

Curated by
Murtaza Vali

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2025



Hassan Sharif

THE STORYTELLER

The Storyteller

Titled after the seminal 1936 essay by German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, ***The Storyteller*** revisits **Hassan Sharif's** "Objects" through contemporary theoretical approaches to craft, which expand its definition beyond modernist notions of skill, precision and medium-specific mastery and towards an experimental, experiential and embodied practice of learning, understanding, and knowing through making. In the essay Benjamin, lamenting the eclipse of the art of storytelling in the modern era, posits a unique kinship and shared space-time between craft and storytelling. While the craftsperson, primarily preoccupied with their hands but free to listen, provided the storyteller with a captive audience, the storyteller's tales would help allay the tedium of repetitive action that serves as the foundation of much craft practice.

Sharif, through his persona, his practice and the discourse he constructed around it, especially in relation to the creation of his "Objects," exemplified this weaving together of storytelling and craft, of narrativity and materiality. As those who knew him attest, Sharif himself was a consummate storyteller, often mischievously resorting to parables and anecdotes when called upon to explain his work, preferring to keep meaning and interpretation in play through recourse to allegory and metaphor rather than providing any definitive statement. And although he routinely dismissed contemporary art that simply recycled traditional imagery, techniques or mediums as mere nostalgia, Sharif surprisingly proposed craft as a hermeneutic through which to understand his "Objects" in an important text-manifesto titled "Weaving," which was first published in the catalogue accompanying the 7th Sharjah Biennial in 2005.

Though often situated within a genealogy of the Duchampian readymade, Sharif's "Objects" are undeniably handcrafted, the products of a near obsessive repetition of mundane manual tasks—cutting, folding, rolling, twisting, knotting,

tying, plaiting, weaving, binding, gluing, wrapping. These actions are used to produce numerous smaller units which are then simply piled, stacked, bundled, or strung together and hung to create a larger form. While on one hand, this process of monotonous repetition resembles that of a machine or a worker on an assembly line, these actions also recall the endless and unrecognized reproductive labor of women (including the production of traditional handicrafts), who Sharif expressed solidarity with, sometimes attributing his "weavings" to Sharifa Hassan, a feminine alter ego. As the artist himself explained: "Despite the fact that my works are based on a sequential, industrial mode of creativity, they also demolish the sequential autonomy of an industrial product." While they might mimic the anonymity and alienation of an industrial system of production and willfully resist the aura of the master artist they are never devoid of the traces and memories of the space-time of their manufacture, of the hand or hands that crafted them. One just needs to know how and where to look for the fingerprints invariably left behind.

Presenting a selection of "Objects," ranging from among the earliest he produced in the mid-1980s to those he completed in the prodigiously productive months just before his untimely death in 2016, "The Storyteller" approaches each as a narrative prompt for a possible story about itself and its maker. The exhibition emphasizes materiality, manufacture, and form through careful groupings and juxtapositions, pairing exhibited "Objects" with texts that present a layered account of their crafting and perception. Sharif famously characterized himself as a "single work artist," unifying his diverse oeuvre under one conceptual premise. "The Storyteller" will attempt to trace some of the myriad material and formal complexities that are otherwise masked by this provocation, presenting a fragmented biography and (art) history of the artist narrated through his "Objects."





Hassan Sharif
Pouches, 2016
Pouches, cotton rope and corrugated card
320 x 420 x 45 cm

***Pouches* (2016)**

A dense mural-scaled wall work, *Pouches* is made up of bundles of black fabric pouches bound in black rope. Labelled as “Made in Pakistan” and embellished with twinkling sequins and colorful machine-embroidered patterns, the pouches are the sort of cheap souvenir a tourist might purchase as a keepsake of a trip or a gift for friends and coworkers back home. Among the camels and elephants that appear on many of these pouches we can discern a repeated word, written in many different fonts: Dubai, perhaps as much a hollow cliché of packaged exoticism as those silhouetted animals. Fabricated from an artifact of the material economy of the tourist industry, one which condenses some of transnational circuits of labor and desire it spans, *Pouches* indexes and reflects on the emergence of Dubai in the early twenty-first century, after decades of city branding campaigns and investment in tourist infrastructure, as the “#1 Top Destination in the World,” three years running, according to Tripadvisor. And, though literally composed of a commodity itself, it marks an important shift in the economy of the city (and the country) from the manufacture and/or exchange of goods to the provision of services that is one of the hallmarks of neoliberal capitalism.

