



Hassan Sharif, **Holes in Cardboard**, 1990, 100 x 70 x 50 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and The Flying House, Dubai.

# A Poetry Of Objects

Hassan Sharif is one of the most outstanding artists of his generation living and working in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. His assemblages and objects breathe new life into everyday objects. His work also speaks to life, nature, and the human spirit on a most profound level. There are many who consider him to be the father of contemporary art in the Gulf.

By Ian Findlay

Since the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971, the speed of modernization and urban development, driven by enormous oil revenues, has been extraordinary. Today, the seven emirates of the UAE are vibrant centers of international finance and trade.<sup>1</sup> Over the past three decades, the UAE art world has also changed beyond recognition, moving from a tradition of figurative and realist arts and crafts to one that embraces the most dramatic cutting-edge art in the Islamic world. Its evolving culture is drawn not only from the Arab world, firmly rooted in Islam, but also from the West. Such changes are underscored by the presence of international auction houses in Dubai and events such as the *Sarjah Biennial*, now in its ninth edition, *Art Dubai*, and the alternative *Al Bastakiya Art Fair*, now in its third edition, which is a platform for emerging artists, both local and international, working in a wide range of media.

The creation of a distinct contemporary artistic identity in the UAE began in earnest in the mid-1970s when young artists began to travel abroad to study, not only to Europe and North America, but also



Hassan Sharif, **Coir and Cloth**, 2007, 150 x 150 x 70 cm.

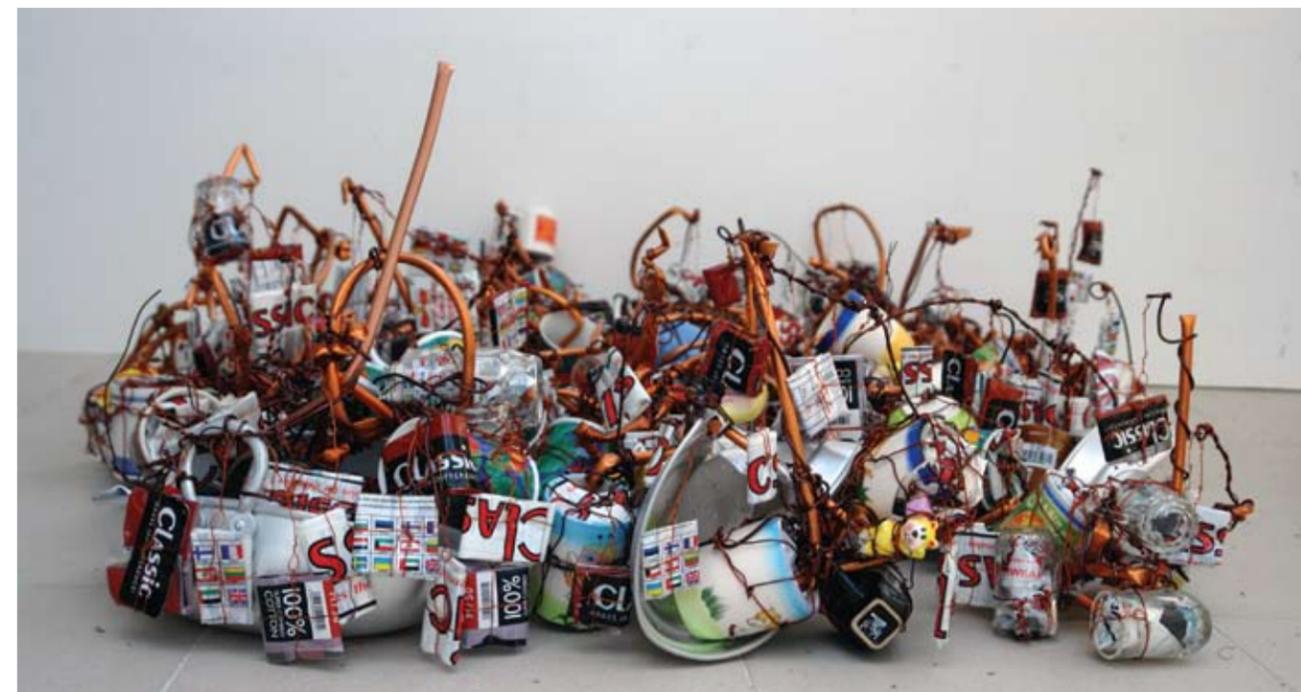
to art schools in the Arab world. Artists such as Ibrahim Mustafa (b.1953), Rahman al-Zainal, Obaid Srour (b.1953), Salih al-Ustadh (b.1957), Hisham al-Mazloum, Muhammad Yousif (b.1954), and Hassan Sharif (b.1956), to name but seven, have played significant roles in the development of both traditional and Western-inspired art. Outstanding among these artists, who have matured during all of the UAE's social and artistic changes, is Hassan Sharif, a

