American University of Beirut

Exhibition Review 2

Hassan Sharif: Works 1980-2012

Name: Freddy Vartabedian

Instructor: Dr. Angela Harutyunyan

FAAH 229E

Date: April 22, 2012

Hassan Sharif: Works 1980-2012

Galerie Sfeir-Semler presents Hassan Sharif: Works 1980-2012, Hassan Sharif’s first solo exhibition in Beirut1. It comprises a series of works that vary between paintings, performance works and photographs, drawings, sculptures and objects, works that stretch over the last three decades of Sharif’s art presented in a non-chronological order, merging the old with the most recent, in a seemingly perfect harmony not devoid of implications of formal and conceptual conflicts within the artist’s works. These works summarize Hassan Sharif’s pioneer quest in the realm of contemporary art in the Arab world in general and in the UAE in particular.

“Different” is what characterizes the works of Hassan Sharif for whom “Anti-definition is the definition of contemporary art”2. The exhibition comprises a collection that conveys the notion of individuality and a strong personal identity through a new kind of art that poses a difficulty in understanding for the average viewer, but at the same time imposes the vivid engagement of the mind; a collection of works that stands as an evidence to Sharif’s words, “Art is not made to be understood, it is not a train that carries you to a specific destination. We, the audience, have to get out and walk into new spaces”2.

The most striking element in the exhibition is the simplicity of the material used to “make” complex art arrangements which leaves the viewer with a sense of amazement and a lingering smile. Through the use of cardboard, newspapers, wires, cables, wastes like empty boxes, everyday utensils like spoons or a toilet brush…, Sharif has created colorful and humorous works which, at the same time, are no less than elegant.

A series of eye-catching colored cardboard boxes filled with variously shaped pieces stand to greet the visitor in *Boxes and Objects* (2011). While in another corner, *Spoons I* (2008), a giant sculpture made of twisted spoons and copper tube captures the viewer’s attention. Fascinating superimposed brush strokes of colors on ordinary or informal sketch papers (*Colour experiments,* 1980), a ruler wrapped in wire (*Ruler and Wire,* 1984) or a diptych of a very unusual theme, pliers (*Thing in TFH No.15,* 2008) and even a hand pump or a toilet brush wrapped in copper wire (*Hand pump,* 2008 and *Toilet brush,* 2008), to name a few among the long list, stand out as pieces of art where the ironic simplicity of material appears in sharp contrast to Sharif’s Emirati background which has come to be associated with oil, gold, skyscrapers or in brief, a luxuriously rich and modern background.

The exhibition conveys Sharif’s critical view of hyper- modernism and hyper- materialism that have changed the nomadic desert people of the Emirates to monsters of consumerism. *Spoons No. 1*, (2012) on the floor, that appears as a heap of identical spoons twisted on black cable, *Boxes and Newspaper* (2011) where an enormous number of newspapers have been folded or wrapped or even wrinkled in identical patterns and filled in the boxes, *Wire* (1984) with its 7528 twisted wires forming a pyramidal shape, or even *Kitchen* (1985) with its numerous lines signifying the repetitive movement of going to the kitchen, all convey Sharif’s sarcastic tone through the stifling monotony and repetition involved in making them. Through the choice of material and endless knotting, weaving, folding, twisting or moving, the artist seems to have rediscovered or even reinvented the reality of his materials and has turned the monotonous work into a meditative ritual3. The irony even seems to extend to the names of the works which are the names of the materials he uses or simply their labels, hinting at the pronounced influence of labels in the modern consumer’s life or more precisely in today’s shopping driven culture.

*Mirror* (2008), *Weave* (2008) and *Fleur de Lys* (2008) are also works made of cast away pieces of wastes like metal or broken mirror, assembled by Sharif’s artistic fingers to become sculptures that talk about the wastefulness of modern societies, but at the same time have a beauty that imprints itself in the mind. Certainly, Sharif moves beyond that which is safe in art, challenging conventional notions of what art is and what it is not and leaving behind art that is easily accepted in the UAE such as the tradition of figurative and realist art, to make things that he loves3.

Western influence imprints the exhibition, owing it to Sharif’s British academic background in art, mainly in Constructivism and Fluxus. In his performance works, such as *Swing* (1983), *Walking No.2* (1983), *Jumping No.2* (1983)…Sharif uses his body as an artistic medium4. His works include preparatory notes and/or sketches of the steps and photographs of the movement arranged in sequential order featuring the artist in familiar actions, creating without limitations and in the process reconfiguring these familiar actions5. For example, in *Body in the store* (1983), the artist experiments with his body as he moves it between nylon ropes that divide the space from ceiling to floor.

