

MOUSSE

Hassan Sharif “I am the single Work Artist” at Musée d’art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne métropole

24.09.2021



Hassan Sharif “I am the single work artist” at Musée d’art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne métropole. Photo: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+

Hassan Sharif was born in Iran, studied in London, and lived in Dubai, where he became a pioneer of Conceptual Art in the Middle East. As an artist, educator, and critic, he helped transform the artistic landscape of his country, leading it far beyond the realm of traditional calligraphy, and he remains one of the most influential artists in the Arab world.

Over a period of four decades, Hassan Sharif developed a significant body of work consisting of drawings, paintings, performances, sculptures, and installations. In contrast to this abundant production, the title of the exhibition (I am the single work artist) instead seems to suggest that this work should be seen as a single gesture that was repeated over time.

Hassan Sharif's practice evolved in a social and economic context that was radically transformed by the discovery of oil in 1958, followed by the creation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971. His work is marked by the rapid transformation of a small land like Dubai into a megalopolis of luxury. He criticised the forced march of modernisation through the caricatures he published until 1979, at which point he devoted himself entirely to his own artistic practice. His training in London exposed him to British constructivism, Minimal Art, and Fluxus, whose influences he adeptly channelled in his own oeuvre.

His performances in the Hatta desert in the early 1980s represent some of the first manifestations of Conceptual Art in the Gulf, as he jumped, threw a stone, filmed rock formations, or disappeared over a dune. He used photographs, collages, and writings to document his actions in his own courtyard, in a taxi, or at a souk.

Through the subversive pop-up exhibitions that he organised with the collective Mureijah Art Atelier, he called viewers' attentions to the everyday materials and objects he found in increasing amounts in local markets. A process of accumulating, cutting, weaving, and assembling led Sharif to develop a major current in his work, which he termed "urban archaeology".

Starting in the 2000s, as his installations became monumental in scale, he returned to painting, often incorporating these same everyday objects into his canvases. Their grotesque style and expressionist touch depict — with a sense of realism—the more shoddy and coarse aspects of consumer society.

At the same time that Hassan Sharif was completing these installations, he developed a more ascetic and graphic series of works that also made use of repetition: the "Semi-Systems". He made mathematical calculations and established rules to generate geometric drawings that consisted of a quasi-infinite number of columns and segments of straight lines. He allowed fatigue and boredom to enter the equation and thereby introduce mistakes, which he left visible. Like much of Sharif's work, the Semi-Systems depict a confrontation of authority, as well as the means of getting around it.

Hassan Sharif's work is echoed in a number of Western artistic approaches from the late 1970s and 80s. In continuation of the exhibition, two rooms have been devoted to the MAMC+'s own collections, featuring Minimal Art, Fluxus and Supports/Surfaces in particular.

This exhibition is originally organised by Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, U.A.E., and curated by Hoor Al Qasimi. The European tour of the exhibition has been organised by Sharjah Art Foundation in collaboration with KW Berlin, Malm. Konsthall and the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne métropole.