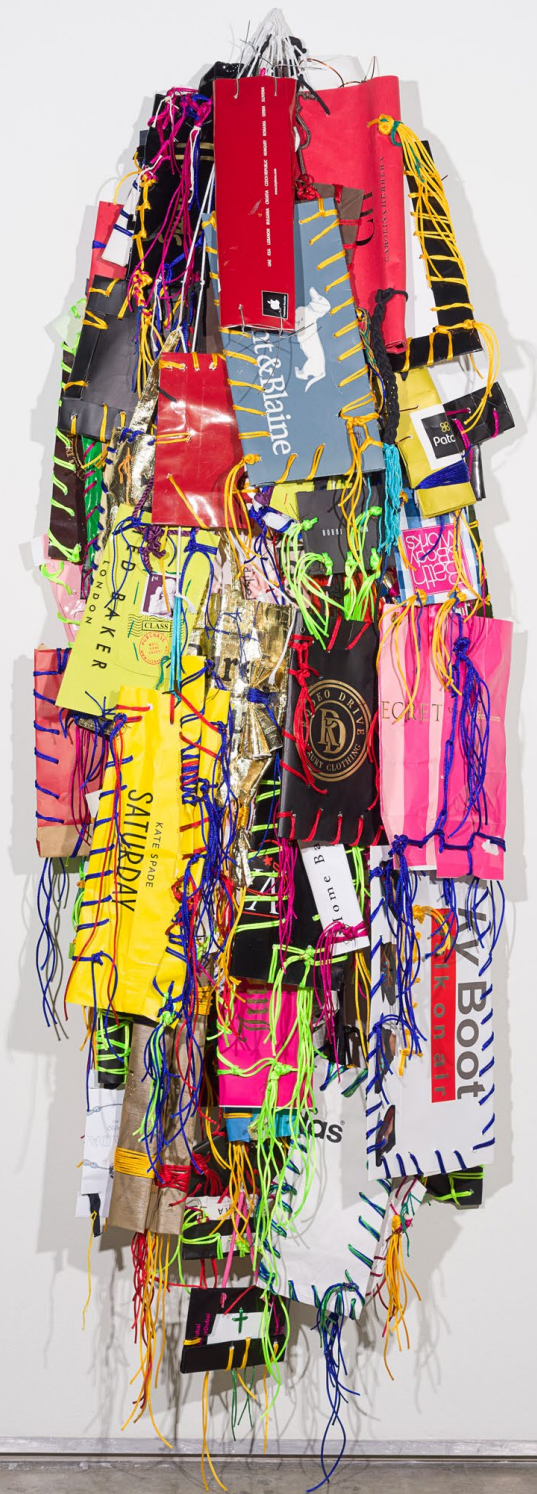


Plastic Funnel and Aluminum Foil (2006)

By the mid-2000s, the cheap mass-produced commodity had become a defining feature of Sharif's "Objects." These works represent an important departure from the "Objects" that came before, supplanting their organic materiality and earthy monochromatic palette with bursts of rapturous wholly unnatural technicolor and the synthetic fabricated look and feel of plastic, rubber, and processed metal. For example, *Plastic Funnel and Aluminum Foil* consists of a pile of blue, red, orange, and beige funnels and mugs (the sort commonly used with a bucket to bathe in the absence of a shower) that are strung together using bits of cloth. These objects are interspersed with scrunched up foil trays and lids that both add an eye-catching glint and remind us, through the pressure needed to crumple them, of the artist's otherwise invisible hand.