cartoonist, painter, object maker, sculptor, and installation artist.

Each generation of avant-garde artists has tilted at the windmills of convention, drawing inspiration and strength from the thrill of the new and the unknown. Sharif, who was born in Dubai and studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art, London, from 1979 to 1984, has always been a rebel. He has never been afraid to challenge conventional notions of what art is and what it is not.

While Sharif continues to paint and to draw but "only for documentation," he rejects the view that he is a sculptor or conceptual or installation artist, or even an abstractionist or abstract-expressionist. Rather he sees himself as an object maker whose work can

be as much about painting as it is about objects. It is clear that through his objects or assemblages he speaks to society's wastefulness, to "the monotony of the industrial producer." Where most people will see only 'trash,' Sharif sees materials for making art. In 'trash' he obtains a sense of freedom that exists beyond art's formal rules. Outside the rules he has tried hard to find himself, especially in his use of tangible materials.



Hassan Sharif, **Classic 2**, 2008, 70 x 150 x 150 cm.

"I am an object maker but I am also painting. It is the same as making an object," he says. "These objects plus the paintings, which I call objects, must have three features. One is nonsense, which is to say I don't have secrets. The second is that it is useless, that it has no function, and that is why it remains a work of art and penetrates a human's memory. And the third is that it is skill-less, because I have no secret to reveal, so I am making art. Even when I paint, I say to myself that I am making a painting. The word 'making' is very important for me."<sup>2</sup>

Sharif has struggled against the confining rules of the art establishment for almost four decades. Without this fight he would not be the artist or teacher that he is, nor would his influence among Emirati artists be as important as it has become. Indeed, there are many people who regard Sharif as the father of contemporary art in the UAE. His words and actions are colored by his experiences of rejection, beginning with his first well-documented exhibition at Dubai's Central Public Library in 1976, when there were "calls to burn his work and expel him from the country," as the writer Lisa Ball-Lechgar has noted. Rather than retreat from the art scene, Sharif has doggedly pursued his own course to make art that is uniquely his own and which is now firmly situated in the mainstream of Emirati art.

Sharif's determination not to be cowed by threats and criticism has always set him apart from those who have taken the safe artistic route, making art that offends no one and sells quickly. Sharif's art, a multifarious narrative, is not timid but something that is bold and stirs the imagination. He abhors "the banality of the rules of art, which stifle, [and] puts one in



Hassan Sharif, *Raj - 555*, 2008, 100 x 200 x 200 cm.

a straightjacket." But Sharif is able to speak of his own art with sense of humor and a candor that surprises. "I see my work as a meta-narrative. I create stories," he says. "[But] my work is silent, nonsense, banality, skill-less, useless, without morality, dumb, and erotic." Whether or not one believes these things, he clearly delights in unshackling the mind, provoking the viewer into imagining art far beyond the Orientalist realism, figuration, and impressionism that dominated early Emirati art.

While Sharif speaks perceptively to many issues, his art is not didactic; it speaks to a wide variety of contemporary concerns, from the challenges of creating a strong personal identity to the wastefulness of industrial production, from the acceptance of new kinds of art, including the demands of painting now, to how it is perceived in the rapidly changing societies of the United Arab Emirates. The manner in which he makes his art raises important

questions about the place of art in the Gulf: What materials does one use to make new art for a new time? Is art a reflection of the society in which it is made? How does one relate assemblage to other art forms? Is one making art for now or for future generations who, with the benefit of hindsight, might understand it better than earlier generations? And what is art and where does it come from?

