



GALLERY
ISABELLE
VAN DEN
EYNDE

Images

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Hassan Sharif
05 March - 15 April 2015

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Images is a discourse on desire, ubiquity and how repetition can become a transgressive act in itself. The exhibition follows Sharif's insatiable appetite for all that convention deems unappealing and his insistence that art begins from guilty pleasures.

Exhibit #2 / 2015

Images

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It is helpful to think of Hassan Sharif's studio as a rock pool where materials wash in like seawater, and are flushed back out again – knotted, encrusted, transformed.

Anyone who has visited Sharif's studio, The Flying House, in Al Barsha, Dubai, will be familiar with this motion. Behind its apparently calm and coherent facade – a pleasant, well-lit anteroom lined with Semi-systems, photographs of performances and bundles of coir on plinths – is an entrance to a chaotic, ever-swelling world where plastics and printouts meet and merge, wires and hinges bend and enmesh, ropes are cut then tied then re-cut again.

On taped-down expanses of kitsch linoleum, empty space is claimed by creeping cords, colourful threads and paint-soaked cloth. Heaps of bags bubble and grow, cardboard, copper and encrusted toys gather on the walls. A litter of kittens dart between and over artworks, flies meet in the sunlight to have sex. Everywhere there is fecundity.

This atmosphere, we sense, is charged by Sharif's restless doing. Art is activity; it is habit, inhalation and exhalation. Artworks are made and then left behind, regarded with the deference that a snake might shed its skin. In such a generous environment, free from pretence, we are invited to reach out, pick up, and salvage our own images, shapes and lines.

Images attempts to offer some glimpses of this atmosphere, from the simplicity of its name to the sheer sense of abundance that's characteristic of his world. The works included continue Sharif's career-long questioning about where art can be found, what art is for, what our expectations are of it and how those limits can be usurped. This 40-year enquiry has been coupled with the artist's insatiable thirst for anti-convention. Despite his

Cover and left:

Printer No. 1
2015

Plinth, printer, cotton rope
and photocopied paper
Variable dimensions

international recognition in recent years, *Images* is still fired by a desire to keep searching for attitudes that provoke. How can we, with access to every extremity, be shocked by – or at least ready-to-reject – a column of strung-together glossy magazines?

On a shelf in Sharif's studio, small bottles of cologne are placed next to a murky jar of pickles. And such meetings, which might curdle in the pits of our stomachs, or tease our well-learned notions of good taste, are the contradictory elements that Sharif has searched for throughout his career. Whether that meant plucking out his pubic hairs and throwing them into milk bottles or, as faithfully reconstituted in *Images*, a painted canvas adorned with elasticated cloth that invites a curious hand ('Bakh Bakh', 1985). The works contained in this show actively challenge polished definitions for what art – and particularly the art of Hassan Sharif – is supposed to look like and how it is supposed to live.

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Hassan Sharif is increasingly referred to as a 'pioneer of conceptual practice' in the Middle East. Yet there is a pointedly critical dimension in his work that cannot be overlooked despite his contribution to a certain artistic discourse. *Images* connects two very important periods in the artist's career, bringing together works made in the last 12 months with very early works up to and during the years he left the UAE to study in England (1979-1984). Collectively, this selection seeks to show how certain key ideas have underpinned his practice.

Probably the most precise outline of these core concerns can be found in Sharif's 2006 essay, *Weaving*. He writes about a "vulgar market mentality that flooded shops with consumer products" in his lifetime, a "consumer-society tsunami" that caused an acute upheaval in the

so-called 'developing' world. His response, and the underlying purpose of his art, as he explains in *Weaving*, has been acts of 'redundant repetition': "I would continuously engage myself in boring, recurring and endless activities". Weaving, in its most rudimentary form of tying and bundling, without "strenuous physical activity nor unique skill", became his gesture.

Sourcing cast-off materials and mass-produced goods (plastic pegs and cheap sandals being well-known examples) from shops in Dubai, Sharif wove these accumulated objects together into free-standing heaps. Such cheap objects were an affront to the idea that art had to be an inherently valuable thing (a line-of-thinking he encountered when he first began exhibiting in the early '80s in the UAE). While his rudimentary manner of weaving challenged ideas of the artist as an agent of official identity, prestige culture and heritage. As with his experiments and performances in the 1980s (jumping in the desert, tying ropes between rocks, meticulously measuring the distance between cars in Al Dhiyafah Street), the Objects were acts of pointlessness, uselessness and anti-functionality at a time of rapid industrialisation and commercialisation.

Today, another dimension of these works presents itself. Economy is, by its nature, invisible and intangible. It an ever-spinning cube of itinerant goods and flowing capital, a fluctuating and abstract multitude of processes to which we are witness to its fragmentary causes, participant in effects, but ultimately unable to grasp as an entirety. Sharif's Objects, we could argue, are the residue of this spinning cube. In the ravenous supply of mass market and production, they are the momentary inertia – the nonsensical surplus – akin to what Slavoj Žižek describes as "a mute presence beyond meaning"¹. These heaps are an inexplicable mass that has stuck around longer than we care to admit because, in their cheapness and ubiquity, they hold a mirror to the usually

Right:
Bakh Bakh
1985 (reconstituted 2015)
Acrylic and fabric on canvas
90 x 90 cm



unseen processes of endless over-supply, mass production and waste.

Images can be interpreted similarly, yet with raw material that's more pertinent to our time. If Sharif made art out of mass-produced surplus in his Objects, then in 2015 he is handing the residue of an age of digital reproduction back to society as art: Glossy magazines, churned out as a shell for advertising, are fused with coupon leaflets, amateur photographs of supermarket shelves printed and reprinted in a geyser of papers. Images are mashed together, redrawn and sliced. In 'Shredder', 2015, for instance, we see the after-effects of a household shredder eviscerating images into thousands of anonymous strips.

Images are returned to the rawnesses of line, colour and shape through these processes – each is stripped of its original seduction, its intended purpose to pique our desires. What we are left



Above:
Gillette Gill
1979
Drawing for silk-screen transfer
Pencil and silk-screen ink on paper
29.7 x 42 cm



Left:

Press Conference No. 1
2009

Newspaper, cloth and glue
Variable dimensions

1 Slavoj Žižek, 'The Pervert's Guide To Ideology',
dir. by Sophie Fiennes, 2012

2 Gilles Deleuze, 'Difference and Repetition', first
published 1968, pg 3 of the Continuum Books
edition, 2004

Sharif matches the volume of print with his own acts of over-ubiquity or over-ornamentation. He strings images together, hangs them like meat in a butcher's shop. He turns himself into a machine of over-production; stitching, cutting, tying over and over again – tracing images plucked from a dictionary or fish-heads in a supermarket brochure. He pierces these traces with thread, or fabricates them in iron to exaggerated size.

But what's the purpose of all this? Sharif is fond of saying that he has been seduced by repetition. Gilles Deleuze: "In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality."² Repetition, which Sharif describes as a ritual without aim or purpose, is a transgression of the singularity of the work. Sharif challenges the viewer's wish to see his work as fragments, as a thing, neatly packaged, distinct and definable as an art object in itself. He repeats and repeats, to the point that images shed their original meaning but also their identity as an isolated art object.

Instead, images become untethered, a formless mass, an irruption. The viewer is not spoon-fed art as object but rather presented with a chaos without clear beginning or end. Creations run into one another. Like the studio that these works are borne of, we are invited to explore and find our own images, our own seductions, amid a crustacean of iron shapes, papers, plastics and severed rope.

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The dictionary is a common trope in this exhibition and a fundamental component of the artist's work since his beginnings. When he arrived in Leamington Spa for his foundation art year in 1979, with only three mail-order books on Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso in his arsenal, Sharif was quickly recognised for his potential but told that his lack of English would be an obstruction. The young artist set to learning English with fervour.

His Arabic-to-English dictionary (with its idiosyncratic little illustrations of ocelots and frying pans) became an access-point to contemporary art and the post-Fluxus, hard-edged and post-Povera discourses that were active in London at that time. As an homage to these beginnings and their continued relevance to his wayfaring through art history, the dictionary resurfaces in this show as photo-documentation of an early performance work in Walham Grove, London (1981), a cascade of pages flopping off the wall ('Dictionary', 2015) and its tiny illustrations enlarged and fabricated in iron ('Images In Iron', 2015).

Finally, a note on the Caricatures and their inclusion. The Caricatures are an early indicator of Sharif's later prolificness. At a certain point in the 1970s, before he'd started studying in London, he was drawing two cartoons a day for publication in the UAE's nascent roster of newspapers and magazines. The content of these drawings is still provocative, fun and inspiring for its forthrightness. Not only do some bear a prophetic streak (note the premonition of the Palm Jumeirah in the 1977 drawing of a persuasive broker urging his friend to buy a piece of sea), others tickle ironies that he would later explore in more conceptual forms: greed, vulgar self-interest and the 'consumer-society tsunami' that the Objects would make tangible.

Yet the Caricatures are, ultimately, images. They were once embers in the UAE's nascent media industry, an industry that (if 'A Pillar of Images', 2015, is any indication) has since bloated to an extraordinary scale. Once destined to be 'tomorrow's fish and chip paper', the Caricatures have thankfully been preserved and here handed back to the public eye. Their wry messages remain intact, pertinent today as they were during the early years of the UAE's establishment. They have resurfaced once more to overstay their welcome. Like the Objects, which are the remnants of an uncomfortable and often unseen process, these too are images that simply won't go away.

Christopher Lord, Artistic Director



with, instead, is a mute, ominous presence. The bulk of a thousand unseen printing presses, digital productions and reproductions, glossy-skinned shopping bags churned out to entice. We are even brought face-to-face with plastic machines, the guilty agents of the printer and the shredder, which Sharif proudly places in the gallery.

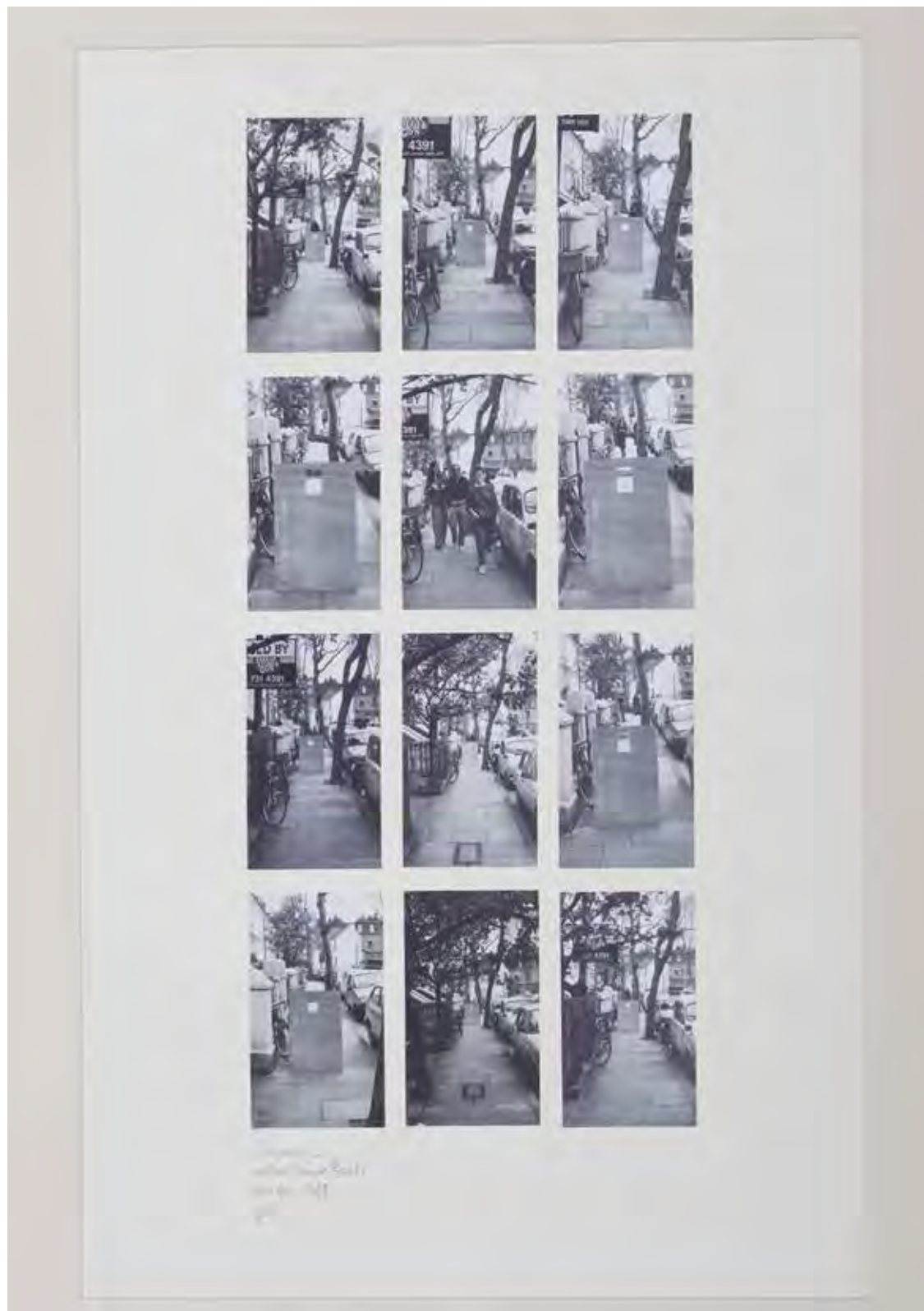
It's important to remember that the Objects have usually been made from material bought or found in Dubai, goods ingested first by the city's markets. For *Images*, Sharif has again focused on the flotsam that arrives into his immediate environment. The glossy magazines (chosen, he says, for their 'very luxury paper') were bought from petrol stations in Dubai. The leaflets showing garish med-resolution photographs of fish, kebabs and vegetables were slipped under the door of The Flying House. The shopping bags stitched with ribbons were collected from the city's many malls.

Above:

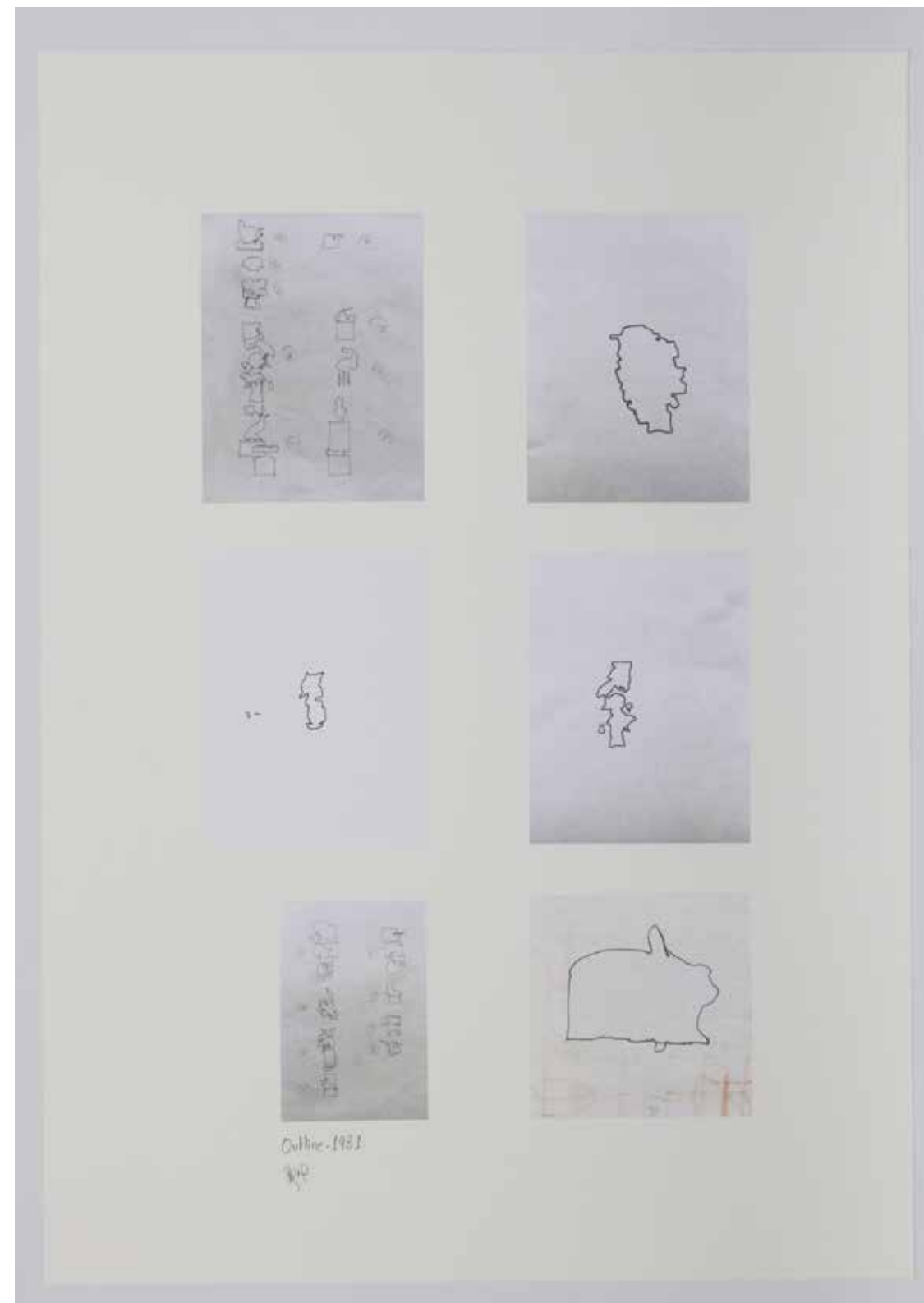
Images on Tracing Paper
2012-15

112 sheets of tracing paper.
Ink on tracing paper, cardboard
and cotton thread
90 x 41 x 7 cm;
53 x 41 x 7 cm (closed)





Dictionary
 1981
 Photo-documentation of an experiment
 Photographs and pencil on mounting board
 84 x 59.5 cm



Outline
 1981
 Photo-documentation of an experiment
 Photographs and pencil on mounting board
 84.3 x 59.5 cm



A Pillar of Images
2015
Magazine pages, staples and cotton rope
1000 x 170 x 160 cm



Images No. 2
2014
Set of 6 works. Magazine and leaflet pages,
glue and cotton rope
Variable dimensions



Top:

Images in Iron
2015

15 individual works from a series of 42
Cut-out iron sheets, variable dimensions
Iron table and 6 cut-out iron sheets
70 x 45 x 31 cm
Installation, variable dimensions





Images No. 7 A, B, C
2013
Gouache and pencil on paper, triptych
42 x 30 cm each

Dictionary
2015
Collage, dictionary and cotton rope
380 x 190 x 80 cm approx



Cutting and Tying No. 2
2015

Cotton rope and wool
275 x 650 x 50 cm



Shredder
2015

Paper shredder, shredded paper,
cardboard, glue and cotton rope
Overall installation, variable dimensions



Shopping Bags
2015
Shopping bags, synthetic string,
cotton rope, copper wire and
plastic clips
235 x 100 x 30 cm



Shopping Mall
2015
Copper
56 x 61 x 55 cm



Untitled
1974-77
14 works from a set of 18
Ink on paper
29.7 x 42 cm each

Hassan Sharif Biography

Hassan Sharif (b. 1951) lives and works in Dubai. He has made a vital contribution to conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East through 40 years of performances, installations, drawing, painting, and assemblage. In his early artistic maturation, Sharif rejected calligraphic abstraction, which was becoming the predominant art discourse in the region in the 1970s. Instead, he pursued a pointedly contemporary art vocabulary, drawing on the non-elitism and intermedia of Fluxus and the potential in British Constructionism's systemic processes of making.

Sharif graduated from The Byam Shaw School of Art, London, in 1984 and returned to the UAE shortly after. He set about staging interventions and the first exhibitions of contemporary art in Sharjah, as well as translating art historical texts and manifestos into Arabic, so as to provoke a local audience into engaging with contemporary art discourse.

Sharif is a founding member of the Emirates Fine Art Society (founded 1980) and of the Art Atelier in the Youth Theatre and Arts, Dubai. In 2007, he was one of four artists to establish The Flying House, a Dubai institution for promoting contemporary Emirati artists.

The first Emirati to have his work shown in the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, Sharif was also selected to be the debut artist to represent the UAE during its first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. In 2011, Sharif was the subject of a retrospective exhibition, *Hassan Sharif: Experiments & Objects 1979-2011*, curated by Catherine David and Mohammed Kazem and presented by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage/Platform for Visual Arts. In 2015, his work was exhibited as part of *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and at Sharjah Biennial 12. Sharif will again exhibit in the UAE's national pavilion, curated by Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, at the 56th Venice Biennale.



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