

MAKE IT NEW

Hassan Sharif has made provocation of his audience an artform in itself. From his outspoken early caricatures to his work over the course of a 40+ year career. Christopher Lord meets the artist in his studio in Dubai for a revealing conversation that canters across Arab Nationalism, England in the 1980s and the potential of the humble slipper



Hassan Sharif,
'Slippers and Wire',
2009. Courtesy
of the artist and
Gallery Isabelle van
den Eynde



There's a row of stout, silent villas in Dubai's industrial Quarter, Al Quoz, that have yet to fall prey to the surrounding sprawl. Here, resilient weeds clamber up white walls, and the smell of cooking mingles with the warmish odour of industry that wafts from warehouses in the distance.

At a black, anonymous gate to one of these villas, we are greeted by Shiraz, assistant to Hassan Sharif, who helps to bend, shape and stitch together all manner of scrap material into the mounds that have made the Emirati artist famous. Shiraz leads us through the garden, between contorted pipes and anthills of coiled cable, to a glass-topped entrance to the studio where the artist waits for us, his eyes shining behind the Nietzsche-like bloom of his moustache.

To describe Hassan Sharif as a 'Master' is to, somehow, miss the point. While he has exuded enormous influence on several generations of artists, particularly Mohammed Kazem who represented the UAE at the Venice Biennale in 2013, the label of 'Master' implies a patriarchal relationship with these artists. Since he returned from studying in Britain in 1984, Sharif has situated himself as both ally and mentor – a translator of art history texts, an encourager and a supporter of Emirati artists that are willing to create something new.

In July, works by Sharif feature in the New Museum's *Here and*

Elsewhere, as well as the continuing *Artevida: corpo* exhibition in Rio de Janeiro, curated by Adriano Pedrosa. He's also had a solo booth with Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde at Art Basel Hong Kong in May, with 'Cotton Rope No. 7' entering the collection of the city's forthcoming museum, M+.

It may be a busy time for the artist, but his daily practice of methodical and unerring work continues. Experiments and output are constant, and more than 12 pieces are visibly being worked on at any one time in his studio. Wheelie-cases yawn open from the wall, their frontage doused in Pollock-like drips of paint. There are tables strewn with spanners and the walls are festooned with racks of wrung-out metal tubes.

He has been creating his *Objects* since the '80s, but was recognized early for his aptitude for painting. Dubbed the *Al Sha'ab*, or 'Public School' painter, by the mid-'70s Sharif was drawing caricatures for two UAE daily newspapers and one Dubai-based weekly magazine at a

time when the unified country was less than a decade old.

These caricatures still make for relevant and outspoken commentary today, and tackle everything from the rampant changes wrought upon Dubai after unification, the nuances of Wasta (influence) and the regional politics of the era.

Sharif, in shirt-sleeves, settles behind a desk topped with teetering stacks of art history books. He lights a cigarette, and we begin.

'WHATEVER YOU ARE DOING IS ART. JUST BE CONFIDENT'

'Plastic and Wire 2', 1987. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde





didn't want to spoil my mentality and lose my personality. I refused all these -isms, including Nationalism. Even Saddam had a group in London – an Iraqi centre – at that time, but I never went there. They were doing lots of things to stimulate young people to make them join them but I was very careful and I survived by rejecting all these ideas and remaining myself. Instead, I concentrated on what was happening in art at that time.

HBA: You also pointedly rejected the use of calligraphy that a lot of the Iraqi artists at that time were doing. Why was that a conscious decision?

HS: There was a group of artists that appeared in the '70s in Baghdad, Syria, and other Arab countries, and they wanted to make 'Arab Painting'. They thought that because we have Arab Nationalism, there must also be Arab Painting and so they turned to calligraphy, which I rejected from the beginning. I'd done some etchings using Arabic letters but I stopped and felt that it was useless. They found, ultimately, that you cannot make 'Arabic Painting', nor is there 'English Painting' or 'American Painting'. There is just painting, that's it. So let us be with art. Art and philosophy saved me and put me on my own track.



HBA: In the essay 'Weaving', you talk about the "socio-political economic monster" and how your work warns the viewer of "over-indulgence in this form of negative consumption". Was this an early concern when you were creating the caricatures in the '70s?

