

But
We
Cannot
See
Them

Tracing a UAE
Art Community
1988–2008



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Maya Allison

with

Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris

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This book is dedicated to the community that has supported the work of these artists and writers, and to the legacy of Hassan Sharif (1951–2016), Ahmed Rashid Thani (1962–2012), and Jos Clevers (1951–2009).

Introduction

Maya Allison



Ebtisam Abdulaziz
Untitled, 2008
Photograph mounted on aluminium
50 × 70 cm

1988–2008

There was a house in the Satwa neighborhood of Dubai where artists, writers, and intellectuals took refuge in one another's company. Many of them identified with a "new culture" of radical, formal, and conceptual experimentation, in both art and writing. It is said that if you had a key to the house you were welcome any time, day or night. The artist who lived there made art from the refuse of daily life around him. This was Hassan Sharif. Some of the most frequent visitors were his art student Mohammed Kazem, the poet Adel Khozam, his brother Hussain, also an artist, and the artists and writers mentioned below.

On the east coast of the Emirate of Sharjah, there was a library in the town of Khor Fakkan run by an eminent poet, a friend and like-minded colleague to the Satwa house artists. This was Ahmed Rashid Thani. Around 1990, two young artists came to live at the library, and made it their studio: Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim of Khor Fakkan, and Abdullah Al Saadi from the mountains of the nearby Emirate of Fujairah. Each developed a distinct aesthetic and practice, drawing directly on the rocky, mountainous landscape around them. Ibrahim's colorful, geometric paintings morphed into sculpture, which joined his land-art installations. Al Saadi produced volumes of nature studies, and environmental installations, derived from his travels by bicycle. Both came to know the Satwa house artists, and soon they were exhibiting their work alongside Mohammed Kazem and Hassan, and Hussain Sharif.

For the first half of the 1990s, there was a sand dune on the border between Ajman and Sharjah, dubbed the "Sand Palace." If you saw a bonfire burning there, it meant the Sand Palace was active. A poet might be reading aloud, a television actor who was also a newspaper writer might be discussing a play, or one of the visual artists might be playing music for the company gathered there.

Sharjah offered yet another kind of haven for these artists and intellectuals. The Sharjah Art Museum and the Emirates Fine Arts Society were among the few public places in the UAE where experimental artworks were exhibited at the time. Some of the UAE's most heated aesthetic debates, public and private, grew out of the exhibitions in Sharjah, particularly the more

experimental, conceptual projects by artists in this group. Controversy followed a number of their exhibitions, and every now and then a piece of artwork would just disappear, seemingly mistaken for refuse.

Most of the year, and in most of the UAE, however, there was nowhere to see the art of this community, despite their prolific output. Jos Clevers was a Dutch artist and curator who came to Abu Dhabi in the early 1990s. He sought original, contemporary, Emirati art. He had been told there was no contemporary art in the UAE. He met Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, who ushered Clevers into the Satwa house community, beginning artistic friendships that lasted until Clevers' death in 2009.

The artist Vivek Vilasini migrated from a lively art community in Bombay to Dubai, where he made his sculptures in solitude for the first year. Right on the verge of giving up, after repeated efforts to find peers and exhibition opportunities, he finally tracked down Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, whose art he'd once seen in the Sharjah Biennial. Ibrahim introduced him to the group at the Satwa house, and, by the next day, Hassan had decided Vilasini must be in the upcoming exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum. Two months later it opened, re-titled *The Six* (in 1996, with Jos Clevers, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem, Hassan Sharif, Hussain Sharif, and Vivek Vilasini).

If it had not been for the Emirates Fine Arts Society, the Sharjah Biennial, and the Sharjah Art Museum, most of these artists might never have found one another. And if it hadn't been for the continuity of their relationships, they might not have grown as they did. The counterpoint to the periodic exhibitions in Sharjah was the daily making of art, teaching art, reading about art, writing about art, and reading and discussing theory, philosophy, poetry, and so on in the homes and ateliers of these artists.

While Hassan's home in Satwa looms large in the formative years of this community, those interviewed in this volume describe the house itself as quite modest: just a few rooms under an asbestos roof, piles and piles of books, and a small courtyard. Photos from that time show Hassan and his visitors sitting in the garden on generic white plastic patio chairs. The garden was part of a courtyard that was originally pavement. Inspired by Vivek's plantings, and with his help, Hassan ripped up areas of cement to cultivate

a garden of his own. Vivek recalls the courtyard when it was mostly empty and white. By the time Hassan moved out of that house, the plants had grown taller than him, and lined the courtyard.

The 1990s saw this community form and settle into a richly productive period. Ibrahim had an Atelier in Khor Fakkan, where he taught art, while Kazem taught at Hassan Sharif's Atelier in Dubai. Abdullah Al Saadi traveled extensively from his base in Khor Fakkan, where he taught English in a local school while he developed a series of journey-based exhibition projects.

A young mathematician and painter, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, was an early student of Kazem's. Kazem and Hassan both taught the techniques of drawing, painting, and sculpture, but encouraged students also to pursue the underlying conceptual truth of each artistic gesture. Eventually Abdulaziz had a profound breakthrough that connected her mathematical practice to her artistic one. Soon she was teaching alongside her mentors and peers at the Dubai Atelier. She became the Atelier's manager, a role that Kazem before her had taken on from Hassan. She began exhibiting with the group, first with *Lines* (2004), a two-person exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum with Mohammed Kazem. She became part of this group.

Although these artists and writers did not define themselves as an "underground," they were not easy for outside curators and writers to learn about or reach. Still, they all wrote about one another, publishing in newspapers and their Sharjah-based magazine, *Al Tashkeel*, slowly building an audience and educating one another.

As the 1990s came to a close, the era of the Sand Palace had ended. Vivek and Jos each returned home (Jos would come back to the UAE shortly). Ibrahim's Atelier in Khor Fakkan closed, a painful loss that ultimately precipitated a rich chapter in his own creative development. Eventually the Satwa house was torn down to make way for new construction.

A businessman-turned-archivist, Abdul-Raheem, brother to Hassan and Hussain, documented and stored the artworks these artists produced, with the collaboration of his son Mohamed. In 2007, with support from the others and Jos Clevers, he founded The Flying House, named after a painting that

Jos Clevers made when he lived in the UAE. Artists from the Satwa house and Sand Palace were invited to turn the house into a showcase for their work. Jos Clevers returned to help curate. Art covered every surface of the house—the doors, windows, steps, walls, and trees. The house was also an experiment in form; it sustained a collection and housed an exhibition, but it was not a gallery, nor was it a foundation. But now curators could locate and see their work year round: they were on the map.

The year 2007 had a seismic effect as the structure of the UAE art world suddenly shifted: Dubai launched its first international art fair, and Abu Dhabi announced its Saadiyat museums project. With The Flying House effort, finally, the work of the community began to surface outside of Sharjah. By 2008, a team of world-class journalists had been hired to publish the English-language newspaper *The National*, which started covering The Flying House that winter.

That first year an Italian writer, Cristiana de Marchi, came to work at The Flying House. She curated the collection and wrote about it, extensively interviewing and comprehending the community centered there. She too made art and soon joined this community as a new voice, further rounding out its dialogue.

In 2009, the UAE had its first Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The refrain, "There is no contemporary art in the UAE" began to fade as the infrastructure for art generated better exposure for work made in the Emirates. It was still quite a while until commercial galleries began to represent these artists.

Shortly after The Flying House opened, Jos Clevers fell ill and passed away in 2009. Within a few years, the experiment of The Flying House wound down. Its contents were moved to a new location that for a time served as Hassan Sharif's studio. Now it houses Sharif's estate and archive.

The trajectory from a small community of unknown experimental practitioners to a group of well-established figures in the UAE arts scene happened in only a few decades. Today, most of the artists mentioned here have participated in the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, many are collected by museums, and they continue to develop their individual voices. Their path,

as well as what they have produced, also serves as an inspiration for emerging artists in the UAE, a kind of root structure for the cultural development of the Emirates.

Tracing a UAE Art Community

This book of interviews focuses on these artists and writers during the period from 1988 to 2008, from the community's formation through its growing visibility in the new UAE art world that developed after the turn of the 21st century. The interviews reveal the historical contours of this artistic community, and how it created a climate in which the artists grew, thrived, and found their distinct voices. The interviews map out the landscape of their creative lives: with whom and what they were in dialogue; the kinds of challenges and breakthroughs that marked their progress; and how they come to identify and succeed as artists in this period in the UAE.

The exhibition that accompanies this book showcases the artists' aesthetic connections over this period of their development, which saw them supporting and challenging one another through the difficult process of forging an artistic vision. In these two decades the community was resolute in its support for its members, in a place that did not yet appear to be able to provide such support. Their influence on one another's work is visible, and intentional. Many of the artists were Hassan Sharif's students at some point, but they became his peers. He exhibited alongside them regularly, in some cases combined his installations with the work of his fellow artists, and he later even painted studies of their works.

The fact of dialogue is unmistakable throughout the group. Several exhibitions in this period featured installations made from tin cans: in one case it was an autobiographical collection by Abdullah Al Saadi, in another the cans were theatrical portraits by Hussain Sharif. Paper streaked with paint curling onto the floor might be an early experiment by Mohammed Kazem (if it has horizontal lines) or by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim (if the lines are vertical). A series of wiry figurative lines might be an altered photograph by Ebtisam Abdulaziz, or a painting or sculpture by Jos Clevers, or an installation by Hussain. Earthy, mystical forms are visible in Vivek Vilasini's massive

installations and in Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's minute clay sculpture collections. Ebtisam Abdulaziz and Mohammed Kazem each used photography to document conceptual performances, but also to collect narrative and data from their surroundings.

All of the artists collected material from the world around them as media and content for their work, blurring the lines between readymade, autobiography, and mixed media. Their projects touched on performance, Conceptual art, and alternated between studio and post-studio practice. Even as each artist developed in distinctive aesthetic directions, their work maintained a quality of call-and-response, affection and mutual respect, competition and inspiration.

The title of the book and exhibition derives from the community's circumstances and method for functioning therein. In the arts, the term "underground" can connote an avant-garde, but more specifically describes a community of artists existing outside the establishment. The term assumes an establishment against which a new movement can gain traction (as with downtown New York's resistance to the uptown commercial gallery scene). The Satwa house community was not anti-establishment, but it was an underground by virtue of its attitudes, aspirations, and artwork, which diverged dramatically from the existing art practices in the UAE. Sometimes this divergence created friction with art establishments, but the community anchored itself in a positive attitude of aiming to grow a contemporary art audience, and supporting one another's growth in the UAE context. Rather than rejecting the establishment, they worked for enhanced arts infrastructure and education—Hassan Sharif took matters into his own hands on the education front, translating art books into Arabic for his students and fellow artists.

Finally, they were underground in the sense of being invisible to art audiences, locally and internationally. That they were so prolific despite a lack of exhibition opportunities suggests an independence from establishment approval. The community would not have survived for two decades without art world recognition if its members had been driven exclusively by the hope of being "discovered." They were motivated by innovation, critique, and productive risk-taking. They worked enthusiastically despite their relative obscurity. In many ways, they were one another's audience, critics, and arts

infrastructure. These circumstances gave them time to grow and evolve before commercial success or premature discourse around their work might box them in.

Hassan Sharif's career before 1988, which included co-founding the Emirates Fine Arts Society and his first attempt at establishing an Atelier in Sharjah, echoes the boilerplate version of the Paris Salon audition narrative of Manet and Duchamp. In those early years, after Sharif returned from studying art in London, he formed his own avant-garde group, complete with a manifesto and publication, and finally a scandalous one-day exhibition in 1985, all of which generated heated debates in the newspapers, among other reactions. As Nujoom Alghanem and Khalid Albudoor recall in their interview, it was not an easy moment; that first group dispersed, and Hassan retreated from overt, manifesto-driven presentation.

By 1988, the year this survey starts, Hassan Sharif had found his footing, turning inward to focus on arts education and his own artwork. The intensive creative community that formed thereafter also shares certain traits with famous art historical communities. It has parallels with much bohemian Modernism during times of changing population (Paris at the turn of the 20th century, New York after WWII, Bombay after independence, Beirut before the civil war, Beijing after China opened its borders). It also shares key plot points with certain legends of avant-garde innovation and their rejection by the mainstream, of artists who eventually ascended into the art historical canon—again, Duchamp's narrative and the support of his cohort both come to mind.

But there were also challenges unique to the UAE context, for when an underground or avant-garde art scene takes shape in an area burdened with a particular set of “regional art” expectations, strange forms of myopia set in. The international world might see them exclusively through a regional lens, with the attendant ethnic or political clichés and expectations of what their art should therefore look like. Similarly, local and regional artists also had opinions about what kind of art Gulf artists “should” be making, and either criticized Hassan Sharif and the community around him as making art that was too Western, and not representing Emirati culture, or for making art that didn't overtly address current political issues in the region.

One retort was that they were using materials readily available in the UAE, from Emirati present-day culture, and those happened to be things like cardboard, wire, rope, and rocks. Close observation of the world around them, collecting discarded objects, recycling trash into art, and mass production were all recurring themes that may, or may not, be considered political. The conceptual register of these projects engaged the boomtown context of the UAE, and made it personal in the hand of each individual artist.

How can one contextualize this community art historically? The routes of cultural influence are complex, and defy Western/non-Western dichotomies. Locals went abroad to study in Egypt, Kuwait, the U.S., the UK, Japan, Pakistan, India, and returned with added layers of reference. Likewise, artists from as many different places lived among them, bringing their own perspectives to bear on their UAE surroundings. Every iteration of this community had some non-Emiratis at its core, and work coming out of Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Sudan influenced ideas as heavily as that from Europe and America. Influence wasn't merely two-way, or East–West, it was, and is, kaleidoscopic far beyond that seen in Paris of the 1920s or New York of the 1960s.

Today the UAE is seeing a surge in interest in the history of UAE art, from the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi's curators to PhD candidates and young Fulbright scholars, all of whom aim to tell its history. Anyone attempting this work faces a daunting, bilingual, scholarly research task. Exhibition records are hard to track down, and coverage of the artists has thus far been inconsistent at best, particularly in English. Moreover, as the UAE Pavilion and catalogue at the 2015 Venice Biennale showed, exhibition history in the UAE is far more varied than one might think. Many artists were working on many fronts. The cohort outlined here was indeed only one facet of a large, diverse collection of artistic trajectories in the UAE in this period. We hope that this collection of interviews will, likewise, help lay a foundation for the production of a more firmly grounded history of UAE art.

We offer this exhibition and collected interviews with a caveat, one echoed by each of our interviewees: these were not “The Group of Five.” There were many more artists who made up the community, particularly when one counts journalists, poets, and filmmakers. Many do refer to a “group” when talking about these artists who frequently exhibited together, especially

from the Satwa house community. In some accounts, the term “Group of Five” derives from an important exhibition of 2002 in Germany, called *Five/ UAE*, which included Hassan and Hussain Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and Abdullah Al Saadi. Still, it was by then already something of a tradition to name exhibitions of work produced by this community after the number of artists exhibiting work in the show: there was *The Five* in 1995, in Sharjah, which included four of these five from the 2002 show, plus Abdul Rahim Salem. There was also an exhibition called *The Four*, and also one in 1996 called *6 Artists* (which included Jos Clevers and Vivek Vilasini). Finally, in 2007, there was *The Seven from the UAE*, which included artists spanning several generations from Hassan Sharif to students of Ebtisam Abdulaziz.

Another critical point for any reader of UAE art history is its context in the wider Gulf’s art movements. In her essay for this volume, Aisha Stoby traces the history of the emergence of modern art communities in the Gulf, in which one can see that the scene in the UAE was part of a larger regional scene, sharing many of the same characteristics. Among the more notable similarities in the last fifty years is the emergence of distinct contemporary art collectives and groups.

From the beginning, Adel Khozam has actively participated in the core of this community in his role as a writer and poet. To this volume he contributes his own history of this community, and a recollection of the library that he and the others read and discussed.

For the interviews, we tried to establish three things: the relationship of the individual artist to their artistic community, the members of that community, and how their peers and mentors affected their creative trajectory.

A few names repeatedly appeared as part of this cohort, among them, Khalid Albudoor and Nujoom Alghanem. Cristiana de Marchi joined the group only as our period ends, but as a curator of The Flying House she is privy to a deeper understanding of the undercurrents and context of this world than most.

We wish we could have interviewed Jos Clevers. With our re-publication of Hassan Sharif’s interview with him in 1999, we hope this book helps reconstruct his importance to this history.

It was a great loss that we were not able to interview Hassan Sharif, as he was becoming ill when we started this project, and has since passed away. We are deeply grateful to Cristiana de Marchi for sharing her in-depth interview with him from 2009, reviewed and approved by him but never before published.

From this massive collection of interviews and material, my colleague Bana Kattan compiled a uniquely-conceived timeline, which accompanies this book as its own document. Inspired by subway maps, it traces the movement of the artists across the two decades in question, visualizing their points of intersection and divergence geographically and chronologically. Instead of a comprehensive timeline for each individual, she has created a timeline and geography of their community. Solo shows are often left out in favor of key points in creative development, travel, and collaboration among the artists.

Finally, much of the research here would not have been possible without the excellent archive developed by Abdul-Raheem Sharif and his son Mohamed.

This book aims to fill a modest but critical role: to provide source material on this particular community that clarifies and adds to what we know. Our hope is that this book can be a reference point for future scholars, whose work we look forward to reading.

Modern Art Pioneers: An Introduction to Artist Communities in the GCC

Aisha Stoby



Hassan Meer
Under the Water, 2002
Video installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Introduction

I first met Maya Allison, Director of the New York University (NYU) Abu Dubai Art Gallery, in Berlin in the late summer of 2016. We went on a driving tour of the city and discussed our shared research interests. I had just completed the first year of my PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, researching modern art movements in the Gulf states. Maya told me that she was developing an exhibition on artist communities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with a particular focus on the community around Hassan Sharif, that has come to be known as The Flying House. She asked if I would be interested in being involved in some form. The invitation was a gift, and I immediately accepted. What followed was a series of in-depth conversations on art communities globally and within the Gulf. I shared some of my research, with particular reference to Oman, and she was gracious enough to invite me into her thinking and planning process for this exhibition. And then just a few short weeks later, Hassan Sharif passed away.

Today, when we trace the work of the community commonly referred to as the “Group of Five,”¹ we can situate their work and envision clear parallels to concurrent movements in London or New York. However, it is important to reposition our thinking and place ourselves locally within the Gulf some thirty years ago, when some from this group created rhythmic performances, with no audiences, and documented these happenings by themselves. They rearranged found objects and drove makeshift exhibition trucks through the outer emirates to display work to local communities. They practiced and invented display methods outside established support structures. Indeed, they invented and created structures by and for themselves. This was an intersection of artists initially known for being absurdist and outlandish, for being different, and, in the end, for art of the highest quality. They are a group of pioneers.

When Hassan Sharif passed away, Maya and I spoke briefly, and then went silent. How could we continue to develop this exhibition in this void? For many of my colleagues, friends, artists, curators, creators active in the Gulf, and for myself, Sharif and the artist community that surrounded him served as endless inspiration and as a constant vision of resilience. He was a role model.

If my generation² is struggling to contextualize our local realities, our evolving identities, and our standing in a global art context, we should remind ourselves what it must have been like just a few decades ago, without the benefit of the myriad of art institutions and the resources that are available to us today. Although the majority of my material is drawn from primary sources, since the start of my research in 2009 I have personally benefitted from support networks that continue to multiply.

A few weeks went by before Maya and I made contact again. In spite of our low spirits, and with a very challenging timeframe, she told me that she was going ahead with the exhibition and a publication of interviews with the members of this particular UAE community, that could be used as an academic resource. She asked if I still wanted to aid in the project. “Absolutely!”

In a short period of time Maya and her team, including Exhibitions Curator Bana Kattan and Programs Curator Alaa Edris, managed to accomplish the mammoth task of locating and interviewing all known living members of the group, and documented their conversations in this volume, now a seminal resource for modern art in the UAE. It is the pleasantest of tasks to celebrate this generation of artists. From my perspective as a curator and a researcher, we may not yet have the benefit of adequate documentation or peer-reviewed criticism, but we do have the words of artists themselves and the evidence of movements deserving of contemporary attention. We have the advantage of memory, of living history, and of vastly broad shoulders, such as those of Hassan Sharif.

In the pages that follow, I outline an historical narrative of the arts and art communities in the Gulf, in order to move away from misleading comparisons to other art histories. It is our hope this will situate the development of this particular community more accurately in the context of their greater artistic and social network.

The Landscape

The Gulf states share complex histories, histories distinct from the greater Middle East. There is far more that we have in common than there is that

sets us apart. In addition to our economic and social backgrounds, we share complex societal makeups of Bedouin tribes situated alongside coastal dwellings. We balance a collective consciousness and rhetoric of maintaining our heritage while building our future, as is seen by national museums and heritage centers developing alongside global, modern art collections. Each state stimulates the other and our projects serve as catalysts for our neighbors in creating what Sultan Al Qassemi called “new centers of the Arabian world.”³

In order to trace an art historical narrative for the Gulf states, it is important that we first examine the evolving landscapes in which artist communities began to develop. Particularly in the international media, the “boom” of the past ten years is often described as an extraordinary phenomenon, but in fact it is not dissimilar to a common modernizing process that took place decades prior. I begin by drawing us back to a period starting in the 1960s.

I would argue that the pre-oil cultural identity and landscape of the Gulf is, at its core, a result of the shared hybrid heritage of each state that consists of both coastal and port cities, alongside Bedouin tribes. These groupings are defined by their mode of flux, in the case of the Bedouins by their transience and mobility, and in the case of the coastal towns, by their various cultures, which are reflected in the living structures. In regional terms the discovery of oil came late.⁴ However, as oil revenues began to bring in returns, societies developed a sense of affluence and excitement, and alongside this, artist communities began to develop. A striking feature of these recent historical developments has been the invitation extended to internationally-renowned architects to participate in the planning for the new capitals, not dissimilar to those architects invited to shape the art infrastructures of our capitals today.

Researcher Farah Al-Nakib describes the societal reflection of this period after the discovery of oil as the “confidence interval.”⁵ The “confidence interval” is a term ascribed to the rapid expansion and modernization that naturally resulted in identity and societal shifts, and with it, increased national self-confidence. Kuwait’s first city master plan was introduced in 1952, with the intention of transforming the old mud-brick town into a modern capital that reflected a new outlook and cultural identity. Celebrated architects of the time such as Kenzo Tange and Arne Jacobsen were invited

to build major development projects, projects that represent the building and infrastructure of a new modern era.⁶

Of this same period of rapid transformation in Saudi Arabia, curator Noor Al Dabbagh relays that, “Saudi Arabia transformed its infrastructure from 18th-century conditions to 20th-century modernity in merely three decades.” She continues, “... the country was catapulted into modernity as it underwent a sweeping tide of modernization and urbanization.”⁷ An example of the aestheticization of this modernizing process is the public landscape that developed in Jeddah. Between 1972 and 1986, Jeddah commissioned and installed over 400 public sculptures by international artists that adorned the city, including works by César Baldaccini, Victor Vasarely, Henry Moore, Jean Arp, Joan Miró and Jacques Lipchitz. The commissioner Dr. Mohammed Said Farsi, called this project *Tajmil*, or “beautification.” The incentive was not only to aestheticize the city, but to introduce its citizens to international modern art. In practice, these sculptures served as visual landmarks and integrated public art into the city.⁸

Oman developed similar public art projects at the roundabouts of old Muscat following the accession of Sultan Qaboos Bin Said. The old walled city of Muscat opened its doors and in 1972 Al Alam Palace was rebuilt as the royal residence. As the country began to mobilize and integrate, Seeb International Airport (now Muscat International Airport) replaced a smaller airfield in Bayt Al Falaj, allowing for a global support infrastructure. The first five-year development plan of 1976 emphasized structural developments, highways that connected the society and infrastructure to care for its citizens.

In nearby Bahrain, Ahmed Bucheery, Director of Gulf House Engineering in Manama, noted the emergence of modern architecture between 1971 and 1979, “The lifestyle of the Bahrainis was changed drastically due to the linkage with the outside world through the modern educational system, the establishments of social organizations, and the increase in the population due to its improved medical facilities.”⁹ It was in 1980–1989 “post-modern architecture” that we see Hamad Town, Bahrain National Museum (Danish architects Krohn & Hartvig Rasmussen [now KHR Arkitekter A/S]),¹⁰ the University of Bahrain, Bait Al Quran, and structures such as the King Fahad Causeway.

Shortly after Qatar became an independent national state in 1971 its first development plan was revealed in 1972. It was executed in 1975 under the leadership of Hisham Qaddumi, President of the Arab Architects and HQA Group. Qaddumi invited a group of international architects to Doha that same year to review the plan and provide insight on Doha's future developments. "The challenge was to take this country at the beginning of its development, and infuse the development with excitement, with a sense of belonging to an international community and at the same time being rooted in its tradition and its heritage."¹¹ In addition to architects, Qatar invited a multi-disciplinary range of figures to review and contribute to the master plan. This included cultural figures from fields as diverse as art and science-fiction writing, all brought together to engage in a dialogue. These forums allowed for vital discussions on innovative approaches to city planning. The Sheraton Hotel, which was completed a decade later in Doha in 1982 was a resultant example of this process of dialogue. It was designed by the American architect William Pereira, an avid science-fiction enthusiast, and referenced his design as a space ship, transported into a new locality.

The neighboring United Arab Emirates was established as a union of sheikhdoms in 1971, a few short years after oil was discovered. In 1969, Dubai began oil production. Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum was the Vice-President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, and the Emir of Dubai. Under the 1971 master plan, John Harris was commissioned by Sheikh Rashid to build the New Dubai Hospital, an international state-of-the-art hospital, which, extraordinarily, was constructed in only two years. In a similarly short time-scale, the expansion of the Dubai airport was completed.¹²

The speed of these developments served as mutual stimuli for neighbors and are indicative of a collective rhythm and a regional pulse. For the purpose of this essay, I have presented a very brief and selective collection of projects that developed during this time period that reflect a range of developments in the Gulf capitals. These examples are indicative of an architectural and artistic integration of aesthetics within city structures, the Gulf states' ability to meet the needs of their society through rapid modernization, and the incentive to modernize on a global scale.

Documenting Changing Societies

Hassan Sharif (1951–2016, UAE) saw these structural changes during his lifetime and made the conscious decision to approach these shifts as a spectator. Sharif was a well-known political commentator and caricaturist in Emirati newspapers from 1973 to 1979, before traveling to London to study visual art. He returned with a new energy and as a holder of recent shifting histories. He also famously found himself a mentor to other artists, first as founder for the Mreijeh Art Atelier in Sharjah in 1984, a creative hub for young artists and writers, as a founding member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in 1980 with his brother Hussain and others, and famously as the senior artist in the dynamic community of artists often referred to as the "Group of Five."

Although there are now seminal studies published on the architectural and structural modernization period of the 1970s,¹³ a casual but inaccurate historical assessment might suggest that there were few art movements that took place in the Gulf during this period. This is in fact not the case, but these movements have not been adequately documented, assessed, or disseminated. In fact, the community around Hassan Sharif was one of a number of artistic movements in the Gulf at the time.

Artist communities develop for a range of reasons. Throughout art history, art movements are inextricably linked to the idea of "the group." Creators gather as peers with shared ideas. Multi-disciplinary conversations amongst thinkers develop to draw in like-minded creative practitioners. Perhaps, in the case of the Gulf, there is something to be said for the importance of tribal structures and communities in establishing sharing and support systems. And in lieu of spaces that would promote organized meeting arenas, unrevealed refuge may be taken by practicing artists in villages and collectives that allowed for experimentation and exchange of thought.

Art education systems began to develop as early as 1940 in Kuwait and 1950 in Saudi Arabia,¹⁴ and following this Kuwait opened its first public art exhibition in 1942 at the Mubarakiya school¹⁵ with Saudi Arabia to follow with its first public art exhibition in 1958.¹⁶ The following decades would see the first regional fine art societies, Kuwait's Free Atelier in 1960 and later the Kuwaiti Association for Plastic Arts in 1967,¹⁷ Oman's Youth Art Studio in 1980,¹⁸ the

Qatar Fine Arts Society in 1980,¹⁹ as well as the Emirates Fine Arts Society that same year,²⁰ the Bahrain Arts Society in 1982,²¹ and the Omani Society for Fine Arts in 1993.²² However, during their initial openings, not all of these structures existed as exhibition venues. Private domestic spaces and alternative exhibition methods would continue to develop through generations of practicing artists throughout the Gulf.

Though many of the artists referenced in this essay drew influences from tribal heritage and handicrafts, it is important to make the distinction between visual art and material culture, and the work described here will be examined as visual art practices. Many of the artists mentioned also traveled abroad for their studies or were influenced by the regional presence of artists from abroad. Although there were the beginnings of art infrastructures throughout the region, visual artists found them to be useful in varying degrees. Equipped with skill and knowledge of international art movements, these artists were living in a rapidly modernizing society, but one that still had few outlets for the practice of plastic arts.

As is common in periods of modernization internationally, expansive changes bring about an artistic urgency to document and narrate daily experiences, and to present a counter-narrative through artistic practice. Many artists of the period preceding the timeline of this exhibition chose to document their changing societies, to explore gender politics, and to engage with the tensions of public and private space. In social art history, the vantage of tracing daily experiences and objects is generally viewed as a non-political stance. However, for many artists within the Gulf, the practice of tracing and documenting personal histories developed as a method of chronicling evolving identities. As the reflective surfaces of newly-developed structures mirrored the shaping of their new capitals, interior spaces resonated the daily realities of living.

The first artist I have found documentation for practicing in the Gulf was Mujib Al Dosri (1922–1956, Kuwait). He was given Kuwait's first art scholarship in 1935, becoming the first known artist from the Gulf to be sent abroad on an art scholarship. He chose to study in Egypt and then returned to Kuwait, where he passed away at the age of 32. His work functions as

painterly archive material, documenting pre-oil domestic traditions and daily gestures before the landscape began to shift and evolve.

Following an early education in Bahrain, Omani artist Anwar Sonya (b. 1948, Oman) began painting in the early 1970s. He is generally considered to be the founder of Oman's modern art movement and was in constant dialogue with artists throughout the Gulf. His early paintings focused on meticulous and meditative renditions of Oman's landscape, much like Emirati artist Abdul Qader Al Rais (b. 1951, UAE), who defined his technique particularly in his early paintings as "romantic realism" with particular interest in old local architecture and coastlines. Anwar Sonya recalls the climate of Oman in the early seventies, "There were 10 or 12 artists in the country. Now there are thousands."²³ One such artist whom Sonya remains in dialogue with is Rabha Mahmoud (b. 1949), and as a woman artist growing up in Oman in the 1960s, without access to art education, she taught herself to paint with supplies brought by relatives who traveled abroad.

Until today, Mahmoud resolutely paints only one subject: women. She portrays highly private interior spaces, with an emphasis on dress and gesture in private. In the same vein as Sonya and Al Rais's work, I would argue that these glimpses into traditional daily rituals and private spaces depicted by Mahmoud serve as painterly historic documentation, in particular as the landscape outside this private sphere was evolving at an astonishingly exponential pace. A similar experience is reflected in the work of French Impressionists such as Renoir and Monet, who concentrated on examining subtle gestures in daily life while Paris industrialized itself and developed urban spaces.²⁴

In styles very similar to the Egyptian painters of this time period, two of the first Saudi Arabian women artists, Safeya Said Binzagr (b. 1940, Saudi Arabia) and Mounirah Mosly (b. 1954, Saudi Arabia), trained in Egypt before returning to Saudi Arabia and displayed their work together for the first time in 1968.²⁵ They painted as one might think of photographing, directly and without embellishment. Painting was employed as a means of commenting on the immediate world around them. A noticeable theme to be discerned in all these artists' work is insight into private moments at a time when tradition and heritage were in constant flux. Art historian Abdulrahman

Al-Suleiman recalls Binzagr and Mosly's unsuccessful efforts to exhibit their work in the 1960s, noting that they "faced the difficulty of introducing and legitimizing visual art to a country completely unexposed to it."²⁶

Similarly, during the same time period, Saudi Arabian painter Abdulhalim Radawi (1939–2006), who had recently returned from studying art in Rome, self-curated his first solo art exhibition in 1964, and it was attended by two people. Radawi focused his practice on architecture, his favorite work titled *Old Buildings in Makkah* (1956),²⁷ now housed in his personal museum in Jeddah. Other artists who began employing this use of landscape and environment as symbolism include Bahraini artist Nasser Al Yousif (1940–2006), who extensively surveyed landscapes and architecture in Bahrain as he envisioned their shifts around him. As with many of the artists above, he served as a mentor for many emerging artists in Bahrain alongside Abdullah Al Muharraqi (b. 1939, Bahrain).

"Group of Five" member Abdullah Al Saadi (b. 1967, UAE) negotiated isolation from exhibition spaces by choosing to exhibit in a range of rural settings. An example of this can be seen as early as the late 1980s through his exhibition trucks and practice of hanging works in rural cafes for local audiences to view. His process of documentation developed through a series of projects involving collecting objects, including those that were foreign to the local landscape, such as empty aluminum cans. These works have been exhibited in their rusted state, and their aging process serves as a function of the artwork.

The practice of collecting objects is also seen in the work of Al Saadi's peer, Mohammed Kazem (b. 1969, UAE) in *Known and Unknown*, a display of sands collected from various desert sites. Sand is inconstant, a collection of particles blowing in the desert air. However, the locations from which they were collected can be identified. Atop the pools of sand sit fragments of collected wood that Kazem knew did not originate in the UAE, though their precise origins are unknown, whether perhaps from Africa or India, thus "known and unknown."

As with artists of the previous generation, Kazem's early practice in performance art was largely influenced by his relationship with the fluid environment he felt was shifting around him. He was born in Dubai in 1969, the

same year of the first Dubai expansion plan. His work is largely research-based and his projects develop over time. "Usually, I work on a project basis of one or two years."²⁸ He began his practice observing the changing landscapes and buildings through windows, watching the cityscape evolve through various lenses. In his window project, he takes a series of photographs of building sites as they develop, which examine the changing skyline.

Kazem's project extended to visiting sites that were marked by construction and hoisting a flag in their space, evaluating themes of citizen ownership and evolving identity. Inevitably, these practices also explored the situation of the workers who built these projects, in particular those largely unremarked roles the imported South Asian worker population played in these developments. In this same series Kazem began to document footprints and gloves, remnants of the workers that had been left behind.

In contrast to these informal clusters of artists and artistic mentors, in Qatar, a formalized artist community called "The Three Friends" was founded in the mid-1970s by Yousef Ahmad (b. 1955, Qatar) alongside Mohammed Ali Abdulla (b. 1956, Qatar) and Hassan Al Mulla (b. 1951, Qatar). Yousef Ahmad was later a co-founder of the Qatar Fine Arts Society and the inaugural director for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, where he played an instrumental role in the museum's collection. Each of the group's members were also inaugural members of the Qatar Fine Arts Society in 1980 and served consecutively as directors.

All of "The Three Friends" studied abroad: Ahmad studied fine arts in Egypt before returning to Doha in 1976, he then completed a master's degree in California; Al Mulla graduated from the University of Baghdad's College of Fine Arts in 1972; Ali Abdulla studied fine arts at the University of Toledo. Each of these artists is distinct in their joint mission of practicing their own crafts alongside creating and nurturing institutional structures. In the case of Ahmad, he developed a program for art history at a university and took on an exhibitions post in the Ministry of Information, and eventually developed Mathaf's collection. In the case of Al Mulla, he developed the educational program for fine arts at the university and founded the Department of Arts and Culture. And in the case of Ali Abdulla, he used public space and heritage areas for projects with contemporary artists.

The role of mentorship and partnership described above was adopted heavily by Sharif upon his return to the UAE. Sharif found peers and young artists and began to develop collaborative curatorial and documentation processes. One example is Kazem's 1994 piece *Tongue*, which is in fact documented through a series of 44 photographs taken by Sharif. Though the process of documentation for Sharif's community was largely lens-based, it is important to remember that these photographs serve as documentation for experimental practices. Sharif was one of the first practicing performance artists in the Gulf. One of Sharif's first work's, *Jumping*, very minimally consists of jumping from left to right. This piece is self-documented and it is difficult to imagine in hindsight an artist, practicing in the Gulf during this period, actually doing this and starting to develop within this medium. In fact, of Sharif's early works (1981–1986), many were self-documented. He hid timed cameras on the streets or in his house, and they were often experiments with no audiences. For a long time, many of these images were kept in Sharif's studio and many have still not been displayed to the public.

It is noteworthy that similar movements were facing great difficulty in gaining audience appreciation in New York and London, so it is hardly surprising that the work of these Gulf artists were not immediately accepted as art. A poignant example of this is Sharif's participation in the 6th Sharjah Biennial (2003), where his collection of found objects from desert settings was installed outside the Biennial site, and subsequently swept away, mistaken for garbage.

A resonance the evolving landscape continues to hold for this generation is the constant grappling with the imperative of changing vistas and society, and within that, a feeling of urgency to document our presence. However, a stark contrast that this earlier period of modernity holds to the current moment was the lack of developed art infrastructures including resources for art materials, art education establishments, and exhibition venues. These artists were involved in building many of the institutions that have emerged since, and their dialogues with one another shaped the art climate that began to be discernable. As each of these artists served as mentors, future generations benefitted not only from their support, but from their personal knowledge of recent history.

Experimental Collectives of the Late 20th Century: The Group of Five and The Circle

Beyond institutional and domestic spheres, the last decades of the 20th century saw the development of experimental collectives and communities of artists creating work that did not fit into existing art structures. Artists who traveled abroad in the 1980s and 1990s were exposed to a new arena of contemporary practices including installation art, land art, and video work. These pieces could not easily be purchased and placed in homes. Their works originated in anti-art-establishment methodology and were not immediately intended for circulation. In order to exhibit these works, a further stage of exhibition methods needed to develop alongside the evolving mediums. Two particular groups, who were aware of each other's practices, are the best examples of this phenomenon: the UAE community around Hassan Sharif, namely, the "Group of 5" and Oman's "Circle Collective" led by Hassan Meer (b. 1972, Oman).

Sharif returned to Dubai from London with a surge of new ideas. Later, it was very much in this same spirit that Meer returned to Oman following his studies at the Savanna College of Art and Design in the U.S. Both Sharif and Meer developed tightly-knit communities that have served as support structures and precursors to many movements to follow. These are examples of artist communities that were largely composed of members from their own states, but maintained important discussions with international participants as is seen in the Group of 5's work with Indian artist Vivek Vilasini (b. 1964, India) and Dutch artist Jos Clevers (1951–2009, Netherlands), and in The Circle's early inclusion of Austrian artist Sini Coreth (b. Austria, 1957).

Both Sharif and Meer returned to their countries with a realization that new ways of sharing art would need to be developed to encompass their art forms. They both functioned as artists and as curators, and their exhibitions became installations. A further joining characteristic of these groups is the setting up of organic meeting spaces by their founders. Sharif's studio served as a meeting place for poets, musicians, and creative thinkers. Meer's studio also served as a point of multi-disciplinary dialogue for a range of creators.

Meer derived the concept of his “Circle” from the concept of the circle as the mother of being. The legendary Islamic mystic philosopher Ibn Arabi stated, “The universe in itself is similar to the central dot, the circle and what is there between them. The dot is God, the emptiness outside the circle is non-existence... and what is between the dot and the emptiness is the possibility of being.” The most well-known figures of the Circle are Hassan Meer, Anwar Sonya, Budoor Al Riyami, and Sini Coreth. With the help of Anwar Sonya, Hassan Meer organized early iterations of the Circle in the 1990s that included exhibitions at the Fine Arts Society as well as spaces that are no longer active within Muscat.

The first formalized Circle exhibition took place in 2000 at the Fine Arts Society with Hassan Meer, Anwar Sonya, and Saleem Sakhi.

Each subsequent edition expanded to include more members, and as the scale began to grow, so did the spaces. The entrance of the second edition greeted visitors with a swimming pool installed in a Muscat festival. A life-size projected image of Meer drowning in the pool was accompanied by an audio track of cutting water and gasps of air. Just above it a monitor showed a continuous image of water, the tide hitting the walls of Muttrah. The following rooms displayed Ibrahim Abdullah Al Qasimi’s cartoons of goats, and as the viewer continued through the space, these goats were eventually slaughtered, hung, and decayed. These works introduced new methods, new expectations, and new meanings for the Omani art public. By the third Circle exhibition in 2005, members included Mohamed Abla, Amal Al-Aathem, Abdulmonam Al Hasani, Ibrahim Al Qasmi, Budoor Al Riyami, Anas Al-Shaikh, Abdulfatah Alzeen, Abdulhameed Al Zubaidi, Sini Coreth, Mansoor Hassan, Iki Nakagawa, Saleem Sakhi, Maisoon Saqr, Anwar Sonya, and Hassan Meer, and by its fourth edition in 2007, the Circle displayed works by 26 artists and had expanded outside exhibition spaces and was shown throughout the city. The streets of Al Khuwair displayed installations by Manal AlDowayan and Tarek Al-Ghoussein, while Camille Zakharia exhibited levitating drawings in Muttrah Souk.

The utilization of city structures can also be found in the work of the Group of 5 in the distinct practices of Hassan Sharif, Hussain Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, Abdullah Al Saadi, and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim.

Abdullah Al Saadi made use of materials found around his studio, bringing rusted cans and old doors into the gallery, and meanwhile installing his work outside on the landscape, documenting it in situ. These subtle gestures encompassed shifts throughout the society.

Similarly, Sharif noted of Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim’s land art in the early 1980s, “When people pass these works they don’t know who has done these things? He is raising questions, who did this and why?” He worked with rock formations, as well as sculpting from clay and leaves, material from the landscapes around him that he appropriated, and often he returned them to their original environments.

Another member of the group, Hussain Sharif, focused on materiality and scale. He describes his form of documentation as “focusing on the horizontal rather and the vertical.”²⁹ With a background in theatre design and as a designer for Sharjah TV, he envisioned space and scale as his canvas. Many of his constructivist drawings on walls and in public spaces can be seen as the first serious examples of the practice of street art in Dubai. In addition to this, as is true of all of the artists mentioned, his practice is largely participatory. Calling himself an “art activist,” he held workshops for emerging artists throughout the UAE.

Conclusion: Artist Communities in the Gulf Today

The movements above merit further discussion on continuity and individual practices that I cannot undertake here. But this sampling makes clear the evidence of joined movements in artistic practice and in the development of art communities in the Gulf.

The Gulf’s current climate of the arts brings with it many of the same themes, in documenting changing landscape, mentorship, collaborative practices, and setting new ideas and values in a vision of modern Arabia. The timeline for this exhibition ends at 2008, the moment when art infrastructures and the visibility of these artists reached a turning point. It is an important moment for the Gulf for a variety of reasons. A few projects of note include the opening of Christie’s in Dubai in 2006, and two art fairs

in 2007—Art Dubai (then called the Gulf Art Fair) and Abu Dhabi Art (then called ArtParis Abu Dhabi). In addition to the commercial viability of these projects, for many galleries active within the region these fairs served as an important space for meeting and exchange. 2007 also saw the first annual March Meeting held by the Sharjah Art Foundation. The Saadiyat Island Projects had just been announced including the opening of the Abu Dhabi Louvre Museum and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Sotheby's had its inaugural auction in Doha in 2009 and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha and New York University Abu Dhabi both opened their doors in 2010.

In the light of the above we turn to our current moment. Reinvention and importation of new ideas are not new phenomena in the Gulf. Even without the benefit of travel abroad that has now become commonplace, artists present works that express and explore the context of a global modern art framework. The further advent of information technology and rapidly changing forms of communication have facilitated new networks, and with it an increased use of new media. Artists continue to activate public spaces outside institutional frameworks, while researchers and practitioners have investigated new methods of performance-based dialogue, as seen in Kuwait's *Nuqat* conferences or editions of Art Dubai's Global Art Forum.

There is a third phase of artist communities relevant to the groups described here, groups that benefitted from significant visibility after the timeline framed in the exhibition. One would be remiss not to mention communities such as those active within Al Meftaha arts village now showcased in Edge of Arabia, The Circle 2, a new generation of Circle artists in Oman who exhibit annually in Muscat's Stal gallery, and formalized artist collectives such as Saudi Arabia's Telfaz 11 or the regional GCC collective. But, as we rapidly soar towards the future, as we should, let us also reflect on our recent past. As put by Hassan Sharif, "I didn't only make art but I made my audience too. I had to contextualize what I was doing."³⁰ There has always been an underground community and, as global art history has shown us, there will always be an underground. But we now have the agency to determine where our practices may be situated.

As put by Hassan Sharif:

I feel bad about these categorizations—"This is Arab contemporary art," "This is Arab modern art," and so on. It should be "This is art" and that's it. Europe and America are making a big mistake by doing this. [In the past] when they started to write the history of art, they just wrote about European art—and ignored African art, Islamic art, Latin American art.³¹

And as these artists and movements are increasingly becoming integrated into history, it is important to proceed with the knowledge that the current artistic developments would not be possible without the pioneers that worked before us.

1. Editor's note: The community came to be called "The Five" or "The Group" as a result of several exhibitions that identified them as such during the key periods of their artistic emergence.
2. Editor's note: The author uses the term "her generation" from her perspective as a young Omani citizen and emerging art historian, from an art community that to some degree overlaps with those in the UAE, geographically and philosophically.
3. Sultan Al Qassemi, "Thriving Gulf Cities Emerge as New Centers of Arab World," *Al-Monitor*, October 8, 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/abu-dhabi-dubai-doha-arab-centers.html.
4. "Oil was first discovered in Iran in 1908. The giant oilfield at Kirkuk in northern Iraq was found in 1927. The first oil on the southern side of the Gulf was found in Bahrain in 1931. Saudi Arabia, which now has the largest reserves of conventional oil in the world—between a sixth and a quarter of the total depending how you do the math—found its first oil only in 1938. Production did not take off until 1941. Oil was not found in Abu Dhabi, the leading emirate of the UAE, until 1958." The Washington Institute, "Understanding the Gulf states," Spring 2014. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/understanding-the-gulf-states>
5. Term used by Farah Al Nakib, Kuwait and the Confidence Interval, Global Art Forum 8, 2014.
6. Spaces of note include Kenzo Tange's Kuwait International Airport, (1967–1970) and the Embassy of Kuwait in Tokyo (1970), Arne Jacobson's Kuwait Central Bank, (1966), Jorn Utzon's Kuwait National Assembly Building, (1982), Reima and Raili Pietila's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (1985), Sune Lindstorm's Kuwait Towers, (1979) and Kuwait Water Towers, (1970).
7. Curator Noor Al Dabbagh, *Women Artists in Saudi Arabia*, Essay, Banafsajeel, 2002.

8. Perhaps the best placed to document the spirit of this time in Saudi Arabia and the responses of society is Jeddah. Dr. Mohammed Said Farsi returned to Saudi Arabia upon completing his bachelor's degree in architecture in 1963. Two years later he was appointed 'Planning Officer for the Kingdom of Western Saudi Arabia,' and later Mayor of Jeddah in 1972. <http://www.themsff.org/dr-farsi/>
9. Citation: Bucheery, Ahmed. Contemporary Architecture of Bahrain. 2004. In Architecture Re-introduced: New Projects in Societies in Change. Jamal Abed (ed). Geneva: The Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Link to uploaded PDF: <http://archnet.org/publications/4774>
10. <http://www.khr.dk/#/142128/>
11. The Sheraton Hotel Qatar Panel, Global Art Forum 8, 2014.
12. *Hong Kong of the Desert?*, Ron Gluckman, 1992. <http://www.gluckman.com/DubaiBiz.html>
13. Noted works include Farah Al-Nakib's *Kuwait Transformed: History of Oil and Urban Life*, Nelida Fuccaro's research on Bahrain, Ahmed Kanna's research on Dubai, and Pascal Menoret's research on Saudi Arabia.
14. <http://www.utne.com/arts/art-in-saudi-arabia-zeoz161ozfol>
15. Museum of Mubarakia School, Kuwait.
16. <http://alwatan.kuwait.tt/articledetails.aspx?Id=314678&YearQuarter=20134>
17. <http://fikirconferences.org/en/events/%5Bnode%3Atitle%5D-5>
18. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274897342>
19. http://www.explore-qatar.com/culture_and_heritage/events/qatar-fine-arts-society
20. <http://www.artsuae.ae>
21. <http://www.bahartsociety.org.bh/history.html>
22. <http://osfa.gov.om/About.aspx>
23. <https://www.y-oman.com/2013/05/art-attack/>
24. As described in T J Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, 1985.
25. Curator Noor Al Dabbagh, *Women Artists in Saudi Arabia*, Essay, Banafsajeel, 2002.
26. Al-Suleiman, Abdulrahmen, *The Modern Art Movement of Saudi Arabia*, Ministry of Education, 2000. (Out of print.)
27. <http://www.greenboxmuseum.com/sa-abdulhalimradwi.html>
28. Mohammed Kazem, interview for 2003 Hassan Sharif Documentary produced by The Flying House, Dubai.
29. Hussain Sharif, interview for 2003 Hassan Sharif Documentary produced by The Flying House, Dubai.
30. <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20160919/ARTICLE/160919210/2306#full>
31. Hassan Sharif interview for *Harper's Bazaar Art*, July–August Issue 2016. <http://www.ivde.net/usr/library/documents/hassan-sharif/harpers-bazaar-art-jul-aug-hassan-sharif.pdf>

Aisha Mazin Stoby

Aisha Stoby is an Omani art historian and curator who formerly served on the planning team for the Oman National Museum and has curated a range of exhibitions including *Oman et La Mer* at the National Maritime Museum in Paris, *The Spirit of the Union* at the New York Public Library in New York, and *Salon Oman Nour* at Leighton House Museum in London. She was the recipient of the 2014 NEON curatorial award and exchange from Whitechapel Gallery in London, where she researched modern art institutions and movements in Athens, Greece, and was awarded a fellowship with the Gwangju Biennale International Curator programme based in Gwangju, South Korea.

She has contributed to a range of publications including *Tribe Magazine* and *Murraqa*, and completed fellowships, internships, and research attachments at institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Project, and Sotheby's Middle East department where she catalogued for Arts of the Islamic world (2010). She has lectured on the topic of Omani modern art movements at institutions including the Anglo-Omani Society in London, the Fine Arts Society in Muscat, the Harvard Arab World Conference 2016, and Cooper Union University in New York, and served as Omani Art Historian for the 2010 Tate Britain exhibition held in Oman, *The Art of Seeing Nature*.

Stoby is currently a guest scholar at the Islamic Museum in Berlin and a PhD candidate at The University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) researching modern art movements in the Arab Gulf. Prior to this she received her master's degree from London's Royal College of Art in Curating, with a dissertation on modern art movements and institutions in the Gulf states. She also holds a bachelor's degree in History of Art from SOAS where her dissertation examining the Louvre and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi projects received a distinction.

The Bridge of Knowledge and the Motor of Ideas: The Space of Reading Among the Generation of Modernization in the UAE

Adel Khozam

If innovation were a road, then reading would be the motor of our passage. If art were the sky, reading would be a hot air balloon to take us to its limit. If great dreams were difficult and full of impossibility, they could become a reality on a paper of poetry. When an artist sums it up on a canvas, or when a poet encapsulates it in a stanza, the conscience shakes and stagnant water trembles within the imagination.

This essay will attempt to trace a number of changes and tremors caused by reading among the generation of modernity in the UAE. By this we mean a generation of artists and writers who split away from the idea of blind imitation and who broke down the barriers of fear and routine in order to reach new and untapped areas of thinking and questioning. Indeed, it has been reading—reading of the self and reading of the other—that has bridged great gaps and created a launching pad to dive into a sea of modernity.

The Beginning

The UAE emerged as a modern state in 1971, finding in its youth that the doors were open to engage in experimentation with the country's gradually increasing openness to the world. Helped by the early emergence of modernity in the Emirates, with its prevailing moderate outlook away from religious and sectarian extremism, and due to there being few cultural references in the country of great influence as was the case in other Arab countries and civilizations, in addition to the emergence of formal education

being delayed until the fifties, the UAE at the time was unable to muster but a few influential names within thought and culture. In this way young people found a clean slate in front of them ready to accept with an open mind the various intellectual currents of thought.

For this reason, dialogues of Modernism in poetry and art called for by Arab intellectuals since the sixties in Beirut, Egypt, and Iraq, found itself a foothold with the new, educated generation in the UAE, especially among young people. Found within such dialogues and books are issues that touch on the conscience and dream for advancement, away from the misery of the greater questions. A new form of poetry (whether through vowelised Arabic grammar or that which does not depend on metre) appeared in the second half of the seventies, including work from Habib Al Sayegh, Dhabia Khamis, Nujoom Alghanem and other names that followed, however they were preceded by some years by the poet Ahmed Al-Madani. Other arts, however, including fine art, remained conservative, and a rebellion against its form emerged in the mid-eighties. Thus began the struggle between the conservative generation, who found a real threat in modernity to the identity of their generation, and the youth that found in it the possibility to achieve their distant aspirations, particularly as they had witnessed everything around them change, from architecture and buildings to streets and the oppression of the civilian nature by the consumer lifestyle.

However, the battle of modernity did not truly ignite until the beginning of the eighties when the publishing of daily newspapers emerged (*Al-Bayan*, *Al-Ittihad*, *Al-Khaleej*). These allocated pages for culture and the arts as well as weekly issues dealing with culture, translation, film, and visual arts. These newspapers increased the level of discussion and debate, with many names appearing that called for a rejection of the past and many spreading their ideas, thoughts and translations that were shocking to the conservative community. On the other hand, there were others who continued to reject and resist this great delinquency towards modernity. Books and readings were the weapons of both sides in this battle.

In the exhibition that accompanies this volume, we have allocated a reading area. In it we have attempted to bring together a collection of books that influenced the formation of thought as well as a collection of names that

we see today as the generation of modernity in the UAE. This includes poets such as Habib Al Sayegh, Dhabia Khamis, Ahmed Rashid Thani, Adel Khozam, Khalid Albudour, Abdulaziz Jassim, Maisoon Saqr, Nujoom Alghanem, Thani Al-Suwaidi, Mohammad Al Mazrouei, Khaled Al-Rashed, and Ibrahim Al Mulla among other authors of books and articles. Artists include Hassan Sharif, Abdul Rahim Salem, Hussain Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem, Abdullah Al Saadi, and Ebtisam Abdulaziz, as well as many who came after them.

Within Philosophy

References in this reading collection vary between different artistic disciplines, the first of which is of course philosophy. Nietzsche perhaps brings together all those of this generation in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, having been a great influence in urging them to look at the world from new angles. It was especially influential because this book was translated into Arabic and the style of its writing was closer to a story or episodes expressed by Nietzsche in high, philosophical poetry. It was also shocking.

This generation, however, has a clear and thorough explorative knowledge of other modern philosophies, especially Roland Barthes in his books *Writing Degree Zero* and *The Death of the Author*. These introduced the concept of the text, writing, the reader or reading. The new issue presented by the book is to re-read the meaning of the text. Interest in linguistics also included Ferdinand de Saussure, who presented theories in semiotics, down to Jacques Derrida and his philosophical approach to “dismantling a text,” as well as Michel Foucault in his great project on the history of gender and his books, *The History of Madness*, *Words and Things*, and, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and what he presented in this context regarding the relationship between knowledge and power in accordance with a new and permanent concept.

Of course we add here books and other references in philosophy, including books on Islamic Sufism, such as Al-Hallaj and especially his *Tawaseen* as well as Al-Nafri and his book *Attitudes and Dialogues*, with many stopping at the Sheikh after the spread of his famous saying “As much as one’s vision widens, one’s expression will narrow,” a saying many resorted to in order to

connect the core of modernist poetry projects. We must, of course, admit that the generation of modernity dug deep into the works of the Sufi Sheikh Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi and his writings *The Bezels of Wisdom* and *The Meccan Conquests*. It did so despite the difficulty of reaching an interpretation of its goals due to the ambiguity of the language and high specificity.

Exploration among philosophical books stretches back to the era of the Ancient Greeks and to *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, in Plato's *Dialogues* and, of course, Socrates and other works that are read within the scope of ancient philosophies, including Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy* about the Ancient Greek era. Along this philosophical line that they walked, some of them dug deep into the roots while others passed by quickly, and others again collected what they could from here and there. However what concerns us is to emphasize that modernity in the UAE has a very strong philosophical base and that the project of modernity in its depths was one of knowledge. When we read the book *Logical Philosophical Treatise* by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, we feel Hassan Sharif's presence. For years Sharif cited the words of this philosopher who devised an approach to language that rebelled against traditional philosophies of linguistic analysis of daily discourse, considering that dialogue is the means by which human beings express ideas.

In this context, the rest of the big philosophical names such as Dante (*Divine Comedy*), Gilles Deleuze, Kant, Heidegger, Spinoza, and Hegel are not absent. There is also full knowledge of books in the same philosophical context, including, of course, *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx and the psychoanalytical books of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as well as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and a long and never-ending list of other books within this context.

We add to this list books from art schools and trends as well as schools that shook the foundations of the arts in general. The Dada and Surrealist schools were the most prominent and famous, particularly as they were established as a branch in Egypt with Georges Henein during the forties. Surrealism—linked with an imaginary thread—extended to art, poetry and other forms of rhythmic writings and experimentation. However, most of those from the generation of modernity in the UAE did not adhere to

Surrealism and did not adopt it. Nevertheless, everyone was floating in a sea of discovery, traveling between Russian Formalism or adopting ideas within new Expressionism. In this way, artists moved freely from Impressionism to Cubism to Abstractionism and collage, finally reaching a place where they would break moulds and add new elements to a painting in order to create art, as did Hassan Sharif and the rest of the youth with him. The important point here is the breaking of the mould, with such transitions being made in accordance with the foundations of studied knowledge, not just for the sake of rebellion or the blind imitation of modern art trends. The poets knew well the experimentation they presented in this pattern of thought experiments, whether it be from the work of Salvador Dalí, or in the works of André Breton, Tristan Tzara, and Apollinaire.

The important point here is to focus on the core idea, namely, that these contemporary philosophies were strongly associated with art and language in particular, as well as the arts in general. In this way poets found fertile ground to plant their intellectual questions and search for viable answers to them. In the midst of such transfers, many were stopping to look at the theses of contemporary Arab intellectuals. Among them was Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, who presented the great project "Formation of the Arab Mind" that followed the epistemological approach in analysing and proposing that the Arab renaissance would not be possible unless intellectual output was similar to an era of notation, based on knowledge and criticism, with a critique of the mind produced by it.

The generation of modernity in the UAE also approached many Arab theses such as that of Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, Taha Hussain and Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad down to Adonis in his books *The Fixed and Variable* and *The Time of Poetry*. Adonis presented a shocking truth in his criticism of the Arab mind in the face of modernity, especially when considering that Arabs practice "Western" modernity and live within such a lifestyle, whilst looking at their achievements. However, there is also refusal of the intellectual principles that led to the production of this modernity. There are a wide range of Arabic books that investigated the crisis of why civilization was late in coming to such societies that also attempted to undermine the old and well-established constants in solid traditional outlooks. The focus of research was in the mentality of the voices of modernity and its writers and artists.

Novel, Poetry and Cinema

In comparison to what happened with philosophy in the thought of the generation of modernity in the UAE, there are many other references in the novel, poetry, music, art, and cinema.

At the level of novels, this generation stopped at learning and studying the classics and narratives of Arabic poetry (there are many), such as *Panchatantra* and *One Thousand and One Nights*, among others. Though many looked at the classic novels by Agatha Christie and Charles Dickens for example, or Victor Hugo and Balzac, their depth stopped at the works of only the most famous novels in the world, such as Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Alberto Moravia's *Me and Him*, Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, William Faulkner's *Sound and Fury*, Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, Hermann Hesse's many works including *Steppenwolf*, *Journey to the East* and *The Glass Bead Game*, while also encompassing Kazantzakis with *Zorba the Greek*, *Report to Greco* and *Rock Garden*, along with the classics of Russian literature including *Mother* by Maxim Gorky the famous works of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Lermontov, Chinghiz Aitmatov and the works of Anna Akhmatova, in addition to a charming book that everyone loves, *My Dagestan* by poet Rasul Gamzatov. These are supplemented with novels of magical realism from other parts of the world, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, José Saramago, Juan Rulfo, Milan Kundera and many others.

This large quantity of knowledge of the world novel is also offset by a good knowledge of the Arab novel, such as the works of leading authors, the first among them Naguib Mahfouz, Youssef Idris, Ghalib Halasa, Hanna Mina, and Amin Maalouf as well as a long list of other Arab novelists. Poetry was strongly present in the consciousness of this generation in all its various types, schools and trends, the old and the new, Arabic and the works in translation in addition to the Persian mystics such as Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, Ahmad Shamlu and Farrukh Farah Zadeh, and French works such as Charles Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, *Elsa* by Louis Aragon, Saint-John Perse's *I, Baz*, Lautréamont's *Songs of Maldoror* and Gaston Bachelard in all his works, including *The Poetics of Space* and *The Poetics of Reverie*—the list goes on.

In poetry and literature this generation possesses knowledge of almost all countries. Arab literature had a strong presence, represented by both the classics and contemporary poetry. In the many meetings that have always been held in homes and cafes, poetry has always been present, starting from East Asia with Japanese haiku poetry, Chinese Tao philosophy and the sayings of Confucius, all the way to India with Tagore, and Africa with Wole Soyinka. The generation of modernity in the UAE read everything, not forgetting Europe, drawing on its modernity of the finest aesthetic ideas, before moving on to America with the Beat movement of Allen Ginsberg's famous poem *Howl* and Jack Kerouac, then to Mexico with Octavio Paz, and Chile with Pablo Neruda, and Argentina with Jorge Luis Borges. All this happened for one reason and that is the desire to discover.

Faced with this passion for knowledge, the people of this generation also went to the cinema, to Federico Fellini's cynical and absurd critique of society concerning violence, to Akira Kurosawa in Japan, Alfred Hitchcock in Britain and America, and Stanley Kubrick in America. The list goes on, with other films also making the list for having been stuck in the mind of some, dealing with the lives of artists, poets and others that formed the twists and turns in the history of public cinema.

Visual Arts

The generation of modernity in the UAE was not satisfied with just novels, poetry and philosophy; artists read poetry, and poets read about art, with cinema also being present in their discussions, while also being able to find their higher passion in music, dance and all that makes life beautiful. In the fine arts we find many writings by Hassan Sharif in which he presents a list of definitions by artists from outside the traditional circle of fame. While people had heard about Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, Hassan spoke, wrote and published about Marcel Duchamp and his artistic work *The Large Glass*, Kandinsky, who established the principles of Abstractism and music in artwork, Kazimir Malevich and his great work *Black Box* that went far away from the idea of Abstractism. Then we come to Joseph Kosuth who believed that all art works after Marcel Duchamp were conceptual in nature. The

philosophy of Conceptualism centers on the principle that the idea is the real goal of art instead of the artwork itself and its artistic effect.

Perhaps Hassan Sharif, along with a number of artists, read many art books as well as books dealing with the history of the visual arts in the English language by virtue of a desire to also read and study, however there was a real lack of books dealing with artistic formation, particularly in Arabic. There were merely translations of Western books dealing with general art, and some books on the philosophies that entered into art, such as the analysis of core subjects. However, it is certain that many discussions and debates concerning art were had on a daily basis in meetings and forums created by this generation for over forty years.

As such, modernity in the UAE would not have held up in the face of a society that rejected it from the outset unless it was based on real principles, the principles of philosophy, poetry and the question of art and its relationship with the artist and the world around him. They are the same principles that we read about in the poems of this generation and their artistic and visual works. This reading area established at the New York University Abu Dhabi will bring together the contents of the collections owned by some from this generation. However, it is but a microcosm of what could soon be provided of the books that attracted this generation and those that were constantly referenced amongst them as the source of the discussions and conversations that went on between them, in addition to being a source for journalistic and analytical writings that were aided by the introduction of new perceptions in art, literature and life.

Adel Khozam

Adel Khozam is an Emirati poet, writer, and journalist who plays an active role in the cultural scene of the UAE, as well as in other neighboring Arab countries.

Since 1984, he has published three poetry collections, dozens of television and documentary scripts, and five books. His books cover various topics such as: the history of Emirati visual arts, the history of theatre in the Emirates, a novel titled *The White Shadow*, a book titled *House of the Wise Man* and his latest book *Life Through The Third Eye*, which has been translated to English and won The Gold Seal From Trafford Publishing House in the United States of America.

Khozam has written music for theatre and the cinema and was recently chosen as a Jury member for the Dubai International Film Festival in 2016. He was formerly Deputy Director of the Sama Dubai channel. Khozam holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration from UAE University.

Khalid
Albudoor

Khalid Albudoor

—Interviewed by Alaa Edris and Bana Kattan

December 19, 2016. Dubai, UAE

“We came under a lot of pressure and after a while the journal ended. We all continued to work in our own style, and still believed in the idea that art should be different and shocking in order for it to be able to stir the stagnant status quo, rather than being a mere decoration.”



Khalid Albudoor

INTERVIEWER: We want to start by understanding how you entered the world of culture, writing and poetry. Start from as far back as childhood, what started you on this track?

KHALID ALBUDOOR: My relationship with writing began through reading. My father was one of the few in the neighborhood who studied at the Ahmadiya School in Dubai in the 1940s. He was a reader and loved books. He did not have so many books but every day after the Maghreb prayer, he would sit to read. Even my mother used to tell us, “Your father is reading, do not bother him.” I always saw him reading, and he always said that reading is important. That is why I loved reading. My father used to love literature, he had a voluminous book entitled *Jawaher Al Adab (Jewels of Literature)*; it includes a collection of Arabic poetry dating from pre-Islamic to modern poetry. So I became attached to books and loved poetry; my mother also liked folk poetry, and I always heard her reciting verses and folk songs.

This is why I became attached to poetry. I started trying to write poetry saying to myself, “Can I write something similar to these great poems?” When I did actually write, I felt that writing was such a beautiful act. It comforted me and I continued on the same track. I began writing classical poems and taught myself how to do that until 1976, when I published my first poem; this was the beginning.

How old were you?

I started writing when I was 15 years old, and published my first poem when I was 17 years old.

Where was it published?

In an old magazine published in Dubai called *Dubai News*.

I would like to focus on the books your father read. What were they about? Were books readily available in that period?

My Father's books were mostly on religion and literature, for example, as I said, *Jawaher Al Adab (Jewels of Literature)* in addition to collections by poets such as Al-Mutanabbi, Antarah Ibn Shaddad, and Buhturi.

When I grew older, I used to go to the Public Library in Dubai, which was the first public library in the UAE in 1962. I remember that in the late 1960s, I used to accompany my father to his workplace in Deira and I used to walk from there to the public library and spent long and interesting hours

there. My school textbooks also briefly included some pre-Islamic poems, and poems by Al Mutanabbi and Al-Ma'arri and some Arab prose texts. Going to the public library allowed me to read the full collections by these poets. Previously, books were available in old traditional libraries in Dubai and among the people who read; however, books were not widely available, but they were passed from one person to another. Some Sheikhs, judges and scholars in Dubai had their own libraries, which they had from Iraq, Syria and Egypt.

Did the school play a role in encouraging your talent? Or did you separate school from writing poetry and literature?

School did not have a significant impact on my interest in poetry, but the presence of some poetic texts in the school textbooks, such as pre-Islamic poetry and poets of the Abbasid era and others, in addition to the explanations made by teachers, helped me to approach and love poetry. But the harsh style of teaching generally made me dislike school. So, because I read my father's books and went to the public library, my writing became good, especially in composition classes at school, and some teachers began to encourage me to keep going.

So your beginning was with writing poetry. When did you begin practicing other types of writing? What was your first encounter with the fine arts? How did it come into your life?

I have never stopped writing poetry, but I also became interested in writing short stories, which I did not publish. I loved reading short stories and some novels, and I was influenced by the writings of many writers in that period such as Ihsan Abdel Quddous, Ghada Samman, Mahmoud Timor, Yusuf Sibai, and Naguib Mahfouz, in addition to poets such as Nizar Qabbani, Kahlil Gibran, and Badr Shaker Sayyab.

My love for the fine arts, and I mean painting, came from poetry; I felt that in order to write poetry, one must have knowledge of other arts as well. I started to see that painting is somehow similar to poetry, except that it uses colors instead of words; the poet writes with a pen, whereas the painter paints with a paintbrush. The painter represents an embodied image, and the poet writes symbolic or metaphorical images. So I started to learn painting. My art teacher encouraged me to paint outside of the class, so we used to spend the art class with that teacher outside the classroom, and he would

instruct us on how to paint what we see. This helped me learn how to paint, especially portraits and still life. My passion for arts further developed when I met other artists including Hassan Sharif.

How did your first contact with Hassan Sharif's community happen? How did you meet his group?

My first contact with the group was when I went with my wife, Nujoom Alghanem, who is a painter interested in the fine arts, to Hassan Sharif's exhibition at the Emirates Fine Arts Society. It was a Conceptual art exhibition, and it was very strange. So we met him, and we realized that he was different; he had an artistic language that was different from other artists. He painted objects and curious pieces.

After that we also visited the Mreijeh studio, and the one-day exhibition by Hassan Sharif and Abdul Rahim Salem in July 1985. This exhibition was the talk of the UAE or the talk of Sharjah at the time. It was the first exhibition to be presented on the street outside the galleries, it was dedicated to Conceptual art and transcended traditional painting and broke with the customary norms in painting. Hassan and Abdul Rahim prepared stones hanging down the wall, and papers on the floor in an alley near the Mreijeh studio. That event actually motivated me to start a friendship with Hassan Sharif. Later, we met in the studio and a group was formed out of this meeting.

Did you meet on a daily or weekly basis? Were there fixed meetings for example that you agreed upon? Or were your meetings held randomly when you would visit and meet together?

