

Where is Plastic Art in the Gulf going? 3 questions and different responses

Hassan Sharif: Modern Schools of Art are no longer Modern.

Interviewed by: Nujoum Al-Ghanim

For the first time one of the participant artists in this inductive survey probes the European schools of art and compares them to each other...

But was he able to maintain a definitive stance on the issue... That is what these questions attempt to provoke in order to identify variant responses... perhaps different than other opinions presented in this column in the past weeks.

We meet this time with the Artist Hassan Sharif from the United Arab Emirates:

- **What is your stance on the Modern European artistic doctrines or movements?**

– First, I disagree with this vague formulation... The word “modern” is very iffy, for since the birth of romanticism that fought the rigidity of the Classical School, and all the way through the many other schools that were all trying to contest with their predecessors, the term modern has been used to mark such movements, including those that have now become orthodox and traditional; therefore we must first specify a time period... If we start with the impressionist or the post impressionist period, namely Van Gogh and Paul Cezanne, we will find that they did their work between 1880 and 1900, presenting good ideas that are considered an extension of impressionism... The importance of this school lies in the time of its conception, but the problem came later when a new generation was tricked into mimicking this style... But attempts on innovation, though scarce, did not stop. Artists turned into finding new schools like H. Matisse and Robert Delaunay and his Orpheus school... all those took refuge in “decorationalism” in their works... and the other good school was cubism (1907-1912) and every painting done after that is not considered cubist, for in the year 1913 a new revolution led by Marcel Duchamp, aiming to destroy the impressionist wave, was born; and under the name of new Art Schools got entangled many artists like W. de Kooning, M. Rothko and others of the supporters of the abstract expressionist school- all those artist’s works don’t compare to a stroke from the brush of Cezanne or a line from the lines of George Braque on canvas... And there were those who noticed the ideas of M. Duchamp and came out with many new themes thanks to his ideas on the relationship of art with philosophy, literature, language, artist psychology and mythological issues, yet Europe took more than twenty years to comprehend the proposals of Duchamp.

Between 1950 and 1960 a new group that critics called the new Dadaists, or the neo-realists, emerged. Those went away from painting in the conventional ways and were interested in ancient eastern philosophies such as the Islamic, Hindu, Chinese and Zarathustian philosophies, yet they differed from Paul Klee whose interest on Islamic ornamentation was merely formal, and they differed from Picasso who was interested in African masks and Eastern carpets only when he used them as decorative devices...

The new Dadaists and neo-realists, however, really embraced these philosophies. Klein, for example, wrote about Yoga and was an expert in it after living for a long time in China and Japan. This artist attempted to present the spirit of the work and its idea. There is also the Italian artist Piero Manzoni who reflected on the issue of the “cultural entity of the artist” and employed Totemism in installations and spiritual factors. Also the Belgian artist Marcel Broothaers who looked into play in a piece of art, as in playing with words, letters and numbers, and he considered art to be no more than a game. After that came the turn of contemporary artists, represented by the American Sol Lewitt, who used numbers and lines in his works... But his works were distinctly disciplined, something that made critics call his style “Organizational art”, i.e. a piece that is based on precise mathematical, logical, or ideological elements, or characterized by the presence of a relationship with those elements in order to communicate the inner expressions or the subjective feelings towards these scenes to the observer. This artist once said, “The Artist is someone who has a heart of stone but gives the world a beautiful flower”.

Another contemporary artist, Joseph Kosuth, correlated art and philosophy. He was very similar to a monk who prays in solitude, for he continued to present art so immaculate that the observer cannot doubt its aesthetic quality, and he used for these works various materials in clever manners that require a high level of artistic knowledge for the observer to understand and enjoy its subtleties. Once he rented a place and turned it into a coffee shop serving tea and coffee. Customers would find books on fine arts on the tables. The artist didn't simply want to build a coffee shop; he intended to present a work of art not in the conventional setting of a painting, but with a new idea and through a different medium...

I intended to differentiate between modern and non-modern schools of art; impressionism now cannot be considered modern and neither can cubism, surrealism and many other schools... The second issue that I think has been misunderstood and misused is one that relates to the new artists. When we talk about cubism or any other such school, we must understand very well that it started and ended in a particular era, and we cannot now produce a cubist piece and categorize it as a part of the cubist school, or call ourselves cubist artists... We could inherit the methodology and technique of a doctrine without giving ourselves the right of affiliation with it; neither can we permit ourselves to speak for a doctrine whose pioneers have been dead for ages, and whose artistic mission had already been accomplished. Its importance, however, remains as part of the history of art, a stage that deserves to be studied and read about in books so that is understood, and then we simply utilize its techniques.

And he adds – Today's artist cannot express his feelings and emotions through a cubist, surrealist or abstract painting, he can simply understand the methodology, tools, elements and philosophy that stands behind it, not emulate it.

- **How involved are you with these schools?**

- An artist has to go through different stages, and reading about those different schools is not enough for us to appreciate them; we must engage in and try them practically and conceptually. I personally have passed through the impressionist stage, then the abstract colorist stage, through to organizational art, and structuralism. There are models I presented in exhibitions that represent these stages... They were over for me as soon as I discovered their secrets and they no longer troubled or consumed me... Now I

follow all that is related to conceptual art that originated in the hands of the young generation of the late fifties and matured during the sixties, one of whose goals is to criticize the art critic, and the right of the artist to deal with everything in his own way—that was when artists started developing their own methods in dealing with works of art and schools ceased to be.

- **What is your definition of modernism?**

- I am not concerned with the subject and would rather leave the topic for others to toss around as they like.

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Translated by: Mohamed Aydabi