But answering his questions has required a lifetime. The foundations of his art and ideas began to take shape during his studies in London, a time that opened up not just a new world of intellectual, technical, and theoretical challenges, but also made him aware that there were in fact no limitations to the making of art. In cultivating a unique artistic voice Sharif's foundation, which is constantly being built up, embraces art's language, history, and philosophy, as well as poetry, literature, performance and installation art, and humor.

One sees this humor at work in assemblages such as *Clothes Pegs* (2007) and *Raj and 555* (2008). In the former Sharif's colorful arrangement of wooden and plastic clothes pegs are placed in the center panel of a cardboard box that has been opened out; in the latter he uses a trademark for "cultivating and conditioning and promoting and stimulating the mind of the individual in all societies." We smile at these works because their quotidian reality is reinforced for the viewer by Sharif's subtle simplicity: the familiar is made unfamiliar through arrangement.

Innumerable artists, critics, and theorists have also played a vital role in shaping Sharif's own theories and art making. Among the most important are Marcel Duchamp, Alberto Giacometti, Willem de Kooning, Kasimir Malevich, Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, Walter Benjamin, Clement



Hassan Sharif, *Clothes Pegs*, 2007, 19 x 41 cm.

Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. "I like the wit and ironic way of Marcel Duchamp. He said it was better to be influenced by poetry and literature than impressionism. Conceptual art is about thinking. De Kooning said that all art after Marcel Duchamp is conceptual. The difference between my objects and conceptual art is that I am not Duchamp nor Willem de Kooning and that is why I want to differentiate between making objects and conceptual art or painting. I am not an abstractionist. I insist that I am not a conceptual artist nor painting as an abstract-expressionist. I don't do what you are doing, neither do I do the opposite of what you are doing. I make something else or I do something else. This 'else' is art, whether or not this 'else' is conceptual, minimal, abstract, pictorial, or representational.

"Philosophy saved me, especially that of Kant and the Enlightenment philosophers and the Frankfurt School of criticism. I am influenced by the French; especially Jean-Francois Lyotard, who said that we do not need any more discussions about being noble; that we don't need any high-level discourse. Life is so complicated and philosophy helps people to be stronger. Philosophy teaches people to think about their condition. The thing is, in 1982 I started thinking about what art is, the function and the nature of art. It is something beyond philosophy."

Fashioned from the simplest of objects and materials Hassan Sharif's art appears as an effortless response to a chaotic world. A close look at his use of such things as brightly colored plastic sandals, cardboard, coir, clothes pegs, plastic cups, paper, copper, aluminum, spoons, and cloth reveals that this is not so. His art is a complex intellectual and emotional riposte to suffocating banality, much in the same way as the art of the great assemblage artist Louise Nevelson's was in the 1950s. But whereas Nevelson boxed her objects and materials, Sharif, who calls his work "objects, not sculpture in the modern or contemporary sense," likes

his work "to be exhibited on the floor. I don't want my work to be decorative in boxes. But you can't get [entirely] rid of the decorative." While Nevelson's works were boxed or shelved and Sharif's are freestanding, both their artworks are directly related to collage.

Painting, drawing, sculpture,



Hassan Sharif, *Spoons 3*, 2008, 230 x 60 x 45 cm.

philosophy, the environment, poetry, politics, cartoons, irony, speed, calligraphy, and literature inform Hassan Sharif's transformations of his everyday materials and objects. His art is also colorful, lyrical, elegant, and humorous. There is, too, a sense of timelessness about it and through this one is able to move beyond the obviousness of the materials into human memory. Sometimes, his art appears random; at other times, it is well ordered, even carefully planned to the smallest detail. Sharif's art then speaks to diverse human sensibilities where we become more aware of humankind's relationship with the environment, nature, and the wasteful reality of the industrial process and consumer society, as well as the margins between art and life.

By the 1950s, when the artist Jean Dubuffet coined the term 'assemblage,' the visual arts world was ready for a new aesthetic with which to address a rapidly changing world. Assemblage or object making, although a significant part of the art canon since the early years of the 20th century, remained the province of only a few adventurous artists. Object making, including Sharif's, is touched by virtually every *ism* and *ist* but for Sharif the freedom to make his art should not be dominated by one thing. "I take from the *isms* [what] I like instead of being dominated by one *ism* or *ist*," he says. "I don't want one *ism* but a pluralistic view, taking in all cultures. I don't blame people who see my work and don't understand it. I am making art for the next generation."