Hassan was always there after he finished his work. He was always in the studio from noon until late at night, and we went to see him there. Our visits became more frequent and a group of four was formed, we called it "Aqwas Group"; it included Hassan Sharif, Yousef Khalil, Nujoom Alghanem, and me. It was the four of us. We started announcing ourselves as a group, and we issued a manifesto and published a journal to introduce ourselves as artists who aim to present a different type of art and a different type of poetry. The poetry written in this journal was very symbolic; it can be described as Surrealist poetry presenting unfamiliar and shocking poetic metaphors.

When we published this journal and announced the establishment of the group, we faced a backlash from the cultural community; they did not

see our work as art or poetry, but rather as nonsense and mere playing. We insisted that art actually does contain some sort of playing and abstraction. They called it nonsense but for us it was an experimentation in new areas of creative imagination.

At this point, we worked to maintain the group and we tried to issue a second journal, but we preferred it to be in the form of an exhibition, so we presented our works at the Central Market of Sharjah without obtaining an official permit from the state. This was a problem because you cannot simply do something like that without permission.

We came under a lot of pressure and after a while the journal ended. We all continued to work in our own style, and still believed in the idea that art should be different and shocking in order for it to be able to stir the stagnant status quo, rather than being a mere decoration.

When you issued the statement, the manifesto, did you publish it in newspapers?

No, we made photocopies and distributed them to the newspapers.

Did they publish it?

No, they did not. We distributed about 20 copies to the cultural sections in newspapers and to all the artists we knew. The manifesto itself was not published in the newspapers, but a negative criticism of it was actually published saying that this was not a journal but a mere nonsense trifling with poetry and art.

Did the Aqwas Group end due to people's reactions or because everyone had their own area of focus? I mean, did the group split organically, or did you come together and decided to separate because the society did not accept you?

A member of the group, Yousef Khalil, decided to withdraw and keep his silence for personal reasons I cannot tell. After that I was personally more inclined towards poetry, while Hassan Sharif saw poetry as a means to serve the fine arts or Conceptual art. So even though we agreed in essence, we disagreed on the means and ways of expression, so I did not fully support the continuation of the journal.

There was no particular reason for the Aqwas Group to disappear, but I think that it had played a certain role and had to move on to something

else. Besides, the Cultural Department in Sharjah decided to close the studio where we worked.

Mreijeh Studio.

Yes, Mreijeh studio was closed and we had no place to meet.

Do you know the reason for its closure?

Because the art and artworks produced there were not acceptable at the time.

Did you make artworks during your participation in the Aqwas Group?

Yes, I painted portraits and used watercolors.

Did you write poems about the paintings you painted? Or about the paintings of your fellow artists, or vice versa? For example, were the poems you wrote directly influencing the paintings you made? Or were they completely separate?

I did not compose poems about the paintings. I look at poetry as something that should offer a poetic image, a metaphor rather than verbiage; I mean that poetry should present an image. For me, an image is a reflection of painting, even if it is a linguistic image, and this is the relationship between the two. I did not write about the group's works nor about my own works; my writings were a little bit different.

I want to go back a little bit to before that time: was there a particular incident or story you remember, which made you feel that you were a poet and a writer, and that this was the right track for your life? A certain incident or moment when you decided that you were a poet or an artist?

I started writing when I was 15 years old, but when I published my first poem at the age of 17 or 18 years, I felt that I should continue with the writing. For me, writing was no longer an internal passion where I show what I write to my friends; after publishing my first poem, I realized that the poem reached a large number of people, and so I sensed the importance of what I was doing. I also felt a sense of responsibility and that the poem I publish should be good and be backed by deeper culture, consciousness and awareness. And this constituted an internal challenge for me with every new text.

I did not want to present myself quickly, and I was trying to present a complete work, not a mere improvisation or nonsense.

Were there people who reviewed your work prior to its publication? Did any teacher or a member of your group or close circle criticize you, or give you an opinion that influenced your work?

Initially no, I was trying to read books on poetry criticism, I read explanations of poetry, and how to write poetry; I did not try to consult any teacher in the field because I did not know anyone who was experienced in the field of writing poetry that I taught myself. However, when I grew up and had a relationship with my wife, who is also a poet, I asked her to read my poetry and give me her opinion, and I read her poetry as well. We read each other's works and discussed them before their publication.

You told us about the first time you met Hassan Sharif, but do you remember the first time you met Nujoom Alghanem?

Yes, we met in 1982. She was a journalist at *Al Fajr* newspaper and an active member of a group seeking to establish a Journalists Society in the UAE; she was active in this group. She was visiting one of the journalists, who is also a relative of mine, to convince him to join them, and I was present, so I met her and we talked. I could tell that she liked both poetry and journalism, and that is how we met.

What about Yousef Khalil, how did you meet him?

Yousef Khalil used to write short stories and publish his writings in the *Cultural Gulf*. We met at one of the cultural events. We felt that he was different and had a very different style; he loved poetry and visuals, and was very active in publishing. He was a good short story writer and an intellectual.

After the Aqwas Group split, what form of relationship did you have with the group? Did you continue to meet? Who remained in the group? What were the issues that you discussed?

After closing Mreijeh studio, we generally stayed in contact with Hassan Sharif; we met him at exhibitions and on a regular basis. Then he founded a studio under the Authority of Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Education, in Dubai.

We visited Hassan at the studio where he was teaching Fine Arts, and there we met Mohammed Kazem and Khalil Abdul Wahid, who were training there under Hassan. Then we met Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim through our friend the poet Ahmed Rashid Thani, now deceased (may God have mercy on him).

So in that period we met together: Hassan, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Ahmed, Nujoom, and I. I met Abdullah Al Saadi but we were not very close, he joined our group, and “The Five” group was formed. We used to meet with Hussain Sharif—Hassan’s brother—he used to come to the studio with the group. We also used to meet when there were art exhibitions held by the Emirates Fine Arts Society for Hassan Sharif, Abdul Rahim Salem, Hussain Sharif, and others. They used to participate in each of the Society’s annual exhibitions.

Of course, we came to know more artists as well, such as Najat Makki, Abdullatif Al-Smoudi, Ahmed Hailoz; they were all active artists in that period and were part of the founding group of the Emirates Fine Arts Society. During the 1980s there were active events in terms of fine arts, such as the annual general exhibition as well as solo or group exhibitions held at the Emirates Fine Arts Society. Following the split of the Aqwas Group, we continued to have a relationship with the fine arts movement and Hassan remained active in the Emirates Fine Arts Society. Later in that period, *Al Tashkeel* magazine was issued, and Hassan used to write and translate articles for it, and I also participated with a number of writings. As for Nujoom and I, we became more focused on our writings and poetic texts rather than fine arts.

During your meetings as the group, it was inevitable that you, as artists and poets, talked about your own work. Did you discuss your work in order to hear criticism for example, whether a constructive criticism or not? We call it critique; I mean did you as a group discuss your work critically or with critical thinking? Did the artists in this group have any influence on your work?

To some extent. Criticism was always made during discussion sessions taking place during or after the exhibitions—the Q & A sessions—where there were a number of critics and artists exchanging criticism about the works and the arts. There was critical dialogue in those meetings, and then there was also the press coverage for artworks or exhibitions or even poetic publications, and they included some impressions and critical ideas. Some critics

were in the UAE and others were from other Arab countries, such as Subhi Hadidi, who was a critic based in Paris. A group of Arab critics used to visit the UAE every once in a while and write about its art or literary movement.

So yes, in this aspect, there was critique or criticism, which I did not always see as a positive phenomenon. I mean, sometimes the critic was a journalist who was not a specialist, nor an academic or an artist, but rather a journalist assigned to cover art exhibitions and write their opinion on them. This was the level of criticism available at the time: journalistic criticism, general impressions criticism. On the other hand, some articles were actually good. In terms of public reaction, of course there was negative criticism against “modern art,” particularly “Conceptual art” and against the poetry that we wrote.

After the Aqwas Group, we began, in 1985 or 1986, to write free verse. I personally had not written free verse before, but it was then I began writing prose in a form different from the poetic content that I had done previously. The poetic content that was presented by the end of the 1970s and early 1980s was a romantic, passionate, patriotic, and even political one, but after Mreijeh studio and the Aqwas Group, I personally experienced a kind of conceptual shift in the poetry itself. I began asking myself: “What is the role of poetry? Is poetry meant to provide ideas? Is it meant to present political statements? To change society for example?”

I was preoccupied with these questions and began to believe that poetry has a more significant role; poetry is an aesthetic discourse with aims that transcend social or political topics, it has an aesthetic goal. Following many readings, and meeting poets and examining the works of Arab and foreign poets, I began to feel that poetry is not the poetry of political, intellectual, and ideological concepts, but rather poetry is man at his highest aesthetic intellectual level. I think that this shift was influenced by the Aqwas Group, and the dialogues that took place with Hassan Sharif and other people, including Ahmed Rashid Thani, Yousef Khalil, and others.

I would like you to tell us how you met Ahmed Rashid Thani and what his role was within the group. We know that he played a role in the life of many artists.

I believe that my relationship with Ahmed Rashid started in 1980 or 1981 in the first poetry evening I ever presented. There were many artists in the evening, and Ahmed Rashid Thani was among them, so I met him there. I

felt that he offered a different type of poem; he wrote modern folk poetry, and his poems were distinct. I also met him when I started studying at UAE University in Al Ain; he and I studied media. So a strong friendship brought us together with another group of writers.

Our friendship continued and increased by virtue of the Free Theater Group at the UAE University, where he was the group playwright and I was an administrator in the group. Our group included Ismail Abdullah, a director; Naji Al Hai, a director; and Hossam Eddine Ezzat.

After graduation, Ahmed Rashid worked in the press and we used to meet constantly. Ahmed Rashid was not a member of Aqwas Group in the Mreijeh studio, but he visited and held discussions with us; we agreed and disagreed on a number of issues. Ahmed Rashid had his own perspective and independent opinion, and focused on his unique texts and writings. His interest in the fine arts was part of his many interests. He used to meet us and meet with others but he wrote and worked individually. He did not join our group, but he kept a constant relationship with us; he was a close friend of Hassan Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and Abdullah Al Saadi. Although in that period he moved to work in Abu Dhabi, he maintained his relationship with Hassan and the rest of us.

Did he have an influence on the artists? I mean, you as a poet in the group, did you notice that his literary works or even criticism had influenced the artists?

Yes, I think his writings influenced these artists. Ahmed Rashid was extensively knowledgeable about many arts, such as poetry, drama, fine arts and criticism. He was a friend of Hassan and Hussain Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and Abdullah Al Saadi; they used to meet and spend long hours together. He wrote in abundance and wrote about works of this group. He wrote his diaries with them and tried to document their works. He used to take part in seminars and defended this group. For me, Ahmed and I were friends and shared some ideas together, but his literary or critical writings had no influence on my writings.

The artists Vivek Vilasini and Jos Clevers used to meet with Hassan; do you know them?

Yes, I met them occasionally, but I do not know much about their work. They were Hassan's friends and visited him almost daily and weekly, and I

only met them at his place and got to know some of their work but I do not know them very well.

What about Adel? Adel Khozam.

I met Adel Khozam at UAE University. He was a writer when he met me, along with Ahmed Rashid and the other members of the group. His writings somehow changed due to the influence of the group.

[Khozam] met more with Hassan and the group. Nujoom and I did not meet with the group as much because we had a family and children and could not meet them constantly. We contacted them occasionally, and Adel Khozam was one of them, and our friendship continued.

Adel developed a special interest in music and playing the oud, so we used to sit together and listen to his playing; and we participated together in some cultural activities.

Some artists told us that some of this community had a special place where you used to meet; it was located between Sharjah and Ajman. Your group named it the Sand Palace, do you remember this place? What are your memories about it? And what kind of activities took place there?

I remember the place, some named it Sand Palace, but it was actually a dune in the desert between Sharjah and Ajman. After a poetry evening or after we finished our work we would go, light a fire, and lie awake on this dune. We used to take some of our guests, even those coming from other Arab countries, to the Sand Palace and stay late out there. I remember that the known artist Adonis was here in Sharjah and we agreed to take him to the Sand Palace. I personally drove him in my car. Adonis and others visited the place and wrote about it, I do not remember who exactly wrote about it, but some Arab writers did actually write about this place.

Did Adonis the poet write about...

I think he mentioned the place in his weekly article in *Al-Hayat* newspaper, and I think others wrote about this place in their diaries. I think someone wrote an article about his visit to the Sand Palace, and that there was no actual palace, only a dune, which was like a palace for those poets who did not have anything other than art. There is a diary published in either a book or a magazine about the Sand Palace, maybe Ahmed Rashid or Meri Al Halyan wrote about it; Meri was also with us.

Was there a female presence at the Sand Palace?

I do not know, I do not recall that. No.

Okay, tell us a little bit more about the time after your return from studying in America.

During my stay in America I began to read about the references and backgrounds related to Conceptual art and land art, because I was only familiar with them through Hassan Sharif and some books. Before I went to America I was not very good at English and so I could not read these art books. In America, I began reading in English about these schools and their history. I discovered that they came as a reaction to early Modernism, I mean as a reaction to Impressionism and Romanticism, Abstraction and even Cubism presented by Picasso and others. Marcel Duchamp's and others' experiences came as a revolution against Modernism. Following these readings, it became clear to me that what Hassan Sharif had presented to us fell under "postmodernism." In America, I read further about theoreticians or philosophers who wrote about postmodernism in that period.

In addition, I began to translate some paragraphs, and when I came here, I wrote an article about this and how Hassan Sharif had presented this school of art but did not name it as "postmodernism" because this was a critical label and not something the artist would say. The artist does not label his art but critics place labels as being Pop Art and as postmodernist art, which presented a radical critique of arts or even the philosophy of Modernism.

Artworks under Modernism turned into something commercial, into something intended for mere decorations such as the works of Picasso and Dalí. Postmodern art called for expressing art outside the limits of the painting; it called for reinvigorating art. As a result Pop Art, Conceptual art and other forms of art appeared.

So my stay in America showed me the roots of these schools, its pioneers, long history and critics; I did not know anything about this when I was in the Mreijeh studio, whereas Hassan Sharif knew about them because he had studied in Britain; he was aware of these schools and this philosophy of art. He was familiar with them but he did not talk to us in terms of criticism, he simply presented his artworks saying that this is art without complicating things and fabricating philosophy about his works. He presented himself without the need to explain his art, or present the philosophy behind his work.

He did not need to justify his works.

No, he said that critics were not artists; they only criticize us and try to stand out. He had a negative opinion about criticism; he believed that they did not understand the true dimensions of Conceptual or postmodern art. And this was actually true about the critics at that time.

I would like to ask you about the importance of translation, because you and Hassan used to translate from Arabic to English and from English to Arabic. I think this was very important for Hassan.

Yes. In addition to the artworks he presented, Hassan translated the biographies and experiences of artists and pioneers of these movements or artistic trends. So he was also a pioneer in introducing these subjects not only to the UAE but possibly to the Arab world, especially as there were no books published about this type of art even elsewhere in the Arab world. He used to publish in the UAE and his writings moved across the Gulf, and we received visits from artists impressed with Hassan's writings, saying, "Who are these artists Hassan is writing about? We do not know them," and that was because there was no professional translation in the field of plastic arts, particularly in the Gulf; even in the Arab world, art books were very few.

Previously, I did not actually have the ability to translate. After my return from America, I became interested in translation. However, I did not spend a long time translating such artistic aspects; I wrote some articles on Conceptual art or postmodern art. I focused on translating poetry, and the biographies of particular poets who are unknown in the Arab world.

Nujoom
Alghanem

Nujoom Alghanem

—Interviewed by Alaa Edris and Bana Kattan

December 19, 2016. Dubai, UAE

“We dreamed of ... offering a rich experience where poetry meets art, sculpture and theater. One night, after attending an exhibition, we talked and decided to issue a manifesto or a journal to express our aspiration for presenting something varied and different; we were four artists coming from different creative or artistic backgrounds to contribute to an artistic and cultural project.

Thus, we established Aqwas Group and published the first journal, we named it *Ramad (Ashes)*.”



Nujoom Alghanem, 2012
Photo: Reem Albudoor

INTERVIEWER: Nujoom, please tell us about your beginnings, how did you start writing poetry? How did you get into the field of literature and art?

NUJOOM ALGHANEM: First of all, I grew up in my grandparents' house, which had all the factors that could encourage any person to nurture an interest in literature, art or music. At that house, my aunt was basically an important fine artist in the UAE and I grew up seeing her artworks. Moreover, there was always a big interest in music as well; and there were many books on poetry, and Arabic and translated novels. We had novels from Egypt and other Arab countries.

I was the youngest among many siblings, and I don't know why I was the one that lived the most at my grandparents' house. This situation felt stressful at the time because I was a little girl surrounded by adults only, and I always longed to play with other kids. But it seems that this situation contributed to my attachment to art. The loneliness and boredom I felt made me look for things to entertain myself at home, and reading was very important and influential. I started reading a lot and I started writing, I began with poetry, mimicking what I read. I used to go to school and participate in poetry reciting sessions.

My Arabic language teacher became aware of my distinct ability for expression. She encouraged me to write and recommended that I read the translated plays by Shakespeare. At a certain point, I felt that I needed to move from my grandparents' house to my parents' house. They were located in Abu Dhabi, so I went to them. This was a big shift in my life because it occurred during high school, and I felt that I could not handle formal school and its regulations, so I decided to work in the morning and study in the afternoon. The funny thing is that writing was what has later shaped my future.

I remember that once I met one of the journalists that used to come to the Women's Society in Abu Dhabi. She noticed that I have a peculiar style in writing and she said to me, "Why don't you write an article for us?" I was 17 years old when I started writing articles for *Al Fajr* newspaper. After a while, they became acquainted with my work so they hired me as a journalist. This was in 1980, and I was very young, but at that stage, I started buying books for myself; I was very fond of books on the biographies of non-Arab artists. I loved reading about French artists, French poets, and art schools because at that time, when I was in high school, I dreamed of studying art, and I was preparing myself to study art and this is why I read about the

different art schools. I was more interested in Breton, Rimbaud, Aragon, Surrealism, Cubism, Dadaism and the new art movements. I was interested in understanding the interesting transition between these stages, and the difference for example between Impressionism and Expressionism. This was my world and my passion, a world where literature is linked to art and theater. I was also preoccupied with the idea of how a person can have multiple talents.

When I finished high school I was ready to travel, and I applied for a scholarship, but my father (may God have mercy on him), did not allow me to travel; he said, "You're a girl, how do you think you can study abroad?" Of course, it was my dream to travel and specialize in art, but unfortunately, I could not.

In that period, I mean in the early 1980s, I met Khalid. I was publishing articles as a journalist and wrote colloquial poetry under a pseudonym. I read a lot at the time, and I felt that I related to such artists of the 20th century and wanted to write something different. I wanted to express myself in a different way, away from the typical or standard forms. My first experiment in writing was with free verse poetry. I remember a certain book that had influenced me greatly, *The Songs of Maldoror*. I think it led to a shift in the nature of my writing and in the way I saw things; I formed a vision of interconnected worlds, and elements of the self and the other, the mysterious and the philosophical. I was in my early twenties at that point.

I wanted to write differently. One of the important things that happened to me was that I began reading the works of the Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad and other Arab poets, such as Adonis and a number of Lebanese poets. There was a sort of proximity with Qassim Haddad in particular because all his life he wrote classical poems, but he also began writing free verse poetry and I felt that I belonged to this world.

Later, coincidence led me to meet Qassim; we met in Sharjah and I got to know him in person; he had a great influence on me and encouraged me to publish my writings. I remember that he took all my poems with him to Bahrain and published them in a book entitled *Paradise Evening*; that was my first collection of poems.

Earlier, I met Adonis in the UAE, and he also took the same poems when he traveled; he later sent me a message saying that the critic Khaleda Saeed loved the poems very much; she was his wife and a very important critic. He told me that they wanted to publish them in the first issue of *Mawaqef*

magazine, which was to be issued in London. The magazine used to be issued in Lebanon, and then it ceased for a while, and the first new issue was to be issued in London. Adonis published almost the entire *Paradise Evening* in that issue. This incident made me feel appreciated as a poet. I felt that I was being recognized by a well-known poet like Adonis, and it was an Arab recognition of my poetry and an acceptance of my poems.

Thank you. Now, about the first time you met Hassan Sharif and his circle. What sort of influence did they have on your work? What was the nature of the conversations or topics you discussed? Did they affect your work? Khalid told us that you introduced him to Hassan. Do you remember this meeting?

Honestly, at the beginning of our marriage, our economic situation was just like any young couple starting their lives with limited resources. We were crazy when we married and we were very young; Khalid had not yet completed his studies at the university and we had to live wherever we could afford. Coincidence led us to Sharjah and I think that step was an important one in our lives on the artistic and literary levels, because Sharjah was rich with art and culture. The first major book fair in the UAE was held in Sharjah. So we were in the right place that was a nurturing environment for those who had a different approach to art, literature, or theater.

We used to attend book fairs, art exhibitions and literary events. By attending such events, we used to meet with Hassan. By virtue of my work in the press, I met with Hassan to interview him, and that was how I got to know him. I remember that I was interviewing him and he told me that he was about to hold an exhibition and so we went to see it.

Of course, when we met, every one of us was coming from their respective fields, and my personal dream of art had not yet been achieved. Although I did not study art, I was eager to practice art. We were hoping to be accepted and get registered at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, but because of our previous disappointing experience with the Writers' Union, and our disagreements with Emirati writers, the odds were not on our side for being accepted in the Emirates Fine Arts Society. The Society considered us a bit troublesome and one of the artists, who was a member in the Board of Directors, strongly opposed our admission.

But we stayed friends with Hassan; we met and argued about European art schools and what they were achieving due to the intermingling of creative forms; we dreamed of achieving something similar and offering a

rich experience where poetry meets art, sculpture and theater. One night, after attending an exhibition, we talked and decided to issue a manifesto or a journal to express our aspiration for presenting something varied and different; we were four artists coming from different creative or artistic backgrounds to contribute to an artistic and cultural project.

Thus, we established Aqwas Group and published the first journal, we named it *Ramad (Ashes)* for some reason, I do not really know why, others asked us, "Why Ramad?" and I do not know, but it came by coincidence. But I know why we named our group Aqwas (Arches), because Hassan was working in the courtyard of our studio in Mreijeh and making works in the form of arches, so we decided to name our group Aqwas. So we continued with our meetings and discussions about our work.

Meanwhile, there was fierce debate about the manifesto/journal that we had released. People were agitated and angry with our attempt to break away from the traditional form of art. They felt we should commit to art forms accepted by the community: the classic painting and poems. They believed that the artist must be committed to inherited forms of expressions, and that breaking away from these forms meant breaking away from our "tribe" and our society; many people opposed our attempts.

At that time, the pressure was intense; we were told what we were doing was illegal because we ought to obtain approval from the Ministry of Information at the time if we wanted to issue our journal because it was considered a publication. And so we said, "Well, if our journal was illegal, then we will present an exhibition, the next *Ramad* journal will be in the form of an exhibition." So we went to the Central Market in Sharjah and presented our artworks, which were also shocking at the time. I made a sculpture that looked like a camel's spine. Hassan brought nine stones, wrapped each three of them in cotton cloths of a different color, and put each three of them in a straight row on the ground. The cloth colors were red, yellow, and orange. He wanted each three stones to represent a matrix in a straight line; each one of us had three stones and we were three persons (Hassan, Khalid and I). I also drew a painting representing blood-covered hands, but with multiple colors and abstract style. People made fun of us; they would pass by the exhibition, touch the stones, and kick them with their feet. Some children came to play with our things. A guard in the market approached us and asked, "Where is your official permission? What are you doing? You must have permission from the municipality and the Cultural Department." So, this option was no

longer available and that is why each of us returned to our corners and tried to focus on our individual work.

At that time, we were constantly talking with Hassan Sharif about Performance Art; he already experimented in this field with his brother and a group of young people, where they went to the desert to execute their work. So, the discussions we used to make were ahead of their time, and the things we dreamed of were ahead of what was prevailing in that period.

People had just started being familiar with the fine arts and beginning to accept fine arts and paintings in their traditional form. As you know, our communities are influenced by some Islamic movements and are under religious pressures in terms of accepting paintings, let alone accepting sculpture, and other art forms, such as Conceptual art or postmodern art. Such discussions were unfortunately unacceptable. Actually, it was sad that those who stood against our work at the time were people from the media and the cultural scene; they were also writers and members of the Writers' Union and the Emirates Fine Arts Society. We were not facing official institutions but rather colleagues who shared with us the same cultural scene. We thought that we were dealing with the cultural community, and with people involved in culture, but it was those colleagues who stood against us.

A community?

I mean we were trying to create a cultural community and an artistic community where everyone works and everyone produces, and where questions are allowed. I think all those pressures made each of us try to focus on our own work.

I was still aspiring to travel to study; I got married, had two girls and reached an advanced level in my career: I was head of the Cultural Section in Dubai and the Northern Emirates Office in the *Al-Ittihad* newspaper, but my lack of an academic degree prevented me from earning a good salary.

I applied for a scholarship from *Al-Ittihad* newspaper, and was accepted with the support of the Minister of Culture and Editor in Chief at the time His Excellency Khalfan Al Roumi (may God have mercy on him), who fully encouraged me to go. He said to me, "Go and study, not only a bachelor's degree but a doctorate if you want, complete your study and then come back. I know your level of writing and it's very important that you go and accomplish this step, go and study."

So did you decide to leave your job and complete your studies?

I did not actually leave my work. It was a paid study leave. At first, I went to America at my own expense, and I studied English language, and when I was admitted into a university, I was granted a scholarship from the Ministry of Higher Education.

You wrote poetry from the very beginning and you had a passion for art, why did you decide to study filmmaking?

I studied all these things, not only filmmaking. I was very fortunate to have my academic supervisor in America who guided me. It is true that the title of my study was video production but I also studied film, TV, the fine arts, and drama, in addition to cinema. All these areas were part of my study and that is why I felt balanced, and that my artistic project was completed through my study of all these arts. At university I produced a number of works in performance art, painting, sculpture, and portraiture; I studied all of these things.

When you came back here and met the group again...

Yes, by the way, I decided to major in cinema when I went to graduate school. A professor in the school of fine art encouraged me to study visual art, video and film. So I studied additional courses and I actually felt that this area was new and could lead me to domains I would like to explore, so I decided to go and major in this field. I earned my master's degree in filmmaking from Australia.

Well, when you came back here, met with the group, and presented your work to them... of course, your works had changed for sure and your writing was no longer such...

When I was in America, I communicated from time to time with Hassan. He was very happy that I went to study art. I sent him some of my performance art and he wrote about it in a journal he published and issued in Sharjah. He also decided to issue a small booklet entitled *Sharp Tools for Creating Art* [Sharjah: Department of Culture and Information, 1995]. He asked me to write an article, as well as the introduction, which I did, and the booklet was published.

So even though I was abroad, I kept in touch with the group here, and when we returned on holiday or something, we used to meet and appreciate

one another, not only in terms of our memories, but our relationship remained strong on the level of art production. This appreciation remained the basis of our relationship.

Despite the fact that others had always accused us of playing, experimenting and lacking seriousness in art and poetry, in fact we were very serious about our project to the point that we continued in our endeavors despite all the reproach. We did not give up or step back; we kept focusing on our artistic choices. Maybe all the pressure that we faced made us search deeper and deeper. As for me, I decided to study more so that when I'd come back to the UAE to write, I would have the potential and the tools to help me to write differently. I wanted to have the basic tools to enable me to write critically or analytically... and this applies to my artworks.

I would like to ask you about the cultural community that was against you as a group, about those who were not accustomed to your ideas, which were outside their traditional framework. Was this the reason that you opted to publish in Beirut and outside of the UAE? Or was there another reason for this?

There were two reasons; the first one is that we were prevented from publishing in the press.

You were prevented?

Yes, the Writers' Union asked all the newspapers to refrain from publishing our work because they saw that our work constituted an offense against the Union. Also, in case we received invitations to participate in events abroad, we were asked to obtain the Union's approval in order to participate, and that was sad, very sad.

How long did this situation last?

It lasted until I traveled to America; actually, that was the situation at that period. I went to America in 1993, and of course we left the Union and each of us concentrated on our fields and specialty.

Was it easier to...

For us, yes. As I told you, my first collection of poems was published in *Mawaqef* magazine and in the Bahraini *Kalimat* magazine, also when Qassim Haddad founded the website "Poetry Destinations," all our poems were published there. So we established an Arab connection, we received an

Arab recognition and respect for our work, and we also received invitations to publish abroad, and that is the reason why most or all of my books were issued abroad, with the exception of one book, which was published by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Arts at the time. This is the only book issued here in the UAE, whereas all my other seven books were issued outside the UAE.

Has the situation changed since then?

The situation has changed, and our views and we as well have changed. Our cultural projects took another track. The situation has changed in the sense that there are official bodies now communicating with us and asking us to cooperate with them. They are appreciating us for being known abroad as filmmakers and poets with many years of participation in events at the Arab and international level.

By the way, our local participation is still limited, I do not know why, possibly due to the lack of enough attention, I do not know.

The movies you make are always linked to the local place and the local community. When you say that there is little interest from the side of the local community, this makes me wonder about the source of this "disconnection." You make films about the society and about important people who have a role in it, people who might be forgotten, but you give them the interest and attention and highlight their role and the reality of this society.

In terms of poetry, I think our society is still apprehensive about the free verse poem. I mean, this issue has not changed a lot. The free verse poem is present, but it is not popular and has no audience, we must realize this fact. Society loves the classic poetry. When I talk about society, I speak about 80 versus 20 percent, so that no one comes and accuses me of generalizing. When I talk about society, I am talking about the public in general...

The public opinion.

There is a public taste, which usually develops due to the influence of the media and television for example. In television now, there is support for colloquial poetry and classical poetry; TV programs support them. But there is no support for free verse poetry and that is why I believe there is still a barrier and a gap. There are writings that have negatively affected free verse poetry rather than helping it, and we must admit and accept this.

In terms of cinema, this is actually another issue, I do not really know what the solution is, and I myself ask these same questions and wonder about the solution. If we are saying that films should reflect the society in which we live, or its culture and the identity, then I think that all my films belong to this society, and to the real people in this society: their life, culture, background and heritage. The films I present are long documentaries. There are always lame excuses for not buying documentaries. However, only recently one of the TV channels bought one of my films. My films are also featured on Emirates Airline, Etihad Airways, Turkish Airlines and online networks. There is a demand for my films from parties unrelated directly to broadcasting; rather they present these films as part of the services they provide to the public. I do not really know how to get support in this field, they might have certain standards for documentary films or maybe they want them to focus on a certain domain, I do not know actually and I cannot respond to this question, for me this issue remains enigmatic.

Let us go back a little bit to the group and to you as a female artist. The main female names that we have heard in our interviews is Nujoom Alghanem and Ebtisam Abdulaziz. What is your impression about this period as a woman artist among a group of men in a field that may not be very open to women, and within a society that might not accept such a thing? Please tell us a little bit about this point.

By the way, Najat Makki was also there.

Was Najat part of the group?

No, she was not part of the group, of course. Najat was active in the field of fine arts only; her work was focused on sculpture and painting, while her artistic and cultural trend was not controversial or problematic, that is why she always stayed the perfect friend for everyone. In our group, I do not think that we had the issue of men and women, we participated together in common events, and I was present with these friends and colleagues, we shared a real interest in fine arts, and there was a kind of openness.

I will tell you something important. I was married to Khalid, and this relationship imposed a kind of respect since I was with him and not on my own; this created a kind of safety and security for me since we went together and worked together and accomplished things together, this made my presence as a woman acceptable. On the other hand, the work we were doing and

the art we were defending was the main source of concern for the society. It was not a question of me being a woman and them being men. The work we presented was a source of concern to the society, to those who wanted the situation to remain in its typical and conventional form, believing that art must be kept in this context, in this form, and at this level that is generally accepted by the institutions and the people.

If an artist ever breaks away from these frameworks and forms, then they became outsiders to the society. This was actually the problem that we faced. By presenting our works, we were not aiming for breaking away from the “tribe” and society, or departing from the norms, customs or traditions of Arabs, we simply wanted to express ourselves differently, to choose creative forms that suited us, and that was all. We wanted to have the freedom to write in the way we wanted to, and to publish what we deemed worthy of publishing. We did not hurt or offend anyone, we did not commit any sin; we only wanted to express ourselves in a creative form that we felt befitting to us. This was our entire story.

Was it fear? Was the society fearful of your mindset?

No doubt. When such fierce anger and attacks burst in that form, then there is no doubt that they are triggered by fear. They were afraid that we might set an example for new generations, and tell them that we are poets. They thought that we did not have the appropriate poetic tools, but this was inevitable; the history of humanity shows that this has always been the case, and we should accept it and allow it. We are now talking about acceptance and tolerance, which is very important. When you write, paint, innovate, and make films, you should have the chance to be accepted; people might not like what you do but they need at least to accept it and accept its presence, even if it is different from them.

In other words, this is part of the natural evolution in creative production: people should develop rather than remain in the same framework.

True. The strange thing is that we live in a society that accepts electronic leaps, but does not accept cultural leaps nor creative leaps. It accepts that we produce advanced electronic products, but rejects us when we write a different poem, and this is a kind of duality, this duality is present in culture itself. The only cure to this duality is education, I mean we must educate people and encourage them to read, to open up, to be educated and accept all

forms of creativity. I believe that education and culture are the only possible solutions to this anger or rejection.

Did you personally know the artists in the group that included Hassan Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hussain Sharif, and Mohammed Kazem? Did they have a role or did you have a role in the creative movement and the creative production of that particular group?

We were very close. Our group was formed in the 1980s, and, as I told you, I went to study in the 1990s. At this period, Hassan Sharif started the studio that was under the Ministry of Youth and Sports. He started educating young people about art, including Mohammed Kazem, Abdullah Al Saadi, Khalil Abdul Wahid, and this group. During our summer vacations or on holidays, we used to go and witness the development of their works and had the chance to know them professionally. We later established some sort of cooperation with them, for example, Mohammed Kazem took part of my performance art pieces and presented it at an exhibition here in Dubai. So it was a pure professional cooperation.

I would like to ask you about The Flying House, which was founded in 2007. What is your impression about it? Did you visit them? Did you have a role in it?

The Flying House is Hassan Sharif's house or his studio, and by the way, when I was working with Hassan on a film, he told me that he did not like the name "The Flying House." He said, "The studio, just call it the studio," so it was his place.

I think that the presence of Hassan's brother, Abdul-Raheem, was a very important step in Hassan's life. Abdul-Raheem was not only a business manager but also a supporter of Hassan's work, and when he came into the picture, he gave Hassan the opportunity to focus only on his artwork, while he took care of the place and appointed people to help Hassan. This actually helped Hassan move into another level of professionalism, where he began working on a much larger level, on the level of a professional international artist. I think that The Flying House was the basis for this leap, which helped him to reach the level he had dreamed of. He had his own studio and this allowed him to execute these huge artworks, in terms of volume and size.

The Flying House made it easier for Hassan to focus on his art, and he had all that he needed: the place had become convenient, the tools were available and assistants were present.

Hassan once told me, "Nujoom, I have become a bourgeois artist, I have become a bourgeois," because he had a studio and a private car. Hassan was someone of utmost modesty and utmost beauty; he was a true artist in every sense of the word.

