

Hassan Sharif: Converting Consumerism into Art



Sharif's piece entitled "Spoons and cables." (Photo: Al-Akhbar)

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Hassan Sharif has been witness to Dubai's transformation from a nomadic society to a city of skyscrapers and has documented it through his art. Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut is exhibiting a retrospective of the artist's work until July 21.

The Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut is offering a valuable opportunity to get to know one of the most important figures in contemporary art in the region, the Emirati pioneer Hassan Sharif. The gallery's retrospective exhibition covers Sharif's works across various artistic media since 1980.

Sharif was born in 1951 in what has since become modern Dubai. He watched the region transform from a nomadic Bedouin society to a hub of consumerism and a city of skyscrapers, diligently documenting this transformation through installations, drawings, sculptures, and performance art.

He got his start drawing cartoons for *Dubai News*, the only weekly newspaper in the Emirates during the 1970s, but he quickly tired of the negative brand of satire that comes with drawing caricatures.

In 1979, he decided to search for a new form of communication with which to produce a more positive and evocative satire.

That is how Sharif began collecting items that comprise an essential part of the modern consumerist society that was infiltrating Dubai.

His room was (and still is) full of cardboard boxes, aluminum tins, metal containers, plastic spoons and cups, nylon ropes, and newspapers. He never throws anything away.

Instead, whenever his room got too crowded, he would transform the objects into artwork. He would strip these items of their functional character, giving them a new, deeper meaning.

He would fold spoons together and tie them with nylon rope and cover them with newspapers coated in glue to make a series of objects that imitate the high-rises that clutter the Dubai skyline.

He also constructed boxes from old newspapers and filled them with items collected from consumer waste.

Sharif prefers to call his works “things” rather than sculptures. He says that sculpture involves removing material in order to accomplish a form, whereas he adds new elements to his material.

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His works cannot be approached from one angle. Their meaning takes shape in a sociological and anthropological reading of Emirati society’s transition towards consumerism that the artist has lived first-hand and seeks to interrogate through his work.

As opposed to previous artistic schools, modern art does not present complete works; rather, it leaves space for questions.

Throughout the discussion that curator Catherine David had with him on the opening night of the exhibition, Sharif attributed the artistic regression that we see today to “our life in a world that reproduces artistic works in an inferior copy.”

“Today,” he says, “we find out about modern art via the internet, books, and pictures, so we lose the third dimension of the works, which have become flat.”

He invited visitors to touch the works, open the boxes, and interact with them, especially since he sees in them a sensual and erotic dimension that invites the senses to interact with it.

He considered the level of Arab art to have begun to decline since the time of revolutions and rebellions during the 1950s. Also, with the discovery of oil in the Arab states, rulers began demanding that artists produce work that is easy for the people to comprehend.

Likewise, the prominent tendency to search for “authentic Arab art,” which Sharif says does not exist, motivated artists to insert Arabic calligraphy into their paintings. Thus, the development of Arab visual arts was stunted



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and became increasingly introverted.

We can learn a great deal from the experience of this unique and pioneering artist. He did not become frustrated when the Arab market ignored his works. Instead, he kept developing his ideas for decades before the modern art world finally did him justice.

Experimentation and Action

The act of accumulation and collection takes shape in Hassan Sharif's pictures as well, with geometric shapes, colors, and mathematical equations repeating in endless permutations.

His belief in the importance of action motivated him to experiment and try new forms of artistic expression. He also translated action into artistic performances.

Whether asking his friends to photograph him jumping, running barefoot in the desert, or writing, these simple actions were documented and presented with drawings and explanatory notes on the details of the act, composed by the artist himself.

These performances confirm his belief in the importance of action in the artistic search that Sharif himself has led since the 1980s, the results of which are beginning to be seen today in the Arab world's liberation squares.

Hassan Sharif Retrospective: Until July 21, Sfeir-Semler Gallery (Karantina, Beirut).

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.