

ART & DESIGN

The Materials Man of the Emirates

By HOLLAND COTTER DEC. 28, 2017

SHARJAH, United Arab Emirates — Ethnic profiling is business as usual in the contemporary art market. Artists from outside the Euro-American sphere, if they want to be noticed, are required to a) present evidence of their origins, like a badge, in their work, and b) package that identity in forms, styles and images that the West can readily recognize.

The Emirati artist Hassan Sharif (1951-2016), who has a sensational retrospective at the Sharjah Art Foundation here on the edge of the Persian Gulf, was a born contrarian. Working in a range of seemingly unrelated media and styles, he made art that belongs to no locatable culture, or maybe to several. Dodging definitions, he referred to himself, half-jokingly, as a nomad, though he didn't live like one. Apart from a few youthful years in England, he spent his entire life in the Gulf region, where he is revered today as a pioneer.

Born in Iran, Sharif was raised in Dubai, which, before the 1960s oil boom, was a low-rise town that made money from harvesting pearls. His father was a professional baker, and Sharif speculated that his own interest in art as an activity — manipulating materials, pushing idea around — began with watching his father make cakes. When, a bit later, he came across reproductions of Cézanne, van Gogh and Picasso in books, he knew that an artist — and a modern

one — was what he wanted to be.

He had talent. A natural draftsman with, as he put it, “a sarcastic outlook on life,” in the 1970s he landed magazine gigs drawing political cartoons that skewered the newly formed, oil-rich Emirates for their pursuit of consumerist modernization. At the same time, he had some of his Cubist-inflected studio paintings accepted in government-sponsored shows. This earned him a scholarship to study art abroad. Many of his contemporaries, given an option, headed for Paris. Sharif went to England.

In art school there, he again made a swerve. He gravitated not to the traditional painting faculty, but to teachers interested in Conceptualism, including performance and mathematically determined abstraction. One of his art history heroes was the chess-playing Marcel Duchamp, who tried to desanctify art, pull it out of the consumption trap. Sharif’s scratchy abstract drawings from this time, generated by gamelike rules of logic, are among the earliest entries in the Sharjah show, along with photographs of performances which involved having conversations in toilets and stripping while walking up stairs.

If such work was only mildly far-out in England by the early 1980s, it was radical in the Emirates, where Sharif returned on summer breaks. There, in 1983, he did another walking piece, this one an endurance trek in the scorching desert outside Dubai. Two years later, in Sharjah, he exhibited abstract paintings, not in a gallery but in an outdoor market, with one picture lying on the ground, another laid flat, like a tabletop, on four upright water bottles. No one knew what to think. He was introducing, at home, a new idea of what art could be, and what could be art.

By then, Sharif had finished school and was back in the Gulf region for good. At first he spent most of his time in Sharjah, a half-hour drive from Dubai, where he made common cause with a small community of avant-garde artists, poets and thinkers who called themselves the Emirates Fine Arts Society. Group support was crucial. In the Emirates at that time, the acceptable form of advanced contemporary Arabic work was calligraphic abstraction, which Sharif disdained, as he did all forms of “nationalist” art. Yet to an Emirati audience, his own art looked nationalist — Western — and met with rejection.

But even before his return, Sharif’s art had started to change in response to

Emirati life. The materialism that he had mocked in his political cartoons had grown exponentially. Markets that once sold handicrafts were flooded with factory product. And the new glut seemed to increase rather than appease hunger. Sharif commented on these developments not with direct statements — he dismissed his early cartoons as heavy handed — but through a series of sculptures, called “Urban Archaeology,” that took the market itself as raw material, and that would become his best-known work.

He fashioned the earliest examples from street trash, elaborately knotting lengths of ordinary rope, bundling broken-down cardboard boxes and braiding strips of recycled cloth. He soaked newspaper in water and glue, mashed it to a pulp, then kneaded the pulp the way his father had kneaded dough. He molded the pulp into loaf-like cakes — some resembled phalluses or turds — and displayed them in stacks and piles, the way he remembered baked goods in markets when he was a child.

Even as he was doing all this, markets and appetites were expanding. In souks and shops, machine-made overwhelmed handmade; imported wiped out local. At some point, Sharif slowed down on scavenging and started buying, picking up cheap, disposable objects, the equivalent of Duchampian ready-mades, in bulk: plastic toys, made-in-China buckets, slippers, brooms, rugs, flip flops. He attached such items to supports woven from wire. The resulting assemblages — free-standing or suspended, cascading down walls, spilling across floors — colonized gallery space the way consumerism swamped the globe.

But this art didn't come across as polemical. It was, first and foremost, visually delightful, with its sleek surfaces, bright colors and hectic, aggressive abundance. It had a tickling psychological edge, a blend of zaniness and violence. And it was accessible in an I-could-do-that-too way. This was art that didn't rely on genius skills or elite training or expensive materials. Almost anyone with a little cash, a knack for wire-twisting and a magpie eye, could make their own versions at home, just as Sharif did in the modest Dubai apartment where he lived and worked.

His studio — including a beat-up desk scattered with pencils, pipe tobacco and notes-to-self — has been transferred, intact, to the Sharjah Foundation. Installed in the show, it looks, in its stuff-jammed corners, as much a hoarder's lair as an art sanctum. And it gives some sense of Sharif's work habits: Basically,

he never stopped. For him art-making seems to have been a form of existential busywork, part child's play, part labor, part meditation. Sharif, the social skeptic, viewed consumerism as addictive waste. But Sharif's art insists that nothing is wasted if you make waste your creative source.

And it wasn't just making art that absorbed his energy. He also taught art, wrote about it, promoted it and helped form organizations, like the Flying House in Dubai (founded by his older brother, Abdul Raheem Sharif), that supported it. He cleared the ground for succeeding generations of Emirati artists, and for international events like the Sharjah Biennial, introduced in 1993 and still going strong. And in his own work, he continued to experiment, to take the pulse of his time and place, which also meant, all politics being connected, that he took in the globe.

After the worldwide economic crisis of 2008, which hit the Emirates hard, the "Urban Archaeology" sculptures shrank in scale, became domesticated. Some were composed of a single household item — a dustpan, a hammer — wrapped in copper wire as if thickly bandaged, or armored, or possibly smothered. At the same time, Sharif's old-style political satire resurfaced in a series of monstrously ugly paintings — they look the way our current American politics sounds — titled "Press Conference." And there was a palette-cleansing return to ultra-spare, system-based drawing and painting.

Examples of most of this work are in his retrospective, "I Am the Single Work Artist," through Feb. 3, which is gratifyingly, though exhaustingly, large. Organized by Hoor Al Qasimi, the founder of the Sharjah Art Foundation, it's installed in two foundation sites: a complex of white-box-style galleries along Al Mureijah Square and in a 19th-century house called Bait Al Serkal, once the residence of the British Commissioner for the Arabian Gulf, and later a hospital.

The architectural ambience of the two places is very different. And it says a lot about the cultural versatility of Sharif's art that it looks equally at home in both settings, as it did in the Venice Biennale last summer. (A New York gallery show, "Hassan Sharif: Semi-Systems," opens at Alexander Gray Associates, in Manhattan, on Thursday, Jan. 4.) The sheer scale of the Sharjah show is an acknowledgment of the high esteem that this artist has, entirely on his own adversarialist terms, earned at home, and that is now ripe to be globally shared.