I read somewhere that he said he considered himself lucky for not having a lot of money when he started out as an artist. It is interesting that you say now that he considered himself a bourgeois after The Flying House.

Although he said that he felt like a bourgeois, the fact is that he slept, ate, and wore his clothes like a poor man. We were joking about him becoming a bourgeois because he had a car and a driver, but Hassan was never interested in money. Even in relation to his art, Hassan was not the one who determined the prices for his artworks or discussed the price; he left all these things to his brother Abdul-Raheem and his nephew Mohamed who was also his business manager.

Money never meant anything to Hassan; he had the ability to turn anything into art or an artistic object. He only ate when he was hungry. And he had his own traditions and beautiful rituals. He used to say "I have my own rituals as an artist," and he loved those rituals, I mean, he slept when he felt the need to sleep, and woke up when he felt the need to wake up and work. His whole life was revolving around work.

I don't know, it was as if he was in a race against time to produce as much art as he could and now I feel something similar, which is somehow frightening. I feel that I want to complete all the projects that I want to complete. Is this trait peculiar to our generation? Is it our fear? Does it emerge from our belief that this is the time to accomplish our projects before it is too late? I do not know, but there is a permanent drive pushing us to accomplish work. Sometimes we are so heavily preoccupied with work that we forget how to enjoy life, nature, and friends. I believe that I am seeing fewer and fewer people and friends these days.

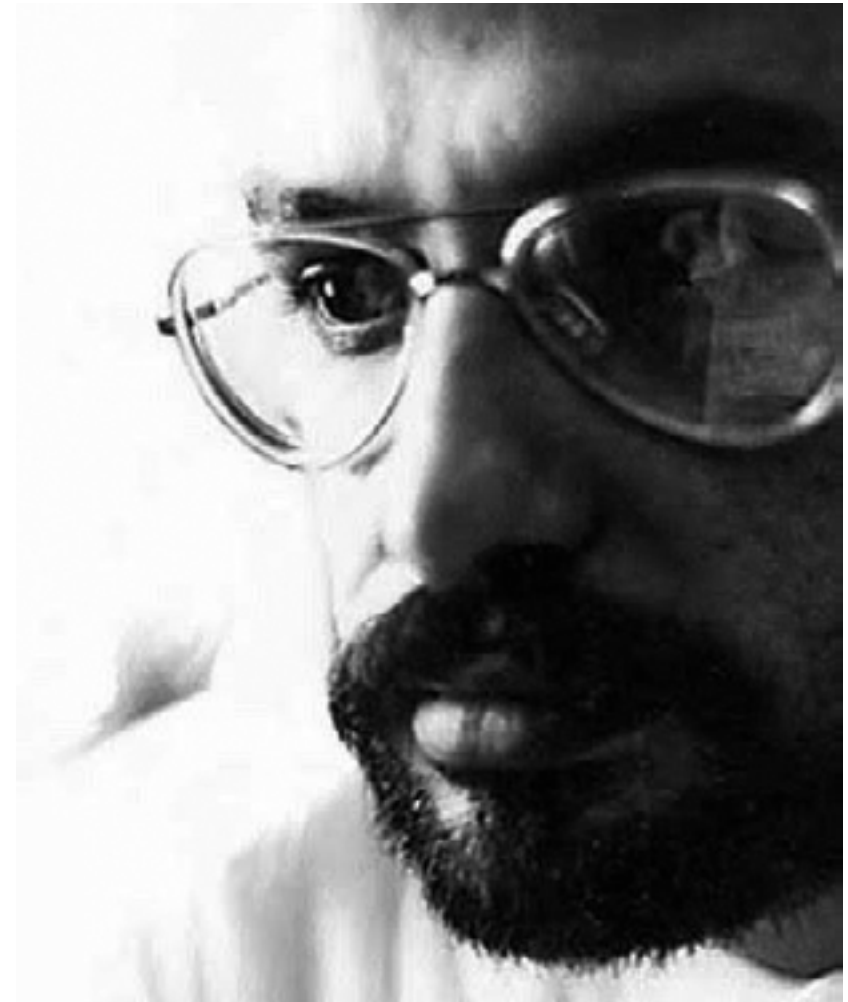
Hussain
Sharif

Hussain Sharif

—Interviewed by Alaa Edris and Bana Kattan

December 20, 2016, via telephone

“In repetition, as much as we try to uphold the rules and steps that we first make, it is inevitable that a change occurs in the work. Change occurs by coincidence; vanity, time, and mood also play a role. Things featured in that work are remnants of the environment and daily life, including metals, wood, and plastic. Despite their differences, I try to make them homogenous. I try to bestow a new meaning on a meaningless item through changing its shape, incorporating it with something else, putting it in another place, or combining it with another substance.”



Hussain Sharif, 1996
Image courtesy of the artist

In the first part of the interview, Hussain explains how he started making artworks at home since childhood, and in primary school. In both places he was encouraged. His older brother Hassan started supervising exhibitions at the Arab Youth Festival, starting around 1975, in which Hussain participated when he was around 18 or 20.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the first work of art you made?

HUSSAIN SHARIF: No, it is very difficult to remember that. I used to participate in school exhibitions. In the summer my school held activities and competitions for the visual arts and sports. In one of these exhibitions I won a prize; they gave me a wall clock. That was in the 1970s at Gamal Abdel Nasser School, they held a competition at the state level in Sharjah at the old Al Ouroba School. So schools used to hold art and sporting activities during the summers. They no longer do. I also regularly participated in another annual exhibition, the *General Youth Exhibition*. It was first held in 1975 and continued until later.

At a later stage came the exhibitions held at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, which were of course very important, next came the exhibition of *The Four* after Hassan had returned from London. It was in 1983 and held at the Al Ahli Club in Dubai. That was our first group exhibition and it was very important; I presented an installation for the first time.

Do you remember the other artists who also participated in the exhibition?

Hassan, Abdul Rahim Salem, and the late Abdullatif Al-Smoudi. It was the first time Hassan had ever presented Conceptual artworks; it was made of files, a box. The exhibition was highly controversial, because it was a little different. Some people stood against it and others liked it. It was a good one; it was successful. I made sketches on the wall, and drawings without frames, about 200–300 sketches. The first painting was a personal portrait of me drawn with the help of a mirror, where the second painting is the first painting, and the third painting is the second painting and so on. That was the idea.

Did you present this work at the Al Ahli Club?

Yes. The features of the work would finally disappear completely, they fade and all the details become vague by the impact of repetition, the repetition of the copying, not the repetition of the image. It was considered an

installation, the drawings were on the wall without a frame and it was large as well.

Were these drawings made directly on the wall?

No, no, on paper pasted on the wall. So they were drawn on paper pasted on the wall. It was different. It can be considered an installation. This exhibition was entitled *Zaed/Naqes (Plus/Minus)*. All the works were black and white.

What was the public's reaction to this exhibition?

It was good actually, they were unfamiliar with such works, especially the works of Hassan, but it was good in general. It was a strong beginning; such works were not common in that period in the 1980s.

Of course, the establishment of the Emirates Fine Arts Society was important. Hassan and other young artists in the UAE had always participated in the exhibitions of Arab artists in Kuwait, and so they had the chance to know other Arab artists, especially those of the Kuwait Fine Arts Society.

They came back with a list of Kuwaiti artists who were part of the Kuwait Fine Arts Society and commenced the establishment of the Emirates Fine Arts Society; they were the ones who first established it. The Society was first established in 1980 in Sharjah.

Hussain, you were also one of the founders of the Society, were you not?

Yes, I was one of the people present in the early meetings.

Do you mean you had a role in the organization or the establishment of this Society?

Well, there was a group of artists who were present in that period. Not one or two, there were about 15–20 fine artists; it was a large group.

Okay. You were painting during this period, right? The art you made consisted mainly of oil paintings and as you said, installations. Did you do other things? I mean music; did you play music or write anything?

I used to draw caricatures in daily newspapers, at *Al Wahda* newspaper. It was issued in Abu Dhabi. In addition to *Al-Bayan* newspaper in Dubai, and the *Arab Family* magazine in Sharjah.

Al Wahda used to publish my drawings on a daily basis. There was a renowned artist drawing caricatures, his name is Ali Farhat, he was in *Al*

Wahda newspaper and we were friends. I was still in school in those days, and I was happy that the newspaper published my drawings every day. It was something exciting.

Did they dictate certain topics and ask you to draw caricatures about them? Or did you just draw what came to your mind?

No, I used to follow up on news and international events, because I made political caricatures. I remember at the time the Lebanese civil war, the issues of the Iran–Iraq war, and Israel and Palestine; such issues were discussed in the daily newspapers. They did not dictate any topics, I used to give them a number of drawings and they chose the ones to publish. They did the same thing at *Al-Bayan* newspaper, which published a drawing of mine on a daily basis for some time. Jalal Al Rifai was another caricature artist for *Al-Bayan*. I used to draw caricatures for them about local and political topics. After that, I worked in theater, in set design, I did the set design for four or five plays in the UAE. I also worked in television as a set designer.

Why did you study theater set design?

I was looking for a Fine Arts scholarship and the Ministry sent me to Kuwait to study. When I arrived I learned that this specialization was not available there, so I decided to study theater stage design. It was the closest thing to fine arts.

Did your study of theater set design influence your artwork?

Theater set design is somehow close to artworks, it is a vacuum, a composition in the vacuum. It is interesting to work with lighting and raw materials that go into a production. There is certainly some effect, one's study or work will absolutely influence an artist's work, even unconsciously, in terms of the formation of the composition. I am very interested in my work from the visual perspective, and this might be why I worked in theater set design and TV design, which is considered visual work.

When did you feel that you were an artist? Can we say that this came as a natural progression due to the influence Hassan had on you and the subsequent contact with artists, the Society and all those things? Or was there a moment during which you realized and felt that you were an artist?

In general, all of us in the Gulf, or in the UAE in particular, felt like amateur artists. I mean we pursued different careers and drew or painted after hours. We worked voluntarily and our participation was voluntary; most of the time our paintings were not sold; however, we participated every year and held exhibitions, even though our works were not sold at all.

We loved art. I can say that all artists in the UAE were volunteers; they drew, produced, and participated in exhibitions for the sake of participation. Selling artworks is somehow new, this has come along in the last ten, or five years, but this was not the case before. I mean that sometimes one sees oneself as an artist. When I saw my works published in the newspaper with my name printed by them, I felt like "I am an artist." However, sometimes when one considers the reasons pushing one to be involved in this mess, why not work on something else?

I think that when one makes a work of art then he is an artist, when he does something else, then he is a regular person and not an artist. I mean, an employee is an employee, but when he produces works of art and participates in art exhibitions, we can call him an artist, because he is involved in the field. I do not know how to explain this, I look at myself as someone involved in art, I am working with something related to art, I produce things related to art, and this is the best thing.

Do you remember certain people who had a great influence on you?

In the UAE, it was Hassan Sharif, of course.

And others?

I admired Abdul Qader Al Rais for some time. I admired his paintings and was impressed with his work, like the rest of Emirati artists. After that, I met with artists who had returned from abroad, especially Emirati artists who had returned from abroad...

Can you give me an example?

Hassan Sharif, of course, and other artists. They influenced a whole generation; they established the Emirates Fine Arts Society. We used to meet on a regular basis.

Of course, Kuwaiti and Iraqi artists were important, especially Jawad Salim and Fuad Hassan. With the Syrian artists, I particularly admired

Louay Kayyali and Fateh Moudarres as well. I was impressed with the Surrealist movement in Egypt; they kept abreast of international Surrealism and were at the same time influenced by [Tristan] Tzara and [André] Breton. Surrealism in Egypt was very important, especially with artists such as Ramses Younan and Georges Henein.

We were fond of their experience, and fans of their work. I think the Arab experience in fine arts and Surrealist art in Egypt was keeping up with the Surrealism in Europe. This Arab experience in fine art was very important. I think the Surrealist movement in Egypt was very important because it was abreast of and related to Breton and Tzara, and hence its significance.

Have any particular books influenced you?

Books, of course, we always sought art books, for example, we had catalogues from Arab artists' exhibitions and pictures of paintings. Also, Hassan came and brought his books with him as well. *Arab Arts Magazine* was an important magazine published in Britain.

Was it issued in Arabic?

Yes, Buland Al-Haidari used to supervise it along with Jabra Ibrahim Jabra; Dia Al Azzawi worked on the magazine as well. It presented Arabic translations of interviews held with Western artists. Then in 1982 I think, I presented *Al Tashkeel* magazine for the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah, it was the first issue.

In Kuwait, I read a lot about theater, because we did the set design for some plays. Plays were published within the World Theater series at very cheap prices. We used to buy them and take them to the library of the Institute. I read a lot of international plays. Also, there was a magazine *Alam Al Fikr* in Kuwait, issued by the Ministry of Information there, it was a very important magazine, I have only two issues of it now.

Before this one, there was an older magazine titled *Al Arabi*, and I enjoyed reading it very much. Of course, I used to draw for the *Arab Committee* magazine and read that, in addition to cultural magazines such as *Awraq*, which is an old local cultural magazine, founded by Habib Al Sayegh in 1982, and I think it ceased circulation in 1988. *Awraq* included articles on poets, writers, poetry, literature, art, and political topics. Habib Al Sayegh issued it in the UAE for some time and in London as well. I used to draw caricatures for the magazine for some time.

At the Arab level, the magazines *Sabah El Kheir* and *Rose Al-Yusuf* were very important for me and for Hassan as well because we were keen to see the caricatures in these two magazines; we were also influenced by them. *Rose Al-Yusuf* is still issued now in Cairo. It was a caricature magazine with many drawings in it.

Did you draw caricatures for it?

No, no. However, we were keen to have it and see its contents. We were influenced by it. I also read novels and art books. I remember that we were also keen to see *Arab Arts* magazine, and I think it was important.

Did these magazines discuss art in the Arab world in particular, or did they discuss Western art, for example, in Europe? I mean, did the magazines you generally read focus on the Arab world and its cultural and artistic movement? Or did they include topics from the whole world?

No. *Arab Arts* used to translate the latest articles on art in the world; it included international artists as well. It was an important magazine; I read an interview with [Alberto] Giacometti in this magazine for the first time. Jean Genet, a well known poet was interviewing the artist. The dialogue was published in one of the issues and I got to know about Giacometti through that. Of course, Jean Genet is also well-known. Important writers and artists held such dialogues, which were published in this magazine.

After Hassan returned from Britain, he was of great help to me. Of course, I got to know different art schools and I was particularly impressed with American Expressionism, specifically Robert Rauschenberg who used readymade materials. He was one of those artists who worked on the introduction of readymade materials to paintings; he was a pioneer of installation art. I was also a fan of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and all abstract artists. After that, Hassan began to write about American Conceptual artists, such as Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Broodthaers, John Cage, Joseph Kosuth, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris. We were fans of their experience and we tried to relate to their experience.

Of course, throughout your art experience, your art has changed. I mean, from oil paintings to installations and caricatures; your artistic experience went through many phases. How can you describe this change? Do you remember certain moments when you felt your practice change, or grow?

When I presented paintings of brutal style, I was not aware of Brutalism internationally; I did not know about them. I mean, I produced paintings that were close to their style; I used stark and strong colors directly on the painting. Later, I learned about Brutalism when I was at school. This was in the early 1980s, I think it was 1983. After a while, I worked with collage, I made paintings with paper and magazines, but only later did I become aware of an art technique called collage.

Making paintings using different styles enrich the artist, and the artist's overall experience refines the artist. Therefore, the artist must try out more than one school and more than one style. I mean, I see many artists today who consider themselves famous artists, but they have never experimented with anything; they did not respect different art schools nor experience them. I believe that the artist, especially at the beginning, must respect all art schools and try to mimic their techniques; there is nothing wrong in doing so. I imitated Roberto Marquez's paintings and [Vincent] Van Gogh's works. I mimicked the works of all the artists whom I felt I should learn from; artists should not be ashamed of doing so.

So, the artist must review art schools and draw, for example, an Expressionist painting and an Impressionist painting. The artist must know about the different types of art movements, must read about them and know how Expressionism came into existence, its causes and how it has evolved. There is nothing wrong in doing this. Contrary to what a lot of young people think today, it is quite impossible for those at the beginning of their artistic life to consider themselves artists and owners of any art school; this is wrong. I do not mean that artists should be part of a certain school today, because such discourse no longer exists, but we should learn and try to comprehend the art schools. This would ultimately enrich the artist's experience.

I was particularly impressed with works by [Pablo] Picasso. I also made paintings using readymade materials in the *Poster* exhibition in 1985 or 1986 at the Central Market. I used newspapers on canvas, and used a real rope on it; I mean I used readymade items on the painting. Later, I came to know about [Robert] Rauschenberg and his experience. We were trying to do many things at the same time, because we were impressed with what had happened and was happening within art movements.

I sometimes made murals, large paintings I mean. I also love to watch movies; it is my hobby.

Do you think that films have had an impact or played a role in your artworks?

Of course, one should always be familiar with the world of cinema, music, and novels; all these elements constitute the human being.

What films and music were important to you in this period?

I was a fan of American cinema, American films, and I was impressed with the experience of the Italian filmmakers who immigrated to America; they went from Italy to America to make movies, such as Francis Ford Coppola, Bernardo Bertolucci, Elia Kazan. I was keen to watch such movies. There used to be the Al Nasr Cinema in Dubai, where they showed new movies and the latest releases from America. In terms of Arabic cinema, I admired the experience of Khalid Al Siddiq, Shadi Abdel Salam, Youssef Chahine, and Mohammad Malas from Syria. I loved watching all their films.

Hussain, I want to ask you about a work of yours with blocks of cement.

Because this is the work that we want to display in the exhibition.

Okay. That is nice.

I want you to tell us the story of this work and how you came up with its form.

Cement is a very essential material in our lives since we live in the city, which is always developing with new structures being built every day. Cement was an unusual substance in art, and no one liked to use it. However, cement is a strong material that binds things together, I mean, if we put something inside a cube of cement, then it would hold strongly.

Installation is close to the repetition found in my past works; I love repetition. When I like something, for example, I repeat it. In repetition, as much as we try to uphold the rules and steps that we first make, it is inevitable that a change occurs in the work with repetition. Change occurs by coincidence; vanity, time, and mood also play a role. Things featured in that work are remnants of the environment and daily life, including metals, wood, and plastic. Despite their differences, I try to make them homogenous. I try to bestow a new meaning on a meaningless item through changing its shape, incorporating it with something else, putting it in another place, or combining it with something else, with another substance. The remnants of a pencil or old glasses will work and I will give them a new life.

Prior to that work, I also worked with plaster cubes.

Did you handle them in the same way?

Yes. Working on the plaster cubes was closer to carving, and cement cubes were closer to abstract work; it is considered installation and an expressive work; you could call it a new realism or new Dadaism.

What about the drawings on newspapers?

These drawings are closer to abstraction; I mean Abstract Expressionism.

Hussain, do you remember the work you exhibited in Abdullah Al Saadi's exhibition in 1999?

Yes. The catalogue was my design. I participated in the exhibition because I wanted to design the catalogue.

Ah. You were very interested in designing catalogues since the days when you designed *Al Tashkeel* magazine, is that right?

Yes, my obsession with designing catalogues made me take part in the exhibition. Of course the Society's budget was limited, so I did not want to burden them with high costs, I designed the catalogue in black and white.

I chose an article by Ahmed Rashid Thani about Abdullah Al Saadi, and also an article by Abdulaziz Jassim about Abdullah Al Saadi to include in the catalogue. This is the first time I have talked about the idea behind that exhibition. I wanted to design a catalogue for an exhibition, so I talked to Abdullah about the possibility of having a group exhibition. The works I presented were good.

One of them was the cardboard, which had burlap and ropes.

Yes, the coir and burlap were very old local materials rarely found; they were essential items in ancient societies used in the construction of houses and building things, they were essential. But today it is difficult to find this material, I mean it is difficult to find burlap nowadays although it is very cheap. It was something very trivial in those days, but now it is difficult to find a piece of burlap and this is an evidence of change that has taken place in our society over these forty years. Burlap was used to tie goods to be transported from place to place.

Cardboard is somehow new and is used to transport goods to various locations. When we import books, they come to us in cardboard, when we import anything, food or clothes, the things that make up our culture today,

they come to us inside cardboard. We usually take the content and throw the cardboard away, so I took them and gave them a new dimension. Why not take advantage of them as a basis for artwork, as a raw material?

True.

It was a really nice raw material, very flexible. We used to sew them as well and make lots of things.

We want to shed light on your exhibition with Abdullah Al Saadi. We will exhibit some of these works.

This would be nice.

Hussain, many people know the artists who were in this circle during the 1990s, I mean the artists who used to hold exhibitions together, including Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Kazem. I would like to ask you about others who were also in this circle but who were poets and writers.

Of course, Hassan Sharif had a very important relationship with Ahmed Rashid Thani.

What can you tell us about this relationship?

I mean Ahmed Rashid Thani spoke about and supported Hassan Sharif in his personal exhibition held in 1984 at the Emirates Fine Arts Society. They were very close, he was a family friend and used to visit Hassan regularly; he was a friend to all of us. Through Ahmed Rashid Thani we came to know, I mean Hassan came to know, Khalid Albudoor, Nujoom Alghanem, and Suha Al Ghefri.

Do you remember when you met Ahmed Rashid Thani?

Yes, at the university at the *Family* magazine, but we were not friends at the university. He used to visit the magazine and sometimes wrote articles for it. We met at the university in 1981 or 1982; we know each other from the university. Later, I introduced him to Hassan and they became friends. Ahmed, Hassan, Khalid, Nujoom Alghanem, and Yousef Khalil, who is a Sudanese theater artist and poet living in the UAE, they all published a magazine titled *Ramad*. And they, as a group, named themselves "Aqwas."

Hassan had a studio in Mreijeh in Sharjah in those days. So they issued an artistic, literary, and modern magazine; they would photocopy and distribute it. I remember that they included gum with the edition.

Gum with the edition? As a work of art?

Yes. The reader could chew gum and read the magazine. Then another group did something similar, they named themselves “Al Qaraeb Al Qazahiya” or something like this.

Who was part of this group?

Do you mean the second group that came later? Ali Al Andal, Ibrahim Al Mulla, and Masoud Amralla Al Ali, who is a famous filmmaker now.

Was this group influenced by the Aqwas Group?

No, they were inspired by the *Ramad* magazine; they wanted to do something similar but in another, different way. After a while, Ali Al Andal and Meri Al Halyan did the same thing, a second magazine. Ali Ibrahim was also present in that period; it was a large group in the UAE. So Ahmed Rashid, Hassan, Khalid, and I were friends. Hassan had a very strong relationship with Ahmed. Zabiya Khamis, an Emirati poet, used to come to the UAE sometimes, she was living in Cairo and the UAE.

Zabiya Khamis or Hamda Khamis?

There is Zabiya Khamis and Hamda Khamis. They used to know each other but are not related.

Do you remember the one-day exhibition held by the group close to the Central Market?

Yes, but it was not in the Central Market.

In Mreijeh.

Yes, at the Mreijeh studio. So the exhibition included Khalid Albudoor, Hassan Sharif, and Nujoom Alghanem; it was held in the Mreijeh market in Sharjah. They put the works on the ground for one day; this exhibition was very special.

I was in Kuwait when the exhibition took place, but I knew about it, people were amazed and it was nice. It was the first time people saw artists

exhibiting works in this very strange way in the marketplace. People were wondering what that was. But it was good, a good experience.

Hussain, I would like to ask you about the exhibition of *The Six*, which was held in Sharjah in 1996, do you remember it?

Yes, it was held at the Sharjah Museum.

Do you remember the work you exhibited back then?

Yes, I worked on newspapers; I dyed them and glued them together. Before the internet, people used to read newspapers; huge amounts of newspapers were available, where some newspapers were like 40 pages or more. So I glued newspapers together and colored them with dye. I mean images and colors in the background suggested that they were pale and transparent showing the images behind them, so there is an image, but it is vague and there are illegible writings. I used to hang them on the wall. The newspapers were compressed and a little thick, dyed with emulsion pigments.

Do you remember any criticism of this exhibition?

There were many Conceptual and artistic works in the UAE and the Gulf, and artists did not care much about criticism. No one would criticize because they would be exposed. Those who would criticize would be exposed as knowing nothing, and hence they would not criticize. Of course, it was a new thing that the exhibition was held at the museum; a Dutch artist and an Indian artist participated in that semi-international exhibition.

Jos Clevers and Vivek Vilasini.

Yes. Jos became a close friend of Hassan and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and all of us; he used to come every now and then. He held an exhibition for us in the Netherlands as well.

In Sittard and in Ludwig, is that right?

Yes. He was an important person in the art scene, and a friend of Hassan. He was impressed with our work. There was another artist and curator named Bert Hermans who was also an important figure and a good friend of ours. Bert Hermans is Dutch and was a consultant to the Ministry of Culture in the Netherlands. He was working on a joint project between the UAE and the Netherlands, and hence he selected some artists from the UAE and held

exhibitions and workshops for them in the Netherlands. He also brought artists from the Netherlands and held workshops and camps here. He had also worked with Indonesia, Jordan, the Emirates, and Damascus. He trained some of the artists currently present in the UAE.

[After some exchange the artist begins describing an exhibition at the French Cultural Center in Dubai.]

There was a mural work once in the French Cultural Center in Dubai, it was one of those nice works, and I liked it a lot. I painted a traditional door—one of the colorful doors.

They still have such doors in popular areas, I painted the door with all its geometric shapes, decorations, and joyous colors, and I used the colors directly on the wall. I gave it the shape of the door with a lamp above it just like a real door.

Hassan and I, along with a group of artists, made this work in the French Cultural Center, in addition to other nice works. It was a nice and gorgeous experience. At night, it looked like a real door.

[The translator establishes that in 1998 Hussain won first prize at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, which held annual portrait exhibitions. He won the prize for his cans (tin cans that were bent to resemble faces). They then review his exhibition history.]

In which year did you participate in the Sharjah Biennial?

I participated in the Sharjah Biennial right from the beginning until 2001 or 2003.

Do you mean that you all ceased to participate in 2003?

No, only me—I ceased to participate in 2003. However, Hassan and Ahmed and Kazem continued to participate.

What about the Emirates Fine Art Society's exhibitions? Did you participate in all of their annual exhibitions?

The last time I participated was seven or six years ago.

So was that in 2011 or 2010?

Yes maybe. With the cans.

[The translator brings up a portrait she saw that he had painted, of the writer Ahmed Rashid Thani. The artist confirms that he painted it when Ahmed Rashid Thani passed away several years ago.]

We know of course how important Ahmed Rashid Thani was in the intellectual, literary, and art scene here.

Of course, he was an important figure in the art and cultural scene in the UAE. He wrote articles in *Al Tashkeel* magazine and was one of the main editors for an issue of *Al Tashkeel* that was commissioned by the Emirates Fine Arts Society. He and Hassan were in charge of a number of issues of the magazine. He wrote for *Al Tashkeel* and other newspapers. He was a main actor in the field.

[After some discussion about Ahmed Rashid Thani and his manuscripts the topic changes.]

Is there any particular memory you would like to share?

I remember a beautiful painting; I remember a painting that was important to me because His Highness Dr. Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi acquired it.

Which painting?

He liked it very much and so he acquired it. Sheikh Ahmed [bin Mohammed Al Qassimi], former Head of the Department told me this. It was a collage painting, I did not know that such a thing as collage exists in art. It was 1983 or 1982 I think. I participated in the Society's exhibition with a painting made of paper and newspapers ads. I used colorful ads from daily newspapers—it was the beginning of colorful ads in newspapers and they were acceptable. The early 1980s marked the beginning of colorful ads in newspapers; they were about luxurious restaurants and cars, with pictures of houses and appliances and nice innovative sentences. So I took these pictures and used them in the collage. They were intertwined forming a particular scene and I added some other things to the painting. It represented the control that media had on people and the visual scene in public life—anywhere you look there is an ad, or a picture or a sign. Consumer life had begun to overwhelm public life.

So you made this work and exhibited it.

The Ruler was very impressed with the painting and he acquired it, this is what I heard from Sheikh Ahmed. This incident motivated me to work harder. It was known that the Ruler of Sharjah always came to inaugurate the exhibition. H.H. Sheikh Sultan was very interested in and a great supporter of art.

Yes, and he is still is. H.H. Sheikh Sultan spares no support.

He supported theater and art; he provided the headquarters for the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah. He annually came to inaugurate the exhibition; he knew the names of artists, spoke with them and knew them all personally, he was keen to follow up on them. To date, of course, he is still supportive of theater and culture. He plays a very important role.

Yes. By virtue of your experience in the field of theater, did you ever cooperate with any of the group's friends, like Khalid Albudoor or any of the playwrights on any theatrical works?

I worked with Meri Al Halyan on two plays I think, and with Abdullah Saleh one play. I was in charge of theatrical design. I did not work much in theater, I mean only four or five, maybe six projects. I also know Dubai's Al Ahli Theater and Tajridi Theater, its name was later changed, and I worked with Naji Al Hai, Joe Al Asghar, and Yousef Khalil in Dubai.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Those I mentioned formed a group with Ahmed Rashid Thani at the Free Theater at the university and they presented their plays.

Did you work with them or help them?

No, at the time I was in college. We were friends; they formed a group with Ahmed Rashid Thani and Naji Al Hai. Naji became an important playwright in the Gulf. He presented important plays in the UAE, along with Jamal Mattar as well.

Hussain, is there a final point you would like to remember, a certain incident, a certain person from this community? Would you like to say a final statement? Is there anyone we did not mention, or an exhibition or work we did not talk about?

Many events happened rapidly during the last 20 years, although I feel that they went by very slowly.

We were supposed to work more. There was a big opportunity to do many things and the UAE government encouraged and supported art a lot, especially the media, which played a major role. Everything was facilitated for those who liked to publish or hold an exhibition or any artistic and cultural activity, and for those who wanted to travel and learn. The government played a huge supporting role. However, our group was especially criticized.

What was the kind of criticism? Was it about the works themselves or the ideas?

Sometimes it was a personal criticism, and sometimes a criticism of the works because they did not know anything about them. In general, things began to calm down and I think the majority of the members of the group received some kind of recognition; maybe some of them deserved even more recognition, for example, Ahmed Rashid and Hassan.

However, it is nice to see what has become of UAE universities, the art schools, and the new artists. I mean it is very nice to see these wonderful and high levels of creation. Sometimes I do not participate in events for this reason—because I feel that I am not on the same level, and this is something nice to see, especially as teaching is done in foreign languages and keeps up with updates from the West. I think that the real art workshops exist in Western countries, particularly in the field of criticism. Those who master foreign language can keep up more with what is going on.

As a group and as friends, did you criticize each other when you met and talked about your work as poets or fine artists?

Of course, I mean, we sometimes criticized one another, and in general, we supported each other and suggested points to develop in one another's works.



Hussain Sharif
Strike, 2002
 Recycled iron wire
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of the artist and Salwa Zeidan Gallery



Hussain Sharif
Installation, 1997–2001
 Mixed media
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of the artist and Salwa Zeidan Gallery

Mohammed
Kazem

Mohammed Kazem

—Interviewed by Maya Allison and Alaa Edris

October 31, 2016. Kochi, India

“Everyone had a different job; no one was working professionally as an artist in the 1980s and 1990s. I was working in the army, Hassan was working in the ministry, Mohamed was in the police, Abdullah was a teacher. Most of them could not find a good job until now, if they did not work as journalists—the writers could not even sell their books.”



Mohammed Kazem, 2016

INTERVIEWER: Will you describe a regular day in the life of the artists, poets and thinkers, when they used to meet? What did they do? What did you listen to? What did you talk about?

MOHAMMED KAZEM: The majority of these meetings were not in the Emirates Fine Arts Society—I think that there was not enough time there since it closes at eight in the evening, so sometimes we would go and meet at Hassan's house.

We used to talk about everything, there were no particular topics or issues to discuss; simply one topic would lead to another. This small community was rich with several topics, some were philosophical, and perhaps some poets would read their poems, and some wanted, for example, to understand certain experiences, especially ours. These discussions were also recorded and documented through the articles that some wrote by virtue of their journalistic work. Most of them were journalists, for instance Adel Khozam, and Ahmed Rashid Thani who was a journalist at *Al-Khaleej*; and some journalists published their material independently.

These meetings also had an impact on the works created and our own production. There was no particular form for our work, but we noted that maybe there was a general influence on our style, experience and the experience of other artists as well.

Did the same people always come or did you notice new people coming?

Some of them were local artists, mostly poets and writers, such as the poet Zahir al-Ghafri, who was one of the poets that I would meet in Hassan Sharif's house. There were also some foreign artists who lived for a certain period at Hassan's house; for instance, the artist Jos Clevers, who later curated at Sittard arts center [in the Netherlands] our first exhibition in a European country in 1995. He also curated an exhibition for us entitled *The Six*.

An Indian artist named Vivek Vilasini also participated with us. Vilasini had significant arts experience in India; he lived at Hassan's house for several years. There was also a Dutch curator named Bert Hermans. We would always meet with this group, but it was not always the same group by virtue of our jobs and preoccupations.

You said that some artists lived in Hassan Sharif's house. Do you believe that their work is influenced by the experiences they had working closely with Hassan Sharif?

Hassan Sharif was a very influential person. And I think that it's the nature of the artist to influence and be influenced in return. Hassan was influenced by the experiences of others, but he was also very influential. He influenced a wide range of writers, and even poets due to his ability to read different languages; for example, he could read Arabic, Persian, and English. If there were some features that were not translated or available, he would be generous enough to provide us with them. And also he was influential by virtue of his age, he was almost 20 years my senior.

He was influential in so many ways, and he had an authentic character rich with ideas and information, which he constantly shared with us. Most of the materials and information we had, we obtained from him, many of which were unpublished or unavailable.

Did the visual artists have any effect on the writings of poets and writers, for example, or vice versa?

We cannot really say that. That small community was influential in general; I mean the discussions that took place had an impact on everyone, not on the nature of a particular work of art. For example, I remember that Hassan Sharif used to speak, write and analyze a lot of materials, which influenced our experiences as artists. He discussed issues related to the nature of art, such as: can art be defined as sculpture or painting? Also, he published some material, for example, about the Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, and wrote other articles about art after philosophy, discussing the nature of art and whether it is related to painting or sculpture. He believed that if an artist accepts art to be a specific medium, like painting or sculpture, he would not care about the real nature of art, but rather care about traditional painting and European standards.

So all the questions and topics Hassan published certainly had an impact and influence that affected certain parts of the artworks, but would not have a specific form or shape.

Was there a direct relationship: a writer would write about an artist's work, and an artist, for example, translates a poem into a work of art?

Poems were not written about art. The writers were interested in publishing materials about the artists themselves. A direct discussion would take place between visual artists and poets due the fact that they were the only ones spreading the word about our experiences, and we felt they were closest

to us. Even today, after the death of Hassan, I believe that Adel Khozam and the majority of writers and poets still write material about artists by virtue of their direct presence and knowledge of the artists' way of thinking. I think that Nujoom Alghanem is still filming a movie about Hassan, and the film is still under production.