As an intense young artist Hassan Sharif grasped the freshness of object making with the tenacity of a free spirit. Like Marcel Duchamp, who found sculpture everywhere, even in rejected material, Sharif rejects nothing, embracing everything that will add to his vision. Today, however, he approaches his art making more calmly, but equally intensely. "I used to be obsessed. Now I don't need intuition or inspiration. I don't agree with people about inspiration," he says. "Art for me is a decision. Suppose I want to make something tomorrow, say three things, if I do one of these three things, it is enough. Making art

has nothing to do with heritage, tradition, convention, childhood memories; it has a link with archetypes, before history. How we find art is by making, by doing, which means living art. You don't live to make art because art is something you cannot stop doing—that is why art is alive.”

As one looks over Sharif's works of the past 30 years in his store-room at his home and gallery known as The Flying House, in Al Quoz, Dubai, it is clear that he has been making art that expresses not only an objective view of the world but also something of his spiritual life and his spontaneous nature. This is evident in almost all of his work, from the making of his first 'books' in the early 1980s to such recent works as *Spoons* (2008), a magnificent sculptural work of spoons bound together with copper wire that hangs on the wall, and *Classic* (2008), a boldly colored work that suggests the fluidity of Arabic calligraphy and an abstract-expressionist collage.

Sharif's first books were made when he was starting "to experiment with art and life. I was a cartoonist in the 1970s, until 1979, in the *Dubai News*. I stopped because I started to think of fine art. This period was very important to me but during this time I was still painting. My art came to represent everything except cartoons. Cartoons are like a joke. I think reality needs sharper things than a joke."

His books are not jokes. They may be seen as ironic statements on the content of all books and, by inference, knowledge and secrets. For Sharif a book begins two dimensionally as individual pages, much like a drawing or the canvas of a painting, then gradually emerges as a three-dimensional object. It is this emerging that clearly intrigues Sharif and inspires his 're-interpretation' of structure and content. His books have a simple geometry that not



Hassan Sharif, *Eight Very Small Horizontal Lines and X*, 1983, 5 x 40 x 40 cm.

only appeals to the eye, but is also part of their austere beauty. Such works may be interpreted as soft sculptures. A book can be just a cardboard box opened out with pages affixed to one of the sides as in *Book of Numbers* (1982) and *Eight very small horizontal lines and X* (1983). The pages may be virgin blank or have typed or hand-drawn straight or wavy or broken lines that he says lead to Kandinsky or Klee. His rudimentary books suggest something of pre-history, of humankind imagining what kind of form will contain their narrative. Sharif's blank pages demand to be written upon and those that are written upon demand that the narrative there be extended by the viewers' imaginations.

His *Holes in Cardboard* (1990)—packs of different colored cardboard bound together and piled on the floor—suggests books that have been discarded, the secrets now unwanted, knowledge abandoned. There is something inherently sad about this work as it reminds one of a pile of books waiting to be burned, the first

step towards destroying a culture.

With works such as *Zip & Cardboard* (2007) and *Clothes Pegs* (2007) the lined paper of his earlier books has given way to colored materials tied with ribbons and the simple geometry of plain wood and colored plastic clothes pegs. One may see these colored materials and clothes pegs as extensions of the typed or handwritten line, as sculpted lines from another culture, calligraphy or hieroglyphs, to be read as something magical, speaking to the imagination, tiny segments of Sharif's meta narrative.

Books and the reading of an artwork so fascinate Sharif that one of his future projects is "a book to be read in which the reader can read a painting of Cezanne's or read a performance of Joseph Beuys."

While Sharif's 'books' have a studied formality about them, other objects such as *Plastic and Wire 2* (1987), which reminds one of the bold line that Sharif has used in drawings, *Plastic Cups and Coir* (1999), *Cloth and Paper* (2005), *Plastic Funnel - Aluminum Foil* (2006), *Foam Rubber and Copper* (2008), and *Classic 2* (2008) come together in bursts of color and spontaneous energy and as such they are clearly connected to the dynamism of abstract-expressionist painting. Since he titles his works simply with the names of the materials that he is using, he is letting us know that art is everywhere, that it requires no special materials. Perhaps he is even suggesting that, since his materials are so common, anyone can make art. "I make some objects that are over ornamented so the audience exaggerates when it questions: Why is it so? The opposite is that I have objects that are almost minimalist. In both there is no skill so everyone can do it," he says.