Hassan Sharif: Yes, amongst other things. Gamal Abdel Nasser had come to power [in Egypt] and was a hero of Arab Nationalism. I was involved with that initially, because it was the talk of the town and of the whole Arab world. But I realised that I was different and that it is not my position. Abdel Nasser was wrong. Whatever they said was nonsense, so I wanted to make my own nonsense.

HBA: Why did you reject Arab Nationalism?

HS: In 1975, I participated in the Arab Youth Festival, which was held in Libya that year, and the UAE took sportsmen, musicians and artists to the country. Gaddafi came and spoke there, Sadat was in power in Egypt and he had shifted the country's ideology towards the Americans instead of the Russians. Saddam was around as well. I realised then that it was not my game, not my way as an artist. Philosophy taught me to see things from different perspectives. Philosophy gave me endless space and I am still inside that to this day.

HBA: You arrived in the UK in 1979 to study and globalisation of the artworld was being discussed at that time. Rasheed Araeen, for instance, was in London at that time and active in this. He took a very polemical stance in trying to globalise contemporary art discourse. Did you identify with that?

HS: In the beginning, no. I had had some experience from creating the caricatures but when I went to Britain I wanted to clean that away; to forget or ignore what I had been doing before. [...] I just wanted to be around new ideas and whatever new was happening. I

(Top) Hassan Sharif.
Photo by Sueraya
Shaheen

(Above) Sharif
produced
caricatures for two
daily newspapers
and one weekly
magazine in Dubai
in the 1970s.
Courtesy of the
artist and Gallery
Isabelle van den
Eynde

(Right) 'Man', 1980.
Courtesy of Barjeel
Art Foundation,
Sharjah





(Right) 'Spoons and Cable', 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

From 1979, Sharif spent five years living and studying in Britain, initially in Leamington Spa. He enrolled at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London and came under the influence of artist Tam Giles, a painter of hard-edged abstraction and head of the university's Abstract and Experimental Department. This definitive period saw him experiment with performance (including a discussion about art over the walls of a toilet cubicle with the faculty's Jerry Hunt), and take Kenneth Martin's mantra of Systemic art, 'Chance and order', to the heart of his practice.

Arbitrary data became Sharif's raw materials. He would trace every instance of the letter 't' in an article from the Daily Mail and join these marks together into gaseous, abstract line-forms. He'd meticulously repeat his own fingerprint in ink on a human-height piece of paper, and rejoice in the spontaneity of mistakes.

By the time the artist returned to Dubai in 1984, he was already hard at work on his 'Semi-Systems'. Sharif would count the cars on Dubai's Al Dhiyafa Street, and use these numbers to create a mathematical matrix that would form dot and line images. He would measure the spaces between trees on the street or, on a traffic-clogged road to Sharjah, record words from an open newspaper at random at certain waypoints along his journey. These visual records of elusive moments became expressions of chance framed within a certain order or 'Semi-System'.

He also began work on his *Objects* – assemblages of discarded or cheap materials bound together with rags, plastic or wire. Continuing to work and exhibit in the UAE demanded an audience, and Sharif set about educating a new generation on the influences that were embedded in his work, from Dada to Joseph Kosuth. He also established the Al Marijah Art Atelier in Sharjah, a studio and a salon where a new generation of artists and poets could assemble to work, write and talk.

**'NOBODY
GIVES YOU
FREEDOM,
YOU HAVE
TO GIVE TO
YOURSELF'**

– Hassan Sharif, 1980



(Left) 'Cloth and Glue', 1987. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

HS: When I returned to the UAE in the '80s, I had to be dogmatic in my work and not exhibit my paintings – I still painted, of course, but I didn't exhibit those, nor did I exhibit my *Semi-System* works because they can be beautiful, be hung on the wall and therefore don't harm the audience. Instead, I just showed my *Objects*. I insisted that my *Objects* must be thrown on the floor, and acts like this would stimulate the audience, even make them angry. I wanted that because I was fighting, and objects were my weapon: I sought the audience's rejection. Now I don't mind exhibiting painting, drawings or semi-systems nor do I mind if the curator decides to exhibit my *Objects* in a certain way - I say, "Ok, go ahead."

HBA: *Is that because you feel your work is done in terms of stoking the reaction you sought in the '80s?*

HS: Yes. We're now in 2014, so now I am re-doing, re-making, re-thinking because there are no -isms anymore. Isms were over in the '80s. If anything, we're now we're in a period of re-ism: Re-think, re-perform, re-paint. When I paint a painting now, it might look like Abstract Expressionism but it is not Abstract Expressionism because that ended. So I am making re-Abstract Expressionism.

