon row of restaurants - one serving Iranian food, the next Indian, the third Lebanese. Whether we accept it or not, we have to live in this complicated space and exist on a horizontal line. It is beautiful when you are floating in space."



"My aim is to destroy the continuous monotony of the industrial producer. I do so by overloading my work with realism."

One Step Beyond

The issue of identity has been pinpointed by the curators and critics of the world as a driving force behind much of the artistic expression in the Middle East and Arab world. With Emirati nationals making up less than 10 percent of the population, identity is a major issue...or is it? "Going back to your identity, being nostalgic is wrong," says Sharif. "People are scared of losing their identity. It prevents them from accepting the unknown." But when the UAE has clearly demonstrated that it is not afraid of the unknown (evident in the unrivalled construction activity and the diversification of the national economy), then why has the country not applied its risk-taking, entrepreneurial spirit to accepting its indigenous contemporary arts practice? If change is good, if the unknown has been embraced, then why are neo-orientalist portrayals of falcons, camels and palm

trees so popular? "When it comes to art, the unknown has remained because of the lack of education, media analysis and public awareness. We have hundreds of television stations but not one covers art in any depth. Art remains untouchable. It's almost as if it's a taboo. Art today is so difficult to determine. We are afraid of it," he says. "Our problem is not with art - the big question is to touch what is untouchable - to talk in a philosophical way in order to understand life. It is not how to paint. A pure artist cannot paint what he sees; he has to paint what he loves." 📷

To learn more about the work of Hassan Sharif, visit www.hassansharif.com or visit The Flying House in Al-Quoz, Dubai. The space is open by appointment only. For more information, go to www.the-flyinghouse.com

Above: 'Portrait of Khalid Al-Rashid'. 2006. Ink on paper. 70 x 55 cm.
 Facing page
 Left: 'Coir and Cloth'. 2007. Coir and cloth. 150 x 150 x 70 cm. Vessel by Mohamed Ahmad Ibrahim: 'Leaf, Paper and Glue'. 1998. Leaf, paper and glue. 58 x 58 x 25 cm.
 Right: 'Cardboard and Cloth'. 2001. Cardboard and cloth. 150 x 150 x 70 cm. Vessel by Mohamed Ahmad Ibrahim: 'Leaf, Paper and Glue'. 1998. Leaf, paper and glue. 58 x 58 x 25 cm.