

## The pioneers of contemporary art in the UAE

Two exhibitions in Dubai are showcasing works by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Hassan Sharif

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**By Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review**



**Hassan Sharif, Shoes, 2016. Shoes, slippers, glue, paper, cotton rope and cardboard**

Image Credit: Supplied

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and the late Hassan Sharif belong to a group of contemporary Emirati artists known as ‘the five’ who in the 1980s pioneered the conceptual art movement in the UAE. The work of both artists is currently being exhibited at Lawrie Shabibi and Isabelle van den Eynde galleries in Alserkal Avenue.

Ibrahim lives and works in the coastal town of Khor Fakkan nestled in the Hajar Mountains and has a deep connection with his environment which is reflected in his work. He is known as a land artist who works with simple, natural materials and objects found in his surroundings such as stones, rocks, clay, copper wire, discarded plastic bottles and paper. Blending intuition and repetition with wry humour, Ibrahim explores memory, imagery and ways of seeing and experiencing the environment through his seemingly simple artworks. In his latest show, *the Space Between the Eyelid and the Eyeball*, the artist is presenting three bodies of work based on his recent



“Our vision does not stop when we close our eyes. There is a huge space between the eyelid and the eyeball where we can see images, colours and shapes that reside in our memory and our imagination. I am interested in exploring this space and discovering the world we can see with our eyes closed,” Ibrahim says.

The artist is well-known for his black and white paintings of simple lines that look like ancient cave markings. In this exhibition, he has covered all four walls in one area of the gallery with these lines to create an immersive installation. Also included in the show are papier-mâché sculptures of the lines that add another dimension to his signature works.



**Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Sitting Man, 2013. Oil on canvas.**

Image Credit:

“My obsession with these lines began because I was intrigued by the charcoal markings on our door made by our water supplier to record the deliveries. I started adding lines to his markings and now these lines have become a significant part of my work and have even taken on a three-dimensional form. These black and white lines represent the dualities that are part of human existence and they play with notions of multiplicity and division.

The process of creating them is repetitive and meditative, but each line is different and unique and tells a story. I see this installation as music for the eyes and can feel the rhythm in the pattern of the lines, while others might view it as a cityscape of high-rises or interpret it in their own individual way,” he says.

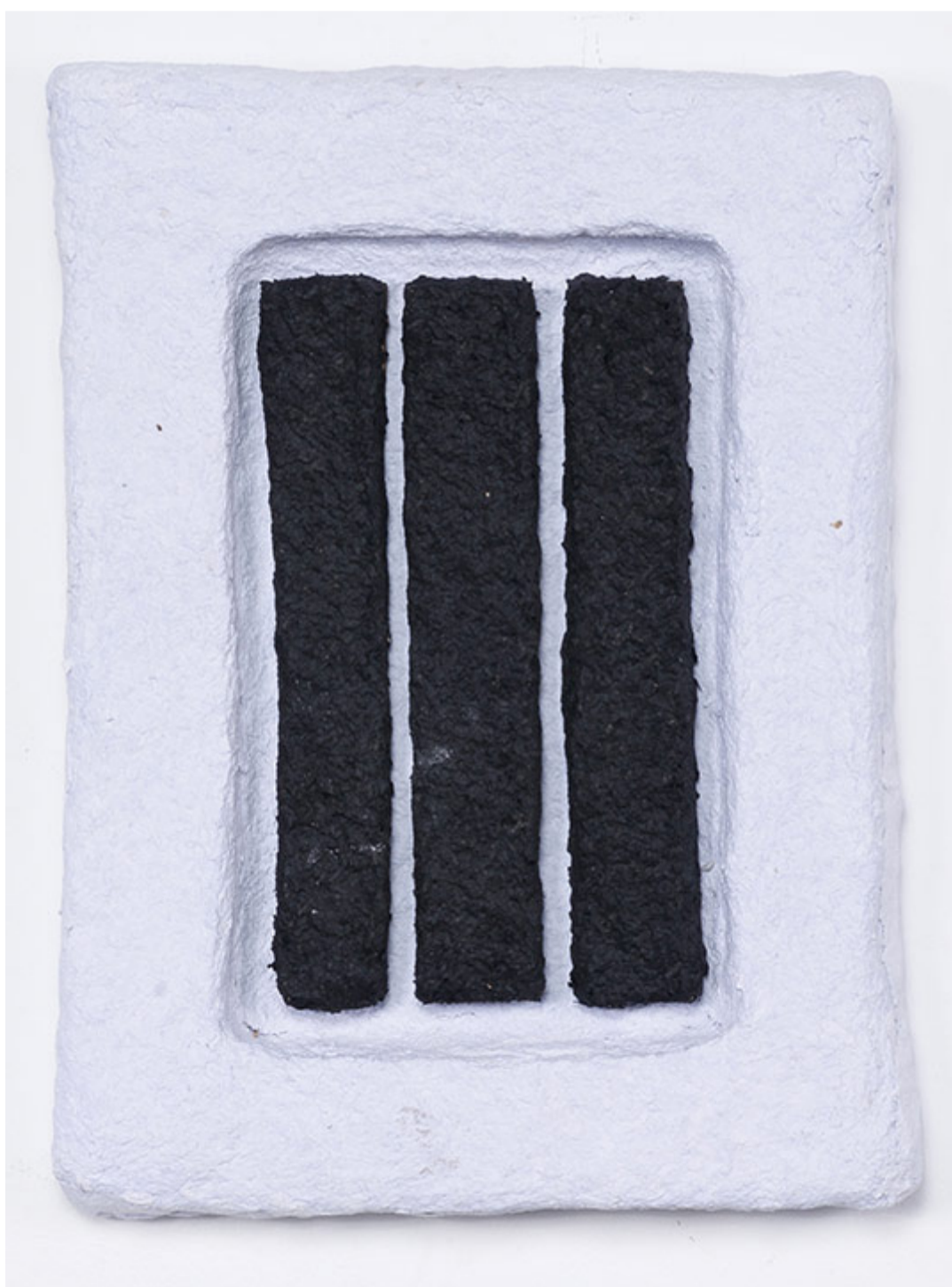
The centerpiece of the show is a collection of hand-moulded papier-mâché sculptures in bright vibrant colours, covered with colourful lines. The amorphous shapes look like vases filled with flowers, pylons, animals, trees or fruits and some have plastic water bottles integrated in the artworks.