Hassan Sharif
Plastic Funnel and Aluminium Foil, 2006
Plastic funnel, aluminium foil and cloth
Variable dimensions
(as shown: 110 x 140 x 150 cm)



Hassan Sharif

Shopping Bags, 2015

Shopping bags, cotton rope, copper wire,
synthetic strings and plastic clips

235 x 100 x 30 cm

Shopping Bags (2015)

Shopping Bags is a large multicolored mass of carrier bags from stores ranging from high end designer brands such as Fendi and Ermenegildo Zegna to mall staples like H&M, Swatch, Adidas and the familiar two-toned pink stripes of lingerie purveyor Victoria Secret. Sometimes folded into smaller more compact rectangles, their edges are hemmed using colored string, suturing them shut so they are no longer usable. Interestingly, Sharif includes a bag from Global Village, a popular local attraction and shopping destination that might be best described as a vernacular Expo of sorts, an extension of the informal aesthetics and economics of the souk into the age of multinational capital and, in many ways, the antithesis of the luxury shopping mall. An accumulation of everyday consumer waste, perhaps the aftermath of a Jumeirah Jane's latest bout of frenzied retail therapy at the Mall of the Emirates or the castoffs accumulated in a tourist's hotel room after a day spent shopping at the Dubai Mall while awaiting their turn "At The Top" of the Burj Khalifa, *Shopping Bags*, at first glance, like much Pop art, can read as either celebration and critique. The crude, almost childlike, embellishments Sharif adds introduce that much needed tinge of biting irony.

A little over a decade and a half separate the *Cardboard, Cloth and Glue* series (on display nearby) and *Shopping Bags*, both works produced from the detritus of consumer society. Their juxtaposition indexes the dramatic shift in the locus and network of consumption in Dubai over that period, as the city firmly established itself as a global metropolis. Multinational monopolies replaced the charming idiosyncrasies of the local, as the musty baqalas and neighborhood co-ops of the 1980s and 1990s, from where Sharif sourced the cardboard boxes he used to make the former, gave way to glitzy air-conditioned megamalls anchored by warehouse-scaled hypermarkets.



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Hassan Sharif
Razor No. 2, 2015
Razor, rug, ribbon and wire
70 x 15 x 6 cm



***Rug 2* (2013)**
***Mask* (2014)**
***Razor No. 2* (2015)**

In an important departure from his signature piles, Sharif began producing wall-anchored “Objects” sometime in the late 2000s or the early 2010s. Perhaps bearing the strongest visual resemblance to a traditional weaving, these works consist of rectangular fields made up of bundles of textile strips or loops of wire or strings of objects. These smaller units are installed in a gridded arrangement on the wall, anchored to and by a kind of immaterial warp and weft, rather than one made up of interlocking thread. An excellent example of this approach is a series of works entitled “Rug” that Sharif made in 2013, all from strips of fabric of roughly equal width and length cut from store-bought rugs. Before constructing the work, Sharif stained these strips using tempera paint to unify the multicolored rug without entirely erasing its pattern, as in *Rug 5* (2013) which consists of three rows of grey blue strips that together resemble a roughshod shag carpet.

Created over the span of three years, the works shown here all use the same sort of strips as those used in *Rug 5* to three very different ends, demonstrating Sharif’s creativity and versatility in relation to materials. In the free hanging *Rug 2*, bunches of the strips, dyed a deep maroon, dangle at various heights off a single vertical axis creating a looming columnar mass that feels more like a totem than a textile or tapestry. In *Mask*, two or three strips are folded over and bound and knotted with white rope, creating a feathered abstract form that resembles the titular. And in *Razor No. 2*, a single strip serves as the ground upon which are affixed nine pairs of blue disposable razors, their heads and half their handles wrapped in fuchsia ribbons. In each of these pairs, the heads, which are carefully aligned with the vertical edges of the textile strip, point in opposite directions creating an alternating rhythm from top to the bottom, recalling the repetitive schemas Sharif was developing at the time for larger works such as *Buckets*.



Hassan Sharif
Rug 2, 2013
Rug, tempera, glue and copper wire
370 x 90 x 90 cm





Hassan Sharif

Mask, 2014

Rug, cotton rope and glue
71x15x8 cm







Hassan Sharif
Shorts, 2016
Shorts and cotton thread
215 x 66 x 8 cm



***Untitled* (2016)**
***Shorts* (2016)**

For his “Objects,” Sharif preferred using new over previously used goods, an unexpected choice for an artist working predominantly with found objects. The trace of human use, and the aura, memory, and history it conjures and carries appears not to have interested him. He was, however, drawn to objects that would come into direct contact with the body, things used in rituals of cleaning and grooming such as combs or disposable razors (as in *Razor No. 2*, displayed nearby) or intimate apparel, as seen in *Shorts* and *Untitled*. In the former, shorts are folded into neat narrow rectangles, with careless stitches in red, yellow, and blue thread ensuring they hold their shape. The resulting units, abstractions that disguise the garment’s function, are then displayed in an irregular array on the wall. In the latter, underwear is stuffed with paper and cardboard and sealed into short sausage-like units that are exhibited in a pile on the floor. While in the former the body’s unruliness is marshalled into a geometric unit, in the latter the forms, though abstract, strongly evoke the body and its many abjections.

In both these works, the abstract forms and the objects they are constructed out of, serve as proxies for a body which, due to prevailing social norms, may not be represented directly. Works such as these build on a recurrent theme through Sharif’s oeuvre: the dialectic between concealment and display, interior and exterior, public and private, abstract and abject. Sharif first explored this tension in an important early work entitled *Table* (1985/2006), covering the underside of a seemingly ordinary white table with clumps of raw cotton, as if an overgrowth of mold had taken root there. Affixed to the center of the table top, a photograph cues the viewer into an abject interior that otherwise remains hidden or obscured from sight.



Hassan Sharif
Untitled, 2016
Underwear, cotton rope, acrylic and cardboard
Variable dimensions
(80 x 140 x 110 cm)





***Buckets* (2015)**

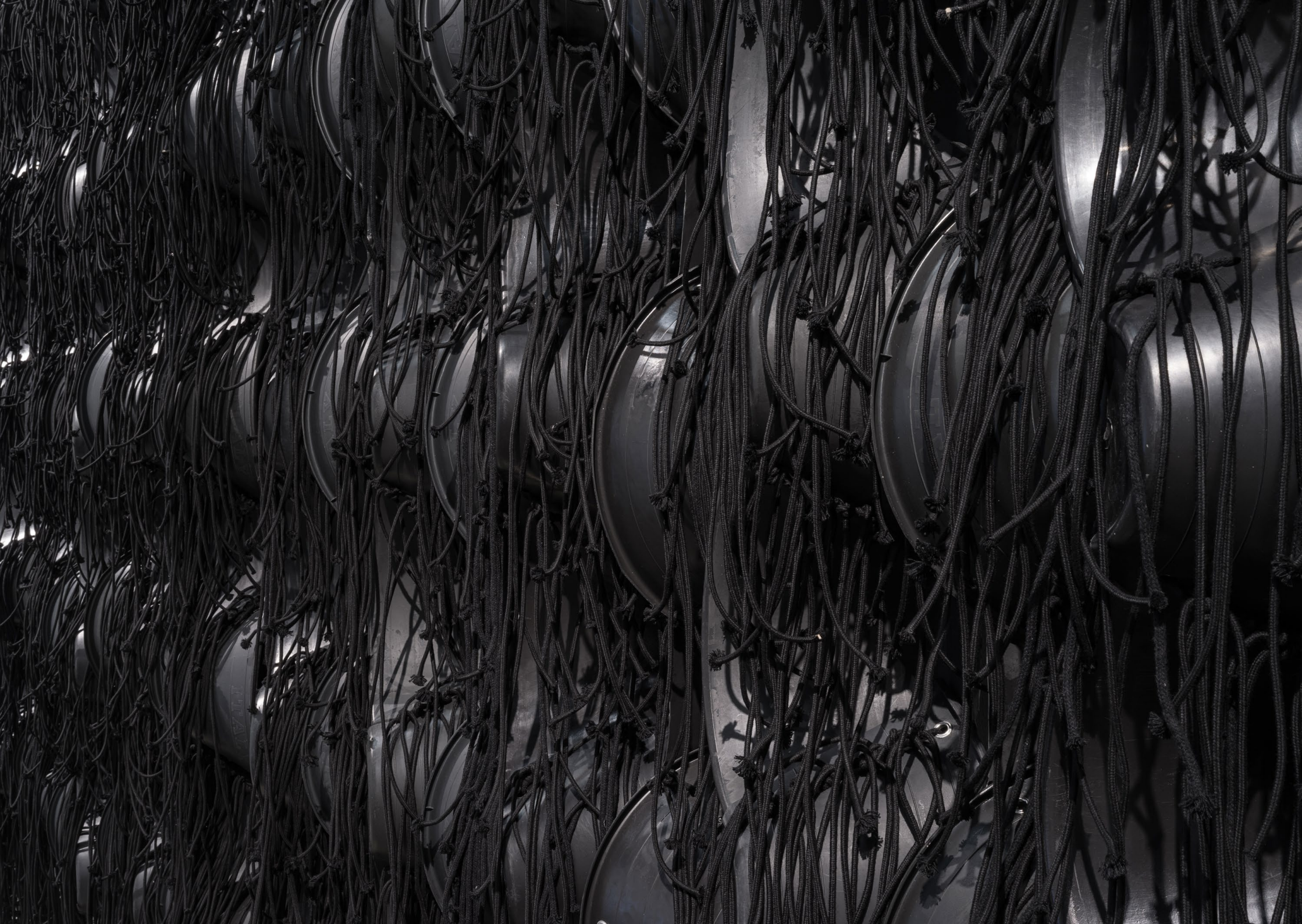
Buckets is one of a series of ambitious large-scale wall works that Sharif produced in the two years preceding his untimely death in September 2016. In these works, Sharif cleverly adapted (and/or minimally manipulated) the existing shape and contours of a purchased, unused commodity to create a repeating pattern. For example, in *Broom* (2016) he simply alternated the orientation of a triangular handheld straw broom across a row, stacking five such rows to create a diamond-patterned field that, from a distance, resembles a swath of textile or a tapestry.

