

Not over-complicating

Approaching Entropy is the latest solo show by Hassan Sharif, considered the grandfather of UAE contemporary art. **Anna Seaman** reports

If you want to philosophise over Hassan Sharif's work, the possibilities are endless. Considered to be the grandfather of conceptual art in the UAE, Sharif is perhaps most famous for being the mentor for two generations of Emirati artists through the 1980s and 1990s, and his work has developed through these constant conversations with his peers, to the point it is at today.

Although his work can be found in a few galleries regionally and is often talked about, his solo show at Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde attempts to unite some of the myriad influences that inform Sharif's career and so offers a new perspective.

In the catalogue essay, Barrak Alzaid, the director of the gallery, explains that for the show – titled *Approaching Entropy* – they were attempting to develop the discourse around Sharif's work by placing two of his series, *Objects* and *Semi-Systems*, alongside each other.

"While *Objects* are constructed via impulse and improvisation, *Semi-Systems* are strictly ordered," he explains. "In this show we invite the audience to consider how these two seemingly opposed methodologies can exist within the same philosophical approach to art."

Upon entering the gallery in Alserkal Avenue, the *Objects* series is exemplified through a pile of balled-up men's undergarments on the floor and cloth-covered canvases as well as planks of rusted metal hung in a repeated pattern overlaying each other to emphasise the sheer volume and disposable nature of the things we surround ourselves with.

On the back wall is a *Semi-System* called *Nine Points Angular Lines*. It consists of 12 paper drawings and eight wooden reliefs, for which Sharif has created a code or system. However, it is not fully



Hassan Sharif says that the search for meaning in his work doesn't need to be difficult. Courtesy Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde

developed, as Alzaid explains: "Sharif is aware of the existing history of constructivism and creating these very formulaic works of art but he takes it a step further," he tells us. "He is not interested in that but is interested in having a specific starting point and organising principle."

So, we are presented with a seemingly complicated system that is actually quite simple.

"This is the first time Hassan has intentionally moved from a work on paper to a material or sculpture," says Alzaid. "So it is wrapped up in different meaning but its meaning doesn't have to be difficult. He once said to me that there is no need to make the interpretation of his work over-complicated: if you like it, then you have understood it."

With that in mind, we move into the rear part of the gallery, where Sharif's first-ever video work is

playing. It is a performance piece called *Cotton*, where he sits on a simple plastic chair in a starkly empty room and takes a pile of raw cotton, handful by handful, sticking it together with glue and making another pile.

"This is the documentation of an object," says Alzaid. "Just as he has been in dialogue with his peer artists, the conversations we can have with him have been really illuminating. This is the single work that incorporates both the moment and the documentation."

Watching the video is a meditative experience and, at the same time, makes us question the fruitlessness of the task. It also points at the conversation between the audience and the artist, which Sharif likes to encourage in all his works. His materials are never precious and he invites us to touch them and interact and offer our own interpretation.

Another work in this show is titled *emails*, where he has collated a month's worth of emails on more than a thousand sheets of paper and redacted all the information other than the dates. Again, Sharif uses everyday materials and points at the mundane and quotidian actions that fill our lives, and we end the show with our minds full.

Sharif is quoted in the essay as saying that whatever interpretation anyone has of his work is the right one.

"My work is not minimalist, it's not conceptual. It's like an adventure. You might fall down, but try not to break a leg because you'll want to go further."

● *Approaching Entropy* runs at Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde in Dubai until January 2. For more information, visit www.ivde.net

✉ aseaman@thenational.ae