

Berlin honours Emirati artist Hassan Sharif with retrospective

Muhammad Yusuf, Features Writer, 16 Mar 2020



Hassan Sharif's work titled 'Playfulness'.

In collaboration with Sharjah Art Foundation and Malmö Konsthall (Sweden), KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, is presenting the first retrospective of Emirati artist Hassan Sharif (1951 – 2016) in Europe (Feb. 29 – May 3), titled I Am The Single Work Artist.

Hailed as one of the most important Middle Eastern artists of the twentieth century, Sharif became a groundbreaking pioneer in conceptual art by reconsidering the conventional understanding of time, space, form, and social interaction.

He lived and worked in Dubai and was one of the first artists to break with the classical conventions of art production in the Arab world and reinvented them with an innovative, experimental approach that continues to resonate among subsequent generations.

Detached from local art production, he articulated an artistic language that was non-elitist, pared-down, process-based, and inspired by Fluxus. Within the tradition conscious Arab world, however, his art was dismissed as unrepresentative, while in the West, there was talk of mere imitation.

Sharif discovered his curiosity and affinity for art at a very early age and independently studied masters of Modernism such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso, whose works he discovered through English books.

Since he did not speak English, however, this first encounter with European art was informed purely by his observations on aesthetics, form, and style. During the social and economic upheaval in the Emirates, he was working for the weekly magazine Akhbar Dubai, drawing caricatures and ironic cartoons relating to everyday life and politics.



This work is called 'Slippers and Wire'.

His provocative and satirical works quickly gained popularity and remain significant today as historical evidence of that period and culture. Through this practice, he developed his critical voice in society at an early stage and was never too self-conscious to express his opinion on things, which he saw as his duty as an artist.

While many of his contemporary colleagues were interested in a revision of traditional Arab art under the auspices of Modernism, Sharif continued with his autodidactic practice, learned English, and explored movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, reproducing their painterly styles in his own manner in order to understand and internalise them.

He began his studies in London in 1979. While being abroad, he moved within an intellectual circle that was to become inspirational for his views and practice. During this period, he also intensively studied Marcel Duchamp's works, which had a lasting influence on his understanding of art.



'Colours' wave brightly on the wall.

At the same time, he adopted various postmodern artistic trends in London such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Performance Art, Pop Art, and Fluxus. Of main importance was a group of London artists who started a local movement with their examination of the modern manifestations of Constructivism and were known as the "Constructionists."

Sharif was primarily influenced by their way of systemic thinking, which he reflected, for example, in his grid drawings or his photographic works created between 1981 and 1985.

After completing his studies in 1984, he consciously decided to return to the United Arab Emirates in order to support the local scene with his newly acquired knowledge.

With the help of the government of Sharjah, he launched the Al Marijah studio, which became the centre of intellectual life in the United Arab Emirates, and which he used to introduce a younger generation of artists to contemporary theory and praxis.



A sculpture made of everyday objects.

At the same time, he organised exhibitions at various venues such as the Al Markazi Market in Sharjah, where he presented works alongside other contemporary artists.

“The essence of localism is to bestow upon objects of heritage an amended and progressive position that negates the dullness of regurgitated concepts like identity, language, customs and traditions, and to give them complementary qualities and intellectual, visual, dynamic, enjoyable and meaningful dimensions that encourage new sorts of questions,” he has said.

Over time, he tended to work more with mass-produced goods and discarded products such as plastic cups, discount toys, metal cans, or cutlery, which he tirelessly altered by cutting, bending, and gluing subsequently putting them on a string.

The dimensions of these hybrid works would vary from small to taking up larger exhibition spaces, resulting in spatial installations. His work *Objects — Urban Archaeology* testifies not only to the rapid transition from manual to industrial production in the United Arab Emirates, but also to his critical stance toward consumption.



Hassan Sharif often made use of discarded products to make thought-provoking art.

The retrospective at KW is a culmination of Sharif's long history with the United Arab Emirates and presents around 150 works from the artist's diverse oeuvre, including sculptural installations, drawings, performances, paintings and assemblages.

Meanwhile, Sharjah Art Foundation has also announced Invest Bank as one of its 2020 Gold sponsors. The sponsorship contributes to the production and implementation of cultural and community initiatives throughout the year, including the Foundation's year-round exhibitions, Learning Programme, seasonal film screenings and other educational initiatives.

Invest Bank was established in 1975 as a public shareholding company in the Emirates of Sharjah and its shares are publicly traded on the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange (ADX). Since inception, it has contributed to the economic development of Sharjah and the wider UAE. In 2019, the Government of Sharjah became its strategic partner.