



Iron No. 2 by Hassan Sharif, which is on display in New York. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates

Craftsmanship is in play at Hassan Sharif's exhibition in New York

Jessica Holland

January 27, 2014 Updated: January 27, 2014 15:12:00

At Alexander Gray Associates, a gallery in Chelsea, New York, the 63-year-old Emirati artist Hassan Sharif is discussing the everyday objects he has repurposed for his latest exhibition. This is only his second solo show in the United States (and at this gallery), but Sharif's work can also be found in the Centre Pompidou, the Sharjah Art Museum and Doha's Mathaf museum.

Apart from a handful of drawings and paintings from Sharif's long-running series of "semi-systems", a repetitive pattern of dots connected in different configurations, the work in the exhibition is dedicated to his notion of craftsmanship.

Weave 1 is made from strips of rubber matting that are bound with cotton rope and hung in layers that look like waves. Iron No. 3 is a grid of interlaced iron strips tied with wire that sticks out in a vicious-looking tangle.

Sharif, who is from Dubai, says that he sometimes perceives the pieces sonically: "You can listen to the spaces. Metal has a different sound. Wood has a different sound. It is music, not only in the objects but in the system."

The most obviously beautiful assemblage in the exhibition is Iron No. 2, an arrangement of 27 sticks wrapped in wire and laid out in offset lines on a long plinth. The viewer can walk from one end to the other, observing the rhythms of empty spaces interacting with objects, says Sharif.

While the work is starting to attract more admirers abroad, Sharif is well-known in the UAE, where he's considered the grandfather of Emirati conceptual art.

When he began his practice, the art scene in the UAE was almost non-existent. In 1980, Sharif founded the Emirates Fine Art Society, about the same time that he received a scholarship to a London art school. In 1987, he founded a workshop for young artists called Art Atelier in the Youth Theater and Arts. He has supported the UAE's art community as it has grown around him, working alongside other artists at his non-profit space The Flying House.

Despite all his achievements, Sharif continues to be, in his own words, a troublemaker and a radical. "Being ridiculous is very important to me," he says, during a discussion of the strange, minimal performance art he would enact in the Dubai desert during summers as a student: walking, jumping, burying himself in sand. "When my art is rejected, I feel happy. It's from the perspective of the conventional mentality."

He also discards the idea of the artist as a lone wolf, creating permanent, sacred items.

"In the end it is a collective work," he says of his exhibitions, of which he allows curators complete control. He even modifies the artwork from show to show and he's not precious about selling pieces that he is in the middle of working on.

"If you want to take it, take it," he remembers telling one collector on a studio visit. "You bought it now and paid the money, so it's finished."