“In Khor Fakkan our view of the horizon is obstructed by the surrounding Hajar mountains, so when I saw a sunset for the first time it was like an explosion of colour in my eyes. My choice of vibrant colours is an attempt to capture that experience. I have placed stones inside some of these paper sculptures to express duality and balance in nature and in life. I worked intuitively with the wet coloured papers allowing the sculptures to build themselves, and in some the individual parts can be moved around to change the forms. The lines on the sculptures are not painted but formed by the pigments on the papers, and I have used fabrics and cardboard to add texture,” Ibrahim says.

The show also includes paintings from Ibrahim’s ongoing Sitting Man series. The paintings are in different sizes and colours, but they all feature the same portrait of a man sitting on a chair. The man’s head is cropped putting the focus on his posture and clothing. The series is based on a photograph Ibrahim took of the late Hassan Sharif and is a tribute to his friend and mentor.

The show of Sharif’s work is titled Blue and focuses on the unique and irreverent way he used colour in his work. The late artist, writer, thinker and cartoonist graduated from the Byam Shaw School of Art in London in 1984 and returned home to spearhead the conceptual art movement in the UAE through his experimental practice, educational initiatives, and mentoring of generations of artists.

He organised the first exhibitions of contemporary art in the country, and translated art history texts into Arabic to educate and engage the local audience with contemporary art. He was a founding member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society, founder of the Art Atelier in Dubai and a co-founder of The Flying House, which promoted contemporary Emirati artists.



**Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Three Black Lines, 2016. Sliced cardboard, papier-mâché**

Image Credit:



Sharif had a playful and experimental approach to art and used everyday materials and simple actions to create artworks that commented on contemporary society and challenged traditional notions of art. He focused on the process of art making and found art in the most mundane objects and actions.

He devised and documented performances of actions like jumping in the desert and did 'Experiments' such as tracking specific letters on a newspaper page as an ironical response to the changes happening around him. He commented on the growing consumerism in our society by creating what he called 'Objects', made from found industrial materials and mass-produced items bought from local markets. The artist is also known for his SemiSystems, where he invented a set of rules and followed them to create artworks that make a wry statement on the systems and structures of our modern world.

Regarding his approach to colour, he wrote in an essay in 2005, "I do not use colours in my work to give various indications, whether symbolic, social, psychological, expressive and so on. I only use coloured materials because they are available in the market. That is all."

Although he refused to attribute meaning to colour, the exhibition highlights the many inventive ways in which Sharif used colour in his visual vocabulary. This includes various 'objects' such as bundles of clothes smeared with acrylic paints, colourful buttons strung on copper wire, jute bags festooned with pieces of coloured fabrics, and shoes and slippers tied together with rope.

Sharif's expressive paintings from various periods and series showcase his experiments with oil and acrylic paints on canvas and paper. Some works are named after the colours he has used such as Cadmium Red Hue and Majenta No. I. His early experiments with performance and semi-systems are seen in Coloured Squares from 1983, where Sharif photographed himself moving across a grid of red, yellow and blue squares painted on the floor in an order dictated by a numeric code that he assigned to each primary colour.

Blue — a work from 2016, the year Sharif died is simply a set of three canvasses covered by tissues stained with different shades of blue. But perhaps the work that truly embodies Sharif's playfulness, wry humour and simple yet profound philosophy of art-making is an untitled work from the same year where he has used an aluminium bucket as his canvas and filled it with tissues covered with light blue paint, inviting viewers to contemplate the meaning of a familiar everyday object and discarded waste materials presented as art.



**Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mineral Water, 2013. Plastic bottles, papier-mâché, cardboard boxes, Variable dimensions set of 4**  
Image Credit:

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*Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.*

the Space Between the Eyelid and the Eyeball will run at Lawrie Shabibi gallery, Alserkal Avenue until May 9.

Blue will run at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Alserkal Avenue until May 6.