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Tracing the Rise of Conceptual Art in the UAE

This notion of playfulness is the crucial lens through which to view this survey exhibition of artists from the United Arab Emirates

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Installation view of *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Community, 1988 – 2008* at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery (all photos courtesy of NYUAD Art Gallery unless otherwise noted)

ABU DHABI, UAE — In a recent conversation about his new role, Hammad Naser, the curator appointed to organize the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pavilion at the upcoming Venice Biennale, discussed his curatorial theme of exploring aspects of play through contemporary art from the region. For Naser, this idea took shape from observing the works of Hassan Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, and Mohammed Kazem three core members of a group of visual artists spearheaded by Sharif and often referred to as “the five,” who have come to define conceptual art in the UAE. This notion of playfulness couldn’t have been a better lens through which to view the survey exhibition *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Community, 1988 – 2008*, currently on view at the NYU Abu Dhabi

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Art Gallery, which showcases the innovative trajectory of “the five,” through the works of several key members of the group.

Coming nearly six months after Sharif’s untimely death at the age of 65, the exhibition, which features Sharif, Al Saadi, and Kazem alongside Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hussain Sharif, Jos Clevers, Vivek Vilasini, and Ebtisam Abdulaziz, attempts to capture what their art meant to Sharif and his cohorts at a time when there were no precedents in Dubai for conceptual art.



Hassan Sharif, “Cardboard and Coir” (1999) cardboard and coir 70 × 190 × 170 cm, loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Sharif was an outlier from the get-go. His early enthusiasm for bringing radically new art making practices to his local community became even more entrenched after he returned from studying at the Byam School of Art in London in the early 1980s, where he was exposed to the history of and works produced by the Dada and Fluxus movements. He began to use combinations of commonplace objects like rags and cardboard, wire and rope, and even clothes to make his art. In his piece “Toftbo-Ikea-Made in India” (2007), consumer objects found in middle-class households, such as bathroom mats, copper tube, wire, cloth, and combs were embedded in glass doors. The purpose of his work lay in its very purposelessness — to be nothing other than unconventional objects that he referred to as “non-retinal art.” These objects were a complete departure from what he described as “paintings of camels and horses,” that were predominant at the time.

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Hassan Sharif "Toftbo-Ikea-Made in India" (2007) bathroom mat, copper tube and wire, plastic, combs, cloth, double-sided tape and wooden door with glass, 203 × 91 × 5 cm, loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde (image courtesy of Isabelle Van Den Eynde Gallery)

Whilst this playful activity appeared to be aimless and pointless, Sharif was consumed with the pursuit of a new conception of art. According to Maya Allison, the curator of the exhibition, the paradoxical activity of conceiving playfulness as seriousness and vice versa formed the crux of his practice. It allowed Sharif and the rest of "the five" to experiment with new methods. What is evident in this exhibition is that from the very beginning of their practices, each one of them used very different materials and forms to make objects. As Sharif wrapped small cardboard pieces with rope and left them in a heap on the floor for "Cardboard and Coir" (1999), Ibrahim made large, stone primordial sculptures, which brought to mind the Lebanese artist Simone Fattal's work, that also resembles ancient artifacts. Ibrahim also made colorful oil paintings of abstract geometrical forms, and numerous paintings like "Lines (group of 9)" (1992), with India ink on paper, which were inspired by marks made on the wall to tally the number of water bottles his father bought from the local vendor.

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Abdullah Al Saadi "Circle and Line" (1999) mixed media 38 × 308 × 11 cm, loan courtesy of the artist

For this group, art emerged organically from their engagement with local customs, relics, and discarded articles. While Sharif has come to be known as the father of conceptual art in the UAE, he was deeply invested in teaching students and local audiences new ways of thinking by reframing commonplace practices. For instance, Sharif's pile of small bundles of cloth placed on the floor for "Cloth and Paper" (2005) resonated with a conservative Emirati observer who, as Maya Allison told me, recalled the Bedouin tradition of using bundles to store objects. Similarly, Al Saadi's mixed media installation "Circle and Line," (1999), comprised of objects such as a camera and a broken Japanese mask hung like clothes from a clothes line installed in the gallery, was motivated by objects his mother would leave him whenever she visited his studio. Even "Mummified," (1993), made up of bug specimens displayed in old tin cans laid out in an orderly fashion in a modern, leather briefcase, showcased Al Saggi's marvelous transformation of local critters into precious objects.

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Installation view including Jos Clevers "Spoon" (1996) wood, linoleum and iron wire, loan courtesy The Flying House and paintings "Untitled," c. 1995 acrylic on wood, loan courtesy Foundation Collection Jos Clevers

In the early years of the group, which disbanded after 2008, the dual notion of play and earnestness was paramount to them, as is evident in Hussain Sharif's large "Installation" (1995), which consists of junk knickknacks and found objects such as shoes, nails, broken toys, beer cans, plastic bottles — all embedded in small concrete platforms made to fit each object. These pieces resemble relics of a lost community, much like Kazem's more austere "Keyboard," (1995), made up of key hooks indicative of numerous unseen occupants. Sharif's objective to initiate disruptive methods is realized by both Hussain Sharif and Kazem whose works also explore atypical processes for making distinctly unorthodox objects.

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Installation view including works by Ebtisam Abdulaziz and Vivek Vilasini

But as Allison points out in her catalog essay, Sharif's small group of "five" was not limited to Emiratis and artists. Poets, philosophers, and writers were embraced, as were the Dutch artist Jos Clevers and the Indian artist Vivek Vilasini who both became significant significant members of the group. Clevers' untitled painting from 1996, of unbridled gestures and graffiti-like squiggles, and Vilasini's large sculpture "Brides of Seven Climes" (1996/2008), of pots covered with braided rope, resonate with the same raw energy seen in works of the other members. I see a similar kind of intensity in the jagged lines within the black and white photographic abstractions of the young female artist Abdulaziz, who later joined.

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Hussain Sharif, "Installation" (1995) cement, found objects 600 × 170 × 30 cm, loan courtesy the artist and Salwa Zeidan Gallery

It is only after Sharif's brother Abdul Raheem established Flying House in 2007 — an empty house used to showcase their work which could be seen regularly — that international exposure and prominence came. Until then, besides a few exhibitions at the Sharjah Art Museum and the Emirates Fine Art Society, their prolifically produced radical objects only appeared sporadically in cafés and ad hoc venues, and thus remained largely unseen and unheard of. But We Cannot See Them reveals the doggedness of a group of artists who instigated each other and prodded viewers to see and eventually embrace what had not been shown or produced in the UAE before.

But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Community, 1988–2008, is currently on view at the New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery (on the NYU campus on Saadiyat Island) through May 25.

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