



Hassan Sharif: I am the single work artist

Art & Performance

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MAMC Saint-Étienne presents 'I am the single work artist', a retrospective of Hassan Sharif. The exhibition showcases Sharif's diverse oeuvre, which spans painting, performance, drawing, installations, and sculpture, and highlights his position as a pioneer of Conceptual Art in the Middle East.

Text by Zeniya Vreugdenhil

MAMC Saint-Étienne presents *I am the single work artist*, a comprehensive retrospective of Iranian artist Hassan Sharif (1951–2016). Curated by Hoor Al Qasimi and Aurélie Voltz, the exhibition showcases Sharif's diverse oeuvre, which spans painting, performance, drawing, installations, and sculpture, and highlights his position as a pioneer of Conceptual Art in the Middle East.

Born in Iran, Hassan Sharif studied in London and was later based in Dubai. There he worked as an artist, educator, and critic, and helped to transform the artistic landscape of his country, leading it far beyond the realm of traditional calligraphy. He remains one of the most influential artists in the Arab world. While the title of the exhibition, *I am the single work artist*, seemingly suggests a single repeated gesture, Sharif's works demonstrate a constantly evolving interpretation and approach to various art forms. With influences including British constructivism, Minimal Art, and Fluxus, drawn from his time training in London, his works criticise rapid modernisation and offer humanist discourse based around a re-envisioning of everyday objects.

The exhibition covers six stylistic themes prevalent within Sharif's oeuvre: the Semi-Systems (1980–2016); The experimentations: objects and performances (1981–1985); Discussions about art: collective action and pop-up exhibitions (1984–1986); Urban archaeology: the beginnings (1982–1987); Urban archaeology: the industrial years (1987–2016); and From objects to paintings (2000–2016).

The Semi-Systems series consists of drawings, notebooks, accounting ledgers, watercolours, and videos, among other things, and stretches out across Hassan Sharif's entire career. In these graphic works, he invented rules to create his formal, abstract drawings and other systematic works. Sharif 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.

Conducted alongside the Semi-Systems series, 'The experimentations: objects and performances' offers, as the name suggests, an overview of experimental works that used the object as the starting point for a formal or conceptual construction. A repetition of system-based or mathematical thinking is echoed in works such as 'Body and squares' (1983), in which Sharif used a cube to draw a grid of 25 squares on the ground, which corresponded to the size of his body. He then lay down in various positions, physically occupying the entire surface area of the grid, thus attempting an improbable fusion with the geometric drawing. Starting in 1983, Hassan Sharif made the very first works of performance art in the United Arab Emirates, thereby opening the field of the visual arts to include other forms. Sharif also created a community and platform for creating, discussing, and teaching art. With this collective, Sharif spearheaded a new artistic discourse that questioned how new art forms could better reflect the significant changes in their society. Through exhibitions such as Central Market (1985), Sharif explored public space and its regulation through conceptual artwork.

Central Market also saw the beginnings of the artist's experimentations with the display and arrangement of objects. Taking its cues from artists such as Marcel Duchamp and the Fluxus movement, Sharif began to work with a large number of natural, readily procurable materials. He shaped small heaps of each material on the floor: a fabric shredded into multiple bands that formed a pile, or a rope braided in four different ways. The process of these works reveals Hassan Sharif's primary concern with the notions of labour and repetition. Sharif dubbed these large-scale installations 'Urban Archaeology'. These works extended throughout the remainder of Sharif's career, with the pieces increasingly utilising industrial materials. Piles of scraps depict our mass consumption, and an arrangement of brooms in a decorative fresco express a certain sense of futility. These installations ultimately indicate the sense of dislocation that globalisation can bring.

I am the single work artist highlights the sheer variety, material strength, and scale of Sharif's works, while also highlighting the artist's legacy as a pioneer of Conceptual Art, and as an advocate and leader in the fields of art and culture in the Middle East.

I am the single work artist is on show at MAMC Saint-Étienne until 26 September.



View of the exhibition *I am the single work artist* by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ On the wall, from left to right: Hassan Sharif, *Things in My Room*, 1982, cardboard prints, 83 x 53 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation Hassan Sharif, *Sandpaper, Pencil, Sharpener*, 1982, cardboard, plastic bags, sandpaper, pencil shavings, pencils, pencil sharpeners, fabric, glue, jute rope, courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; gb agency, Paris; Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.



View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ In the foreground: Hassan Sharif, Slippers and Wire, 2009, thongs and copper wire, variable dimensions, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation



View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ Hassan Sharif, Things in My Room, 1982, prints on cardboard, 83 x 53 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation



View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ On the base, in the foreground on the left: Hassan Sharif, Cotton Rope, 2016, cotton rope and emulsion paint, variable dimensions, courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; gb agency, Paris; Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai. On the base, at the back, on the left: Hassan Sharif, Paper and Cotton Rope, 2016, paper, cotton rope and glue, variable dimensions, courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; gb agency,



View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ Hassan Sharif, Rug 6, 2014, carpet, tempera, glue and copper wire, 304 x 195 x 32 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation



View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ On the wall, from left to right: Hassan Sharif, Colors, 2016, cotton rope, acrylic paint and copper wire, 240 x 535 x 10 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation Hassan Sharif, Color Wheel, 1980, gouache and pencil on cardboard, 28 x 37 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation On the ground : Hassan Sharif, Plastic cups and coir, 1999, plastic and coconut fiber, 170 x 150 x 80 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation



View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ On the wall, from left to right: Hassan Sharif, Towel 2, 2013, towel and copper wire, 240 x 535 x 10 cm, courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; gb agency, Paris; Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai. Hassan Sharif, Colors, 2016, cotton rope, acrylic paint and copper wire, 240 x 535 x 10 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation On the ground : Hassan Sharif, Plastic cups and coir, 1999, plastic cups and coconut fiber, 170 x 150 x 80 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation



View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ On the wall : Hassan Sharif, Broom, 2016, brooms and copper wire, variable dimensions (max: 1070 x 315 x 10 cm), collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation On the ground, from left to right: Hassan Sharif, Jute and Cardboard, 2005, burlap, cardboard and glue, variable dimensions, courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; gb agency, Paris; Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai. Hassan Sharif, Cotton Rope, cotton rope and copper wire, 2012, variable dimensions, courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; gb agency, Paris; Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai. Hassan Sharif, Paper and Jute, 1999, paper and jute cord, variable dimensions, courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; gb agency, Paris; Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai. Hassan Sharif, Napoli Green, 2012, painted wood, 14 x 128 x 35 cm, 17.5 x 122 x 37 cm, 14 x 122 x 36 cm, 11 x 125.5 x 38.5 cm, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation



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View of the exhibition I am the single work artist by Hassan Sharif at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, through September 26, 2021. Photo credit: Aurélien Mole / MAMC+ In the foreground: Hassan Sharif, Art Map, 2012, paper, cardboard and varnish, variable dimensions, collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation On the wall : Hassan Sharif, Broom, 2016, brooms and copper wire, variable dimensions (max: 1070 x 315 x 10 cm), collection of the Sharjah Art Foundation