

# ARTS & CULTURE

---

## A look back: the five UAE artists who shaped the country's contemporary art scene

Alexandra Chaves Dec 2, 2020

These Emirati artists are considered to be the pioneers of contemporary art in the UAE, starting in the 1980s



Emirati artist Hassan Sharif, who died in 2016, at his studio at The Flying house in Al Quoz, Dubai, in 2012. Antonie Robertson / The National

It was almost a decade after the creation of the UAE that its art scene started to take shape.

In the 1980s, the country's contemporary art scene revolved around five key figures who gathered with intellectuals and writers to discuss ideas and who worked together to put on exhibitions for the public.

These Emirati artists – Hassan Sharif, his brother Hussain Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohammed Kazem and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim – came to be known as the "Group of Five" or "The Five" because of their participation in the 2002 exhibition titled 5 UAE, held in Germany.

Though they worked in different mediums, they bolstered the UAE art scene and influenced a generation of artists in the region.

Over the years, their practices have gained more attention abroad, with a recent travelling exhibition of Hassan's work, and Ibrahim's next show planned for the Venice Biennale 2022.

So who are “The Five” and what are they known for? Here’s a quick look at the first wave of contemporary artists in the UAE.

### **Hassan Sharif**

Perhaps the most prominent among them was Hassan, who died in 2016. Born in Dubai in 1951, he studied at Byam Shaw School of Art in London in the late 1970s and returned to the UAE in 1984. His home in Satwa became the meeting point for many writers and artists, and also became an atelier for other artists.

His work was largely conceptual and experimental – his work with assemblage and sculpture is his most recognisable. These objects, as he called them, were made using industrial materials or cheap, everyday products that were mass-produced.



Hassan Sharif's 'Jumping No.1' (1983). Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

In 1980, he helped found the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah, where most of the other artists in the group met. Since 1993, his pieces were often featured in the Sharjah Biennial, and in 2017, the first major retrospective of his work was shown at the Sharjah Art Foundation.

The exhibition titled I Am The Single Work Artist travelled to the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin this year and is currently on its second iteration at Malmo Konsthall in Sweden.

### **Hussain Sharif**

Born in 1961, Hussain, like his older brother Hassan, is a conceptual artist. He was active in the 1980s and 1990s, often helping emerging artists develop their practices through workshops.

Primarily concerned with materiality and scale, he has worked with cement, metal, wood and plastic. For the artist, these objects are typically used in construction and daily life, but are also easily discarded and considered as remnants.

His 1995 work *Installation*, for example, features cement and found objects arranged neatly and in order on the floor. With the use of repetition, Hussain sought to conjure a kind of meaning to the randomness and "meaninglessness" of the selected items.

His creative career is varied, he studied theatre design in Kuwait and eventually joined Sharjah TV as a designer. For a period, he also worked as a caricaturist for daily newspapers and magazines in the UAE.

Referring to himself as an "art activist", Hussain often participated in the discussions held at his brother Hassan's residence and was active in the Emirates Fine Arts Society.

His other works include constructivist drawings adorning public spaces, which are considered one of the earlier examples of street art in Dubai.