

Process and Provocation: An Interview with Hassan Sharif

by David Ebony

An artist long prominent in his home of Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, Hassan Sharif recently established an international reputation after a solo show of his work inaugurated the U.A.E. pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Sharif, 62, is known for his evocative and provocative conceptual pieces, as well as paintings, works on paper and sculptures, produced since the early 1980s. A selection of recent works currently at Alexander Gray Associates in New York, his second solo with the gallery (through Feb. 8), offers a concise overview. Included are several small abstract drawings and paintings, plus seven large wall reliefs and free-standing sculptures.

Using a grid format in the drawings, Sharif presents rows of ink marks that appear to be part of an esoteric alphabet, albeit one the artist has invented. He isolates one or more of these ciphers in the paintings. The three-dimensional works here are fabricated from found objects, including rags, wire, strips of metal, bent spoons and wood. All of them incorporate the process of weaving, which corresponds to ancient Middle East craft traditions of textile and carpet manufacturing. Despite the abject materials and rough-hewn construction, each of Sharif's sculptures conveys a systematic unity and formal elegance.

Offering an insight into his process and approach, Sharif recently gave *A.i.A.* a tour of the exhibition.

DAVID EBONY Can you describe your process in the drawings?

HASSAN SHARIF I think of these markings as more of an

Hassan Sharif,
Alexander Gray
Associates, 2014.
Courtesy Alexander
Gray Associates, New
York.



engagement than an arrangement. The series starts randomly. But then I give the marks a kind of order, by lining them in rows and then expanding the series by progressively adding a line or two to each mark. Eventually, I remove a line as the series progresses, until I make just a single line. The important thing is the process.

I have used these like pages of a performance script or musical notation, for performances I did in London in the early 1980s. Each mark would suggest a simple action. For instance, I speak while my mouth is full of bread. I take a sip of water. I eat more bread, speak, drink some more water, and so on, recording all the sounds. All the while I'm talking about serious things like politics and art, but it's an ironic delivery, imitating politicians and lecturers. There would be only three or four people in the audience—mostly friends or other artists.

EBONY It sounds like a Fluxus performance.

SHARIF Yes, of course. I love Fluxus. Most of my work builds upon the simple procedure I use in the drawings.

EBONY The large wall relief has layered pieces of fabric, hundreds of strips of cloth all dyed blood red. It seems to have a symbolic significance.

SHARIF I don't use color symbolically. I'm more of a realist than a symbolist. And I'm not suggesting a specific narrative. These are just rags soaked in glue and tempera, then dried in the sun. The pieces are systematically arranged, and the sculpture can be expanded or reduced in scale. Basically, the work is about consumerism. I use cheap materials, ordinary things that are readily available in the market. And I buy them in quantity. I'm both the consumer and the producer. That's important to me. I'm just like anyone else buying these materials. I'm imitating consumers, but I'm using the materials to make art.

EBONY Does your work relate to your homeland in some way, or to Middle East traditions?

SHARIF It doesn't relate to a specific place. That would be romantic and nostalgic. Even though the materials I'm using may be traditional, I'm not using them in traditional ways. I also use lots of found objects, like pieces of used cardboard boxes. But I'd like the audience to consider them in a completely different way.

EBONY You don't seem to be obsessed with craftsmanship. The metal pieces and the fabric works seem a bit rough, sometimes even crude.

SHARIF Yes; my work is handmade but it's important for me that art is easy, and technically anyone can do it. In that sense, my work is skill-less. I mean, you don't need special skills to make work that becomes art. I don't want the sculptures to appear to result from virtuosity. I'm not trying to make magic of some kind that would impress an audience as to how the work is created. There are no secrets. The philosophical or psychological question here is how, as an artist, I give myself the authority to make art.