



Obituary

OBITUARY

Hassan Sharif, the godfather of conceptual art in the Gulf, has died

Emirati who created constructivist drawings and performance pieces in the desert was “probably the greatest artist from the UAE”

by GARETH HARRIS | 19 September 2016



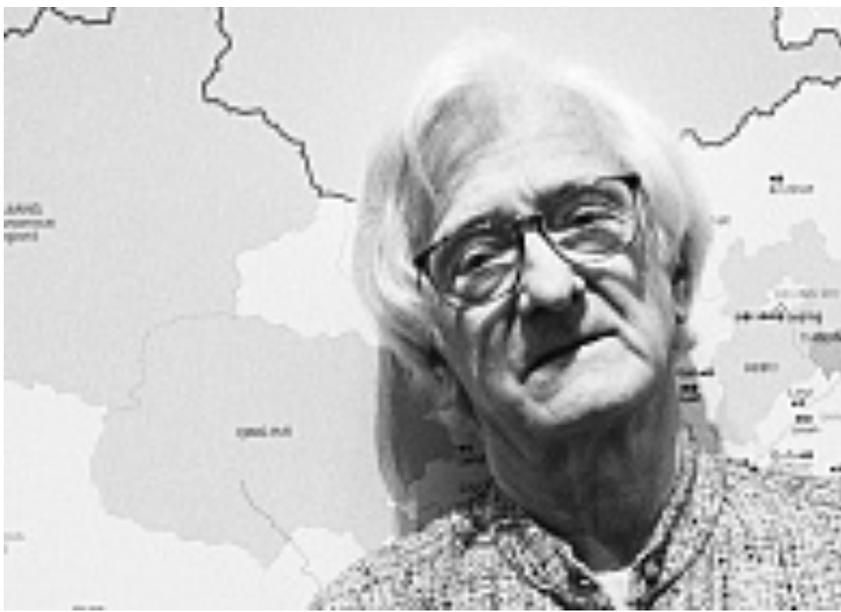
Hassan Sharif, who died yesterday, enjoyed going against the establishment: “Being ridiculous is very important to me... When my art is rejected, I feel happy.” (Photo: Maaziar Sadr)

The Emirati artist Hassan Sharif—who is recognised as a trailblazer of conceptual art in the Middle East—died yesterday (18 September), aged 65. The Dubai-based polymath, whose work encompassed painting, performance, assemblage and installation, was a “giant in terms of art in the UAE”, says Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, which includes several works by the artist. Sharif’s career began in the late 1970s as a satirical caricaturist, drawing cartoons for the Akhbar Dubai newspaper, but his vision and practice was transformed after studying at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London from 1979 to 1984. He returned to the UAE, with the aim of building an audience for contemporary art in the Gulf. “Sharif was probably the greatest artist from the UAE and was active at a time when the fledgling [UAE] federation, that was formed only in 1971, was seeking an identity and a place in the world. Sharif, to a large degree, helped define that identity,” Al-Qassemi says. Sharif transformed consumer items and found industrial materials into complex assemblages and weavings in his ongoing series Objects (1982-present). Another long-running series, entitled Semi-systems, consists of constructivist-inspired line drawings depicting different permutations of geometric patterns. His bold, Fluxus-inspired performance pieces made waves especially in the conservative UAE. Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, which represents Sharif, says in a statement: “For his earliest experimental work of the 1980s, Sharif brought friends to the edges of Dubai and they were the audience for his performances—jumping in the desert, tying rope between rocks— using apparently simple gestures to pointedly question ideals of technical skill, mastery, and accomplishment.”



Hassan Sharif, *After The Press Conference No.4* (2008) (image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation)

Sharif told the Emirati newspaper *The National* in 2014 that he enjoyed being a troublemaker: “Being ridiculous is very important to me... When my art is rejected, I feel happy. It’s from the perspective of the conventional mentality.” He established the Sharjah-based Al Marijah Art Atelier in 1984, a mentoring organisation for emerging Emirati artists, and co-founded the Emirates Fine Art Society in 1980. “He believed that art was not only a practice to be expanded and shared, but also a catalyst for community,” Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde says in a statement. Sharif was also selected to represent the UAE in a group show at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, the president of the Sharjah Art Foundation, says Sharif was “an icon and pioneer, a very daring artist who pushed boundaries and inspired many artists. He will be greatly missed.”



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