



Hassan Sharif at his Al Barsha studio in Dubai. Satish Kumar / The National

## Images by Hassan Sharif tackles the image overload we are constantly subjected to

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“All my work is one piece,” says Hassan Sharif from behind a cluttered desk in his studio in Dubai’s Al Barsha district. With that one sweeping statement, the 63-year-old artist, known as the “father of Emirati contemporary art”, casually throws together more than four decades of his oeuvre.

Sharif’s body of work is colossal, spanning caricatures from the 1970s; experimental performances that he began in Sharjah in the 1980s when contemporary art was hardly present, much less understood; and the more recent sculptures made of countless printed images and pages, which he completed early this year for *Images*, a solo show that opened last night in Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde (IVDE).

“Since the 1980s there have been no ‘isms’ any more, so now we have a kind of anti-style and the artist is free to do whatever they want,” says Sharif. “For me, this is very important – I don’t want to have a style, I want to be able to experiment.”

This freedom to move between media is apparent not just in the IVDE exhibition, but also in Sharif's various exhibitions this year – including the ones at Whitechapel Gallery in London, the Sharjah Biennial and the UAE National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

*For Images*, which tackles the image overload we are subjected to in the 21st century, Sharif cut out pictures from glossy magazines and leaflets and tore pages from dictionaries, then photocopied and shredded them, and created repetitive sculptures hanging from the ceiling or along walls. Also included are cut-outs from iron sheets reflecting images of icons from an old dictionary. In their rusted state, the iron shapes evoke Sharif's previous exhibitions.

Sharif's preoccupation with global consumerism is apparent in past works, especially installations made of piles of everyday detritus – pieces of cloth, balled-up men's underwear, slippers and wire, plastic bags and rods of metal.

"There is a continuation from my previous works, yes," says Sharif. "Here the main idea was images. We are surrounded by images – they are everywhere we look and they are even above us in the sky, coming and going like ghosts that we receive through the computer, TV and radio."

Also on display at IVDE are his 1970s newspaper and magazine cartoons – ink drawings that "wryly reflect on everything from the excesses of new money to labour, influence and greed", says the exhibition statement.

In one 1977 drawing, two Emirati men stand waist-deep in the waters of the Arabian Gulf as fish frolic around them. "My friend, I recommend that you buy a piece of land in the sea," says one to the other. "But they are building an island here in two years."

Sharif brushes off any suggestion that the cartoon was prophetic, saying he was simply recording the conversations of the time. "I did not want to say that they would build an island in the sea, although people were talking about this at that time. I just wanted to show the kinds of ideas people were having then were like dreams to us. We never believed it could happen."

And, as much as the infrastructure and landscape of the UAE has metamorphosised since the 1970s, so has the art scene.

Back then, there was nobody in the UAE to teach Sharif about art. He went to London to study at the Byam Shaw School of Art in the early 1980s and returned with a whole new understanding of contemporary art, going on to found an atelier to share his knowledge and teach, while writing essays and giving lectures.

"I didn't only make art but I made my audience too," he says. "I had to contextualise what I was doing."

Despite his phenomenal success at home and abroad, Sharif is - uncomfortable being called the father of Emirati contemporary art.

"I hate it," he says. "I don't want to be a father or a grandfather; I just want to keep working. I am an artist, I found my way and this is me. I am happy that it happened like this."

**• Hassen Sharif: Images is at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai, until May 5**



Hassan Sharif's Dictionary 2015 for the Images series. Courtesy Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



Hassan Sharif's untitled caricature from 1977, which shows two Emirati men discussing the future of real estate in the Arabian Gulf. Courtesy: Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde