



DUBAI INTERNATIONAL ART SYMPOSIUM

Twenty-five artists will turn tweets from Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, that have humanitarian messages into paintings for an exhibition at Rashid Centre for the Disabled in Dubai. The paintings will be at the Dubai International Art Symposium, an annual event that this year will be presented under the title Coloured Tweets. DIAS runs from April 13 to April 20

Hassan Sharif // Dubai

# 'I didn't only make art, I made my audience, too'

Anna Seaman

"All my work is one piece," says Hassan Sharif from behind a cluttered desk in his studio in Dubai's Al Barsha district. With that one sweeping statement, the 63-year-old artist, known as the "father of Emirati contemporary art", casually throws together more than four decades of his oeuvre.

Sharif's body of work is colossal, spanning caricatures from the 1970s; experimental performances that he began in Sharjah in the 1980s when contemporary art was hardly present, much less understood; and the more recent sculptures made of countless printed images and pages, which he completed early this year for *Images*, a solo show that opened last night in Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde (IVDE).

"Since the 1980s there have been no 'isms' any more, so now we have a kind of anti-style and the artist is free to do whatever they want," says Sharif. "For me, this is very important – I don't want to have a style, I want to be able to experiment."

This freedom to move between media is apparent not just in the IVDE exhibition, but also in Sha-

**We are surrounded by images – they are everywhere we look and they are even above us in the sky**

Hassan Sharif artist

shredded them, and created repetitive sculptures hanging from the ceiling or along walls. Also included are cut-outs from iron sheets reflecting images of icons from an old dictionary. In their rusted state, the iron shapes evoke Sharif's previous exhibitions.

Sharif's preoccupation with global consumerism is apparent in past works, especially installations made of piles of everyday detritus – pieces of cloth, balled-up men's underwear, slippers and wire, plastic bags and rods of metal.

"There is a continuation from my previous works, yes," says Sharif. "Here the main idea was images. We are surrounded by images – they are everywhere we look and they are even above us in the sky, coming and going like ghosts that we receive through the computer, TV and radio."

Also on display at IVDE are his 1970s newspaper and magazine cartoons – ink drawings that "wryly reflect on everything from the excesses of new money to labour, influence and greed", says the exhibition statement.

In one 1977 drawing, two Emirati men stand waist-deep in the waters of the Arabian Gulf as fish frolic around them. "My friend, I

the shows

● *Adventures of the Black Square* is at Whitechapel Gallery, London, until April 6

● *Hassan Sharif: Images* is at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai, until May 5

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recommend that you buy a piece of land in the sea," says one to the other. "But they are building an island here in two years."

Sharif brushes off any suggestion that the cartoon was prophetic, saying he was simply recording the conversations of the time. "I did not want to say that they would build an island in the sea, although people were talking about this at that time. I just wanted to show the kinds of ideas people were having then were like dreams to us. We never believed it could happen."

And, as much as the infrastructure and landscape of the UAE has metamorphosed since the 1970s, so has the art scene.

Back then, there was nobody in the UAE to teach Sharif about art. He went to London to study at the Byam Shaw School of Art in the early 1980s and returned with a whole new understanding of contemporary art, going on to found an atelier to share his knowledge and teach, while writing essays and giving lectures.

"I didn't only make art but I made

my audience too," he says. "I had to contextualise what I was doing."

Despite his phenomenal success at home and abroad, Sharif is uncomfortable being called the father of Emirati contemporary art.

"I hate it," he says. "I don't want to be a father or a grandfather; I just want to keep working. I am an artist, I found my way and this is me. I am happy that it happened like this."

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Left, *Dictionary 2015* for the *Images* series by Hassan Sharif, above. Top, one of his cartoons from 1977, showing two Emirati men in the Arabian Gulf discussing the future of real estate. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde; Satish Kumar / The National

Hassan Sharif // London

# Squaring the circle: Sharif at Whitechapel

Ben East

It's the kind of painting that can infuriate the more casual art follower. Walk into the Whitechapel Gallery in London and it's there, almost confrontational in its simplicity. A solid black shape sits on a white rectangular background. That's it. And yet Kazimir Malevich's famous piece, now almost 100 years old, is credited with not just being a revolutionary symbol, but a dawn of a new age, the beginning of abstract art and, well, the first painting that isn't "of" anything. It's one of the most important paintings in the world.

We're at the Whitechapel Gallery because just around the corner from Malevich's work is an offering from the pioneering UAE artist Hassan Sharif. He's in exalted company – to get to his piece, *Drawing Squares on the Floor Using a Cube*, you have to walk past Piet Mondrian's famous grid-style *Composition With Yellow, Blue and Red*, and work from the fascinating Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi, who melded western abstract ideas with Islamic patterns.