Some journalists wrote some material, and there are other articles that Hassan felt that he should have written himself due to the lack of understanding of the nature of this field. He also wrote about himself personally, and translated or wrote other material because they were rich in information that would inform the public and clarify some points related to art criticism. I believe that he played the role of a critic, although he never described himself as such; he always referred to himself as a visual artist. When asked about this particular point he used to say that he actually practiced this role because it was not covered by anyone else. So ultimately, he practiced several social roles, including teaching art and writing. He became a writer soon after his return from the UK, when he felt that there were many texts that should be made available to the UAE public in order to bring the viewer closer to the artwork.

I would like to know more about who was part of your group at each stage. In the 1980s and 1990s, your group included Hussain Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Abdullah Al Saadi.

Hussain was the closest one to the group, then Abdullah, Mohamed Ahmed, and myself; we did not meet that much because we lived in distant places. In the 1980s, Mohamed Ahmed was living in Khor Fakkan and Abdullah was living there as well.

Ahmed Rashid Thani and the others were older than I was, so I could not even go out with them easily. I could only go to school, so I did not hang out with them.

So in relation to this social group, which had such creative discussions, what are the names that we should be looking for from the 1980s?

Names from the 1980s include Ahmed Rashid Thani (now deceased), Adel Khozam, Ali Al Andal (a poet, now deceased), Khalid Albudoor, Nujoom Alghanem. Also Saad Juma who is a writer as well, Abdulaziz Jassim who is now Head of the Culture Department at *Al-Ittihad* newspaper in Abu Dhabi.

Do you still communicate with these people? Do they still meet together?

They are still active in the field. We were very close to one another in the old days, and we used to meet in Sharjah, but now, taking into consideration that most of us work, in Abu Dhabi, others in Dubai and Sharjah, meeting again is no longer easy. In addition, some are busy with their families, and so on. However, most of them are still active in the field of publishing and writing.

It seems like the structure of this group was appropriate for that period, and at a certain point people settled in and focused on their careers.

Maybe it is difficult to meet now due to the great number of cultural events. In the 1980s, we would have a maximum of one or two events, but now there are many events here and abroad as well. Everyone is practicing their work professionally and taking things more seriously.

I am thinking now of the younger artists, a group of artists who came together under the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation Fellowship program, and this makes them officially a group, it is the institution that enabled this group, in a way that was not possible...

Yes, we did not have the budget, for example, to support the art. We had very little money sometimes to buy one piece. Everyone had a different job; no one was working professionally as an artist in the 1980s and 1990s. I was working in the army, Hassan was working in the ministry, Mohamed Ahmed was in the police, Abdullah was a teacher. Most of them could not find a good job until now, if they did not work as journalists—the writers could not even sell their books.

I want to ask you about other people who came into the group but then moved on, but who were important to this, and I know it's not a group—there's no manifesto. But it sounds like there was a connection, a friendship that was important to the process of creation, right? I'm thinking about Vivek, Jos, and anybody else at this stage in the 1990s?

Bert Hermans. Bert was old, older than us. Vivek told me he passed away, but I don't know. I haven't had any contact since maybe 2005. In 1996 Bert curated a show for a group of artists in Sharjah, and we had a few good shows during that time.

Which show was that?

It was a group of Dutch artists and one of them was Monkith Saaïd, an Iraqi artist, one of the best contemporary artists. People don't mention his name now. Monkith Saaïd started in the 1980s as a contemporary artist, and got his Dutch nationality. He was living in Holland, and I met him here and there as well. After that I heard that he passed away.

So Bert curated a show that was influential in 1996 that included an Iraqi-Dutch artist.

Yes, it was in 1996. But in 1996 we [also] had a good exhibition entitled *The Six* that was held in Bait Al Serkal in Sharjah.

Then in 2002 there was the first exhibition, *Water-Sand-Space*, on Conceptual artists at the Sharjah Museum, which was curated by Dr. Dorothea van der Koelen. This is of course the first exhibition in which we see the works of American and European artists at the Sharjah Museum; it was a very important exhibition that included raw materials and books presented by the organizer.

This was a Conceptual art show?

Yes. She brought such international artists as Francois Morellet, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner. They were in that show. It was the first time we met some of them.

The artists were from all over?

Yes. There were Americans, Europeans, and Conceptual artists from different places. Eduardo Chillida was there.

Please tell me how Jos Clevers and other foreign artists were able to join this community. How did you meet? And what is the story of your first encounter with them? How did they come to know about Emirati art?

I think some things happened purely by chance. Jos visited the UAE in the mid-1990s; he went to Abu Dhabi, I think, or Dubai and stayed for a long time. Later, he met with Hassan Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Abdullah Al Saadi and myself. He became interested in our experience, and being the Director of the Sittard arts center in Holland, he offered to transfer the exhibition we held in the Emirates Fine Arts Society to the Sittard arts center; this was our first overseas exhibition, which took place in 1995.

Vivek Vilasini was also an artist who came to visit the UAE in 1995; he used to work in a factory. He was probably looking for a group similar to ours, and we actually met him by chance. He lived at Hassan's house for almost four years.

Later, Jos revisited the UAE to participate in our exhibition, which was held in cooperation with the Culture and Information Department in Sharjah. The title of the exhibition was *Five*; however, Hassan Sharif and Jos Clevers changed the exhibition's name from *Five* to *Six* (1996). We went to meet the Director of Culture and Information Department, Abdul Rahman Hassan Al-Shamsi, and told him that we wanted to change the name because Vilasini, a very important artist, would participate in this exhibition.

Tell us about the exhibition you held in Aachen, Germany, at the Ludwig Forum.

After our exhibition in the city of Sittard, the curators of the Ludwig museum met with the artist Jos Clevers. He showed them some of our works and they expressed their interest in meeting us. Later, we met at Hassan's house with Annette Lagler, who was a curator at the Ludwig Forum for International Art, and we discussed the issue with other artists. This experience took us almost a year, and we also received the support of Abdul-Raheem Sharif, who documented the majority of our works and organized an exhibition for us under the name *Five*, and we also named the exhibition *Faces*. The exhibition included works of artists and poets; the poets selected included Khalid Albudoor, Adel Khozam, Khalid Al-Rashed, Ahmed Rashid Thani, and Nujoom Alghanem. Nujoom also presented a film on the opening day. There was great collaboration between the poets and us as visual artists.

[At this point in the interview, we shifted to the role of education in an art community.]

The Atelier in Dubai (which opened in 1987) is not still open, is it?

Since 2010, when I went to America, I asked one of the students, Ebtisam, to take over. She taught for one year and then maybe Muna AbdulQader Al Ali took over. And then nobody continued.

But the one in Khor Fakkan is still going?

No. They closed it a long time ago. There wasn't only one workshop; there was one in Ras Al Khaimah, which belonged to the Emirates Fine Arts Society, which opened at the beginning of the 1980s. The person in charge was an artist who graduated from Egypt. He forced all the students to do things his way—so you'd end up seeing forty paintings that were all the same. If you didn't look at the names, you wouldn't be able to tell them apart. That workshop—which I'm talking about simply as an example—didn't evolve, didn't develop the artists in that area. Sometimes education can be dangerous when it becomes like this.

What is the difference between a group of artists who keep learning, and developing and enhancing their art; and artists who refrain from learning new things or developing their experience?

First, I believe that every person has a particular way of thinking and living, even before they join any course to learn the basics of art in general. I noticed that teaching is a critical issue, because we must aim to teach students and provide them with all the information they need on visual arts, without affecting their individuality. We ought to try to guide them, for example, without influencing their special style. The final goal should not be to witness the graduation of 10 artists, who are the same version of one another. We must focus on their special style because everyone has one. But there are, for example, some ateliers that impose or demand the student produces the works in a certain way and thus we see a group of paintings drawn with brush strokes that seem as if one person has painted all of them. So I believe that individuality and diversity must be present. Art is a diverse and changing field and we must be influenced by some movements; we must welcome and accept the change happening continuously.

The story that Abdul-Raheem tells of The Flying House starting was that they were in Kassel [Germany] (for Documenta). I think you were there, but they had an idea that there should be a place to show artists and it would be called The Flying House. Do you remember when this idea was brought to you, and what your feelings were about it, what you expected it to be, and what it turned out to be?

It was a house that belonged to him [Abdul-Raheem]. It had been his family home in the past—his kids grew up in that house. Then he rented it

out and then he asked himself what he would do with that house. He told us, "I want to show you something." We went to that house and he said, "I want to rebuild this house, and maybe you can use it."

He said this to you?

Yes, yes. At that time, we did not have the name The Flying House. Mohamed Ahmed and Abdul-Raheem traveled to see Jos in Holland. That was in 2007. So they were talking, saying we have a house, and I was arranging the house, hanging the paintings and distributing everything. Then they said we have to choose a name for the house. And then they said: Okay, Flying House. He has a painting, which he did in the UAE, called *Flying House*. He took it with him to Holland and Abdul-Raheem told him: listen, let's just say The Flying House. They returned from Holland, and then I remember Jos came 10 years after the exhibition in 1996. They came back with a name and brought back a painting as well, and he was the curator of the House.

I sometimes assisted. It was 2008 when we curated a show at DIFC [Dubai International Financial Centre] for 10 artists. The Flying House was: myself, Hassan, Hussain, Mohamed Ahmed, Layla Juma Rashid and AbdulRahman Al Ma'aini. Ebtisam left immediately. [Mohammad Al] Mazrouei was there and then he left later, and then Layla Juma Rashid as I recall.

One thing that I've heard people say is that what we call The Flying House existed already before it happened, that there was this kind of community.

The name came later.

Yes, it wasn't like it was invented in that moment—it already existed as a community of artists.

We were working in the villa because we... also I curated a show for 16 of them, the *Window* exhibition, and they were people from the first generation, and second and third generation. Ten of them were my students, so we intentionally did not want to keep any distance between us and the first, second and third generations. So they were also involved with us in writing, publishing, and curating, like Ebtisam, Hoda, and Layla.

What is your impression of the current art communities? How did the organizations sponsoring these communities and artists' residency

programs come to exist? What is your personal opinion, since you have actually witnessed this? And what do you think has changed now?

There is a huge difference between the scene today and that of the 1980s, where the cultural and art events were limited to one annual exhibition or a few exhibitions organized by the Culture and Information Department, and later the Biennial. Now several institutions have emerged following the establishment of the Dubai Cultural Council, the Culture and Arts Authority, the Tourism and Culture Authority in Abu Dhabi, and the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation.

So now artists have endless opportunities ahead of them, which sometimes exceed the number of artists currently available, especially with the presence of artists' residency programs outside the UAE. Of course, the Emirates Foundation is the institution that has contributed the most to support postgraduate programs from foreign countries. It has also contributed to the printing of many books that support group and solo exhibitions.

There is a great diversity of events, and many great opportunities, which did not exist previously. Also, galleries came as a new phenomenon to the UAE, and they were interested in the art market. Now artists deal not only with the Emirates Fine Arts Society, which used to be the major party supporting artists in the past, but rather the majority of artists can now go and contract directly with commercial galleries, some of which are important galleries and some are modest ones.

I see also a disparity in the quality of events. Some events are of course highly comprehensive and important, and we respect them very much, especially those organized by the Sharjah Art Foundation, such as the Biennial and other exhibitions and events, and also the events organized by the Tourism and Culture Authority in Abu Dhabi, which usually organizes international symposiums and seminars. Art materials are also printed, documented, and translated from other languages into Arabic.

Many of today's students receive scholarships to study abroad in other, art-related disciplines pertaining to museums, art history, or curation. We need such disciplines to fill the gaps that did not previously exist. So I am optimistic that many things will continue to happen in the UAE, which has outperformed a lot of the countries in the region in culture and art.

Another very important aspect is related to the education policy in public schools, because this aspect should not be marginalized. Today we are talking about having a museum like the Louvre, the contents of which relate

to international and local artists; or like the Guggenheim Museum, which also contains numerous artworks and presents several events. So in order to bring the public or the recipient closer to the artwork, we really need to pay attention to art education.



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Mohammed Kazem
Directions 2001 (Landscape), 2001
C-print and captions on paper
From a series of 68 prints
29.5 × 21 cm (each)



Mohammed Kazem
Wooden Box, 1996
24 gelatin silver prints on mounting board in a wooden shelf
175 × 31 × 28.5 cm
Courtesy the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Mohamed
Ahmed
Ibrahim

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim

—Interviewed by Maya Allison and Alaa Edris

October 31, 2016. Kochi, India

“When I drove to meet Jos [Clevvers], I saw a very strange guy with big boots, big glasses, long hair, coming like a cowboy, I said to myself, “Who is this guy? Give me a break.” Then, we started chatting and he wanted a ride to the hotel. We chatted all the way to the hotel and I was going to take him to Khor Fakkan the next day. I thought, “We are chatting like we are old friends, speaking the same language,” and I thought, “Oh, come on then!” So I told him we would go meet Hassan, Mohammed Kazem, and so on.”



Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, 2016
Photo: Alaa Edris

INTERVIEWER: Let me begin by asking you to tell us the story of how you became an artist. When did you feel the need to make art? When did you understand what art can be and when did you begin to see yourself as an artist?

Well, my early passion for art started at school: my teachers and parents noticed that I had a talent for drawing, and the school started focusing more on this talent. We had extra activity classes, and we would draw and make teaching aids for the school; I was a little bit distinct in this field. Also, I used to try copying the images and drawings I saw in magazines or elsewhere, this was childhood, when my interest started.

Later, after I graduated from high school, I decided to study art and was going to Cairo to pursue my studies. But due to circumstances beyond my control, I could not go ahead with my plans... there were no longer any art scholarships. I was not frustrated; instead I took it as a kind of challenge. I used to draw landscapes, although I did not have even a little information about art. I knew that painting and the other arts existed, but I did not have a clear idea about the nature of art. I remember once reading an article about the painting *Guernica* (1937) by Picasso. The article caught my attention because I discovered the philosophical aspects of art in general, and this painting in particular. This article made me even more passionate about art.

By coincidence, one of my relatives was studying in the UK, and he began sending me books about art. As I recall, Arabic books about art were very few, only three or four books were in Arabic and they were published in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo or Beirut; they were very simple books.

I used to read the English books and translate them, which helped me develop my English language in terms of reading and writing. I used to read the book with the dictionary by my side; sometimes it might take me a month to finish reading one book. Of course the translation was a little bit literal, but the important thing is that I understood the general idea. Hence, I acquired an idea about art, and I further discovered myself and what I needed from painting. This phase lasted until the beginning of 1983, when I began creating artworks and paintings.

At first, I drew landscapes and portraits with oil colors. At that time, I was studying at the UAE University and a friend of mine there, Ali Al Andal, a deceased poet (may God have mercy on his soul), said to me one day, "A friend of mine is in the Emirates Fine Arts Society, why don't you go to them?" I

was not... anyway, he said to me "Go." I went and met Hassan Sharif at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, and I got to know the building etc.

When I first met Hassan he wanted to talk with me. I thought that our discussion would last a maximum of 10 minutes, but it actually lasted for two hours. We became friends and used to meet every day to talk about art. Hassan explained to me the message of art or art discourse, and I knew then that my only discourse was through art.

The first exhibition I ever participated in was held at the end of 1987, then I started to participate in public exhibitions. Our friendship also started to grow deeper. My discussions with Hassan made me feel, which is strange, that we had the same discourse, which was unique. I met Mohammed Kazem, who was very young in those days, I also met Abdullah Al Saadi, and suddenly we all became a group of friends without any deliberate decision. We used to meet once or twice a week to discuss art. Hassan would talk to us about art. If we needed any books, Hassan would gladly offer them.

Then we... there was an Atelier for the Youth and Sports Public Authority at the time, and Hassan was in charge of this Atelier. We used to visit him there, where he provided us with raw materials etc. Before I met Hassan, I had participated in several technical workshops with Mr. Yasser Dweik, who taught me drawing techniques; I mean how to make the basic paint layer and how to tighten the canvas. In that period art materials were scarce, I think that only one shop sold oil paint and other materials in the UAE. We could not always find the canvas size we wanted, and so we made our own materials and hence we taught ourselves.

I began to participate with Hassan in exhibitions in the 1990s; however, I was not only working on paintings, I also produced land art at home. I had some kind of a ritual where I would spend a week to 10 days on the mountain, in nature, moving rocks, by myself working on land art, although I did not have any background in land art. In the 1990s or before my first solo exhibition, held in 1990 in the Sharjah Cultural Center... during the exhibition, or before that, Hassan and I were going by chance to Khor Fakkan, and I told him that I wanted to show him some of my works. When he saw it he said, "This is land art! What are you doing?!"

He said that this is land art, and I said "Okay." But we had poor information on the subject; we searched the books we had but did not find a thing. After a while, I do not know how, we got a book on land art by Robert

Smithson and I loved Robert's works and I felt that this person is somehow close to me, I thought that we had the same spirit. Also Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy, and so on.

So, I started working, and began to pursue my land art, which I understood better. After my solo exhibition, I began to see painting as a narrow space for expression, so I focused more on land art.

By doing this, I started to comprehend land art further; I found myself driven into this type of art, and that it was the right tool for me. But this did not mean that I abandoned painting altogether; the painting was always present no matter what. I started working and experimenting with natural materials, I mean all the materials available at home, cardboard or paper, tree branches etc., so I started focusing on such works. In the 1990s, I began to participate in exhibitions; my art-related information began to expand and deepen, and I gained a solid foundation and knew what I wanted, where I wanted to work and what I wanted to do. I basically understood the message of art so I became an artist.

When you held your first solo exhibition at the Cultural Center, you already had photographs of the land art you made, so you were aware that this was art, but Hassan Sharif's visit to your house was after this exhibition, right? So you were already thinking of it as art enough to take a picture of it, even before his visit?

Yes, it was after the solo exhibition.

So, you knew that it was some kind of art, and that is why you took those pictures. Okay. One of the stories that I usually hear from artists is that they sometimes get to a point where they have to confront obstacles whether internal or external. Maybe they think "I'm a bad artist" or because of circumstances they can't do what they want to do for their art. Do you want to tell us about any internal or external obstacles to your artmaking?

Basically, at the beginning of our careers we faced opposition to our artworks, which were not very accepted by our society. The five of us had been in conflict with cultural institutions before any conflict with the public. Certain institutions refused us and did not recognize our work as art; there were many issues, but we asserted our position and ourselves despite their opposition. We believed that this was art whether they liked it or not. I remember that they used to prevent us from participating in some of the

exhibitions, or they would attack us in seminars and lectures etc. We had to face such opposition from people who were involved in the field of fine arts, and even artists themselves were against us at times; however, the public somehow accepted our work and were curious about it, saying "What is this?"

There were big challenges, but we knew what we were doing, we knew the real basis, and that what we did was true, so we did not need... or we were not influenced by their opinion, because if we had been, then we would have accomplished nothing. We had faith and believed in what we did; and this solid belief is what helped us overcome those barriers.

Certain artists helped us, Europeans in particular; other artists were against us and did not like our works because they were not adhering to the framework of traditional painting. So there were many difficulties, but as long as the person believes in their work and life, then the self-esteem and self-confidence can make them great and distinct, it is... What can I say? There were obstacles, but in my opinion, we also make our own obstacles.

Throughout my art career, I was never frustrated or... actually I was frustrated only once, when I burned all the artworks that I had made right up to the year 1999, all the artworks that I had made from the very beginning until 1999. And after I did that, I began creating new works. Frankly, I do not want to disclose the details to the media.

I would like to hear about this incident in general without going into details or the reasons behind it. You, as an artist, went through this stage, which made you destroy a large part of your work, can you talk about this please?

In general, this happened in 1999. I had an Atelier in Khor Fakkan and supervised the students learning there. I taught them the principles and basics of art and its techniques. For some reason at the time, I was deprived of my Atelier. All of a sudden, all my artworks were put in a truck, two trucks actually, and I did not know where to put them, there was not enough space in my house. I roamed the streets of Khor Fakkan followed by the two trucks for more than half an hour, until one of the drivers complained, saying, "Why are we roaming the streets aimlessly?" I told him that I was going to pay him his fees, and that he should not be complaining. We went to the place where Khor Fakkan municipality used to burn trash, and I dumped all my artworks there and burned them. A friend of mine had seen my car and followed me; he had a camera by mere chance and filmed the whole scene, and we ended up with a record of the whole incident.

Was this a sad time?

I had no choice at the time, I did not have a place to store my artworks. Then suddenly comes this flash, “What the hell, I’m doing all of this and they don’t respect my art? Let it go.” So I burned all of it. A half an hour later, I went to do my art again.

After half an hour, you started creating a new artwork?

Yes.

Did you feel liberated? Free?

Yes. Sometimes you get this kind of feeling, you don’t know it, you cannot recognize it, you feel something, you cannot say happy, or sad, this kind of feeling you cannot name it... It’s like this...

Transcending...

Yes.

When you informed your friends and Hassan Sharif about this, what was their reaction?

They accepted it. It was normal for them.

I mean... Did they support you when they knew about what had happened?

Yes, Hassan said, “Oh thanks, you are burning your work, and not yourself.”

He was right, that was a good point.

Yes.

This is very interesting, so he was accepting that this was part of the development.

Yes.

Do you remember the first artwork you produced after burning all your artworks? You said you started working half an hour after the incident...

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

What did you create?

Yes, I remember. It was a painting, and I still have it.

Was it about the fire and burning?

I still have it; I keep it to myself.

What a story! It made me forget about all the other questions. Well, okay, we talked about how you became an artist, some of the challenges, your first public exhibition...

You know the art critic who advised me to focus on art? My mother. Although her intentions were not mean, she did not like my paintings, and the smell of the materials. She would say, “What are you doing? What is this kind of art? Draw a camel, paint something beautiful, or trees; draw something we know.” On one occasion, she expelled me from the house—my painting and me. I lived with her in her home at that time.

Was she bothered by the smell of the colors? Or did not she like the painting?

Yes, yes. The smell of turpentine and the... Twice she kicked me out! One time in the rain, one time on a normal day. The time she kicked me out, me and my paintings, when it was raining you know, in that weather the smell can get very strong. I was painting and she came to me and said, “Hey! Go and take these things outside!” I said, “Mom, it is raining, how do you expect me to go? I’m here with my family...” “No, go!” I said, “No I want to take my family.” She said, “No! It is raining!”

By your family, you mean...

My wife and two children at the time, Abdullah and Ahmed. Anyway, she kicked me out, she is my mother and I must respect her in any case. Then, I wrapped my paintings in plastic, and myself with plastic, and went out to the gate of the house. It was raining heavily and there were no taxis around, I did not have a car at the time, and no one could be seen on the streets in this weather, so I was just hanging around...

In Khor Fakkan, there are not so many taxis.

Yes, yes. There were no taxis, and the rain was pouring heavily...

Where were you going to go?

I didn’t even have a studio at that time.

You were a new kind of Bedouin.

[laughter]

Yes... I put the painting on the side of the road and I walked to my friend's house who lent me his car; I went back to my mother's house to bring the rest of my stuff, and my mother said to me, "It is okay, you can stay here, go and bring your painting."

Does she support your art now?

She passed away in 1998.

May God have mercy on her soul.

But she supported me, really, she did such things because... I don't know, but she supported me.

So, in 1998 your mother dies, and in 1999 your Atelier is taken from you, no wonder you were upset. That's a big loss.

Yes, frustrated. Bad things never come alone, and before that something bad had also happened to me, but I cannot remember what it was.

I read in the timeline of Hassan Sharif that he had stopped painting for a long time, and then began painting again around the year 2000.

Yes, Hassan stopped...

But it seems like you kept painting. Have you ever stopped painting?

No, I did not stop painting; I did not stop. Well, I stopped for a couple of years, only two or three years and then I resumed painting again. Sometimes I used to paint and then stop for a few months. Maybe in 2000 or 2001 I started painting again. But through 1999, when I burned the paintings, I had produced and exhibited many paintings. I painted them after my solo exhibition. Later, I created many more paintings between 1990 and 1999.

I would like to talk about the people who influenced you and the people you influenced. I know that you taught young artists, and of course someone had taught you. So, there are teachers, students and there are also peers, friends and colleagues. Such as Ali Al Andal, Yasser Dweik also.

Yes, yes. Yasser Dweik? Yes, Yasser is in Jordan, I think.

[Maya Allison reminds him of a story that he had told her, and also Munira Al Sayegh, about a place where the community sometimes gathered. She mis-remembers it as being called the "sand box."]

Yes, Sand Palace, we named it that, it was just a sand dune between Ajman and Sharjah. The guys used to go buy supplies to make a barbecue, especially in winter. We would buy what we wanted and sit there to light a fire, make a barbecue and drink. It all started with two or three people, I mean it started with just Meri Al Halyan, Ali Al Andal, Adel Khozam, and me; we used to sit in that place. We would sit and make a barbecue. After a while, greater numbers also started coming, so it turned into a meeting place for the intellectuals of the UAE, so to speak.

We used to meet there, some people even daily because their homes were close to the place; those who lived in Sharjah or Ajman would go every day, so this place became a daily gathering, of lighting a fire and sitting. We used to go there alone knowing that we would always find someone there.

It became a gathering place. For whom? For all of us, the young people, I mean poets, writers, playwrights, musicians. We used to talk about culture, about concerns that mattered to us, each in their discipline, music, poetry, literature, and the novel. Whenever we had guest artists or poets from Sharjah, for example, we would take them to that place. It became a gathering place for... something like spontaneous seminars; a poet might discuss a poem, or someone might talk about a book or a novel they had just finished reading. All of this created a kind of cultural dialogue among all of us; I will not mention all the names, even Mohammed [Kazem] was there, I mean, all of us. Every weekend, we would go there to see a friend sitting there or passing by.

It lasted until 1996. This is the story of the Sand Palace. It became a natural gathering place for us in the winter, without us making efforts to make it like that; and it lasted for years, not just one year. In the summer, you could find one or two persons who were not bothered by the high humidity of the summer.

[laughter]

Was this place open to men only? I mean, was it open for female artists as well?

It was open for both.

Did women go there?

Yes, I mean, the place was open for everyone, young men and women used to come; young female poets who wanted to participate in the discussions. Everyone who had an interest in culture or interest in poetry knew that this was a gathering place for all the young writers and poets. Many used to come during the weekend, there were those who were from Ras Al Khaimah, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Sharjah... yes, we had people from Ajman, young people, I mean. We used to gather at that place, which became a meeting point, and women used to come, but at that time women were not strongly present. We used to see a woman or two, but now women have enhanced their presence a little.

Who were those female artists?

I remember, Nujoom Alghanem, Hamda Khamis, a poet; they were a group of honorable women.

Some of the artists used to play the oud, there was a lot of music, Mohammed Kazem used to play... Adel Khozam used to play as well. Sometimes there was singing too, I mean, it depended on the activity.

Meri Al Halyan, he is... an actor and he writes articles for *Al-Ittihad* newspaper or *Al-Bayan* newspaper I think.

Al-Bayan newspaper. Yes, he is a famous actor.

It lasted until 1996, and when did it start?

It started in the early 1990s, I mean 1991, yes, at this time, it was the year 1991. Yes.

So the 1990s were a really fertile time.

Yes, the 1990s were very active.

What's so exciting to me is to discover so much that happened in this period. I think the timeline [that Cristiana de Marchi wrote for the Hassan Sharif monograph] captures most of what I've heard about this time, I haven't yet heard about it anywhere else.

This was a hatching time...

A hatching time, that's a great way to put it.

[*They mime a hatching egg, laughter*]

I mean after you burned all your artworks, you went back to practicing art, but at the same time you accepted a job at a bank, which is something quite different from art. Tell us about it.

After Khor Fakkan arts center, I worked as a clerk in a bank, and this was very different from art, but the job was challenging. I entered the field knowing absolutely nothing about banks, and I was working in a place where information was the real treasure. No one was ready to give you a piece of information; you had to fight for it. I looked myself for the information I needed, for example, how a certain commercial transaction was made. I worked hard and I do not know if this was a kind of self-punishment or something. Within seven years, I was promoted from a clerk to the position of an Area Manager in the bank.

After seven years, I felt done with this job. Deep down, I knew, "I am not a banker," I was not a bank employee, and could not be like that forever. So one day I went to the headquarters and submitted my resignation out of the blue. I had no particular reason to resign. My manager did not accept it, offered me more salary, a better job, but no, I submitted my resignation. After I resigned, I had a feeling I cannot describe, it was not joy nor... it was something different. I mean, it was like liberation and confusion, I became free or... So I called Hassan and I told him that I had just quit my job, and explained to him how I felt. He said to me, "Don't worry, come visit me." And I went and stayed with him for a week.

So you burned your artworks in 1999 and then worked in the bank until 2008.

2008, no 2007. It was 2007, because in 2008 I was jobless, free for one year, then in 2009 I began my new work. So I was free for one year. I had money, I spent it, and when it was finished I started looking for a new job.

[*laughter*]

That sounds good.

There is always this debate that you were not a "Group." Because there was no manifesto, but they were a group because they were a community of people who would meet with each other regularly. Can you tell me who those people

were who formed the inner circle of that creative community, of which you were a member? Because I believe that they were artists, writers and poets... Musicians?

Musicians, yes. Musicians? Abdullah Al-Noobi.

Who were these people for you? How did you come together? Were there particular people within the group who agreed the most with each other?

Basically, the friendship relationship grew different from... it was not aiming for anything else. It is true that we were artists, but we built our friendships through art. Friendship relationship is unlike any other relationship that might be linked to a certain aim, where the relationship vanishes as soon as the aim is no longer present. In fact, we were not a group or a collective where someone would join or leave us, no, we were friends.

Of course, there were many people interested in the arts, music or poetry, but they were not very serious, I mean they would just withdraw; they did not withdraw from our friendship, but withdrew from their interest, from poetry, from art, and they automatically left the group of poets or artists etc. Basically, our aim was not to form a group, we were mainly friends.

We did not have an official statement but it was society that imposed this label on us, I mean the society referred to us as a group; it was the society who made us the official statement, we did not see our relationship in that way. It was something imposed on us from the outside, I do not know what was the real reason, but it might be the society, because we were a new case at the time, so it made us a group, but it was a group based on friendship.

At the same time, the members of this group had a shared discourse, a shared concern and aim, which was culture and disseminating enlightenment seriously and academically. We used to keep up with what was happening in the world of art, and the poets, for example, did the same thing. I mean there was a kind of commitment and follow-up. This was different from other artists who did not follow-up what was going on in the field of art in particular, who, so to say, were stuck in a particular artistic style, and were not ready to change. So, this group had a different discourse and a different vision, so for us, as friends, we did not have any tendency to withdraw, death was the only thing that could pull us apart.

And there were also poets and others.

Yes, the poets included Adel Khozam, Abdulaziz Jassim, Abdullah Abdul Wahab, Saad Juma, Abdullah Abdulrahman, Jamal Mattar, and Naji Al-Hai.

Does this group meet nowadays?

It was over, over. It was over after that place no longer existed.

You mean it was over, when the Sand Palace no longer existed?

Yes, yes, I am talking about the Sand Palace. But we continued to meet as a group, for example, I might meet with Adel, or Adel would meet with someone else, or the three of us might meet together, but it is no longer the same as it was before.

Ahmed Rashid, sorry I forgot to mention Ahmed Rashid Thani who was also with us. Mohammad Al Mazrouei as well.

Did Al Mazrouei used to go to the Sand Palace as well?

Yes, he visited us several times.

So there's another thing that I would like to ask you. Did you ever have an idea about being an "Emirati artist," or was it something that came... because I think that with The Flying House a clear line was drawn: this is only for Emirati artists.

Yes.

But obviously Jos [Clevers], Vivek [Vilasini], and other people coming through were not Emirati but they were part of the group, for a while.

Yes.

Did you think in those terms, or did that come later? Did you think, "We have in common that we are all Emirati"? In what way did you think about your nationality and your role as an artist in relationship to nation-building? Because there is this notion of "soft power," of developing the creative community.

Of course, basically the presence of the artist in the society here is very important, I mean, the role of art is highly important in, let's say, building society. Art as a culture can convey your language, discourse, dialogue, culture etc. to other people. In the end, when dealing with others, you deal with

them regardless of their identity; I mean their country and nationality, etc. Art discourse is a unified human discourse understood by humans, whether in Latin America or in the Gulf.

Human discourse is one. You might find someone like me living in the UAE producing the same work produced by a person living in Mexico or in Siberia. This unity in human discourse is always present. I am always against calling artists an “Emirati artist” or an “English artist” or an “American artist”; I am against this terminology. In my opinion, artists should be defined by saying: an artist from the Emirates, an artist from the USA, because art is a human trait and has nothing to do with identity. It is natural to see in my artworks, as an Emirati citizen, symbols of my community’s culture or traditions, which find their place in the work unintentionally. These are the only factors that can distinguish art in terms of identity or nationality, but in the end, the art discourse is a comprehensive human discourse not limited by identity or nationality.

The role of the Emirati artist, like any other artist, is to affect and be affected. So why should we say that we were Emirati artists while we hosted non-Emirati artists as well, such as Jos Clevers and Vivek Vilasini; we had the same discourse, the same language and the same understanding, the vision of art was not based on nationality. Art discourse is more important than the identity or nationality of the artist who influences...

It is an interesting question for me because there is so much pressure now to find and support Emirati artists.

Yes.

But it’s the opposite of the 1980s when there wasn’t enough support, so it’s sort of a catch-22, too much support, not enough support...

My thoughts go now into two directions at the same time. One is the “Progressives,” who were Indian artists in the 1940s and had a manifesto; they called themselves the “Progressives” and were modern artists who wanted to create an authentic and modern Indian art. So they were very conscious of the idea of being Indian, and this is partly why I’m asking if this is how you think, but it seems like you think in a different way.

True, we do not have a dogma, we are not dogma. The dogma means a doctrine or something. We are not like them. Of course, I am against this idea, I do not agree with them.

So you don’t feel like there’s a question of “Am I being authentic to my culture or to my identity?”

No, no.

You are just being authentic to you.

Yes.

Okay, let us put the question of authenticity and culture aside. The other thing that I am thinking about now is: were there conversations about looking to the East, rather than the West? Hassan went to England and his ideas about contemporary art were influenced by the history of the Western canon, right?

Yes. I went to India, but that was before I joined the university. When I had finished my high school, I went to India and stayed for a year and a half. I was 18 years old, and did not have money. My father and my family did not know where I was.

Why?

I do not really know; I was a teenager. Teenagers.

[laughter]

I studied, well not actually studied; I participated in a workshop at a university in Lahore, Pakistan. Yes, I worked there, in the Shalimar Garden; I earned 10 or 15 rupees a day.

Was that because you could not go to art school?

Yes, I think so. Since I could not go, I went there to find some kind of... maybe to study.

So, what did you study ultimately at the UAE University?

I studied psychology; I am a psychologist.

[laughter]

Do you have any additional information that you think might enrich our research, the exhibition and this publication?

Yes, I will tell you a story about the artist Jos Clevers, it’s very important for UAE artists. Jos Clevers arrived in Abu Dhabi in 1994 and stayed for six months or more, I do not remember exactly, more than six months. He was looking here and there and everywhere, but did not find any art he liked. He

spent his time in Abu Dhabi with the Cultural Foundation there, and he just saw nothing. He found a few paintings and the like, but mostly what made him think “It’s not art.” Then he did a workshop in Sharjah, and at that time I was working in Khor Fakkan with the Sharjah Culture Department. They called me and said there was an artist who wished to set up a workshop for children in Khor Fakkan, so please come and collect him. I was excited, the artist was from Holland, which is something new; it was the first time an artist came to us from Holland, so this was going to be either good or bull. I thought that if he is good, we can spend the evening together and sit with Hassan and the group; and if he is bull, I say, “Okay, tomorrow I’ll collect you and take you to Khor Fakkan.”

When I drove the car to meet Jos, I saw a very strange guy with big boots, big glasses, long hair, coming like a cowboy, I said to myself, “Who is this guy? Give me a break.” Then, we started chatting and he wanted a ride to the hotel. We chatted all the way to the hotel and I was going to take him to Khor Fakkan the next day. I thought, “We are chatting like we are old friends, speaking the same language,” and I thought, “Oh, come on then!” So I told him we would go meet Hassan, Mohammed Kazem, and so on. So he changed his clothes, and we went directly to the beach in Ajman. We went to the beach in Ajman because at that time Dubai was too far away and when we did not have enough money, we always went to Ajman. Sometimes we are broke. If we have money we go to a hotel cafe; no money, the beach. So we went to Ajman and sat on the beach.

So, I took him to the beach and we started talking, and then Hassan and Mohammed Kazem showed up.

They all came to meet you on the beach?

Yes, yes. So, I took Jos and went to buy supplies, and went to the beach. We met Mohammed Kazem and Adel Khozam; we were many, maybe six or seven people eating, drinking and we found Jos had the same language. So I took him to Khor Fakkan, and he became our friend. Jos then returned to Abu Dhabi. Later he spoke to the Director of the Ludwig museum [Ludwig Forum for International Art] in Germany, who said to Jos, “There is no art in the UAE, I didn’t see any art in the UAE.”

Jos was angry with him, the man said there are maybe five artists, and Jos cursed at him and said, “You think so because you did not look for anybody else.”

This man was the Director of the Ludwig museum, right?

Yes. Then, in 1995, Jos held the first contemporary art exhibition for UAE artists in Europe. Really! So the first exhibition was at the Sittard arts center, organized by Jos Clevers. It was the first UAE exhibition in Europe.

Holland, okay, and it was 1995.

Yes. Then in 2002, the Ludwig museum presented an exhibition for the five of us, and Jos was the reason behind that exhibition.

Okay. What was Jos doing here? Why did he stay in Abu Dhabi for six months?

He was hanging out; he wanted to see the new city.

What in 1991 or 1994 would bring an artist to hang out in Abu Dhabi for six months?

He was a crazy man.

So the last question is a question we asked to Mohammed Kazem as well. Since the “hatching” in the 1990s, now we are onto our third generation...

Fourth generation.

And I still see some similarities... Of course, there are differences, but I still see some similarities. So there are the Emirati artists and expat artists residing in the UAE. There is a difference, but some people are still becoming a real part of the community. The Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation supports artists, ADMAF [Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation] supports artists, and the Sharjah Art Foundation has really grown and thrived, and *Al Tashkeel*, and there are more examples.

The question I have for you now is: what would you like to see happen from here? What is great, what is still needed? Is it the same as it was before or have things changed? Talk about how you see things now in terms of art and art support. And also, I wonder whether the relationships between writers, poets, musicians are different from that among visual artists?

I am very optimistic about the new generation. Very optimistic and very proud of the institutions that have been established, such as those you have mentioned, I mean Sharjah Art Foundation and the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, and many other institutions, even in other emirates

such as Fujairah, where a cultural center or a culture department has been established.

All of this is a positive indication, this is the best thing to do... the new generation is different; a rational generation who knows, understands and can read the paintings and artworks. It has a solid foundation, and we count on it. We had struggled and fought in the past because we were sure that the new generation would continue on the same track, so we depend on the new generation as being the basis. The new generation is like the cornerstone for us.

So I am very much encouraged by what has happened and the cultural movement, for instance, the upcoming museums. This in itself is a cultural revolution, so to say. I am very optimistic, as I said, about this coming generation, a well-informed generation.

Still, these institutions need schools and universities, we need a fine art college. It is true that Sharjah has an art college, but one college is not enough, because every school or college has its special style, and we need more than one style to complement the University of Sharjah. We need other colleges to produce different graduates; this diversity is what we need, because diversity is right.

And as for the general development and the new generation: on the contrary, I am very optimistic about this more-aware generation. We actually feel their respect for us, and this is enough. It is enough for us to see the new generation, you and the young people—Munira Al Sayegh and many others.



Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim
Untitled, 1997
Oil on canvas
73 × 60 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Fine Art Gallery



Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim

Lines (group of 9), 1995

Indian ink on paper

48 × 36 cm (each)

Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Fine Art Gallery



Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim

Teela, 1994

Mixed media

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Fine Art Gallery

Abdullah
Al Saadi

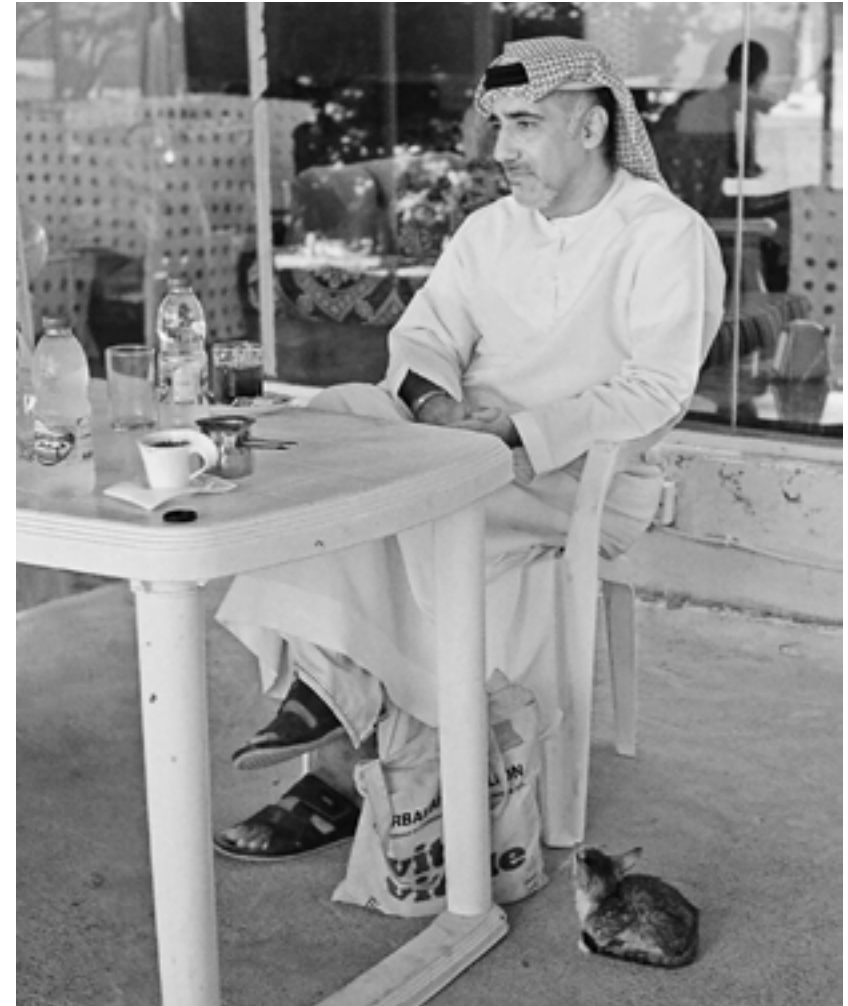
Abdullah Al Saadi

—Interviewed by Maya Allison, Alaa Edris and Bana Kattan

November 12, 2016. Khor Fakkan, UAE

“Listen, the relationship between the artists is... for example, I used to go to Hassan and we would not only talk about art but about life in general. Sometimes we might discuss personal things. Also we used to talk about his cat, for example, and many other things, not necessarily art.

An artist needs to meet other artists, so I used to go to Dubai to see Hassan because I need to see artists from time to time to talk with them. There are no artists here. I mean, okay there might be some artists, but there are no discussions, you need someone to talk to, to recall memories and to make discussions. An artist needs to meet other artists.”



Abdullah Al Saadi, 2016
Photo: Alaa Edris

INTERVIEWER: Tell us the story of how you became an artist. Start from when you were young, and the first time you felt that art was what you wanted to do. Tell us about the people who helped you to discover your talent, from as far back as you want to go, until today.

ABDULLAH AL SAADI: It began at school, when I was studying at the School of Masafi. I used to draw during art lessons, and in the afternoon I used to study with art teachers to work on artworks; from there things developed. My older brother also painted well, but he left school very early; we were together at the Masafi boarding school, and when he dropped out I stayed there. At the school, I designed wall magazines, which sometimes the teachers of Geography or Arabic language would also ask me to do. I continued and became known for this at school; I also participated sometimes in regional competitions. My art teacher encouraged me to draw and join such competitions like the rest of the students.

At first, I relied on teachers, especially Art and Arabic language teachers, because they had me make wall magazines and journals, and sometimes we needed colors. I mean at the time there were no printers, so we had to color the magazines to be issued—for example, we would color 200 magazines because there were no colored images. I continued in this way. Then, after I graduated from high school, I made myself a studio at home. We lived in a traditional Arabic house, with an open courtyard, so I bought wood and built a part of the Liwan; I designed and built by myself a two- or three-meter space using wood, and so I made myself a studio. I spent hours at home drawing. This was probably 1986.

Soon, I felt the house was overcrowded with my siblings and parents, and did not feel comfortable working there, so I rented a house in Khor Fakkan. This house was in the east near a mosque and was owned by the mosque's muezzin, and I stayed with him. I remember that there was no electricity in the room because the house was very old. I moved all my things and belongings into that room and managed to connect an electricity cable from the mosque to the room. I connected the cable to the outlet replacing the muezzin's microphone. So, when he wanted... (Ghalib, his name was Ghalib)... when he wanted to call for prayers, he disconnected the cable, and kept it disconnected after he had finished as a way to make me go to pray.

[laughter]

After the prayer, he would reconnect the cable.

I stayed at Ghalib's mosque for one year or less, and then moved to the Folk Arts Association; they gave me a room and I remained for a while. Then I moved to the public library in Khor Fakkan; Ahmed Rashid Thani the poet was there and then Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim came as well, so I took a room and Mohamed took another one and we stayed there for I do not know how many years. Later, maybe in 1991, the Emirates Fine Arts Society rented a house, a traditional Arab house, which Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and I moved into and stayed for a few years, until 1994 I think. Again, the Society closed the house and in that year, I went to Japan.

So I went to Japan for a year, two years, or maybe a year and a half, and when I came back I rented a house for a year in Khor Fakkan. In 2001 I moved here into this house, and began building a house on a farm in Madha, and I have remained in this studio in Madha since then.

I would like to ask if you remember a certain moment or story where you felt that you had become an artist, when you found your vision, or that this is what you would like to do for a living. When did you feel like "I'm an artist"?

This came later. A person gradually evolves. I used to paint in the studio, and I used to paint in Japan, but your sense of art is not only related to practicing painting, you need friends and you need to participate in art events. Throughout this [early] period, I did not participate in any exhibitions, I mean I used to work at home and make more and more artworks. Sometimes the Emirates Fine Arts Society, for example, would organize an event, and everyone would participate as well.

I spent my high school years in Sharjah [at a boarding school], and I used to walk to the Society, and there I met artists. For instance, I met Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, and even Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, whom I did not know well at the time.

When did I see Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim? At the Expo, that old Expo that looked like tents. On one occasion there was an exhibition and I saw him there; Ahmed Rashid Thani introduced me to him, I remember that he was wearing big glasses and I did not recognize him. Later I got to know him better.

So I became friends with Hassan [Sharif], Abdul-Raheem and the guys in Sharjah.

You know, at the time I was still at high school, I did not have enough money to buy things, did not have a car to go to Dubai to buy any canvases

or other materials. The same situation continued throughout my time at the university. The case is different when you start working and earning money. I relied on my father and my family's support during my study at the university, so I used to practice art within the limits of available resources.

For example, in making artworks when I was in the old studio in the east near the mosque, I used old doors, bottles, and such available things. I used to buy colors from a nearby supermarket. I could not afford to go to Dubai. So my first close encounter with artists began at the Society, the Emirates Fine Arts Society, where I got to know Hassan, and as days and years went by, my relationships with artists began to grow and grow and I was introduced to different art trends etc.

Sometimes a person needs friends among artists, why? Because they have the same work concerns and interests.

Hassan, I used to meet with Hassan, and discuss the things that I made or he made. For example, we would make recommendations and comments and... Hassan was a friend, and more than a friend. I used to go to Dubai to see him but now I don't go to Dubai anymore. I did not meet the other artists that much, I mean I did not see Mohammed Kazem and the rest a lot, because they lived far away. I had also different relationships with each different artist. For example, my relationship with Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim was different from my relationship with Hassan or Mohammed [Kazem], and yet we were a group together. Everyone had a different relationship with the other artists... I mean... the artists were open to each other, but sometimes you feel closer to a certain person.

Who was the closest artist to you?

Hassan was the closest; but death is... I mean, death is inevitable, what can you do?

So you did not consider these people as teachers, however, you met Hassan Sharif as a teacher. At the time Mohammed Kazem was in your same age group, an adolescent as well, so you were both at a similar stage of your career and development.

There, in Sharjah, I met Hassan and Mohammed Kazem. Mohammed Kazem used to go to Hassan at the time to practice. They used to go to Dubai and I could not accompany them, so I only visited a couple of times. Even in Sharjah, I used to go to them but not on a daily basis, maybe twice a week.

To the Fine Arts Society?

Yes, yes.

You did not go to Dubai because the boarding school had a curfew?

No, I used to go, but I do not know how many times. I saw the studio; the studio of Hassan Sharif, Mohammed and the other group, I saw it once or twice—I am not sure.

At the time, it was not easy because I did not have the car nor the money, lots of money... And if you did have money, you would rather pay it to buy what you needed rather than to pay for a taxi.

Yes, yes, of course. So you did not visit the Emirates Fine Arts Society to take lessons, you just went to visit.

Yes, yes, I think so.

Tell us about the first exhibition you participated in, the first group exhibition and the first solo exhibition.

I presented my first solo exhibition when I was studying at the UAE University, it was in 1987 or 1988—I am not sure. The works I made in the studio near the mosque were mostly made of wood, doors and such things, as well as some paintings—the works I did before included oil paintings on wood. So, these were the works I presented and I remember that I moved my big artworks by bus that day. I mean there were not many means of transportation, and I asked the driver to come and I put all the wood works inside the bus. The exhibition was beautiful, even Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan [Chancellor of UAE University and chairman of the General Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare at the time], was present and this was my first exhibition.

As for group exhibitions, I participated in the university exhibitions when I was at college, and also with the Emirates Fine Arts Society. The first exhibition was at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, and it included paintings and sculptures as well. That was in the days of Wafaa Sabagh, yes I think she was there. I participated with one painting that year, and the Minister of Education also attended, these details are written in the diary. So this was possibly my first group exhibition. After that, I began to participate with the Society, I mean the Society helped me; they helped me a lot.

How did they help?

Financially and morally. I used to meet the artists—Abdul-Raheem and Hassan, and we used to hang out together. Especially Hassan, we would go to a restaurant, for example, or to his house as well, and hence we all came together, even with other artists who are not active now.

The public negatively received one of the exhibitions held by the Society around that time, I mean the public did not accept it; the media and the public felt that this was not art, that this was something new and foreign to them. Do you remember this exhibition?

No, I do not. I made paintings and other such artworks. Maybe those were Hassan's artworks; I mean every artist is different from the other. In that period Hassan's works were different from the work of other artists. We were younger than Hassan and still at high school, we did not know what the future held for us. Many artists were in the Society, young men and women who disappeared later. It depends on each person and what they want for their life and whether they want to continue with art or not. Those who focus on art would possibly prove themselves as artists in the future. I mean, making a beautiful painting will not be enough.

[At this point, the curators looked at images of an exhibition of Al Saadi's works in which tin cans were used, asking about them, and he explained:]

I used to collect old cans, which I found thrown between the old houses, people just left them after they had consumed the contents; they threw them away. I collected such things and began examining cans, and the way people opened them: some opened them from the top, or from both ends for example, some used a can opener, some used knives. I had a book in which I included drawings of the things I drank, like Pepsi and Coca Cola, as well as the juice I drank in Japan and here as well. It contained drawings, a study of the can or the bottle from different angles, for example, I drew them placed on their side, or upright; I drew the caps; they were enjoyable drawings. I presented one of these works at the exhibition during the Sharjah Biennial, I am not sure if it was the first or the second, I do not know. The reaction of the people was like, "What did this man bring to us, what are these things?" When I remember this event... *[laughs]*

This was the reaction of the newspapers?

No, no. It was the reaction of the public, they said, "What are these cans brought to us by this artist?" *[laughs]*

Did you care about the reactions?

Sometimes I was not there even, I did not attend all the events, and sometimes I would just give them the painting and not attend the exhibition. Even when I was at the university, I did not go to Sharjah. Why? Because I did not have a car to go to Sharjah and come back; I used to go by bus, for example. There was a bus from Al Ain to Khor Fakkan. Sometimes, if I did not go to Khor Fakkan I would stay in Al Ain, on weekends for example; I would go on Thursday and Friday to the cinema or things like that, because Khor Fakkan did not have a cinema. I liked hanging out there rather than in Khor Fakkan, which had nothing entertaining. I also did not go a lot to Sharjah in that period, due to my study at the university, I did not see Hassan and the guys often. After I started working and got a car, I started going there more. Though even when I had a car, I used to go, but not a lot.

[The curators confirmed with Al Saadi that this showing of the tin cans was the first time the public had a negative reaction to his work. This was the early 1990s.]

How did curators find you? Was it from the UAE University exhibition? Did Hassan Sharif say "Go see this art"? How did people find you? Here is what I understand: you exhibited in the University exhibitions, and a little with the Emirates Fine Arts Society. There must have been a moment when there was a positive reaction to your work and someone said, "Come be in this exhibition" or someone tells the curator, "You should put Abdullah in this show." I mean, how did you start exhibiting your works, or how did people find you to show your work? Or did you go to them?

In Sharjah and at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, the artists knew each other, and they used to choose artists to participate in their exhibitions. There were no curators in the real sense of the word. Participation was made through the Society or the Ministry of Culture only. There were no curators, then.

Jack [Persekian]?

Jack, yes. No, not Jack. The British curator, Peter Lewis... before that Hassan and the artists used to go and hang their paintings; there were no curators or gallery agents. After that, Peter Lewis came. He came with Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi when she came... to manage the Biennial.

Before that they only choose you. They tell you if you are going to participate or not. If you had artworks, then you would participate; if you did not have any artworks, then you would not.

Can you tell me, where did you get the idea of using tin cans? And also the story of how you go from that to the journeys using the bicycle.

When I was in Khor Fakkan in the old room next to the mosque, there were many things available around me, like doors, because the houses were abandoned, and I would take the doors and make an artwork. There were many such things, and I used them to make artworks. I also collected these cans. There were many things around, and sometimes I did also buy wood from the carpenter and brought it to the studio to work on it. I mean, these were simple and available things; even the wood, I bought some, and it was also available around me. So, some artworks I did in this way and in other ways. I told you that I drew paintings when I was in my parents' house, and later in the old studio.

As for the bike, well I did ride the bike all my life; since I was a little child I mean. But the trip, hmmm... I have always had an obsession with making trips and such things. After university I went to the Ministry of Culture or Youth, I do not remember, and told them that I would like to travel the world on my bike. I forget the person's name... I was talking to Hassan about the subject... Anyway, I went and told them I wanted to go on a trip around the world on a bike for ten years, five years, depending... an employee there said, "How will this benefit us?" Then the second one said to me, "Do you have a car?" I did not have a car, but I would like to go on a journey. They told me to address the Cycling Union.

I went to the Cycling Union and a man there said to me, "You need to think about yourself, you have to think about... I do not know. I have to think." I saw that there was no use in trying; so I went back and I knew that it was over. They did not contact me.

Years went by and I went to Japan where I took a trip on the bike, this same one, I brought this one from Japan with other things. I went on my bike to a large lake in Japan for a week to camp and relax. Then, when I returned

from Japan I began, I mean I have always had this dream of traveling, but it began to wear away a little... I did want to go but the circumstances... I began to do my trips on the bike within the country. I do not know, but the important thing is that I had a dream but it did not come true. I mean it partly came true. I traveled, and instead of riding a bike, I took the plane or the bus, for example in Brazil, I used the bus for 27 hours to move around, I mean, there are different solutions. And as the proverb says: winds blow... winds blow counter to ships' desire.

What do you think motivates your constant desire to move? Or is it...

Obsession.

You had this obsession since you were young, why?

Movement is maybe... When you move, you feel a bit of freedom, I mean, I was born here and all my family as well, we go to live in Khor Fakkan for a while and come back. I had this obsession since I was young.

For 20 years, I did not come here to the house, as well as the region. Once, after I came back to live here, I heard at night the sound of a cricket, I said to myself, "Oh God, I have not heard that sound for 20 years," yes this is what it was. I mean I used to see and hear things in Khor Fakkan that I did not hear anywhere else.

I found that life here has changed. Usually when a cricket sees a human, it runs and hides under the carpet, when it makes a sound it means that rain is coming. Also when a gecko makes a sound, it means that you will have visitors, or, for example, when an animal that looks like a fox, what is its name? We call it "Aldhabah," when it approaches the houses and howls; it means that someone is dying.

I remember all these things from the days of my mother, when we were in the old house, we used to hear these stories and myths, and such things remain stored in a man's memory.

[They discuss Al Saadi's account, and his artistic motives. Al Saadi also explains that he used to ride from Al Ain to Sharjah by bicycle to take letters to deliver. This would be a two-day trip. En route, he would sleep in a small mosque in Sharjah. This might have been in the late 1980s or early 1990s.]

Some contemporary artists have done journeys. Have you heard about the various trips made by other artists? What told you this could be art?

When I go on a trip, I must make an artwork. I do not just go for entertainment. Even the bike trip around the world, I wanted to make artworks during this trip and write the diaries of my trip, I mean, I must make something. I did not want to simply roam the world on my bike. When I could not realize this wish, I began making internal trips. After university, for example, I made trips from Al Ain to Sharjah and Sharjah to Al Ain, and from Al Ain to Khor Fakkan—that was when I was at the university. After that, I made a trip when I was at my old studio, not the one next to the mosque, but that of the Emirates Fine Arts Society, when I was there with Mohamed. I made a trip on the bike to the tops of the mountains, which was the first time I went into the mountains, and I came to Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah.

Then, when I went to Japan I got to know the types of bikes and trip tools, for example I saw special bags to contain my stuff. I was introduced to many things I did not know before. At that time we did not have many types of bikes; mine was heavy, a normal one... so Japan gave me a greater chance to see things, including art and artists. Even though I was at university, a young free man without restrictions, I used to go... I mean, because other artists went by bicycle... I noticed that there were many who used a bicycle, and everyone had their own way. I mean you might as well have a bike but your style is different. A man might have a motorcycle and ride it differently from other young people as well.

I would always plan in advance for my trips: what I am doing, camping, the food I would take to eat, the artworks I will work on, I mean there is always a goal for my trip. I write diaries, and return with many things. Even if I travel by plane to a particular country, I need to do something, I cannot only just go and watch; I write my diaries, as well as paint and buy gifts, I bring myself gifts when I travel. I do not know—I wish there was an artist who shares my interest and does the same, then we would have gone together, but there is none.

What I want to know is, which is the part you consider the fundamental artistic piece? Is it the performance, the documentation, or photography?

I mean this is my way, I make paintings, for example, and write my diaries, things that can fit with the trip; it is not possible to work on a large

painting while I am on a trip on the bike. I might video record some things, like many views and landscapes. I have a camera, but I do not use it, because I cannot work on a lot of things. I cannot always film and take pictures of everything, I would take some pictures as a documentation, and I wish if there were someone with me as well, then they would have documented the whole thing. So mainly I write and draw, and photograph. I photograph to work later on the landscape, for example, if I wanted to draw a landscape. I mean, photography and video recording are not so much important for me, it is painting and writing that are the most important.

In what year did you make your first trip?

When I was in my last year at university, 1987. I do not know... 1987 or 1988, possibly 1988.

[At this point they list a number of names that have come up in interviews with the community.]

I'm bringing up these names because I understand that it was not only you, Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, there were intersections with many others. Can you tell me who in this group helped your art, how they helped your art, is there a story that you think is important? Imagine a young artist who is trying to make art, so they think they need to go to art school, but I think they also need a community. Can you tell me the story of the relationships that people have to you and to your work? Do poets help painters, and do painters help writers, etc.?

I used to see Ali Al Andal, and Adel Khozam at Hassan's studio at home, we met there most of the time. We used to talk and discuss issues. Khozam was a writer.

We would like to know about the topics you discussed; even if they were not related to art.

Whenever we met at a cafe or at Hassan's house, we discussed Hassan's work, the work of this or that artist, or an article published or about to be published; I mean they were all discussions related to writing and painting. But the most important thing was the relationship among the group; we sometimes discussed life in general, I mean that writers and artists have always met together to discuss different issues. I do not know the details,

I might have written about it in my journals, I used to write journals but I'm not sure if I wrote about this.

Did you discuss philosophical issues? Or were your discussions about normal things, and jokes for example?

Listen, the relationship between the artists is... for example, I used to go to Hassan and we would not only talk about art but about life in general. Sometimes we might discuss personal issues; his secrets or my secrets, I mean personal things. Also we used to talk about his cat, for example, and many other things, not necessarily art.

An artist needs to meet other artists, so I used to go to Dubai to see Hassan because I need to see artists from time to time to talk with them. There are no artists here. I mean, okay there might be some artists, but there are no discussions, you need someone to talk to, to recall memories and to make discussions. So an artist needs to meet other artists in order to discuss issues that concern them.

Because they have the same mentality.

Yes, yes, they have the same concerns and interests.

Are there any new names; are there other people we must talk to?

There were many artists, who else? Adel Khozam, Ali Al Andal, Ahmed Farhat was there [...] he is a Lebanese writer and journalist. Who else? Abu Alloz... a Jordanian journalist who used to write for *Al-Khaleej* newspaper.

[The curators discuss and confirm that the group and intersections were an important part of Al Saadi's creative life. Maya Allison notes that his story confirms her hypothesis about the role of community in creative development.]

The concept of the exhibition is based on the idea that all the artists gathered together, I mean this group was formed, even if it was not officially announced [...] That despite the differences between the artists' works, there was something that brought them together.

Look, it is... I mean, for example, we started going to the Emirates Fine Arts Society, there we met other artists, and the relationships began to grow. But now, it is not possible for me to go to the Society and wait to meet other artists, there is no time.

Why not?

There is no time to meet and get to know artists. But back then, as a group... now, there is no time.

Do you feel that it was easier to form groups before all these museums, art institutions, the Biennial and such things?

Yes, you might be right. I mean in the beginning, there was only the Society, and artists met in one place; now they are spread over different places. Things are different now... there are galleries and many other places in Sharjah, in Dubai, in Abu Dhabi, so artists are spread here and there. And even artists who are close to each other might not meet due to certain circumstances. If I did not go to Sharjah, I would not have met these artists. Sometimes time, circumstances and age play a role as well.

You would think that it would be easier, but actually, there is less time.

It was easier in the past, but now some things are easier, for instance to participate, to sell your work is easier than before.

I do not know for me if it is harder now, but maybe it is easier for others who may live in Sharjah. Maybe if I lived in Sharjah, it would have been easier for me and maybe not, but I do not like to stay there. Even if I lived there, the artists are the ones who decide such a thing. I would have the chance to know this or that artist, or go there or not.

Most artists do not want to go out. For example, Hassan in recent years, the last years of Hassan's life, he did not want to go out because he had nothing to do. He used to have his friends and the like, but with age, he became more focused on his art and studio, and he would say, "What am I going to do at the mall?" I mean, in the end you decide what you would want to do [...] or think, "Yes, I should stay at home."

Do you feel now that you are doing the same thing too? That you want to focus more, I mean, you got the nourishment you needed and now you need to focus on your work?

Now my situation is... I have a family here, and we have two houses, so I stay here [at the studio] for a few hours and then I have to go to sleep there. So I come here to concentrate but at the end of the day I must think of the family. So I go to work and after work... maybe it would be easy... Hassan had a studio, so it depends on the artist.

I want to ask you about two things. When you left to go to Japan, the UAE community was reaching a certain phase, and when you came back, maybe things had changed, maybe not. So I want to know how things were here before and after Japan. Also, how did your stay in Japan impact your artwork and were there artists there who altered the way you think about your work, or whom you have affected? I want to know about the artistic community in Japan and the development of your work in Japan.

Before traveling to Japan, I told you, I lived in the studio. So Mohamed had a house, he comes and goes, I lived in the studio, and my parents' house was a little bit away, and I went to visit them, but I always lived in the studio. After that I went to Japan, and I saw many new things I have not seen before in my area, I mean visiting exhibitions and the like.

In the 1980s there were no museums here, there were no places to see art. In Japan I would visit one or two exhibitions every week. I moved around and saw the museums; I bought a bicycle and used it for transportation.

I saw many things I did not see here, for example, I witnessed the four seasons and snow. Once I was sleeping and I felt cold; I used to live in a wooden hut in the countryside, not in the city, there was a river close to it; the whole area was semi-rural. So once, I felt cold at night, and I did not think that there would be snow. In the morning, I saw that the whole earth and houses were covered with snow; I saw snow for the first time in Japan. Also, once when I was asleep, suddenly the antenna of the radio vibrated, I was amazed at it, and I looked outside and knew that it was an earthquake. I was in Kyoto, it was a mild earthquake, and later I went with my Japanese friends to have coffee.

So I witnessed the earthquake, the four seasons and the snow in Japan. I also saw many other things, the beautiful Japanese gardens, the paintings—Japanese art is beautiful. Food as well, it was the first time I ate Japanese food. What else? I liked Japanese pottery and bought many pieces. I saw Pepsi and juice vending machines, and sometimes the Nescafé comes too hot, betrayal!

All this made my mind open to many things, I saw things for the first time, in addition to studying the language and the like [...]. Before I graduated from the university, the embassy offered a scholarship and I applied for it; I think there was another girl who also applied. I graduated from the university and taught for a year, and then I went on the scholarship and traveled.

So it was not an artist residency program, you were studying.

Yes, studying arts, but there you must study for a year and a half and are called “a research student,” after that you take a language exam and finally you study your master's degree. I studied for a year and a half, but did not take the language exam, and then I returned here. I did not complete my study, I thought about changing the university but there were some circumstances.

How did your stay in Japan influence your artwork?

It had some influence. The first work I made was a long scroll, I painted the area where I lived. I used to go to museums and see long scrolls, and I brought some copies with me. That is the only artwork that I had made there, in addition to writing diaries, making sketches, collecting and examining cans. At the university in Japan I had a solo exhibition with works taken from here and there.

Did you meet Japanese artists?

I was a student, so I only met my fellow student artists, whom I saw at the university. I did not see other artists, I did go to the museums and see them but I did not have the chance to get to know them.

I want to ask you about the exhibition made in Sharm Café. Is it true that you used to go on your bike and your car and hold exhibitions, or was it just one incident? Can you tell me why you did this, who came to see the exhibition and what did they think about it? In which year was this?

This was in 1994, [...] I'm not sure... the Emirates Fine Arts Society had given me money, I think it was 3,000 dirhams, to make a publication for my exhibition in Sharm Café, I brought the money here to have the publications printed at a company, and the printing was so bad. [...] A friend of mine owned Sharm Café so my friends and I would go to drink tea and see the guys and so on.

Once I was walking, and I saw a nice cafe close to the sea; it was simple and open to nature. Next to the cafe there were old houses. I noticed many things around the cafe, for example a broken abandoned washing machine, a shower, a pillow, garbage left by the young people who would come to drink Pepsi, and throw the cans away on the sand. So the cafe was open to this view and the sea where natural rocks were lying, and people were smoking shisha. I contemplated all this, wrote some poems about it, and collected things. I had the idea of exhibiting the works in the cafe, and distributing

them around. I chose some works, for example, my mom's letters, which I approached in a certain way. I began to distribute the works.

In that year I ceased teaching for a while, there were problems between the Education Council and me, so I had free time, I did not have to teach, and so I seized my free time and made the exhibition. The audience were... I remember the Director of the French Center. Hassan, the group, and I made an exhibition, but the aim was not to make the people come see the works, I showed my works because I wanted to document a certain case, whoever wanted to come was welcome. Sometimes the cafe regulars would come and sit without noticing that there was a painting or the like, they used to come, drink something and leave. I think this was similar to the idea of the road exhibition, which I made here; where I took the paintings and exhibited them in nature; they were photographed and then removed.

I have just a few more questions. I heard that when people addressed Hassan as an Emirati artist, he would say to them, "I am not an Emirati artist, I am an artist." Are you familiar with this?

Hassan is right, it is not a traditional custom. A Dishdasha or Egal, one puts on and you say that this is Emirati, but even the Egal cannot be labeled as Emirati, because Kuwaitis and Iraqis wear it as well.

So, you cannot say that this is Emirati art. Why? Because art... first of all, the raw materials are used by everyone. Secondly, different art schools are universal as well, when you say that this is Emirati art, you reduce it into the limits of nationality, into a passport, I do not know. You can say that Hassan is an artist from the Emirates, but you cannot label his art as "Emirati art," I would not say this.

Now, to the subject of *The Flying House*, I know that you chose not to be part of it, do you want to talk about this?

The *Flying House* idea, it seemed to me, was to sell artworks, and I was not interested in selling my artworks, so I was not part of *The Flying House*, but I was with them as an artist and a friend; we visited each other. After a couple of years *The Flying House* artists also began to leave the group, I mean, Mohammed Kazem opened a gallery and then he left *The Flying House*. Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim also left the group and joined Cuadro Gallery, there were others as well, Ebtisam, whom I do not know as well. In the end, only Hassan stayed, I mean, *The Flying House* was a group and

sometimes circumstances make you leave, but I knew what I wanted from the beginning.

The other artists went to galleries but I did not, and many artists had problems with the galleries in terms of payment and the like. I refused the whole idea of galleries from the very beginning: why should I accept that a gallery take control on my work? They used to take fifty percent of the sale, and I decided from the beginning not to sell my work, so I could not join them. They had this idea that if you are not like us then you cannot be with us. Artists should not place such barriers, because in the end, we are all artists, and everyone has their own way. We might agree on some points and disagree on others, but there should not be a problem, like the brothers and sisters who have the same father and mother, but each is different.

There are several names I would like you to comment on and tell me if you have met them, if they have influenced you, or if you felt that they were part of this group. Jos, Vivek, Bert Hermans, and Hassan Meer from Oman.

I know them all, but differently, the first one is Hassan Meer.

Did he influence you or the community?

I do not know, I mean I met Hassan Meer in Sharjah probably for the first time, and we talked about art and I watched his video work, he worked mostly with videos, but there was no further relationship.