There is a quirky, lyrical quality to Sharif's art that is immensely attractive. This is no accident since he has a great interest

in poetry, but he also has a sense of time that informs his art. He says that whether it is a minute, an hour, a day, or a month, he pays no heed except that he knows within himself that his "art" will emerge from him as a continuous narrative, life unfolding in the folds or twists or bends of his objects. "The aim of my work is not answering any questions, nor is it solving any problems," he says. "It represents my state of mind up to this moment. Because after one hour my state of mind is going to change, but it doesn't mean that I have forgotten. It is adding to my state of mind and my experiences so that one hour is added."

But in object making Sharif is not only investigating how to bring his found materials together in a lively and spontaneous manner, but is also questioning the space between form and illusion, between void and solid, and the relationship between painting and sculpture. To achieve the most fluid results he allows them to reside freely on the floor, their colorful volumes and arrangements open to myriad interpretations.

Sharif invests his found objects with a new identity far beyond their quotidian reality; there is both a hint of Arte Povera and existentialist angst here.

This is not a job of a few hours but often weeks, months, and years of activity during which he rediscovers and reinvents the reality of his materials, challenging their original associations in unique, colorful objects, sometimes tied with copper and rope, of which *Classic 2* is a good example; sometimes the materials are simply piled up on the floor unrestrained, as in *Coir and Cloth*. *Plastic Sandals* (2009) [see cover] is a fine example of Sharif giving new life to the mundane object. The pile of brightly colored sandals bundled together and tied with wire stands on the floor as an object whose fluid geometry encloses dark spaces, whose line and form suggest something eerily organic, a monster grown from waste. But Sharif's 'monsters' have a warmth and intensity that the calculating, high-tech consumerist society that is 21st century Dubai does not.

Some people might see madness in his art. But as he says, "If art is madness, then the authorities should open the doors of the asylums. Art is not madness. Art is a mirage, as Marcel Duchamp said. It [art] comes



Hassan Sharif, *Foam Rubber and Copper*, 2008, 40 x 70 x 40 cm.

from philosophy. If an artist doesn't walk together with the philosophy in his time, then there is something wrong in his art. He can't improve," says Sharif. "In the past artists' demand was how to paint and then what to paint. Now this has totally changed. Now the demand is in knowing what painting is in the context of the 21st century and how we are going to make a painting or an object."

Hassan Sharif's influence as a writer and teacher since the mid-1980s has been profound and his artistic voice remains a unique one in the United Arab Emirates. He has long been aware that while new art movements and schools dress differently

from their predecessors, to hold onto one's voice in times of rapid change is a difficult challenge indeed. "Art," he says, "is between order and chance," and he lives through this daily to make his art. He notes that one has to move beyond that which is safe in art, to make things that one loves, to speak in a philosophical way so that one begins to understand life, and not to be afraid of what art has to offer.

While many challenges remain for artists and the acceptance of new art in the UAE, Sharif looks to the future with optimism, but it is tinged by a warning. "I think there is a new civilization growing or emerging from the Middle East. You cannot judge now how it will look," he says. "The most important thing is education. We abandoned art, music, and dance in government schools. We must reinstate these if we are to build or to realize a new civilization. Without these we won't reach this new civilization. In the collective unconscious if these things are destroyed, human beings become little more than machines." Δ

Notes:

1. The United Arab Emirates, in the eastern Arabian peninsula, formerly known as the Trucial States, is made up of Abu Dhabi (the largest of the emirates), Dubai, Sharjah (al-Shaiqa), Ra's al-Khayma, Fujayra, Umm al-Qaywayn, and Ajman (the smallest of the emirates).
2. All quotations are from the author's interviews with Hassan Sharif in Dubai, March 28, 2008, and March 22, 2009.



Hassan Sharif, *Zip & Cardboard*, 2007, 24 x 40 cm.



Hassan Sharif, *Plastic Funnel - Aluminum Foil*, 2006, 150 x 100 x 100 cm.