

Hassan Sharif

SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

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

Hassan Sharif, who died in September 2016, is broadly credited with bringing international art idioms such as Conceptualism to the United Arab Emirates; he was, by all accounts, the center of the generation of Emirati avant-garde artists of the 1980s and '90s who broke with traditional art forms. Coming a year after his death, this retrospective is situated somewhere between an homage to the artist and an attempt to come to grips with his vastly productive, unruly practice.

“Hassan Sharif: I Am the Single Work Artist” is curated by the Sharjah Art Foundation’s president and director, Hoor Al Qasimi, and includes about four hundred of his thirty-five hundred works. Organized thematically rather than chronologically, the exhibition shows Sharif working through a consistent set of concerns (repetition, systems, chance, consumer detritus, material transformation) from his performances in the ’80s to the “Objects” series, 1982–2016, for which he is best known. It also contains his early work in painting, which he stopped in the ’80s and resumed in the 2000s, as well as the caricatures he drew for local papers before he attended art school.

For his “Objects,” Sharif collected cheap, plentifully available items from the Sharjah souk or local shops—plastic combs, flip-flops, brooms, metal spoons and dishware, wire, nail clippers—and transformed them. He folded aluminum trays and bound them in wire, took cotton wool and glued it into balls, wrapped items in cloth, wove together zip fasteners and the soft tendrils of mops. His urban archaeology, as he termed it, reflects the excess of consumerism, and his work is often read as a response to the rapid changes to life post-oil in the UAE, bringing the labor-intensive, handicraft techniques of Bedouin tradition into contact with the quickly bought and discarded items of mass consumerism.

This exhibition, in focusing on Sharif’s early performance works and systems notations, underlines the more formal aspects of his practice, substantially adding to the understanding of his work and bringing Sharif farther away from the rubric of Emirati artist. His early work was heavily influenced by the systems-centric art of figures in Britain at the time (he studied at London’s Byam Shaw School of Art in the early ’80s), and his performances evince a Fluxus delight in pointlessness as an organizing heuristic. *Nylon Rope*, 1983, shows him tying together plants in the desert with lengths of cord. *Barrel*, 1985, entailed Sharif moving an oil drum around Sharjah, taking notes of people’s reactions.

The influence of Marcel Duchamp is palpable throughout, both in Sharif’s seriousness about the possibilities of art and in his idea that it should be, above all, seriously irreverent. Duchamp also informs Sharif’s interest in what the latter called “semi-systems,” grids that he plotted out in ink on paper and undercut with elements of chance or impulse.

The exhibition's thematic organization helps connect these gridded explorations to his "Objects" series via reiteration. Here, his repeated acts of wrapping or soaking or bending are tools of transformation, obviating the object's original function and instead teasing out its inherent material properties. They also functioned, for Sharif, as something close to meditation. He said that he kept rehearsing these actions until he lost himself in the process, and then he was finished.

Though the performative aspect of his "Objects" is crucial, the exhibition also highlights how aesthetically resolved these works are—more beautiful, more attentively made, more colorful than one might expect given his rudimentary methodology. An enormous sculpture made of metal spoons retains the soft curve of the utensil's depression, while the wide, flat brooms used here are displayed as geometry against the wall. Emotions and moods are also perceptible. Later in life Sharif often wrapped everyday objects in wire, performing a violent take, perhaps, on traditional Emirati embroidery, which involves wrapping thread around a bolster, and in which sharp objects—nail clippers, wires, scissors—proliferate.

Part of the Sharif myth is that he lived art, putting it above all other concerns. The exhibition begins with his studio, included as if it were an artwork, and one of the venue's themes is "Things in My Room." This aspect of the show borders on hagiography, but also functions as a reminder of his perseverance in the face of strong opposition from the local Sharjah arts community. There is poetic justice in the very fact of such a monumental exhibition taking place here; but the show should be taken as an opportunity to look at the wild, angry, tender, sly work, and not just at the man.

—Melissa Gronlund