Jos Clevers was our friend, he used to come to Hassan Sharif and he came here to this studio as well, Mohamed used to meet with him more than I did; Mohammed Kazem went to Holland to see him. I did see him, when did I see him? There was an exhibition, *The Five* or *The Six*, I do not actually remember. The important thing is that I know the artist, and he came here once. I used to hang out with him along with Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim.

Bert Hermans... I went to Holland, to Eindhoven, and stayed there for a couple of months as part of an artists' residency, and he was the curator. Khalil and I were there along with a number of Dutch artists. Who is the other one?

Vivek.

Vivek, the artist from India. Yes. I met him with Hassan once or twice in the studio, at Hassan's house I mean.



Abdullah Al Saadi
Cans (group of 12), 1995
Mixed media on paper
28 x 18 cm (each)



Abdullah Al Saadi
Cans (group of 12), 1995
Mixed media on paper
25 x 18 cm (each)

Jos
Clevers

Jos Clevers (1951–2009)

—Interviewed by Hassan Sharif (1951–2016)

October 1999. Dubai, UAE

“I would like to assure you that I am neither a professor nor an orientalist nor an anthropologist. I am just among you, not looking forward to discover you, but in order to reveal my unconscious side as an artist, to foster it more. Briefly, I didn’t like to commit the same errors that were committed by the Europeans in the past decades and centuries. As an artist, I look forward to seeing artists who hear and respect each other... and all I have said so far is intimately related to a universal concept for art and culture affecting beyond doubt all human society. The content doesn’t unveil the form.”



Jos Clevers, 2008
Photo: Mohammed Kazem

Introduction

Jos Clevers was born in Holland in 1951. He studied sculpture at the Maastricht Academy of Visual Arts from 1981–1986, after which he left for New York to serve as assistant to Professor Kenneth Campbell. He held and participated in a number of art exhibitions and fairs that led him to establish, and act as director of, the Center for Contemporary Art in Holland, which hosted an exhibition of four Emirati artists from 17 December 1995 to 21 January 1996.

The works of Clevers express the continuity of culture at the social level; the inspiration of his works and their effectiveness lie in their past, present, and future significance. They suggest the presence of modern trends and attitudes that affect our age, and these attitudes constitute part and parcel of our social activities, including, for example, the organization of exhibitions, workshops for youth and children, debates as well as taking necessary steps to ensure that the exposure to art becomes available to all, rather than the reserve of the few.

When Clevers creates an artwork, he goes to a place of his own choice, and stays there for a while, thereby enabling him to conceive the idea of the concerned work. He then uses material collected from the same location, weaving it into his work, and finally displays the results of his experiment. Subsequently, he leaves that place to a new one and repeats the process. Clevers moves bodily as well as mentally to other cultures.

During the period of *The Five* exhibition, which was held by the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah in 1994, I met with Jos Clevers, Director of the Cultural Center for Contemporary Artists in Holland, who expressed his appreciation for the displayed works. He related some of his personal experiences as well as those of other colleagues, talking about his City Art Center and showing some slides and a film that reflected the activities of the Center. In 1995 he invited a group of Emirati artists—Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hassan Sharif, Hussain Sharif, and Mohammed Kazem—to display their works in the Sittard art center, in Holland; and the exhibition was inaugurated on December 17, 1995. Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Mohammed Kazem were present at the opening.

The contacts with Clevers and some other Dutch artists continued through exchange visits; some Emirati artists visited Holland, and Clevers paid regular visits to the UAE. Moreover, the Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah organized an exhibition entitled *The Six* in 1996, with participations by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hussain Sharif, Clevers, Vivek Vilasini, Mohammed Kazem, and Hassan Sharif. In 1997, Clevers displayed some of his works in a group exhibition hosted by the French Cultural Center of Dubai; moreover, in 1994 he took part in organizing, with Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, a workshop for children in Khor Fakkan.

In the booklet of *The Six* exhibition, he describes himself and his experiences saying: “Art needs soil to grow. To me, the best way for fertilizing such soil is to displace myself to where new experiences and absorb various cultures. States of the mind such as love, anger, happiness, distress and hope are difficult to materialize... We cannot highlight them through tears and smiles only but also through words, verse texts or the fingers of the artist. I used to embody these states in visual works by appealing to my exploding emotions, an act that might last for whole weeks or months... to be followed by indispensable creations to reflect it.”

Jos Clevers

Interviewed by Hassan Sharif

October, 1999. Dubai, UAE

HASSAN SHARIF: You once said that you always liked to travel and that art had reached a pessimistic stage, like a catastrophe, so you liked to attempt the incongruent. What do you mean by “discovering the incongruent”?

JOS CLEVERS: I don’t mean that I like traveling, but I do like to go and meet with things in search of consolation or self-pleasure. I’m well aware that I cannot go about searching for the horse I’m riding, so the artist usually experiences a confrontation or contradicting attitudes between the ancient (deep) culture and contemporary thinking... and all of us possess roots and instincts shred to pieces as a result of new impacts and changes worldwide. This action is caused by a giant dominant power.

Our chief concern is searching for information. This is how personal discovery instinct is born in me and how open adventure is brought about,

resulting in some sort of balance. I travel looking for ideas and sensual culture very likely to influence my future artistic career. So, it all resembles columns reaching one big stream. This doesn't imply that I'm only concerned with my art or creative projects... but again in my capacity as a director of an art center, I feel obliged to create new opportunities or creative climates for other artists and the public as well as enabling it to view new unfamiliar experiences.

I would like to assure you that I am neither a professor nor an orientalist nor an anthropologist. I am just among you, not looking forward to discover you, but in order to reveal my unconscious side as an artist, to foster it more. Briefly, I didn't like to commit the same errors that were committed by the Europeans in the past decades and centuries. As an artist, I look forward to seeing artists who hear and respect each other... and all I have said so far is intimately related to a universal concept for art and culture affecting beyond doubt all human society. The content doesn't unveil the form.

[They begin a discussion on displayed works entitled Spoon, Coffee Cup, and Mineral Water.]

How are these titles related to metal and plastic pieces as well as other materials used in producing the concerned works?"

In fact, the title *Spoon* is not correct; rather, it should read *Attempting a Spoon*.

But you displayed that work twice in Sharjah and Dubai in 1996 and 1997, under the title *Spoon*?

Such matters are not so important. What is important is to be aware that it is impossible to interpret the content of any work from its form, while also viewing the big world, a small world or my own universe... When I remember many things taught to me about the correct and the incorrect behavior, it is fruitless and unfortunate; somewhere and somehow there is an error in the title of my works.

I do also believe that we commit errors and that is what I mean when I say that it is impossible to grasp the content from the naked form, and when I evoke the existence of a certain error I mean trying to correct and overcome it.

What does the German artist, Joseph Beuys, mean to the Dutch Jos Clevers?

This is a difficult question to answer or investigate. I think that the impact of Joseph Beuys was greater in Germany... and the Germans differ widely from the Dutch. They love to embark on indepth research as on a Faust drama and the philosophy of Nietzsche. As far as the Dutch are concerned, they are more reasonable and less affected—i.e being close to the logos or mental concept of the universe.

Could you please attempt to establish a comparison between the works of Anselm Kiefer and Piet Mondrian?

Anselm Kiefer was a German citizen born in 1945, the year that witnessed the end of World War II. The themes of his works are related to German nationalism and nostalgia, to Nazi heroism of the war-time period.

Piet Mondrian, on the other hand, was a Dutch artist who lived from 1872 to 1944. His works are characterized as purely abstract and color mixings and the excessive reduction to natural elements. The vertical lines in his works symbolize sunbeams; the horizontal ones stand for horizon in nature. The justification for this lies in the varying interpretations of religious concepts, besides the geography of Holland.

I live in southern Holland, and my attitudes and vision of life differ enormously from the person who lives in Amsterdam. Holland is flat, which is why about 60 percent of the painted area depicts a "sky" that constitutes a background for it. Had Mondrian not been Dutch, he would not have been able to produce nature to such proportions.

In general, I would like to hear about myself and the most significant remark made by Joseph Beuys, that is, that each person after all is an artist, not exactly a sculptor or painter in the fashionable way. I guess that what Joseph Beuys means is that each person is an artist in his own life; and he is obliged to work hard in order to reach such a goal no matter whether he is a painter or a sculptor. Thus my own experience is after all a social experience.

And what is the purpose of Joseph Beuys' speech to the world?

The connotations and symbols in the speeches and works of Joseph Beuys regarding globalization claim that we should be responsible for our ideas and beliefs, to get rid of "self-assurance" and preaching, to search for a special style of addressing that is suitable to us as well as to others... Time is the unique element that awakens big question marks... The artist's role is limited to communicating this idea—nothing more than that.

[In August 1999, Clevers wrote a short essay to explain how he became attracted to the experience of some Emirati artists. He was asked: “Art is a concept that has started with philosophy; does this mean that photo advertising is an art? There is a line of thinking supporting it no doubt?”]

Well, let us say “yes.” In this way, we do not seat art on a throne and declare ourselves as monarchs. In order to remain as artists we should organize our minds, in the sense that we must ask the question: Is there any sculpture, light painting, theater, cinema, literature, poetry? We must not forget dancing. Music is an art that is suited to our time.

It is widely believed that art is inherent in decorative objects. This is not my personal view. The purpose or concept of an artwork is strengthened by the idea that all that we perceive, read or hear is above all linked to our senses before comprehending them or the material that took various shapes: optical, concrete such as words, forms, color grades, and so on. Afterwards, we can reach an understanding of the adapted art style in our own era. An artwork is likened to a handsome man or a beautiful woman. However, not all things beautiful are inevitably good, but again the artwork that belongs to our time remains beautiful. This is how beauty functions.

We can read history, for example, so as to be close to the epoch and ourselves. Sometimes we decide our own targets; art reinforces our targets and sometimes it reincarnates memories... It is not concerned only with satisfying desires; it is more linked to our consciousness, enabling us to understand our goals in this life.

In the UAE, I met with artists whose works and artistic outlook is closer to mine regarding the question of art. This encouraged me to organize an exhibition to display their works in 1995 in the Sittard art center, in Holland. We exchange visits for this reason. I’m referring here to the works of Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem, Hussain Sharif, Hassan Sharif, and Abdullah Al Saadi. Their works reflect the notion of our time and express the spirit of this century.

In our epoch, a host of questions are raised about a number of things, and the concerned artists do not act as preachers. They simply endeavor to reflect their views on life. Their ultimate goal is not fame; and as their views reflect their inner inclinations, so they behave spontaneously as well. There is a certain affinity between the experience of Mohammed Kazem and Abdullah Al Saadi despite the separate identities of each. In both, their experiences can be

brought back to their characters in the sense that they relate their own lives through their use of devices and style.

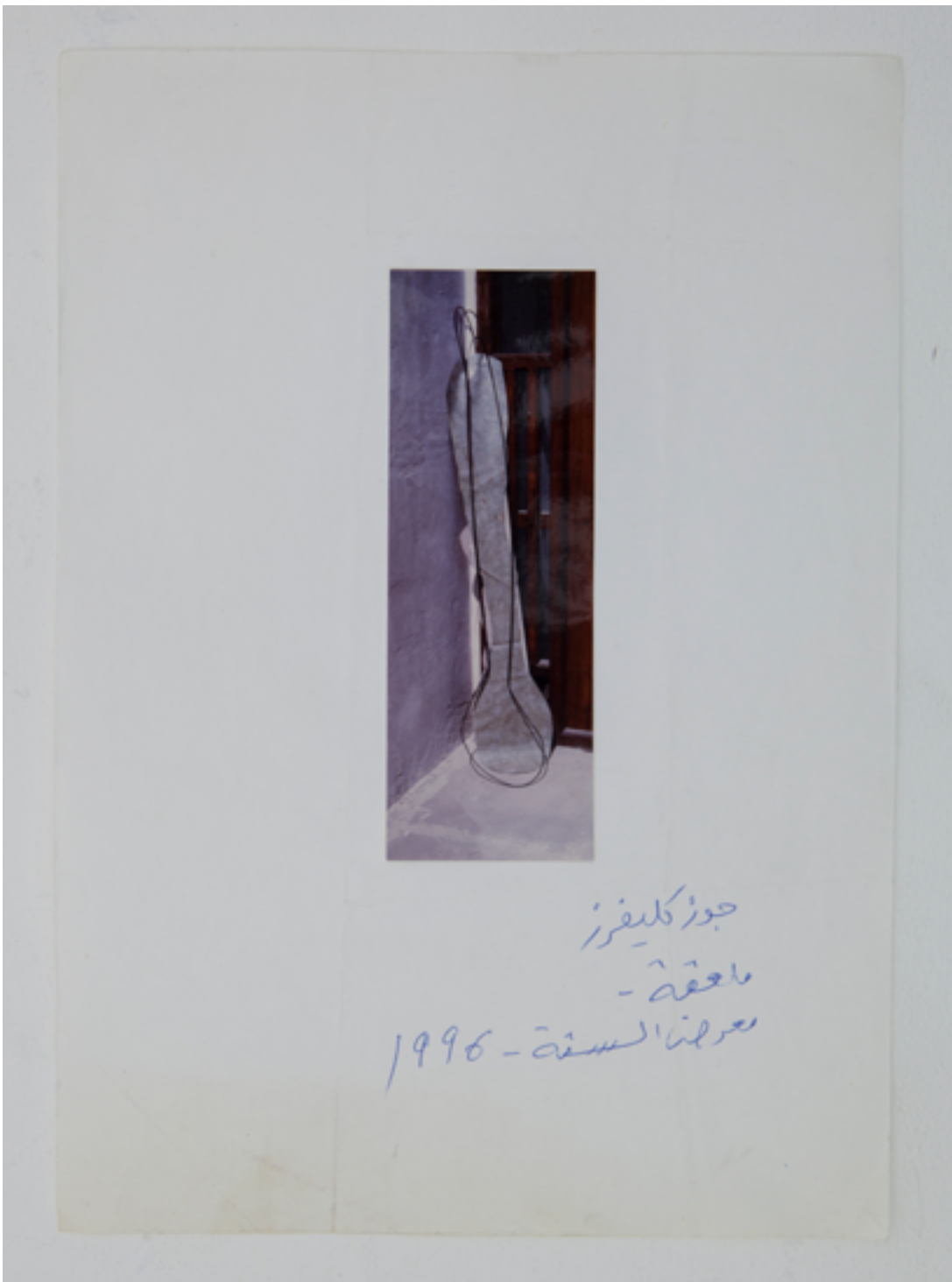
The works of Mohammed Kazem were greatly linked to objects he handles in his daily life—in other words, the environment has its impact on his creations, especially in his work created in 1995, entitled *Keyboard, Shirt Holder*, and other works consisting of soil samples he had brought from areas he used to visit.

Abdullah Al Saadi is much more straightforward with his objects, which he collected and displayed as artworks, including, for example, *Jars, Sardine Tins, Bean Tins*. As for the works of Hassan Sharif, meditations and spontaneous compositions were evident in *Nothingness*. Moreover, he uses such primary materials as cotton, paper, cardboard, and so on... And when you view such works you are assured that Hassan Sharif has created a lot.

In brief, his works do not expose pessimism and inevitability and they do not give us specific answers, but rather some sort of an immovable mirror reflecting a number of notions, such as, for example, that we should be wary of objecting to other people’s views, respecting their views and allowing ample space for them.

Finally, Hassan Sharif uses materials like empty tins, which are not intimate to him. This implies that he does not use them in the same way as Abdullah Al Saadi; his specificity of such things comes from the very fact that Hassan Sharif only collects them, with no relation to traditionally used material in painting and sculpture, such as color and marble. He transforms these ordinary objects into artworks and, in so doing, he is in search of new questions somewhat in a violent mode.

The works of Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim are experimental and personal. Sometimes he uses colors or just contents himself with drawing lines in blacks and whites. His recent work consists of pieces of tree leaves and gum, providing us with no answers. But they are exciting and visually interesting because they stand immovable to reflect as a mirror. The artists I have evoked so far put into consideration and with profound understanding the question of the age in which they live; so their works reflect their views regarding their immediate environment.



Jos Clevers
Spoon, 1996
 Wood, linoleum and iron wire
 187 × 40 × 19 cm
 Image courtesy of the archive of The Flying House, Dubai



Jos Clevers
Breakfast, 1996
 Mixed media
 200 × 100 × 70 cm
 Image courtesy of the archive of The Flying House, Dubai

Vivek
Vilasini

Vivek Vilasini

—Interviewed by Maya Allison and Bana Kattan

December 12, 2016. Kochi, India

“Most of Hassan’s friends who knew where his house was had a way of knocking on his door, it was a kind of rhythmic number knock, so when he heard that he knew who it was; if he didn’t know who it was he wouldn’t bother to open the door. Friends could come any time of the day or night and some would also bring other young poets or writers or generally creative people who wanted to meet him. Even if he was sleeping he could wake up and find time to listen and offer his critique or appreciation of the person’s work...”



Vivek Vilasini, 2013
Photo: Thulasi Kakkat

Conversations at the Edge of a Desert
The Art and Ideas of Hassan Sharif

By Vivek Vilasini
 1997 – Unpublished

Simple, still and silent; Hassan Sharif's art is defiant in its dialectic and diversity. So simple you can't avoid it and so complicated you can't figure it out. His philosophy of images is a rigorous and disciplined path that leads thought in a direction wherein the viewer experiences a "re-awakened awareness," and a unique mode of access to hitherto unexplored dimensions of history and of Being. The "understanding" of art takes place within a wide realm and a history of images and materials. It is a continuum of the visual sensibility opened up by the first cave painters.

Hassan Sharif began by systematically re-exploring the roots of aesthetic dimensions of man's relation to the desert, his deserts, which he longs to both escape and embrace.

His search for self-expression led him to a powerful aesthetic and an alternative method that seeks to explore the relations of the object, and its latent relations to society. He preferred crude, cheap and easily available materials not usually found in art stores. The methods used in making his works were also simple. "Making" for him is a matter of knowing the language of the materials and exploiting its syntax, creating a rare aesthetic coherence so that the object comes alive with its own story.

"I am satisfied when the forms push through or appear like a rare bloom in a desert." What results is an art in which modernist cerebration and tribal atavism, the traditions of Western high art, and those of pre-industrial craft, painterly illusionism and sculptural abstraction, counterbalance one another in a dialectical take off.

INTERVIEWER: Please tell us the story of how you first met the artists in this exhibition. I believe you said the first one you met was Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim at the Sharjah Art Museum.

VIVEK VILASINI: Okay. I read in the newspapers about the Sharjah Biennial but I could only go towards the end. It was on the last day that I met Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim. I saw his work and was just standing there, looking at it. He was nearby and I said to him, "Nice work" and he nodded and smiled, and I think that's how we met.

So you didn't know that it was his work?

No, no. He just happened to be there.

It was purely by chance, this meeting... that made all the difference. I asked him about his work. Then we spoke about art in general and I was so impressed...

See, most of the work on view at the Biennial was from outside the UAE. And here was somebody, locally, whose work was so radical. For me that was the most important thing, to meet one artist from the UAE who's doing work that I found interesting... I had seen other painters there, doing narrative, large-scale, very realistic paintings, but of course that's a different school. But I was more interested in works like this. I mean this is what fascinated me, the kind of ideas that I had also come to like and it was reassuring that, okay, there's somebody also working like this. That was a good feeling for me, then.

Do you remember what you talked about?

One thing I remember was that he knew about Anish Kapoor and Richard Deacon and all those new young British sculptors... Anish Kapoor was not so famous at that time. In the UK perhaps they knew about him. But I'm saying as an Indian, in this part of the world. I thought, "Wow, this is interesting. This guy knows about Anish Kapoor"—at that time, of course now everyone knows but at that time, he was not really discussed in my art circles.

Let's back up to what happened before you met Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim.

I had seen couple of shows in a gallery called Green Art and they had a good space. I showed my sculpture maquettes to one of the gallery owners who was excited by them and we planned for a show. When I finally invited the gallerist to see the finished works she was shocked, she had expected

lots of smaller works, of the kind I had shown her. She said she liked the works but they were too big to enter the gallery and also who would buy these works? So the show was called off. I was looking for a space to show my sculptures.

They're still around but in a different location.

Okay, different location. Yeah. They were near the zoo. For me the zoo was a place that I always used to go to. What's interesting is this one story: when I later got selected for *The Six* show at the Sharjah Museum, I was working at an advertising place for a friend and I had this Bangladeshi friend, Deepu, who was also working there. He knew I was struggling to do my work and that the Green Art exhibition had been called off. So when I announced the good news to my friends, Deepu stoically narrated this wonderful story:

Once, they got a lion for the Dubai zoo. They brought him at night and the lion was so tired from the travels that he slept. The following morning he woke up and was surprised to find a piece of carrot, half a banana, a small piece of mango, chickpeas, and some sprouted beans, but he was so hungry he ate it all.

Then in the afternoon, the zoo-keeper came and brought the same foods and threw them into the cage. The lion could not figure out what was happening and said, "Hey, look, I'm a lion. That's not what I eat. I was hungry last night so I ate what was there, but don't think you can feed me bean sprouts and get away with it." The zoo-keeper looked at his list and said that this is the food that has been allocated to this cage number, but said he would check with the manager and come back. He returned a little later and told the lion, "It is true that you are a lion from Africa... but here it says that you arrived on a monkey's visa... sorry, this is what you are entitled to."

This guy is very serious. I tell you, it was the joke of my life. He said, "I know you have good work already. You don't have to show in the museum to prove it to me." He liked what I was doing and he used to come [to my exhibitions] later on.

That is a beautiful story. I think that's actually one of the most challenging things for people who are artists, who do art, to make a living.

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

I mean that's challenging everywhere.

Oh yes. But also I was always funding my own projects. For a long time, yeah. It happened during the exhibition in Sharjah. Finally, I was discovered.

But you were also discovered by Hassan in a way.

Of course, that's true. That was like the biggest thing in my life that really kept me... that gave me the chance to... I know it was Hassan, all of them, and that camaraderie: "You are okay."

More than anybody else that I knew. [Because of him] I could still continue what I'm doing.

Tell me the story of Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim the second time. And why you were searching for him.

So when Green Art Gallery told me that they couldn't show the works, then I knew that it would be difficult to show anywhere else.

Meanwhile, my room mates and friends were also worried as to what I would do with all these big works and no place to show them. Slowly they were also becoming hostile to my ideas. I had hit rock bottom.

Then it became clear that it was not going to work for me as an artist in the UAE. I decided to search for that one artist whom I had met at the Biennial, who I thought might be able to appreciate the kind of work I was doing. I only knew his first name and that he was from Khor Fakkan, and that he worked at the library. A friend, Ajit, who worked at the Princeton Hotel [in Dubai] knew a journalist, Saad Juma, from Khor Fakkan, and also mentioned that a lot of artists came to the hotel cafe. Saad Juma told my friend that there were only two artists from Khor Fakkan and knew the artist who worked with objects and installations.

That reminds me, once, Hassan was working and I was reading something and suddenly it struck me and I asked him, "Hassan, you see you're making objects. Is this kind of your objection?" Like, "Are your objects your objections?" He just smiled and didn't say anything.

That's amazing.

Yeah, yeah... He was always was working on something, making his objects, writing, editing, reading...

Earlier, I had tried calling the library in Khor Fakkan, because Mohamed had mentioned that he was working at the library and... when I called the library they said, "Everybody is Mohammed here. Why don't you come and find which one you want?" Then I finally got his number and met him at the library. We got talking and he said his artist friends would be at the cafe at the Princeton. And while we were driving to Dubai we were chatting. After a while he said that if we had met two months earlier, I could have been part of an exhibition that he and his friends were having at the Sharjah museum, and that I should come to the exhibition to see some real art.

This is Mohamed Ahmed.

Yes. Then we reached the Princeton. Hassan was there along with a whole gang of friends. There was Mohammed Kazem, Hussain Sharif, Adel Khozam, and also editors, poets, writers, journalists... and we all got talking. After a while, Hassan also said the same thing like, "Oh, maybe two months ago if we had met..." Mohamed said, "I was just telling him that."

I felt finally I had met artists who could understand what I was doing... It was a nice evening, We dropped Hassan off at Satwa, then we said goodbye and I walked home.

The next morning I thought, I should show at least my maquettes to Hassan. So that he actually sees what I do. So I decided to go early before he left to work at like 7:30 or 8am, I went to his house and knocked on his door. He opened the door and I was holding the works and said, "This is the kind of work I do." Then he... I don't know. Like he had just woken up or something, he put his hand on his head and said, "Oh my god, this is a big problem." I said, "I'm sorry, I woke you." He said, "No, no, no. Don't be sorry. This is very good work. The problem is you have to be part of the show [at the Sharjah Museum]. Yeah. That's the problem. I don't know how you can be... we need to inform them because they have started printing the catalogue and we need photographs of these works."

He was talking very fast and said, "Just wait..." He needed some coffee, "You just wait." He went to the telephone—at the telephone booth. He called Dr. Yousif Eidabi. Dr. Yousif was this Sudanese artist who studied in Moscow. He's a left-leaning intellectual who's in charge of cultural something. At first

he said, "No, it's not possible Hassan. This is a museum exhibition planned two years ago... and six months ago you wanted to add Jos Clevers, a Dutch artist, and now you want to include this Indian artist... you can't do this... How can it be done?"

Then Hassan said, "He has to be in the exhibition. If he's not there, I am also not there."

Finally Dr. Yousif agreed, "Okay, bring this guy to me, let me also see what he does." That's when we went to Sharjah and met Dr. Eidabi. I asked Hassan how I should speak. He said, "Just speak what you know. I mean you don't need to fake anything."

Anyway, Dr. Yousif was quite happy and gave the okay. He also instructed his staff to stop the catalogue printing. Hassan had arranged and photographed the maquettes before we got to Sharjah. It was these maquettes that are in the catalogue.

For me, it was an amazing thing. Like, I'm thinking of going back to India and suddenly I'm going to have a museum show, not even a gallery show, a museum show. This is a moment I can remember for the rest of my life even if I don't do many shows later on, I have been in a museum. For me, it was a very big thing.

When Dr. Yousif said I could be part of the show, Hassan said, "We have to celebrate this. Where shall we go? Okay, let's go to the Holiday Inn, Crowne Plaza." It was behind his house. Some piano bar was there and Hassan was so excited and said "Now you sit here." Then he went to the guy playing the piano and whispered something to him. Hassan had learned some classical guitar or something when he was in London. So he was quite good with music. He instructed the pianist on what to play, then announced that there are these wonderful artists who would be showing at the Sharjah museum and he would like to dedicate a song to Vivek Vilasini, an artist from India. And he began to sing with the pianist accompanying him. Wow! That was wonderful performance. I couldn't believe it. *[laughing]*

Also the kind of acceptance that I got... the kind of friendship, like all of them have been very supportive... and these are people who are not supportive of a lot of the arts in the UAE itself, you know. They were very different.

They were a kind of movement, actually. But they didn't have a manifesto like I said. Their manifesto has to be seen in their work. Like a lot of things Hassan has also written extensively about the kind of work they were doing, and about other people's work. He was always trying to educate and create an

audience for the kind of work that they were doing, which he had not succeeded at during that time.

Hassan said there would be a press conference after the show opens, and we need to address them, that I should also speak. I asked, “How do we speak? Should we be polite or... should we be...” He said, “Just hit it out there, they should know what you’re doing is a very valid and very heroic thing, you’re not hiding and doing things.”

Hassan said, “We need to be clear about that, we need to make others understand.”

That evening, at the press conference, most of the questions were hit at Hassan. Hassan was very cool and calm and then he asked me, “Do you have any comments to say?” I said to Hassan, “I don’t understand the question.” He said, “Please translate it for him.” Then somebody had to translate it.

Would you say that overall the press responded positively?

Very positively. See, first of all, they had no experience in writing about something like this.

Okay.

Maybe now there is, but the kind of aesthetics that these people were struggling to establish was a very difficult thing to do, very difficult. I’m surprised even now that at the time a museum in Qatar bought Hassan’s work. That is the only time he had sold his work in his life. I met him after that, actually.

He had great respect for the person who bought it. He said that person had [guts] to buy it, that’s what he said.

So you met Hassan after he sold work to Doha.

Yeah. That was like more than 20 years ago. Even now it’s difficult to collect Hassan’s work. It’s very difficult. I mean unless somebody knows how to place those works. People might buy because it’s an investment, but really to place those works in a cultural context is difficult.

So, you met Hassan, this group was supportive. It was clear to you that there was a lot of art they didn’t support. But you became part of this. Tell me the story about after the exhibition and about this community that you were a part of.

We used to meet almost every day, Mohammed Kazem, Hussain, Mohamed Ahmed used to come on weekends; maybe Abdullah Al Saadi might come like every two or three weeks or something. Then there was Adel Khozam, Khalid, Ahmed Rashid. We met every week, Mohammed Kazem every day and Hassan and Hussain every day. Abdul-Raheem maybe once in a while. Also people from around the Middle East, whoever came, who flew through Dubai, stopped, and would meet with Hassan and go. He was somebody who mattered to people from Lebanon or Iraq or Syria.

And was there a sense that this community of artists and poets that you are talking about was basically invisible, or do you feel like everyone knew you were there and what you were doing? Or was there a different art world that was happening in exhibition spaces and galleries and so on, but that you were not a part of because the work was too conceptual or avant-garde? Was there a split or was it just like you guys hadn’t—

No we were not really bothered about that. There were some other people... I mean... I used to know a lot of other artists also, and most of them, they wanted to speak to Hassan. They used to tell to me something because they knew that I would tell that to Hassan, because Hassan would not probably be patient with them for long. And that’s the way he was.

Now you said something really interesting a minute ago, which is that artists would want you to tell Hassan Sharif something. Can you tell me more about that? What would that situation be?

Well these were other artists who couldn’t carry on a conversation with him beyond hello... hi...

Most of Hassan’s friends who knew where his house was had a way of knocking on his door, it was a kind of rhythmic number knock, so when he heard that he knew who it was; if he didn’t know who it was he wouldn’t bother to open the door. Friends could come any time of the day or night and some would also bring other young poets or writers or generally creative people who wanted to meet him. Even if he was sleeping he could wake up and find time to listen and offer his critique or appreciation of the person’s work...

He was always working... making his objects, writing something for the newspaper, cleaning the house, or cooking... there was no one to assist him in those days. He was very intense about whatever he was doing.

As I had access to his library, it was interesting to read Hassan through the passages he had underlined and annotated in his books. Of course the annotations were in Arabic, which I couldn't read or understand. He had said that they were for translations.

And were people talking to each other about their work as well? It sounds like in many ways Hassan Sharif was the magnet who was sort of holding people together.

He was.

And would there be an environment of constructive critique of your work, of Kazem and so on...?

The Hassan I knew would not fool anybody by telling them that they were good, he would be truthful. He was very tough with his criticism and very honest with his criticism. Because of that he made a lot of enemies... not really enemies, just people who did not know him or his way of thinking, or working, or writings.

So Hassan's critiques were very rough. Is that what you're saying?

Very blunt. But that's what they all came to hear. They knew that he would speak the truth. And to read your poetry to Hassan was not easy for a lot of young poets. Because Hassan is always reading and there are some very embarrassing moments that I have been told about. They might be challenging... I mean Hassan's life would be very challenging to put into print. *[laughing]*

Hassan had his opinion about everything.

So would you also have, say, a conversation with Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed or Jos or somebody about your work as well? Was it always just Hassan giving the critique, or did you guys also have debates and mutual feedback?

We were always excited to share what we were doing or what we are going to do... or about what we are thinking or what we are reading. That was the excitement that kept us going.

Can you tell me about the Alliance Française?

All right. Natalie Guignabaudet, who was director of the Alliance Française at that time, had seen some of our work and wanted to meet us. One of her friends knew Abdul-Raheem, Hassan's brother, and that's how a meeting was fixed at Hassan's house.

Have you seen that house in Satwa? Okay, just 'til there *[indicates small space]*. Here was a veranda and there's a toilet, there's a kitchen, bedroom and another room which was the studio and library. And this *[points up]* is asbestos. And here's like the greatest artist of the UAE... living like that.

I remember I was growing some plant and Hassan said, "Hey, this grows here?" I said, "Of course it grows. You know, this is soil." He asked, "Where can I get these plants?" I said, "There are nurseries Hassan, we can go," then he planted a lot of these plants and he is knocking off the cement with a pickaxe, and then planting plants in that small place and he said, "This is my garden!" And these plants started growing. He used to water them and... amazing.

So Natalie came to the house?

Yes. She said, "Can you do a show?" Our friends were like, "Wow. This is something..." Normally we'd have to wait for the yearly art exhibition in Sharjah at the Emirates Fine Arts Society.

She invited us to visit the Alliance Française, it was a very interesting space, she said we could exhibit anywhere. The show was an event, she had invited all the French who's who in the UAE, they came from Abu Dhabi and other places to Dubai to attend the show.

She took great pride in associating with us and invited all these people whom she thought mattered. She would encourage anyone who was interested in art to meet us, or to see our works.

I was really struck by what you said during our past conversation, which was the bravery that it took for Natalie to do this show. So the one time each year, otherwise, that you would get a show was at the Emirates Fine Arts Society. Then the rest of the time?

We were all doing jobs and working on our individual projects. And also helping one another. We were working mostly to share, and not for a show. That was a nice time. We weren't doing work because there was a show that had been planned. We were doing work because nothing else could stop us from doing it. That is the only thing. That was really formidable.

The kind of work they were doing was not for selling. There was no price fixed on any of these things. Natalie had asked us, “How do you price it?” I said, “Natalie, are you joking?” She said, “No, no, this thing is... maybe some people will buy for sure.” Hassan said, “No, it’s okay. If somebody comes then we will think about it.”

And did people respond with confusion?

No, there were people like writers—she brought them from Abu Dhabi. Like some French writers had come. They liked the work and they were really quite happy that something like this was happening.

This is more like an underground moment. There was absolutely nobody looking at the stuff.

My hypothesis is that it basically functioned like an underground.

It was an underground. But also it was a subculture, it was a peculiar kind of subaltern practice.

By choice or just because you had nowhere to show?

Well it was all 20 years ago, so you can’t really blame anyone. There weren’t really any opportunities to show. The best thing that happened at that time was the Sharjah Biennial and that brought real changes in people and the galleries’ attitudes I guess. Now there is a better-informed viewing public. Yeah, no, you can’t blame the UAE also, anywhere else it would have been tough. Not just in the UAE. It was on par with what was happening around the world. We weren’t doing Impressionist painting or something.

I mean that’s true and everywhere that I’ve worked I ran into this issue of artists making work that people have a hard time with. Then as time goes by, you begin to realize how important that work is.

Yeah, exactly, exactly. Natalie was one who took great pride in showing that this is the kind of work that she would like to show.

Can you tell me about deciding to leave the UAE?

Though I liked the idea of the artist as a nomad, working from different places and absorbing the kind of resonance that a particular place offers, I could not afford it. So I had to relocate my practice.

Okay. When you met this group, this movement, these undergrounds, you had hit rock bottom...

Yeah.

I gather from this that the experience of connecting with this community nourished you, lifted you up, encouraged you and revitalized you.

Oh, yes. See, I had come with a background of reading art history, and had an interest in poetry, and I am also quite aware about the Beat poets of the U.S., like Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, Amiri Baraka, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and of course, the Latin American poet Pablo Neruda, people like that. I was also interested in Heidegger’s phenomenology and objects.