While all the works in the exhibition engage the mind and the senses, Sharif’s semi-system drawings like *System 01* (1983), *System 02* (1983), *Movement of square’s* *side* (1983), *One-two-three* (1983)…are works that, true to Marcel Duchamp’s words, leave “retinal art” behind to arrive at an art that could be “in service of mind”6. These non-retinal works involve geometrical figures, mathematical calculations and notions of chance and randomness, where the artist, as well as the viewer, learns about new structural possibilities through the exhilarating mechanics of chance and of course, Sharif’s notes that guide the viewer.6

“I am a practical person. For me art is not about inspiration or emotion-it is about decision. It is about molding your thoughts into something tangible, so that others can see what you have visualized. And the real essence and beauty of art is that through his work, an artist can say to society that he is different,” Sharif says.7

The exhibition, Hassan Sharif: works 1980-2012 is truly “different” and it goes beyond the realm of imposed meaning and norms. It is a journey into reality through the eyes of Hassan Sharif; a poetic journey that departs from the present and extends far into the future.

References (in order of occurrence in the review):

1-K. Wilson-Goldie, *Collector, recycler, game changer, enigma*, The Daily Star, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2012/Apr-07/169491-collector-recycler-game-changer-enigma.ashx>

2-L. Ball- Lechgar, *Minimal Excess*-*Hassan Sharif*, Canvas magazine, January 2008,

<http://www.google.com.lb/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=canvas%20magazine%2Bminimal%20excess-hassan%20sharif&source=web&cd=1&sqi=2&ved=0CB8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hassansharif.net%2Fhome%2Ffiles%2F23_Canvas_magazine__January_08.pdf&ei=lVSUT4SgKcaf0QXkvIDcAQ&usg=AFQjCNG25QHQ9olsrLoRgbKckBlPg_t9Tw>

3-I. Findlay, *A Poetry of Objects*, World Sculpture, spring 2009, <http://www.google.com.lb/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=a%20poetry%20of%20objects%20by%20ian%20findlay%2Bworld%20sculpture%20news&source=web&cd=2&sqi=2&ved=0CCMQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fhassansharif.net%2Fhome%2Ffiles%2F24b_A_Poetry_Of_Objects_2.pdf&ei=6leUT_eDE8PT0QXJwf3eAQ&usg=AFQjCNFKERGnEYxUAVRT9t0s380-ebHGDA>

4-*Hassan Sharif, Experiments and Objects 1979-2011*, Nafas Art Magazine, April 2011,

<http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/hassan_sharif_abu_dhabi>

5-P. Kolczynsca, *Paths to the World, Paths Home, Hassan Sharif: Semi-System Drawings and Performance Art, 1979-1985*, Nafas art magazine, September 2009, <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/hassan_sharif>

6-P. Kolczynska, *A Rare Bloom in the Desert,* <http://www.scribd.com/doc/77537486/A-Rare-Bloom-in-the-Desert>

7-J. Kalsi, *A Practical Look at the World,*Gulfnews.com, December 04, 2009, <http://gulfnews.com/arts-entertainment/film/a-practical-look-at-the-world-1.545483>

List of works in the exhibition:

*Boxes and objects* (2011), *One-two-three* (1983), *System 02* (1983), *Movement of square’s side* (1983), *System 01* (1983), *Spoons I* (2008), *Classic 2* (2008), *Jellyfish No.2* (2011), *Colour experiments* (1980), *One, two part 3* (2009), *Spoons No.1* (2012), *Shanghai* (2008), *One ball* (2008), *Four bright and three five* (2008), *Yellow-Blue-Red-White No.7* (2006), *Painting No.18,* *No.19, No.20* (2007), *Boxes and Newspaper* (2010), *Thing in TFH No.10* and *No.15* (2008), *M.A. Ibrahim’s sculpture No.5, No.3, No.2, No.4* (2008), *Dustpan* (2008), *Hammer* (2008), *Brush* (2008), *Davidoff* (2008), *Toilet Brush* (2008), *Hand pump* (2008), *Staff of the project in Hatta* (1983), *Digging and standing* (1983), *Jumping No.2* (1983), *Walking No.2* (1983), *Walking* *No.2/1* (1982), *Wire* (1984), *Nylon rope* (1982), *Follower basket* (1986), *Kitchen* (1985), *Sound* (1983), *Swing* (1983), *Recording stones* (1983), *Jumping No.1* (1983), *Nylon Rope* (1983), *Project of Al Marijah Art Atelier-Sharjah*, (1985), *AlMawrid Dictionary* (1980), *Apple* (1982), *Ruler and wire* (1984), *Coloured square*s (1983), *Writing* (1983), *My Body in the Store* (1983), *Weave* (2008), *Mirror* (2008) and *Fleur de Lys* (2008).

**Hassan Sharif Biography**

Born in Dubai, where he lives and works, Hassan Sharif received his Diploma in Fine Arts and Design from the Byam Shaw School of Art in London. A founder and member of the Emirates Fine Art Society, he has started as a caricaturist and columnist publishing in the 1970s hundreds of sketches and articles on local newspapers and magazines, an “educational” path completed by the publication of four books (New Art and Sharp Tools for Making Art, 1995; Concept of Art, 1997; Al Khamsa, 2003).

Expressing himself in a wide variety of media (paintings, objects, semi-systems, experiments, performances…), Hassan Sharif has extensively participated in exhibitions, biennials and shows both in the UAE and abroad, thus considerably contributing to creating awareness about the Emirati art scene. His works have been widely collected by international museums and institutions apart from numerous private collectors.

(Extracted from <http://www.ashkalalwan.org/news.aspx?id=326>)