

ARTFORUM

Hassan Sharif

GB AGENCY

PRINT NOVEMBER 2017 ISSUE



View of “Hassan Sharif,” 2017–18. From left: Towel 3, 2013; Slippers and Wire, 2009; Rug 6, 2014.

Displayed at the top of the stairs leading down to the gallery’s main exhibition space for Hassan Sharif’s “Reading Is Making: Books and Boxes” were copies of three political cartoons that the artist drew in the 1970s. The images speak of the tide of consumerism that began sweeping Sharif’s native United Arab Emirates in the ’60s. In one, a hand reaches up from under a pile of electronic appliances. I’M DROWNING, DROWNING, DROWNING!!! his speech bubble calls out in Arabic. In another, a mustachioed man is pictured on the toilet, surrounded by a discarded mess of books, wearing a Rube Goldberg–type contraption as a crown. DEVICE TO ENLIGHT ((EN)) THE MIND, the caption reads.

Works from “Books and Boxes,” the series Sharif started in 1982 and continued until his death last year, formed the core of this exhibition. These pieces show how Sharif’s youthful cynicism had evolved into an observant practice that valorized found materials and craftsmanship. By 1980, he had left Dubai for London, where he would earn a degree at the Byam Shaw School of Art a few years later. A conceptual yet consistently poetic approach marked his work from that time on. My Little Tiny Box, 1983, for example, consists of four black-and-white photographs that depict the artist’s construction of an elegant wooden vessel displayed nearby. The simple container seems appropriate for storing pencils or paintbrushes, but its dimensions are also roughly those of a doll-size coffin. Meanwhile, the more recent Black Box, 2015, made of cardboard, was displayed open, with twelve identical packets of aluminum net and concrete tied with shiny red cord visible and emerging. Silently exploding from the crafted container, the modest but carefully realized contents seemed to be potent embodiments of the artist’s quiet attention.

Elsewhere, formal associations between Sharif’s sculptural compositions and surrounding works in oil on canvas yielded moments of poetic playfulness. For instance, three small paintings titled Jelly Fish, 2011—each picturing the eponymous poisonous sea creature—were positioned across from the roughly twelve-foot-tall Dictionary, 2015. The latter work is made of pages from an English-Arabic dictionary that hang from cotton ropes like tentacles of a wicked medusa. In the next room, disklike shapes dominated four canvases from 2008, each titled The Flying House. In the largest of them, several disks—presumably satellite dishes—appear to be perched atop modest houses. The disks are symbols of our current mania to consume not only things, but information. The inherent social critique in these works, even the very configuration of human life drowning beneath modern electronics, recalls Sharif’s early political cartoons. In the three smaller versions of The Flying House, the artist zooms in on the form of the rooftop disk, repeating the isolated shape on square canvases. On the floor before these paintings, three sculptures—White Paper, 2015; Cloth and Rope, 1984; and Newspaper, 2013—lay as earth-toned hemispherical mounds. Like the discarded books in the artist’s early cartoon, these materials have fallen to the floor, ignored by most, but closely studied by Sharif.

—Lillian Davies