Buckets is made up of twenty-eight vertical units each composed of five black plastic buckets. The sequence of photos included in the exhibition's announcement show Sharif's process. After methodically bisecting each bucket and puncturing a series of holes along the edges of the resulting fragments, Sharif strung them together using black rope. He rotated each half by 180°, carefully aligning the wider top lip of each bucket and the outside edge of its narrowed base to create a continuous s-curve through the unit. Hung closely together in a row these units form a unified visual field, a sculptural relief whose surface undulates between the valleys and peaks of the alternating bucket halves. Sharif left the excess length of the rope used to suture the buckets together to dangle around and in front of them, partially obscuring his carefully conceived and constructed geometric array behind unpredictable hair-like skeins of black, shrouding system under a veil of chance.

The genius of Sharif's "Objects" lies in their uncanny ability to materialize his "semi-systems" approach, translating this conceptual conceit into a work ethic of sorts that generates myriad physical outcomes, each a distinct avatar of the "single work" he devoted his life to. But Sharif also occasionally broke clear of this abiding working methodology, as demonstrated by the related *Buckets No. 2* (2016), an outlier that reveals his engagement with materials and experimentation with form. In this work, the bucket halves are haphazardly jumbled together into an ominous black mass, an abstraction in which the order and logic of the system gives way to the chaos of gesture and expression.



Hassan Sharif
Buckets, 2015
Buckets and cotton rope
280 x 525 x 28 cm





Hassan Sharif
White Cube No 1, 2015
Cotton, glue, and wood
33 x 40 x 18 cm

***White Cube No. 1* (2015)**

White Cube No. 1 is one of two small works Sharif produced in response to an invitation from curator Amanda Abi Khalil to participate in “White Cube... Literally: On form and convention of display,” a 2016 exhibition held at this gallery that interrogated the ideology of the white cube as form, space, and institution. It presents a sequence of three white cubes composed of the same basic unit, increasing in size from two to four-unit length sides, recalling similar works based on cube number patterns by Sol Lewitt, whose practice Sharif was familiar with and admired. However, Sharif replaced Lewitt’s signature rigid open-faced white cube with store-bought cotton balls that he glued together to form the cubes, perhaps a wry nod to previous works with raw cotton such as *Cotton and Wire* (1995, on display nearby) and the 2013 video and object diptych *Cotton*. Sharif’s canny substitution introduces an element of chance into an otherwise systematic approach, challenging its integrity and the orthogonal logic it is based on. As the size of the cube grows, and the number of cotton balls used increases, so does the physical impact of their pliability on the whole, their softness compromising the rigidity of the grid—which is at once a physical, visual, and ideological structure—from within.





