

HASSAN SHARIF*BLUE*

18 March – 6 May 2019

Opening: Monday, 18 March from 6.00 to 10.00 pm



Untitled, 2016, Bucket, tissue paper, glue and oil paint, 30 x 33 x 28 cm

Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde is proud to present *Blue*, Hassan Sharif's third solo show at the gallery, focusing on the late artist's highly individualistic approach to colour. Spanning multiple bodies of work—paintings, Objects, Boxes, Experiments and even Semi-System-like pieces—*Blue* reveals how Sharif's almost irreverent engagement with colour exemplifies his entire philosophy of art making. A tireless experimenter who pushed the limits of his own exploration, Sharif deployed a double-barrelled strategy with colour—both subverting and elevating it. Shifting, morphing, sabotaged or framed for the viewer to ponder, colour is a “red thread” weaving across four decades of work. By considering Sharif's practice through the specific prism of colour, *Blue* prompts us to re-examine the complexity of Sharif's vision, providing a closer look at some of the impulses and contradictions that shaped it.

“Recklessly repetitive,” as he described himself in an unusually introspective series of essays from 2005, Sharif maintains a compelling balance in his practice between rigour and randomness. On one hand, the slow, futile gestures of tying, weaving, knotting, and the crisp meticulousness of the Semi-Systems. On the other, a taste for the accident, for letting a process unravel, for following a work down an unexpected path. His sense of irony—the wry humour, the bite of sarcasm, the playful disingenuousness—pulses through it all.

While colour is leveraged to both rigorous and random ends—the precision of individually painted squares in the series *Squares* (2013) and the wild inventiveness of *Cadmium Red Hue* (2010)—it clearly constitutes a site of invention for Sharif. Colours are complicit with the artist's will to play. He revels in tricking our vision, stripping colours of their meaning, or endowing them with the status of material.

Subversion is one of two complementary approaches to colour apparent in *Blue*. At once perverted and exhausted, colour in the *Venus and Fish* (2009) series of paintings is completely unhinged from any referent. There is a sense of the thrill of sabotage, of subjugating the largely constant content to the chromatic experiment, which runs slightly amok. Elsewhere, Sharif titles works with names of colours. The descriptive “cadmium red hue” (the precise chromatic nomenclature that would have been

lifted from paint tube), becomes the title of the painting *Cadmium Red Hue*. Yet what are we really seeing? The colour is sabotaged, hijacked. In his reinvention, the haywire hue is no longer a mere component; it has become content itself, muzzling the figurative scene that tries to emerge amid its rampant strokes.

Parallel to such subversive tendencies is Sharif's will to elevate colour, albeit with the same ironic flourish. These gestures are frank and candid: colour here functions almost as a material. A particularly Sharifian humour simmers in *Untitled* (2016), this bucket brimming with blue-doused tissue paper into which the viewer must peer. The blue here is isolated, ring-fenced for us to ponder; the humble, paint-stained bucket its unlikely frame. In the triptych *Blue* (2016), colour has a life of its own, and indeed becomes strangely organic as it slides across the surface and seeps through the magma of used, crusty tissues.

Sharif is never straight with us as viewers. Part of the pleasure of reading his practice is navigating this gap between what he says and what he does, savouring the contradictions, enjoying this journey signposted by both the philosophical and the haphazard. In almost all the works in *Blue*, colour has the final word. It is inextricably linked to Sharif's belief that art should shake us, push us to challenge inert ways of thinking. In his twin quest of generating both meaning and meaninglessness, colour emerges as a critical tool. Ultimately, through colour, Sharif demystifies the very notion of a work of art.

Text by Kevin Jones

Artist's Biography

Hassan Sharif (1951-2016) made a vital contribution to conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East through 40 years of performance, installation, drawing, painting and assemblage. Prior to leaving the UAE to study in London in 1979, Sharif gained attention for his cartoons published in the UAE press - ironic, outspoken critiques of the rapid industrialisation of the Emirates and political deadlock of 1970s Arab Nationalism. As an artist, he rejected calligraphic abstraction, which was becoming the dominant discourse in the Middle East at that time, and pursued instead a pointedly contemporary vocabulary, drawing on the non-elitism and intermedia of Fluxus and the potential in British Constructionism's systemic processes of making.

Sharif graduated from The Byam Shaw School of Art (now part of Central Saint Martins) in 1984 and returned to the UAE shortly after. He set about staging interventions and the first exhibitions of contemporary art in Sharjah, as well as translating art historical texts and manifestos into Arabic so as to provoke a local audience to engage with - or at least reject - contemporary art discourse. Beginning in 1982, Sharif began to formulate and document private performances of mundane activities (e.g. discussing art in a toilet cubicle with the faculty of The Byam Shaw School, jumping or digging holes in the UAE desert). Simultaneously, he began work on what he referred to as *Experiments* - formal exercises, like counting cars on a street in Dubai or tracing every instance of the letter 't' on a page of The Daily Mail newspaper. These absurdist and purposely boring practices were initially performed, in part, as an ironic response to the functionality of economics and globalisation: uselessness as gesture. This critical stance, what he termed 'positive irony', has since been developed on in subsequent works in other mediums.

Sharif started creating his *Objects* in the 1980s using found industrial materials or mass-produced items purchased in markets and stores around the UAE. Weaving these objects together with rope, coil and twine, the heaps and bundles that Sharif created became a visualisation of the surplus of mass-production - the commonly unseen by-product of the UAE's globalised, consumerist society that developed since the formation of the UAE. His *Objects* - which handed cheap, mass-produced or discarded materials back to society as artworks - were a vital instrument in provoking and engaging UAE audiences with contemporary art in the 1980s. Sharif's *Semi-Systems* were initially informed by British Constructionism and particularly Kenneth Martin's notion of 'Chance and Order'. He invented a set of rules, following this system to create line drawings that transform within a grid and colour studies on paper. Sharif revealed in the mistakes and errors that naturally occurs in the monotonous creation of the work, believing that "'Art' is a result of errors."

In addition to his own practice, he also encouraged and supported several generations of artists in the Emirates. Sharif was a founding member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society (founded in 1980) and the Art Atelier in the Youth Theatre and Arts in Dubai. In 2007, he was one of the four artists to establish The Flying House, a Dubai institution for promoting contemporary Emirati artists. His works are held in the collections of the Sharjah Art Foundation; MAMCO, Geneva; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate, London; Guggenheim New York and Abu Dhabi; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah and M+ Museum, Hong Kong, among others. In 2017, a major retrospective of his works, entitled *Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist*, curated by Hoor Al Qasimi was held at Sharjah Art Foundation. This retrospective will travel to the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in Autumn 2019 and to KW Institute for Contemporary Art in February 2020.



Venus and Fish No. 3, 2009
Acrylic on paper
84.1 x 59.5 cm

About Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

After establishing B21 Gallery in 2006, one of the first contemporary art spaces in the United Arab Emirates, Isabelle van den Eynde launched her eponymous space in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue in 2010, representing a pluralistic roster of artists from the Middle East and North Africa.

Through exhibitions, book publishing and international fair participation, the gallery prides itself on closely collaborating with its artists to create insightful, and often provocative presentations that challenge the conventions and ideologies related to the notion of art display and exhibition making.

Exhibition Dates: 18 March - 6 May 2019

Opening: Monday, 18 March 6.00 to 10.00 pm

Regular Hours: Sun to Thu: 10.00 am to 7.00 pm, Sat: 10.00 to 6.00 pm

Location: Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Unit 17, Alserkal Avenue, Street 8, Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE

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