

ARTFORUM

PASSAGES

HASSAN SHARIF (CA. 1951–2016)

February 15, 2017 • Christopher Lord



Hassan Sharif, 1981.

TALKING ABOUT COURAGE would be a bit grandiose for Hassan Sharif. He dismissed the labels put on him in the second half of his life: the Gulf’s “Godfather of Conceptual art,” the “grandfather of United Arab Emirates art,” and such. Yet one can take courage in the way Hassan continued to work despite early rejection and the true nature of his work going underappreciated until the end of his life.

I worked with Hassan for about a year on what would turn out to be his last solo show of new work on his home turf in Dubai. He lived and worked between two rooms, on stuck-down strips of garish pink linoleum, in a white villa he called The Flying House.

The place was like a rock pool, where materials washed in and washed out—encrusted, enmeshed, transformed. There were no good or bad days there. Kittens darted about over the artworks, flies met and screwed in the sunlight, and Hassan tag-teamed between a cigarette and a pipe, chugging smoke like a malfunctioning steam engine. Always working, cutting, and retying.

Awareness of Hassan's work gathered pace only after a 2011 monograph and exhibition in Abu Dhabi curated by Catherine David and his longtime collaborator Mohammed Kazem. It revealed thirty years of making, from burial-mound-size bundles of rubber sandals to the tomes of ink-on-paper experiments that he called Semi-systems. The show also unearthed a radical, critical seam in Hassan's work that is too often overlooked in celebrating how much of a pioneering force he was in Middle East art.

Born in the north of Iran in the early 1950s—no one is exactly sure when—Hassan Sharif could always recite lines by the Iranian modernist poets in their original Farsi. The sight of fishermen fixing their nets on the shore of the Caspian Sea may have fed his love of rudimentary, untrained weaving. Yet it was Dubai and the Emirates, where he and his family came in the early '60s, long before the country was formed, that would be his sparring partner.

While still in high school, Hassan began drawing satirical cartoons and by his twenties was contributing two cartoons a day to the UAE's nascent press. He took aim at everything, from the Arab nationalists to the consumerism and gaudy globalization that was sweeping through the young, oil-rich Emirates. Many of these cartoons are still relevant today others are just damn prophetic: Two men stand waist-high in the Gulf, and one says to the other, "My friend, I urge you, buy this piece of sea . . . They'll build an island here one day!" (Drawn up, of course, long before Dubai dreamt of cobbling palm-tree-shaped islands out of dredged sand.)



Hassan Sharif, *Body and Squares*, 1983, photographs, ink, pen, pencil on paper mounted on cardboard, 33 x 23".

One of the first UAE nationals to get an arts scholarship, he moved to England in 1979 and at London's Byam Shaw School of Art (today part of Central Saint Martins) came under the mentorship of Tam Giles, a hard-edge abstraction painter on faculty. She introduced him to the work of Kenneth Martin and his Constructionist mantra: Chance and order. Martin's pencil-marked graph papers had an incredible effect on Hassan. Art could be found in rigid systems—one needed only to erect a system so elaborate that error was inevitable.

He also never forgot watching Laurie Anderson perform at the Tate. Today, all that's left of Hassan's own London performances are washed-out Polaroids: plucking out his own pubic hairs and tossing them into a milk bottle, talking art history with a member of the faculty in a toilet cubicle. Post graduation, Hassan returned to Dubai in 1984 and was expected to embody the artistic ambitions of a young nation. Yet he dismissed the Arab calligrapher-painters as nationalists, and the portraits of falcons bored him. Instead, the artist loaded up a truck with friends, headed to the desert on Dubai's periphery, and had them photograph him jumping a few feet in the sand or tying rope between rocks.

Hassan became the meeting point for a small group of frustrated writers, artists, and filmmakers in the Emirates. The first exhibition they held in a marketplace in Sharjah was shut down for not having a permit. Later, an atelier was closed after an altercation with the neighbors. Hassan, meanwhile, was translating art manifestos, Fluxus texts, and the lectures of John Cage into Arabic, hoping to show that what he was doing had roots in theory.

He started bundling together cheap stuff he'd bought in the markets in the UAE—mass-produced, plasticky things like pegs and sandals—and explained to me that it was about handing back to society the product and excess of rapid globalization and industrialization as art. An essay from the '90s, "Weaving," touches on this: "It was this the new world order, whose slogan is 'Adapt your aspirations to our ends—or else' that particularly irritated me, this vulgar market mentality that flooded shops with consumer products had so infiltrated the minds of individuals that it now controlled them."

Uselessness or dysfunction became the prolonged gesture of his work. His life was equally indecorous. He had no time for convention and had an extraordinary constitution for drink. I crawled out of that studio a couple of times and woke up, the next day, gripped by a hangover, yet Hassan would wake at the same time the next morning, roll up his sleeves, and set to work.



Hassan Sharif, *Slippers and Wire*, 2009, slippers and copper wire, dimensions variable. Installation view, Qasr Al Hosn, 2011.

One day, after we'd finished jotting down the dimensions of a column he'd made of strung-together glossy magazines, Hassan laid out on a table several folders of press clippings from his early career. "This one is very harsh," he said, giggling slightly, as he turned over pages of yellowed Arabic print.

Rejection, he said, meant that people were at least reacting to what he did. Three decades later, in 2015, his works would be at the Whitechapel Gallery alongside names that had lit up his youth: Mondrian, Malevich, Carl Andre. He attended the exhibition's opening, only after finding a hotel in London that would let him smoke. The last time he had been in London was as a student.

Hassan never stopped working, and the archive at The Flying House overflows today. He was making until the end. I hear he spent his last couple of hours talking about his Semi-system drawings, as well as the chance and order of things.