Hassan Sharif
Rubber, 2016
Rubber and cotton rope
20 x 130 x 75 cm



***Cloth and Rope* (1984)**

According to art historian Paulina Kolczynska, Sharif's earliest known "Object" is the now lost *Nylon Rope* (1982), a simple piece of rope dangling off a hook on the wall, with knots of varying sizes and shapes tied at irregular intervals down its length, as if a fisherman, sailor or weaver had been practicing a skill necessary for their vocation. Eventually, such knots would come to hold other objects, or parts of other objects, in place, creating strings or bundles of smaller units that Sharif would gather into a larger form. Made two years later, *Cloth and Rope* is among Sharif's earliest extant "Objects." It consists of thin fibrous brown rope—possibly made of coir, a material Sharif frequently used, and highlighted in his titles—carefully threaded, in a stitch-like manner, through strips of white canvas-like cloth. The rope and cloth were most likely industrially manufactured and purchased from a local souk or supermarket.

Sharif experimented with a few different strategies for how to group and display the smaller units he was making at this time. A pile, placed directly on the floor, emerged as his preferred typology, eventually becoming a hallmark of his sculptural practice. More a casual accumulation than a carefully considered arrangement, the pile is unceremonious. Not declaring itself as a form per se it remains open and mutable, amorphous and unpredictable. It is also nonhierarchical; neither part nor composite whole is privileged, though the specific physical qualities of the part—its shape, density, weight, texture—do influence the final form of the whole.

Popularized by Felix Gonzalez-Torres's iconic candy works of the 1990s, the pile as a sculptural and/or exhibitionary typology arguably first emerged within art history in the late 1960s in the context of the post-Minimalist practices of Robert Smithson and Arte Povera. For Sharif, as Kolczynska has suggested, the pile may simply have been a familiar and everyday form of display, drawn from the same contexts as his materials: the souk, where it was used by traders to display all sorts of largely unpackaged wares, such as bread, dates and other dried fruit and mixed nuts, spices both whole and ground, etc. Some of the other strategies Sharif experimented with during this early period support this observation: for a trio of three works composed of units that were long and thin (either pieces of wood wrapped in white cloth or thread or newspapers tightly rolled into rods) that parts are vertically stacked against a wall or in a corner, their arrangement echoing that used for displaying bolts of cloth in Dubai's many bulk fabric stores.





Hassan Sharif
Cloth and Rope, 1984
Cloth and rope
Variable dimensions
(as shown: 30 x 100 x 100 cm)

Cotton and Wire (1995)

Cotton and Wire consists of a small pile of over one thousand two hundred individual units, each a simple ball of raw cotton wrapped in a loop of wire. Though there are exceptions, Sharif's early "Objects," from the 1980s and 1990s, predominantly feature organic materials like raw cotton, jute, coir, cloth, rope, thread, wood, cardboard and paper, the last two either used as is or pulped and used as papier-mâché. There are multiple possible reasons for why Sharif gravitated to these unconventional sculptural materials, which he was able to easily scavenge or source locally. Humble and biodegradable, these materials allowed him to challenge sculpture's traditional preoccupations with monumentality and permanence. It may also simply have been borne out of necessity, given the scarcity of conventional art supplies in 1980s Dubai and Sharif's limited financial resources at the time, when institutional support for any contemporary art, let alone challenging work such as his, and a viable commercial art market were nonexistent.

Unlike the "Objects" Sharif would produce in the following decades, which involve the transformation of utilitarian found objects into use-less artworks, these early works feel more traditionally sculptural, an exploration of form, albeit one that is decidedly abstract, iterative, and serial, through the manipulation of a raw material. This minimal language was reinforced by their predominantly monochromatic palette—natural and neutral shades ranging from the white and off white of cloth, paper and raw cotton to the spectrum of browns of jute, coir, wood and cardboard—which forced a direct encounter with their materiality and facture, with what they are made of and how.



Hassan Sharif
Cotton and Wire, 1995
Consists of 1215 components
Cotton and wire
Variable dimensions
(as shown: 50 x 100 x 120 cm)





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Hassan Sharif
Cardboard Cloth and Glue, 2000
Cardboard cloth and glue
Variable dimensions
(as shown: 80 x 140 x 120 cm)

Cardboard, Cloth and Glue (2000)
Cardboard, Coir and Glue (2003)

Once Sharif began using cheap mass-produced goods to make his “Objects,” his sculptural practice would come to be read, perhaps reductively, as a critique of Emirati society’s enthusiastic embrace of consumerism. However, the earliest material evidence of such a critique might appear in a series of modest transitional works from the early 2000s. Extending the organic materiality that characterized his previous work, they do not feature actual commodities but the branded cardboard boxes they are often stored and transported in, the byproduct rather than the product of capitalist consumption.