So to be included in this huge, and genuinely global survey of abstract art, entitled *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015*, feels like a big moment for Sharif, and the notion of UAE art itself.

"I feel really happy that I was chosen, and yes, being included does feel very important," he agrees. "I remember when I was in England in the beginning of the 1980s – I used to go to Whitechapel all the time. It was a gallery that was very important in my development. So to be exhibited there in particular feels good."

In fact, it was during the early 1980s that Sharif actually made *Drawing Squares on the Floor Using a Cube*. It's exactly what the title suggests – a series of photographs in which Sharif has drawn around a cube, gradually constructing a grid that appears to have no obvious end. Taken in the context of what Sharif was thinking about at the time, it could be an homage to Malevich – which he admits it is, in part – or a wider comment on the infinite possibilities of art, or even his homeland as it began to grow.

That's the thing with abstract art: there are many possibilities – or there are none. It might just be art. And Sharif understands how that's a barrier some can't overcome.

"Though for me, abstract art has everything to do with society," he says. "Malevich was creating his work at an incredible time in early 20th-century Russia. But the problem is, abstract art is not direct. It takes a lot of education to understand it, which is maybe why people don't always appreciate it."

When he was painting, Malevich wanted to break up the bourgeois art scene, which he believed was not much more than "a necktie on the starched shirt of a gentleman and a pink corset holding in the stomach of a fat lady". And Sharif has actually translated Malevich's Suprematist manifesto into Arabic – "I understand the primacy of pure feeling in creative art" – in an attempt to encourage a younger generation of UAE artists to gain inspiration from the past. In a sense, his journey to Whitechapel mirrors the journey the entire UAE contemporary art scene has been on, with Sharif as the figurehead.

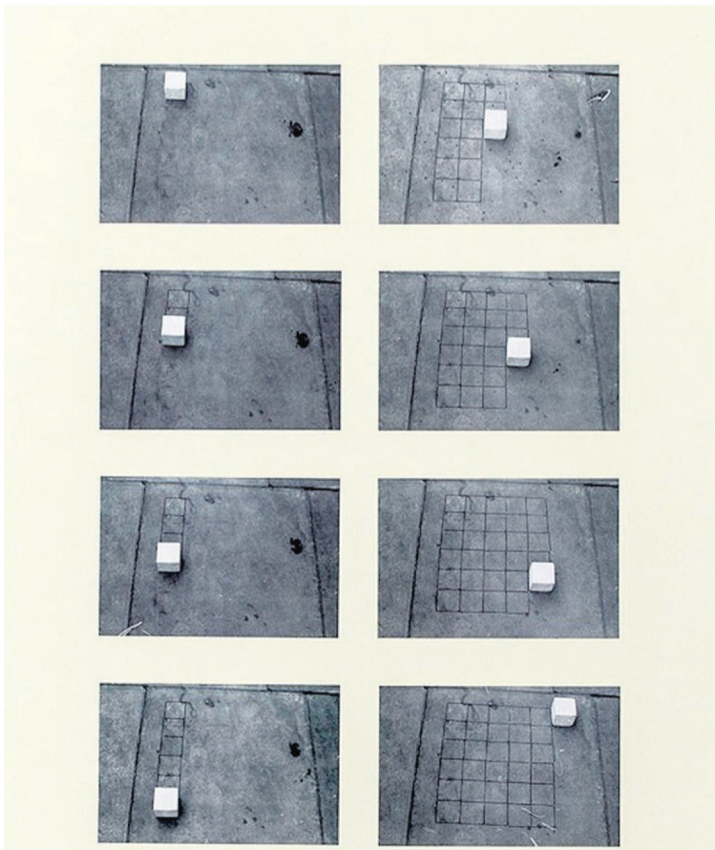
"I'm happy I've been recognised,

and taken part in the Venice Biennale, for example," says the artist. "But as artists in the UAE we are all one family and we have to support each other. We are new in terms of art, and we are in a way making history. There are now important abstract artists living here, and while the scene might be small, we are forcing ourselves to do better."

Sharif points to the imminent arrival of Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi – in which there will be more than 60 of his works – as proof that his world is changing. "I would never have thought back in 1982 these museums would exist in the UAE, but we now need them," he says.

"Life excites me," he continues. "Every day I'm stimulated. And I think my work is more than making art. For me, whatever I do, even when I walk to the bathroom, it's interesting. So if you ask which work of mine I like the most, then I can't answer that. Whatever I've done and whatever I'm going to do is equally important. I live art."

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Hassan Sharif's *Drawing Squares on the Floor Using a Cube* (1982). Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde