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HASSAN SHARIF (1951–2016)

BY KATHERINE VOLK



Emirati artist Hassan Sharif passed away on September 18, 2016. He was 65 years old. Photo by Maaziar Sadr. Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai, and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

On September 18, 2016, Emirati artist Hassan Sharif passed away at age 65, after suffering from cancer.

Often described as the “grandfather” of modern Emirati art, Sharif was considered one of the United Arab Emirates’s pioneering contemporary artists who had been at the forefront of experimental practice in the region. In 1980, nine years after the UAE was officially formed, Sharif co-founded the Emirates Fine Art Society, a group that set the precedent for art in the UAE.

Speaking to *ArtAsiaPacific* (AAP) on Sharif’s passing, Jean-Marc Decrop, collector and friend of the artist described him as the “greatest artist in the Persian Gulf.” He added, “[Sharif] was a real knight who, in the face of ignorance and adversity, consistently pursued his avant-garde art with humor and freedom. He had an incredible ability to transform mundane material into beauty.”

Sharjah Art Foundation president and director Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimi, who showcased Sharif’s work as part of her exhibition for the UAE Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, also expressed sorrow on news of the artist’s passing to AAP: “He was an inspiration to us all, a teacher and a daring artist. He was an important figure and well loved and respected by many generations. We are all deeply saddened by his passing, but his legacy lives on and he will forever be in our hearts and in our memories.”

Born in 1951 in Dubai, Sharif produced caricatures and ink drawings in his early 20s for Emirati newspapers and magazines, at times poking fun at the political climate in the Middle East and North Africa region. He soon sought a formal arts education, which he found at London’s Byam Shaw School of Art (now a part of Central St Martins). It was here that Sharif was mentored by Tam Giles, then the head of the abstract and experimental art department. Upon his return back to Dubai, Sharif’s new practice and shift in media shocked his peers in the UAE, where contemporary art was barely present, much less understood.

As he moved beyond cartooning, Sharif’s work comprised of a multitude of disciplines, including sculptures, experimental performances and installations. He used everyday materials such as textiles, metals and plastics to reflect upon the observable world and concerns of globalization, consumerism and commercialization. From the

early '80s, he continued his "Objects" series that explored the rapid industrial changes present within the UAE, as he was witness to the growth of the emirates from a small Bedouin society to a connected series of international cities. "Objects" takes found items and waste material and manipulates them into sculptural forms.

Sharif was chosen as one of the artists for the UAE's first pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. He also participated in several editions of the Sharjah Biennial. In 2011, the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage/Platform for Visual Arts hosted a retrospective with his works titled "Hassan Sharif: Experiments & Objects 1979-2011." The artist never stopped evolving, and continued to speak to the conditions of our times. More recently, in 2015, Sharif attempted to tackle the image overload that is prevalent in 21st-century life. For his solo exhibition at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde in 2015, "Images," he took pictures from magazines and pages from dictionaries, photocopied them, then shredded the copies to create repetitive sculptures hung from ceilings and walls. He said, in an interview with *The National*, that the sculptures were "a continuation from [his] previous works," which were often assembled from detritus, and that all his work was "one piece."

Sharif's creations are held in various public and private collections around the world, such as Guggenheim New York, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Sharjah Art Foundation, Doha's Arab Museum of Modern Art and Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Sharif was a pillar of support for the development of arts within his home country. In 1984, he founded Al Marijah Art Atelier in Sharjah. Three years later, he founded the Art Atelier in Dubai's Youth Theatre and Arts. In 2007, he co-founded The Flying House in Dubai, a non-profit institution for promoting local Emirati artists. He also wrote extensively about the modern concept of art and the philosophy of art production. Some of Sharif's work is currently on display at the inaugural *Yinchuan Biennale*, "For An Image, Faster Than Light," which runs until December 18.

Katherine Volk is assistant editor at ArtAsiaPacific.