HBA: *Why is re-enacting important?*

HS: I think we can go to the poet Ezra Pound for that. In one of his works he said, "Make it new." He didn't say make it conceptual or make it abstract. Now I'm doing what Ezra Pound told me to do through his work: I'm re-newing something.

HBA: *Are we are in danger of forgetting or losing touch with these manners of art-making, like Abstract Expressionism or Cubism?*

HS: The 20th century is over. Between 1900 and 1980, lots of things happened in the history of art, politics, society, music. Now we are trying to go back and see what happened in that period. That period is like a gold mine for any activity because the 20th





Informally referred to as the 'Supermarket', this room in The Flying House shows the breadth of material that Sharif has worked in. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

century has become our terminology. We cannot disregard any past.

HBA: *When you returned to the UAE after studying in England, you translated a number of art history texts from English to Arabic. Amongst these was several Fluxus texts. What was it about Fluxus that you wanted to communicate to people in the UAE?*

HS: Do something different, do something else. This 'else-ness' is what I wanted to communicate and that was important in Fluxus. In order for my art to live and spread in society, I needed to explain that there is a history to what I am doing and that it's not coming from nonsense. [...] I don't blame the society in the '80s for not understanding conceptual art – it was not their fault, it was my fault so I had to tell them about the artists that influenced me and show that my work has roots in the history of art and philosophy.

HBA: *Some of the caricatures that you made in the '70s were so outspoken. Did you feel you could still be as outspoken like that when you returned to the UAE in the '80s?*

HS: When I changed my mentality in 1979 away from Arab Nationalism, I also felt that caricature has a negative aesthetic or negative irony. I was searching for positive aesthetics and irony. Now I see my *Objects* as more ironic than any caricature that I did in the '70s. My *Objects* made the audience aggressive, and I wanted this aggression.

HBA: *So you did encounter opposition?*

HS: Yes. But that was the power of objects, not the power of caricature. Caricatures are like jokes told in the coffee shop, and that's why I rejected them. I was looking for a positive side of irony.

HBA: *You've also talked in the past about the 'potential memory in objects'; what does that mean?*

HS: I'm not talking about a nostalgic memory for childhood – it's introspective rather than retrospective. I am searching for myself, asking myself what I am doing and what I have done in the past.

HBA: *So the pairs of slippers, for instance, that you use in your *Objects*; there is an essence in them that resonates with you?*

HS: I use materials that are disregarded by society. People ask me, "Why you are using a slipper? A slipper is cheap." But I like this cheapness. I like ugly, I like the bad side of whatever society says is good. People want the best perfume from Paris – Chanel, or whatever. Yes, Chanel is good but there are many other smells that are beautiful. It's this kind of irony that I was searching for in these materials that get disregarded. By bringing them into my studio, I give them back to society. The same cardboard that caused people to say me, "Why are you using this", is now going to be exhibited in the New Museum in New York.

HBA: *Do you think it's important for a young artist to go through the entire panorama of art-making, from drawing to painting to conceptual art, as you did?*

HS: No. Conventional people say they have to go through all these mediums. I am the opposite. I tell them, go ahead and do whatever you want - whatever you are doing is art, just be confident. Don't be worried or shy about experimenting. [...] I'm into reduction – compress things, make them sharper.

HBA: *I suppose that goes full circle in our discussion, in terms of 'over-indulgence' and 'negative consumption'. How do you feel about these shows that categorise artists according to their origin – contemporary Arab or Emirati art, and such?*

HS: I feel bad about these categorisations – "This is Arab contemporary art", "This is Arab modern art", and so on. It should be "This is art" and that's it. Europe and America are making a big mistake by doing this. [In the past] when they started to write the history of art, they just wrote about European art - and ignored art from Africa, Islamic art, Latin American art. Now they're making the same mistake again by creating exhibitions that categorise in this way.

HBA: *Is challenging that a job for curators?*

HS: I think it's more a matter for the institutions. I would say it is not the artist's fault if they exhibit in these shows – I participate in them because it's a chance and you have to participate. But the policy of cultural institutions must change. They are not moving fast enough and are a bit behind.



Sharif turns to prise a book from a teetering stack on his desk: 'A New Spirit In Painting', a well-thumbed catalogue from a 1981 exhibition at the Royal Academy in London that included the likes of Julian Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer and Sean Scully.

In 2009, Sharif returned to exhibiting painting with a series of works titled *Press Conference* (2008). There are rumblings of the old caricaturist in these images, as a wild-eyed leader rails at an unseen crowd. Thirty years after he sketched out provocative caricatures for the UAE's daily newspapers, Sharif returned briefly to pointed social commentary. 'They are so confident that, in the end, they go mad,' says Sharif. 'They think that when they talk there are bombs coming out of their mouths.'

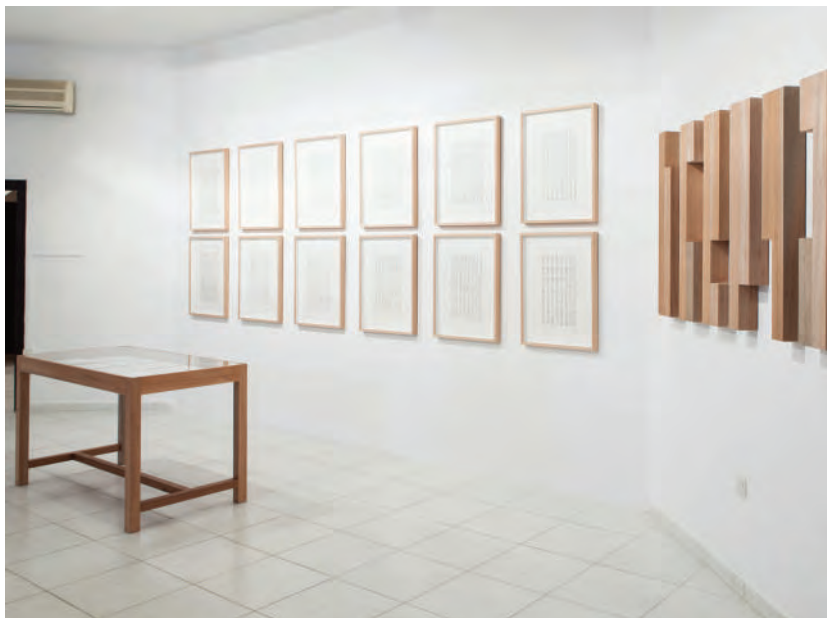
But there's a sense that the act of painting itself was more the motivator for Sharif's return to exhibiting the form. 'It is so easy now for me to give up painting and make objects, but time and time again I feel painting is important,' he says. 'In my *Objects* I can't show landscapes or seascapes.'

Yet there is something of the landscape about his *Objects*, in their submerged details and tangles – coral-like clumps of plastic, mountainous outcrops of rubber.

In the wryly-named 'supermarket' – a room of shelves in The Flying House [see box] lined with Sharif's *Objects*, from bundled up foam footballs to scraps of shipping rope – his process of constant accumulation and adoration of material becomes clear. But it is the adoration of an artist who has dedicated themselves to colour, to sensitivity and to always making his work as new as possible. 'I am not anti-retinal, I respect lyrical and retinal painting,' says Sharif, as we discuss Marcel Duchamp's double-edged legacy. 'Look at Kazimir Malevich's black square, there is music, dance in it. Look at Piet Mondrian; it's lyrical, it is jazz.'

The artist's monograph, *Hassan Sharif: Works 1973-2011*, is published by Hatje Cantz and Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage and edited by Catherine David. hassansharif.com/ivde.net

'MY OBJECTS MADE THE AUDIENCE AGGRESSIVE, AND I WANT THIS AGGRESSION'



(Left) Installation view of The Flying House, a villa in Dubai converted into a space to house Sharif's work

(Above) The evolution of Sharif's *Semi-system* works. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



THE FLYING HOUSE

Originally founded in 2007 in the villa that Hassan Sharif now uses as a studio, The Flying House has since moved to a new location in Al Barsha, Dubai. It was initially intended to be a space to show work by Sharif alongside talented young Emirati artists, but today The Flying House concentrates solely on Sharif's work and is as a hub for documenting and preserving his work. His art is spread across two floors, ranging from early caricatures to his performances and experiments in England and the desert in the UAE, to a number of works created this year.