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HASSAN SHARIF

Experiments and Objects 1979–2011

BY KEVIN JONES

Like much of the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates is a hotbed of misconceptions. Commonly reduced to images of metastasized construction projects, frenzied consumerism and a rampant money-buys-everything worldview, the country suffers from the preconceived notion that culture—contemporary art included—suddenly appeared *ex nihilo* and was slapped onto its sprawling map a decade ago. Capital city Abu Dhabi's moneyed wooing of Western art behemoths such as the Guggenheim and the Louvre, inducing them to open outposts in the Saadiyat Island development, has done little to counter this cliché.

For a brief moment in 2011, however, a different reality appeared. In one masterstroke, the retrospective "Hassan Sharif: Experiments and Objects 1979–2011" not only revealed a pioneering Emirati artist's decades-long evolution through the twists and turns of contemporary art-making, it also catapulted Abu Dhabi into a new cultural limelight in a manner distinct from the promise of looming museums and their glossy, blockbuster shows.

Organized by the former Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, "Experiments and Objects" was a beacon to the art scene at the time. The rambling spaces of the freshly refurbished Qasr al-Hosn Cultural Quarter Hall, located in a historical area of Abu Dhabi, were dotted with 30 years' worth of Sharif's experimentation—from the early performance pieces in the desert to the ensnared clumps of consumer detritus for which he has become famous. Substantial meat was finally put on the bones of his honorific title "father of Emirati contemporary art," and Sharif was consecrated for having long grappled with modern art concepts in the utter absence of institutional context. The sheer scale and curatorial sophistication of "Experiments and Objects" outshone most of the preceding shows held in the capital, while its decidedly local focus counterbalanced the preview shows of international treasures favored by the fledgling museums. It was a watershed moment for both the artist and the Emirates, whose homegrown art scene gained a newer (and deeper) credibility.

"Experiments and Objects" was co-curated by Sharif acolyte and artist Mohammed Kazem and Middle East art advocate Catherine David, of Documenta 10 fame. Comprising more than 150 sculptures and installations, the show knowingly foregrounded the experimental dimension in two distinct currents of the artist's work, namely the titular "Experiments" and "Objects."

"Experiments" covered Sharif's Fluxus-inspired "actions" from the early 1980s: banal, tedious acts that were documented photographically. Initially performed in London, where Sharif attended art school, and later in the Dubai desert, works such as *Walking No. 1* (1982) and *Throwing Stones* (1983) established the artistic use of repetition, banality and futility that became his hallmarks. One standout was the strangely intimate *Hair and Milk Bottle* (1984) in which the artist, after having plucked a public hair from inside his trousers, attempted to toss it into a bottle, which was sealed upon the act's success.

Echoing the purported pointlessness of his "Experiments," Sharif described his "Objects," begun in 1984, as illustrations of

meaninglessness. Taking Duchampian philosophy to heart, they were crafted from commonplace materials, cut, bound or tied together with rope or wire, and thus stripped of their original function. The intestine-like rolls of *Newspaper 1* (1984) or the stringy rings of *Jute, Cloth and Rope* (1985) were clumped on the glass-enclosed shelves of the Qasr al-Hosn alongside more machine-aided variations of the same technique, such as *Punched Cardboard in Plastic Bags* (1986), comprising cardboard sheets punctured by an office paper puncher.

A concentrated series of "Objects" from the mid-1990s seemed somewhat apart, as distant from the agglomerative clusters of the '80s as they are from the mass-produced urban flotsam and jetsam that would follow. The piles of writhing, vaguely phallic shapes severely constrained by wire in *Jute and Wire* (1996) and *Cotton and Wire* (1996) implied sexual tension and latent violence.

As consumer culture tore through the Emirates at breakneck speed, its souks newly teeming with cheap, mass-produced goods from the global emporium, Sharif sat patiently by, knotting, weaving, folding and stringing. He painstakingly threaded together the props and refuse of daily life—cardboard boxes, plastic cups, Made-in-China metal plates, Made-in-Italy rubber buckets, stainless-steel spoons and foam flip-flops—into labor-intensive but immobilized, defunctionalized and useless creations, making his irony palpable. The towering pile *Slippers and Wire* (2009) was the multicolored centerpiece of "Experiments and Objects," overshadowing the more subdued heaps of twisting cardboard garlands punctuating the space.

While "Experiments and Objects" enabled new readings of individual works within the wider span of Sharif's oeuvre, it also raised questions about the audience in those early days of his artistic production. Determined to engage with younger Emiratis capable of seeing beyond the reigning traditionalism of Emirati art in the early 1980s, Sharif subtly layered provocation in his work, like some kind of sly invitation to the uninitiated. A nascent slant for interactivity, evident in such works as *Table* (1985–2008), which enticed viewers to bend and feel the pillowy, cotton-ball-lined underbelly of a table, hinted at a cunning strategy of audience involvement.

One of the bitter contradictions that dog Emirati artists is that they often enjoy greater visibility abroad than at home. In this light, "Experiments and Objects," the first curated show for a local artist organized to international standards, set a powerful, and reassuring, precedent. As the museum infrastructure on Saadiyat Island slowly shores up, the legacy of "Experiments and Objects" lives on—it stands as the most important (and ambitious) exhibition of a single regional artist that the UAE has held to date. Abu Dhabi's cultural bridges to the world are fortified by its own local artistic credibility, a reputation that Hassan Sharif's oeuvre, and his retrospective "Experiments and Objects," did much to establish.

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HASSAN SHARIF, *Suspended Objects*, 1971, mixed media, 359 x 180 x 180 cm.