These works, two of which are displayed here, succinctly demonstrate Sharif’s intuitive, iterative, and experimental approach to the unconventional materials he used. Through simple exercises in making that involve repeated gestures and actions of and by the hand, Sharif sought to understand and uncover their full sculptural potential. In *Cardboard, Cloth and Glue*, rectangular pieces cut from the cartons are carefully rolled into thin tight bundles and bound with strips of colored cloth that are held in place with glue. In *Cardboard, Coir and Glue*, whole boxes are roughly folded and crumpled and bound with coir rope. While the density of the unit in the former conceals the logos and branding on the cardboard boxes, the more open and larger visible surface area of the units in the latter make them more legible; while the former privileges material and form, the latter remains open to the possibility of narrative.

If you look closely, in the latter, you can make out familiar local brands such as Masafi bottled water, and much-loved childhood snacks like the cheesy orange corn puffs of Pofak Oman and the distinctive blue into red fade and “Chili Flavour” of Chips Oman, the latter now a trendy ingredient of street food here. Sharif scavenged the boxes from the baqalas and shops in Al Satwa, the neighborhood where he lived and worked at the time, transforming detritus into unassuming works that materialize the specific time and place of their creation, making manifest and tangible the otherwise fleeting and immaterial rhythms and textures of everyday life in Dubai just before the turn of the millennium.



Hassan Sharif
Toshiba No. 2, 2014
Suitcase, papier mache, cotton rope, coir, and acrylic
108 x 65 x 13 cm



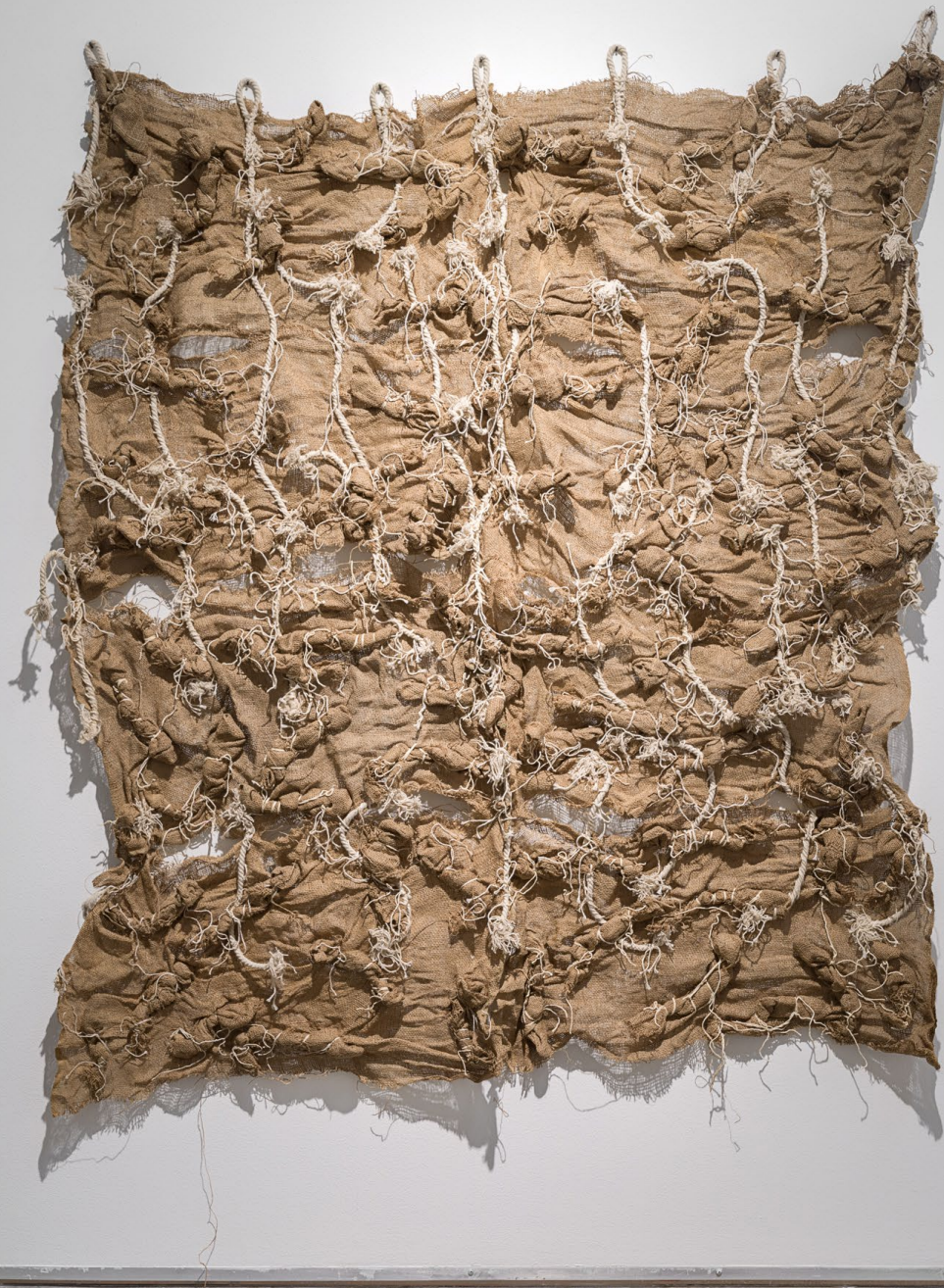


Coir and Cloth (2007)
Toshiba No. 2 (2014)
Jute (2016)

The three works in this gallery are made from coir and jute, two natural and biodegradable materials that featured prominently in Sharif's "Objects" from the 1980s and 1990s. Commonly derived from the outer husk of coconuts, coir rope can also be spun from the fibrous sheath that surrounds the trunk of date palms and is used in traditional Emirati handicrafts. Similarly, jute fiber is made from the outer skin of a plant that grows widely in the tropics. Characterized by its musty smell, it is commonly used as rope and woven into coarse fabric used to make sacks. It is unclear what type of coir Sharif used but it was, along with the jute, most likely purchased from a local market.

This grouping strives to reveal Sharif's extended engagement, sometimes across decades, with the unconventional and everyday materials he used to make his "Objects." The diversity of outcomes he was able to achieve demonstrates an artistic ethos that did not subordinate a material to a preconceived vision or will but was more intuitive, playful, and exploratory, that thought through and along with it. Sharif understood and worked with every material as essentially malleable, both physically and semiotically, as a multivalent sign that carries and conveys information and meaning that is both aesthetic and social, optic and haptic, and sits within and beyond language.

In contrast to Sharif's earlier monochromatic coir works, *Coir and Cloth* introduces flecks of contrasting color through the strips of cloth he used to tie off the bundles of rope, reflecting his growing interest in and use of color. In *Toshiba No. 2*, he transforms a laptop case into an enigmatic talisman, splaying it open and filling it with red and yellow painted papier-mâché and tangles of brown and white rope. Affixed to the wall, the surface of *Jute* is ripped, creased, and bunched together with white thread. Short pieces of stringy rope that suggest critters inhabit this furrowed expanse, evoking a freshly tilled field.



Hassan Sharif
Jute, 2016
Jute, cotton thread, cotton rope and glue
200 x 175 x 15 cm





Hassan Sharif
Coir and Cloth, 2007
Consists of 1076 components
Coir and cloth
Variable dimensions
(as shown: 130 x 200 x 200 cm)





Hassan Sharif
Flowers, 2014
Ornamental flowers and cotton rope
120 x 56 x 42 cm



Artist biography

Hassan Sharif (1951-2016) made a vital contribution to conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East through forty 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.

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; M+ Museum, Hong Kong and Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Yinchuan, 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 has travelled to the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin and the Malmö Konsthall, Malmö in 2020. In 2022, Hassan Sharif's atelier is re-constituted at the Whitechapel Gallery's exhibition. A Century of the Artist's Studio, a major historical under-taking. And the musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMC+), in Saint-Étienne.

Access Hassan Sharif's cv: [Here](#)



Hassan Sharif