Suddenly I meet this guy who talks about Wittgenstein and how to read Wittgenstein, about learning how to use materials as a language, and the “language games” possible in relation to art practices. Also there were conversations of Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus movement. But Hassan was excited about them as material content, to look at the poetic works of Marcel Broodthaers. He had Benjamin Buchloh’s catalogue on Marcel Broodthaers. In 1996, while we were discussing Broodthaers, he had already died nine years before and the world rediscovered him when his work appeared on the catalogue cover for Documenta X, curated by Catherine David in 1997. Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Mohammed Kazem had gone to Documenta in Kassel and brought back this catalogue.

So art books were a very special commodity. Especially through the 1990s.

Yeah, because back then there was no internet. I mean how do you get art books?

There were some book stalls and some places like the Alliance Française, they had magazines and some books. Most of these magazines didn’t carry any criticality, and we knew that. There was nothing like *October* or *The Third Text*, those we got rarely and once you do get an issue of *October*, you’re hooked.

So these books helped to connect you with the group.

Yeah, yeah. That really helped me to click with Hassan. Hassan and with the group.

[Vivek turns to the topic of the group and their development in speaking English as they discussed the texts. They mention Abdullah Al Saadi who had good English training.]

[Abdullah Al Saadi] is very poetic, actually.

Yeah. He's quite inspiring.

Yeah. He cracks a lot of jokes but he's very quiet. I mean, sometimes very profound.

You're not sure if he's joking.

Oh, that's exactly what I mean. You don't know whether to laugh or not. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He talks about his projects like that too. He knows that in the end you will laugh.

He understood Hassan in a very different way, actually.

Really?

Hassan is like an ocean that all these little rivers will finally join. And Abdullah Al Saadi was a fantastic stream that really joined the group. He was in Japan at that time, that's why he was not part of the 1996 exhibition.

Hassan didn't think that he, himself, was going to make it, as an artist. But he felt that these artists would be his works of art.

Hassan really thought that he should train the next generation, whoever was willing to learn. He was always a teacher and took it as a mission to give back what he had achieved as an education. Because there were no art colleges in the UAE then. In a way I was very lucky because I could read the books that he had read, and he used to guide me regarding which books to read.

What did he ask you to read?

He gave me books like *Recodings* by Hal Foster, *Marcel Broodthaers* by Benjamin Buchloh, *Green Book* by Richard Hamilton on the making of *The Large Glass* by Marcel Duchamp... "Blue Book," "Brown Book," which were sets of notes taken during lectures conducted by Wittgenstein.

The combination of the community and the reading and the conversation, the kind of the education that he was providing, those two together were part of what helped you recover from your rock bottom.

I have a question for you, specifically to you as somebody from India working as an artist. One of the issues that comes up when I'm looking at this community is that they're looking West, both from an academic scholarly perspective and in terms of their inspiration.

I know that this was also an issue in India with the Progressives and the Sir J.J. School of Art, and that there's this question: at what point are ideas colonizing your creative practice? Can you tell me what your thinking is on this question? The UAE is Hassan Sharif's roots, and can his radicalism be seen functionally as a kind of colonizing of thought?

No, no, no, no. It is actually a decolonizing of thoughts. Also about sharing... For me personally, I am interested in the transmigration of ideas, how they travel and how people access ideas and how they internalize them and how they make them their own. How people express their innermost feelings and get salvation through them.

We have seen how the Post-Impressionists were inspired by Japanese woodcuts, and also how Picasso and Braque were inspired by African sculptural traditions... then you have a normal American painter getting so inspired by the sand paintings and rituals of pre-Columbian Americans and rising to the level of a genius, and achieving radical breakthroughs in painting... that's Jackson Pollock. Of course, there is Paul Gauguin who some of the Impressionists accused of plagiarizing their works and when they heard he was going to Tahiti, they mockingly said he was going to steal from those unsuspecting islanders. But a genius he was. More recently you have Alighiero Boetti going to Afghanistan, and look at what he could come up with from there... then his friend, Francesco Clemente, who maintains studios in Madras, Rome and New York and absorbs inspirations from three continents, now that is taking this whole question to another level.

I feel the idea of Gauguin going to Tahiti has been played to the hilt now and it's actually time for Tahitians to go to Paris, or London, or New York, or Abu Dhabi. I am that Tahitian, we are all those Tahitians and Art History is our Paradise.

Thank you so much. That's it. This conversation is sort of at the root of why I want to do this exhibition because I think that right now in the UAE, they're having this kind of renaissance. Artists are emerging; they're funding artists, they are supporting, they are training, they're trying to find venues.

They're really investing... But the story that's being told with all of these interconnections gets lost. They talk about "The Five" but in fact—

There are two more. Yeah.

At least. And then they find out that Hassan was also talking to artists in Saudi Arabia and other places, it was not limited by borders. When I look at your work at the time, and especially Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's work, I see a clear resonance. It may not be a big portion. But I think it's really interesting.

Yes... and like I told you, along the way I got interested in photo-based art and it started off as a practical way of solving the storage and shipping problems of my works. I am glad I was able to do a couple of good works and luckily I have shown with some of the best artists in the world.



Vivek Vilasini
Brides of Seven Climes, 1996/2008
 Painted fiberglass jars, cotton & coir
 91 × 91 × 640 cm
 Courtesy of 1x1 Gallery



Vivek Vilasini
 Installation in progress view of *Six Artists*, Sharjah Museum, 1996
 Image courtesy of the archive of The Flying House, Dubai

Ebtisam
Abdulaziz

Ebtisam Abdulaziz

—Interviewed by Bana Kattan

October 24, 2016. Washington DC, USA

“During these three months, I was not capable of producing anything. I was subjected to an internal shock, I discovered that I was making paintings which I did not like, this was not me. I experienced a shift in my way of working.

During this period, of course, my relationship with Hassan and the five artists became stronger and closer. I discovered that the things they made were not accepted by the society; it rejected them. The society had a point of view that was different from the point of view of these five artists. I felt lost at the time, should I make what the society wanted?”



Ebtisam Abdulaziz, 2011
Photo: Ashok Verma

INTERVIEWER: We'd like to hear about your career as an artist from the earliest stages, and from your mathematics degree, to art. How does math relate to your art?

EBTISAM ABDULAZIZ: I studied mathematics not because it was my passion, but out of curiosity, in addition to the general atmosphere at my high school. I don't regret studying mathematics, but in a way it was a coincidence that added to my experience as an artist. I mean, if I look back on those days, I can see myself heading toward the field of art, I see myself as an artist, even back then. I remember that before I made my decision to study mathematics, I looked into pursuing an arts education. I went to see the students at the UAE University; they were producing crafts, working on the loom, and sewing. I thought to myself, "No, I cannot accept this, this is not for me." I could not accept being an artisan producing things; I believed that art was more than that.

On a personal level, I really appreciate education in general because educators play a huge role in life. But when I saw this scene, I was totally convinced that this was not the art that I wanted to create. So I decided to pursue math. Mathematics is somewhat similar to my character, I mean in terms of ambiguity; I have an ambiguous character, which is somehow similar to the ambiguity, or manipulation you exercise when you solve a mathematical problem. At the same time, I felt that there is a kind of challenge to study something that may be close to your character, but far from the field you really want. So, this was my beginning with mathematics. It actually changed a lot in my life and influenced my art. It taught me to be simple and complicated at the same time; I learned to produce works that stimulate the viewer to think as a person solving a mathematical problem and trying to reach a solution. This is what mathematics actually taught me. At the same time, I felt that mathematics is a raw material, like the materials I use to create art. I sought to create works that have art systems, and hence presented a mathematical equation through art. Now, after I have grown and understood myself as an artist, I am glad that I did not join the art education program. I am happy that I went for mathematics.

Do you remember the first work of art you made?

That is a very long story that might need an entire book. But I'll try to cut it short. In the beginning I did not see myself as an artist; when I started to create artworks I created my own world, and I felt that this world is mine

only and that no one sees it. Ever since I was little, I produced works but I did not know it was art. I was a very little girl when I came up with a work of art. When I was five or six years old I started drawing, and I remember that I used to draw for hours to the point that at one time, my parents searched all around the house for me, and I had been drawing in the living room for long hours without paying attention to the time.

Probably the first painting I did was when I was a little girl; however, as an artist I believe that the first thing I made of value was when I was in junior high school. It was during the summer holiday and I remember my father gave me a gift of a big set of colors—oil pastels. I felt it was somehow a fake, tough material, but I was happy with it, it contained almost 46 colors and I was thrilled. I bought papers and started working. First, I made a landscape of trees, forests and mountains; my dad saw it and told me it was very beautiful and encouraged me to do more. Ten years later, I discovered that the painting was missing; my dad had actually taken it, framed it and given it to a friend of his who was an ambassador, and of course I was unaware of that. For me, this was my first artwork, I was in junior high school, and the painting went to the ambassador's house or elsewhere. So when I remember these simple things now, I say to myself that I had exhibited my work when I was a little girl, long before I became a professional artist.

Can you please elaborate more about the support you received from your father and from your family as well?

My mother did not get a chance to study and learn, but she has artistic taste in clothing, home furniture, makeup, and all these things. In addition, she also has a beautiful voice. I remember she used to sing for us when we were little children. My sister and I also used to sing, so somehow I feel she had a role in my passion for art. My father played a greater role in our being educated, intellectual and fond of art. He also used to draw and sketch. When we were young, for our homework we were asked to make educational drawings and teaching aids, and my father was the one who drew and helped us with these things. Personally, I believe that he is an artist and a calligrapher. I remember once being curious, I opened one of his cupboards and saw cameras and huge lenses; he had actually documented our lives since we were first born, and the places we had been to. As a photographer, a calligrapher and a painter, he unfortunately did not get the opportunity to become an artist because he was a father to six kids and responsible for a family.

Certainly, this man and artist inspired and encouraged me a lot. I remember him buying me books to read, in addition to various gifts, which were different from the rest of my siblings because he saw something different about me. He used to travel a lot, and I will never forget one of the gifts he brought me, it was like a game we'd put pens in to make circular forms or templates, and geometrical things. This is one of the memories from when I was 10 years old and I will never forget such things. I feel that since the early beginning, my father was keen to refine my talent even through simple things that remain present in my memory.

I also want to add a point, though I am not sure it will clarify things more. I want to talk about the Emirates Fine Arts Society; actually, my father played a role in my relationship with the Society, I mean he used to encourage me, and drove me there for art courses. I had explained to him that my aim was not only to take art courses, but that I wanted to become an artist. He did not oppose my dream, and when I later resigned from my job and risked many things for the sake of art, he supported me and did not stand against me. Maybe afterwards I will add a few things about his role.

Let's talk about your first encounter with the Emirates Fine Arts Society.

I remember that after I got my degree in mathematics and graduated from university, I felt that I had performed my duty to my family. My parents, especially my mother, really insisted that we pursue our education. Of course, this was a good point, but unfortunately it made me a really poor cook, because my mother would expel me from the kitchen saying it was not our place and that we should go back to the table and complete our homework. This has nothing to do with art of course, but I failed in cooking. I remember that after finishing my studies, and I was so happy that I did, I'd always felt this was not what I wanted in life. I am not against having an academic degree, having a full-time job and being a traditional and normal human being, but my ambition was to do what I was really passionate about. As soon as I received my college degree, I remember telling my parents, "Here is my degree but I want to become an artist." My father said, "Okay, what do you want to do?" I told him, "Now is the summer vacation and I have free time. I would rather not be looking for a job; I want to do what I like during the summer." I researched and heard about the Emirates Fine Arts Society and their summer workshops. I did not drive at the time, so my

father drove and told me, "Go and learn more about this, and I will be waiting for you in the car."

I entered the Emirates Fine Arts Society and met the secretary, "I want to learn the art of painting, and I heard you have summer workshops." I still remember his response, "You are very lucky, today is the first day and you did not miss any lessons." I was thrilled. He said, "Register your name and join the workshop immediately." I ran to my father and told him, "Please go now and return at eight." He said, "Okay." Then the secretary informed me, "The Society cooperates with a place called the Free Atelier in Dubai, the headquarters will be at the Society, but the organization is made through the Atelier, and the workshop's duration is two months."

I went to the workshop and was surprised by the number of students: almost 70 percent female and 30 percent male, which was actually amazing. I realized I had waited too long to take this step and asked myself why had I not joined such workshops before. I was surprised to see the huge number of girls. I met Mohammed Kazem who was the supervisor there. Khalil Abdul Wahid attended on some days to help and Hassan Sharif (may he rest in peace), had a role in these workshops. This was my beginning at the Emirates Fine Arts Society.

After a month or two I discovered that we, as girls or women, played a major role in that period, simply by attending and being present in these workshops and such events. But unfortunately, girls did not pursue this further. I think the main reason for this can be explained through my own experience. After I finished the workshop, my father said joyfully, "The workshop has ended!" I cannot blame him because driving me around was a bit difficult. I told him that for me, this was not only a workshop to learn the art of painting, but that I wanted to become an artist. I told him I must mingle with this community and these people and stressed the need to learn from them to gain experience. I felt very lucky compared to the other girls whom I'd met at the workshops, who did not receive the type of encouragement and support that I got from my father. The issue of transportation may have played a role in discouraging women, or maybe society's views on art as a hobby that women can practice in their free time; women were not considered professional artists. In addition, we as girls are also programmed with the idea of obtaining an academic certificate, followed immediately by getting married or seeking a job. These views were still common in those days, maybe to a lesser extent than in the days of my mother and my grandmother.

But nevertheless, the idea that your primary role as a girl is to be a mother is still widespread. I am not against the idea because I believe motherhood is a beautiful thing, but unfortunately, I felt in general that fewer and fewer women or girls were present in the workshops due to society and its views. I believe this was the main reason for not having many female artists at the time.

Can you tell us about your first encounter with Khalil and Mohammed, and others? What were your discussions about?

It was in 1999 when I first met Mohammed Kazem and Khalil Abdul Wahid, who was an assistant supervisor at the workshop. Hassan Sharif was also there. The workshop was cheerful, it did not feel like a workshop. When I first attended, I told them that I wanted to learn art; I remember Mohammed smiled and said, “Do you know how to draw?” I told him I used to paint when I was a little girl and so he gave me paper and said, “Okay, this is called a still life; draw me a sketch of it.” I actually didn’t feel that I was in a lesson or something; it was a relaxing atmosphere.

I got to know the girls. I remember Muna AbdulQader Al Ali was present, and many girls attended for a period of time and then would just disappear. I remember Khalil, who was and still is a very nice person; he used to talk like he was a brother to us. As for Mohammed, I never felt that he was our teacher. I do not mean that he didn’t teach us but he was so humble with us as students. He did not impose anything, rather he made us love what we did. Sometimes I would tell him that I wouldn’t repeat this drawing again, and he would never make me do that against my will, rather he would ask what I wanted to do instead.

Meeting these artists made me very happy, I was lucky and privileged to be around such artists who shaped my way of thinking. I mean, I did not become a copy of Mohammed, Khalil or Hassan; I was independent and had a vision of my future and of myself, backed by the rich experience of the people I worked with. After the end of the workshop we held an exhibition, and used to laugh about this all the time. Most of us were young, unmarried girls and the exhibition felt like our wedding day. We were that happy, thinking about what we would wear and how we would look. We were very naïve and extremely happy, to the extent that this exhibition presenting the works created during the summer workshop, was maybe as important as our wedding day.

We realized that we had become artists: our paintings were framed and exhibited; normal people and high-ranking people would come to see us and examine our work. For me it was a major transition for Ebtisam, the young girl who used to paint at home and show her works to family and close friends only.

Please tell us about the shift from attending workshops to becoming a teacher. We know that teaching is important for you, so can you also tell us about your thoughts on teaching, education, and the importance of educating future generations? You talked about Mohammed and how he contributed to your progress. Do you do the same thing for your students?

During the summer workshops, everyone had a role in my education and I gained something from each one of them. Hassan Sharif played an important role, not in terms of drawing skills and techniques, but rather on an intellectual level. I remember Hassan giving us a workshop that surprised me on many levels; I’d always thought that art was only painting, calligraphy, something two-dimensional or even sculpture. Hassan allowed us to see new things, to know the nature of art which goes beyond the three types I mentioned. For me this was surprising because I suddenly felt that I didn’t understand art, even though I still considered myself an artist! Hassan played a major role on the intellectual rather than on the technical levels. Two years later, Mohammed Kazem said, “I see that your work is acceptable, and that you have a grasp of some of the things that I taught you in the workshops, so do you want to teach with us in the studio?” I said, “Of course.”

What I loved was that we were not literally teachers, for example, we were not better or more capable than our students were. I still felt like a student myself and after three years, I came to work with Mohammed in this field. I believe that simplicity and humbleness in dealing with people gives you further confidence and reinforces your passion for change, and sharing what you have with others.

Hassan was a giving person, you’d only have to say good morning or hello and he would give you tons of information within five minutes. He was so generous to the point that a normal, personal conversation would simply transform into a discussion about art. I learned from him how to share information I have with anyone who needs it, be it a person specialized in art, or someone on the street, or a child. As an artist, your role is not limited to production only, but you should also teach those around you through

your art and through sharing and giving to the community. I worked with Mohammed and was an assistant supervisor. At first, I supervised the girls group, because they are usually shy at first so I tried to break the ice, and encourage them to overcome their shyness. I helped them with the still life topics and taught them how to hold the pen and take measurements. I believe that I mingled well with the girls, and later supervised the boys group.

In short, I believe my role was not only educational, I also learned from the students' questions. They were afraid of breaking the rules of art, and Mohammed and I would say to them, "Now you have learned the rules, but notice how many art schools have broken these rules." We would provide the students with the information they needed, believing that after learning the rules, you can break them. We taught them to be free in the way they want to express themselves.

As for teaching, I really appreciated what Hassan had given us, and it is now our turn to complete what he had started, because we can serve the community in this way, and we can provide an opportunity for those who did not have the chance to study art, like myself. Now that I have had the opportunity to learn, my role is to teach others. The workshops were a very important experience in my life; I am pleased that I made a simple contribution to the community, to the students and to the girls who were attending my classes.

Tell me about the kinds of responses you received, was this conversation or criticism with the public?

As for criticism of the art that we produced, or the public's reaction to it: I will go back to the year 2003, when I used to work with Mohammed in the studio. In that period the society saw our artworks as modern or strange, unfamiliar.

Of course, I taught in 2003 and 2004, and continued for a couple of years later.

During 2003 and after I met Hassan and saw the works made by him, Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and I met the group, Hussain Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi; I discovered many things and learned many things. I stopped making artworks for almost three months, during which time I concentrated more on reading; I had to educate myself. I discovered that art does not only mean that you know how to make artworks

literally, no, that is why I did not join the Art Education College; I did not want to be literal.

The issue was not only related to me making beautiful paintings and artworks and collage, no, the issue was to discover my way of thinking, to discover myself more. Hassan helped me with my readings; he gave me books. Mohammed also recommended some books as well.

During these three months, I was not capable of producing anything. I was subjected to an internal shock, I discovered that I was making paintings which I did not like, this was not me. I experienced a shift in my way of working.

During this period, of course, my relationship with Hassan and the five artists became stronger and closer. I discovered that the things they made were not accepted by the society; it rejected them. The society had a point of view that was different from the point of view of these five artists. I felt lost at the time, should I make what the society wanted? Or should I be with the five artists against the society?

I had to think about what I wanted exactly.

To be brief and clarify the issue of criticism, and what happened at that time, I will tell you the following: the society saw art from a completely different perspective to that of the five artists. There was a kind of pressure exerted on this group and some actions could have prevented them from exhibiting their artworks. Many wrote at the time that these artworks were different, unfamiliar; the community could not accept them.

I remember that once I heard a story about how one of Hassan's artworks was thrown in the desert; it is unfortunate that our society did not understand exactly what art was. I discovered that Hassan played a role, Mohammed tried to play a role, and each of the five artists as well. The rejection did not frustrate them. I learned that this rejection made them stronger, more powerful, and they continued expressing their voice and communicating their ideas, regardless of the society's acceptance or rejection. I felt that I was on their side on this subject. I turned to writing because I felt that the society was not educated. It was not our fault that they did not read and understand work; however, it was our mission to educate them. Hassan Sharif played this role through his writings and published articles. He did not want only to convey his message, and I supported him on this subject (may God have mercy on him), he felt... Our role was not about making artworks

and pushing the viewer to wonder and reject these works; but rather to explain exactly what these works were. We became teachers who wrote, explained, and published the details, and our society became like a student that had to read and be educated to elevate their level of thinking. In 2004, I was in a shock; I discovered that art was not only a nice thing to delight the eye, but rather it is something stronger and more important than this; it is related to the brain, the vision and sight, and how they work together to appreciate works of art.

In 2004 I reached a point where I surrendered; I thought that I was not an artist. I remember that Mohammed visited me once in the studio; the girls were at the Shamsi House in Sharjah, and he would sometimes pass by after finishing the workshops to encourage us to come to this place and work. So I remember that he visited the studio and asked me what was the problem, and I started crying. I told him that I did not know what I wanted to do, who I was, or what kind of art I wanted to make. I told him that I did not want to make paintings, that I was tired, and that painting was not what I wanted. He asked me what I wanted, and I told him that I needed to speak to Hassan. Hassan was not the type of person who would carry a mobile phone, so I told Mohammed to call me as soon as he went to Hassan.

I also asked him to take some papers I wrote; I remember that I wrote about all the suffering and loss I experienced at the time. I wrote my ideas on art and the reasons why I reached a point where I stopped making artworks. He promised to deliver the papers to Hassan. After two or three days, Mohammed called and said that Hassan had read my papers and that he wanted to talk to me. I said to Hassan, "How are you?" He said, "Ebtisam?" I said, "Yes?" and he replied, "Welcome to Conceptual art." I asked him what he meant and he told me, "The papers you wrote are ideas on contemporary art; you have entered the field of contemporary art." I felt that he saved me and put me on the right track. I could not find myself, nor what I was exactly.

He said to me, "Ebtisam, you are right, what you are doing is right; art is not only a beautiful thing, it is something more sublime, art has an idea, and you must begin to apply this idea." I thanked him very much, and when I hung up, I felt mixed feelings of joy and sadness. I began to cry because I felt lost no more, that I had reached the right safe place, and that I could make the things that I wanted to make. I started making artworks again.

To summarize this experience and to answer your question on criticism, art and society: by the end of 2004, I made a new series that was completely

different from the paintings I used to make. The new series was contemporary installation that integrated mathematics and geometry. I intended to present this series in a solo exhibition at the museum.

Unfortunately, the society's criticism of these different artworks led to their rejection. The idea of the solo exhibition was rejected by the museum; they unfortunately said and thought that this was not art. Of course, this put me 10 steps back, but I did not give up because I felt that I had become part of "The Five" group, the rejected group. I felt that I did not have a choice; I had either to fight or to run away. I had either to join the group and fight to educate the society and prepare it to accept my work, or to go back to my paintings—although my paintings were not traditional, they were semi-abstract works with undefined figures. Never have I ever painted anything traditional.

At that time, when my works were rejected, I sat with Mohammed Kazem and Hassan Sharif to discuss the issue; they encouraged me. Mohammed told me, "So the museum refused to host the solo exhibition because you are still young to make a solo exhibition." Of course, this was one of the flimsy reasons the museum presented; they said that my paintings were beautiful and they would exhibit them. But I did not want to exhibit the paintings, I wanted to present the artworks I made during that year. I agreed with Mohammed to present a dual exhibition; this was in 2004, and they agreed to host the exhibition. I felt that the presence of Mohammed made the exhibition possible and for me to exhibit such conceptual works. So they hosted the exhibition in 2004 and it was titled *Khat (Line)*, because there was one work of calligraphy, but it also conveyed a second dimension; we were talking about the line separating our understanding and the way we think, from the society and how it accepts us. So we presented these works, and the exhibition marked a change and a shift from the Ebtisam who used to produce paintings, to Ebtisam who produces conceptual installations.

Do you remember when this group came to be The Flying House? And what did you think of this group?

Of course, I consider "The Five" artists as among the most important artists in the UAE and the Gulf states and even in the Arab world. I knew them a long time ago. In 2000, I came to know them a little better; I think we had so many things in common, for instance we had the same mentality, and love for the arts, for giving and for reading; we were intellectuals more than we were artists. Most of our conversations and meetings were not about works

of art, but rather about general discussions, where we had to get out what was on our mind. We were not a group that loved one another simply because we have something in common, or because we share the same art principles. On the contrary, we were five artists where each and every one of us worked in a way different from the others. No work of art or material was common or similar to that of any of the other five.

I see a difference between what the five artists did; intellectual compatibility was what caused The Flying House group to come to light in the first place, in addition to the conditions they experienced in the early 1990s. As for me, I met the group at the end of 2000; obviously, it was present before it came to be The Flying House. By the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, the group found a place, a semi-gallery or a museum to show their work, but the group was founded a long time before that.

Even before I entered the field of art, they were a coherent group with a clear idea, and I liked their simplicity. I did not know that this simple transparent person is the same Hassan who had long experience in the field of art; I did not feel any gap between our two experiences as artists, rather he talked to me as if we were peers. I felt the same with Mohammed as well; I worked extensively with him and we produced many works; we became partners, him helping me with a work and me helping him with his, and we exchanged knowledge and information. We all became a group of people who shared the same goals, and at the same time, we cared for one another.

A normal person sees you after 10 years and asks you, "How are you doing?" But we do not ask each other such questions, rather we ask, "What are you working on? What is your new work? How is art?" Sometimes, we would organize brainstorming sessions, and we would start proposing new materials and discussing new companies, as if we were people working in a factory and sharing the same goal, which is to produce and give to people surrounding us.

I joined The Flying House group by the end of 2007. I offered my works and they selected some of them since they used to change the collection from time to time. At the time, the group was well established, and the target became that we should no longer meet at a cafe or Hassan's house, we said, "Let us be more professional since we have become known." We have come so far and the community began to accept and understand us, so we had to show everyone that this is our place and this is our organization, this is The Flying House.

I started exhibiting with them at the end of 2007, and continued this way for about a year. At that time, Abdul-Raheem was responsible for the themes. However, at a certain point I felt like I was not a good fit with the group for reasons that had nothing to do with art. It had to do with what I had achieved, and what was my next step. Obviously, I did not leave the group, no, I am still in the group and we work together, but I felt that I did not genuinely belong, maybe because I was from Sharjah, which was somehow far.

I felt that it was not my right place, and so I no longer participated in The Flying House exhibitions, but to this day I am still in the group and we talk with each other from time to time. No matter how many years have passed, art always makes it possible for us to meet, and makes us feel that nothing can separate us.

Are there any people whom we did not talk about?

Yes, there are, but their roles were more comprehensive and greater than ours as individuals. For example, in 2003, Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi returned and totally changed the Sharjah Biennial, which served as a strong message to those who previously refused my work. We were amid an internal conflict and we were trying to do something. Suddenly, someone of high position and foresight came and saved us 10 years of hard work.

Sheikha Hoor played a huge role: Sharjah Art Foundation was not established yet, but she changed the position of the Sharjah Biennial when she invited a foreign curator who then achieved a quantum leap. Previously, the Sharjah Biennial seemed like a festival, they used to send out invitations to the countries through embassies and consuls, and exhibited whatever works these countries sent; however, later they made extensive research, and the Biennial played a highly important role; we were extremely happy and we had every right to say, "Thank God for making this happen." A positive change was achieved and our voice became more heard.

The first Sharjah Biennial you participated in was in 2005. How did curators know about your work? And do you remember the first time you exhibited outside the UAE?

Perhaps the reason I exhibited in that year was actually my own exhibition, which turned into a two-person exhibition in 2004 with artist Mohammed Kazem. I presented contemporary works; it was as if I introduced

the general community and the artistic community to the new Ebtisam, because I presented new things that were not mere paintings. I think this paved the way, or gave an opportunity, for the people in charge of the Sharjah Biennial to learn about a group of new, young people who were producing work. I received an email from the Sharjah Biennial saying that they would like to introduce me to their curator, Jack Persekian, who wanted to meet and see my work; he also wanted to meet Mohammed Kazem, Hassan Sharif, and Hussain. We agreed to meet at Hassan's house.

Frankly, I was not very optimistic about the meeting. The dialogue that took place was very funny, I remember I was very nervous. Jack Persekian reviewed a collection of my work on my laptop, which he was holding in his hands. He told me the Biennial's theme was about "Belonging" and that if I came up with any new works around that theme then he might be interested. So I angrily closed the laptop he was holding—it was a good thing that I did not smash his hand!

I told him, "This is what I have, I'm not a cook whom you can ask to make your favorite dish, this is what I have, and these are my thoughts. I do respect your theme and this is your profession, but I refuse to accept that artists should be told to make anything for the sake of a theme." I was at the early stages of my art career; it was the first time I had ever worked with a curator or met one.

He was actually a very nice person, he laughed and said to me, "Okay, you will not cook the dish I want, but do you have any new ideas that you think might fit the theme?" I told him, "Okay, if you put it this way, then I have some new ideas, which we can work on together." He said "Okay," but at the end of the meeting I felt that he would not call again. I felt like I built barriers and that he would never work with me.

A week later, he did call and told me that he liked two ideas. I thought to myself, "You said you did not like any of my works and asked me to work on new things, and now you like two ideas!" But I told myself that this is a new opportunity for me to exhibit my work at the Sharjah Biennial, which was a dream come true for me, and have the chance to work with a curator. I benefited a lot from the experience. I learned that I should not be hot-blooded, and to not take things personally; that it was possible for an artist to work on an idea with the curator and that the result would make us both happy, the final work would be based on my ideas and benefit at the same time from the curator's experience. In the end, the result was good and I participated in the

Sharjah Biennial with two works—in fact, I was the only one who exhibited two works.

I believe that working on the Sharjah Biennial gave me professional experience and refined my way of thinking. I learned much from this. The first work was a video and an installation at the same time, we had to take measurements and build the room in a manner appropriate to video display. The second work was a big project where I collected almost 2,000 pictures of peoples' hands; there was a small studio in the same location where I would photograph visitors' hands. There was such a lovely interaction with the audience and I loved that experience.

Later, in 2009, the Singapore Biennale took place. During the Sharjah Biennial, I met the Japanese curator Fumio Nanjo; he is currently Director of the Mori Art Museum in Japan. When I met him, he was attending the Sharjah Biennial and had the chance to see my work. I think it is amazing to be an artist who lives in Sharjah and exhibits at the Sharjah Biennial, which attracts important people from all over the world. I think the experience gave me the opportunity to meet with international curators, which led to participating in the Singapore Biennale in 2009.

Tell us about your decision to move to the U.S.

I am currently in Washington D.C., in the U.S. This is my second year here. In the beginning this was a new experience for me as a human and as an artist. I have reached a stage in my life where I need change, and being an artist, the works I create alter according to the environment surrounding me as a human being; they are somehow a reaction, an expression, or a message through which I express my views on the things surrounding me.

I think that if I had stayed in the UAE I would have produced the same things over and over again. I needed to leave, to get out of the ordinary or out of my usual place, and so I moved. Of course, the first year was the hardest one; the weather is different, the people are different, and life itself is different. I consider myself lucky because back home we have a simple life and a simple routine, while in the U.S. life goes by very quickly, the week would start and end without your knowing it. Life here is so rapid, and people can hardly catch up with it. I refused to drive a car here in the U.S. even though I used to drive in the UAE, because I wanted to challenge myself into taking the subway, to walk and to live a very different life from the one I used to have because I wanted to see different results in my work as an artist.

Frankly, in the first year I could not create any artworks to the point that I questioned myself, and the possibility of ever creating art again. I was skeptical about whether this was the right place for me, maybe I should just go back to the UAE. Nevertheless, I tried to read, to go out and meet people, to get to know their community and their way of thinking. The subway experience was very helpful, and it was wise not to drive around, because this made me become a little more aware of the community. In the subway, you see things and hear things.

By the end of that first year, in the summer, I joined a residency in New York; it included accommodation and a special studio for each artist for a month. I liked the idea because the house was far from New York and its chaos as a city; the house was in an area where there were forests as well. This was something quite different from the environment of the UAE and its architecture; it was away from the city, the chaos and traffic, which was actually very nice. I was able to create artworks during this time.

The people I met at the residency are semi-traditional artists, and I realized that my idea about the art in the U.S. is quite different from the reality, or perhaps I was just unlucky because the artists who participated in the residency were traditional, and created works that were very different from mine. This did not stop me from getting inspiration from the things surrounding me. I got to know many artists in this residency, and began to create artworks during this period. I am very happy with this experience, and the fact that I began from scratch.

I understand that some people might be surprised by my happiness with starting from scratch, but I needed to challenge myself and to feel like an unbreakable, strong woman. Since I managed to survive here during the first year, and I am still here for my second, then this means that I am still the same strong woman who challenges herself, and succeeds in her pursuits. The U.S. is characterized by freedom, and this might be the reason why it took me a year to start creating art works again, I did not know what to get out of this community.

Back home we initially had to struggle to defend our work, and later we had the chance to create what we wanted, we had a lot of galleries and art schools; everything became available, but I still felt like I was somehow in a closed environment. Suddenly, I moved to the U.S., and I felt free. This made me think about what I can do with this vast amount of freedom. Although in the first year I could not produce any works, I actually read and wrote a lot.

The nature of my work, or my way of thinking, has changed during my stay in the U.S. Back home, I experienced certain restrictions being a female performance artist; community and family will pose certain restrictions on you as a woman, and you might have to challenge them because they think that you might use your body to produce a work of art. At the early stages of my career, those restrictions were one of the reasons that made me think about every detail before I did anything. I do not know if there are now many women in the UAE who produce works of art that include performance art. But this was one of the things that made me think a lot before I produced any work that included a performance, I had to think through every detail in a way that did not cross limits, I was keen to respect all religions and society's traditions, knowing that there are topics that should not be addressed.

I believe that somehow I carried all these restrictions, my community and my culture along with me to the U.S. I produce works that include performances, but I never break any of these restrictions or limitations because I will not change, despite the fact that I am in the U.S. There are certain topics I did not address in my past works—one of them being freedom. The freedom of expression here made me able to produce works about freedom, and to express my ideas without any fear. Perhaps in some of my past works I had to represent my beliefs indirectly, without expressing my mind freely and clearly. But here, I feel that I can pose my ideas clearly and openly. Another topic I did not touch upon in my past work is political issues. I live in Washington where politics plays a huge role with all the issues happening in the U.S., and the elections and all of these things. In my recent works, you will notice things I had never discussed in my art before; a great transition and change has occurred in my way of thinking and in my work.

I have a studio in Washington and it's interesting: there are 70 people in this building, which means that you meet people from different cultures who have other ways of thinking and distinct works. Unfortunately, until now I could not find a new group or a new The Flying House in the U.S. There is a small group consisting of three female artists who are my friends; we work together and produce works, but I think it is too soon for me to feel the deep connection that I used to be part of in the UAE.

My new work tackles politics and discusses the U.S.: the place, me as a human being, the culture I came from, being a Muslim and all these things that may seem sensitive to some people in the U.S. In the studio I create some works, it is shared with other artists so I produce some 2D works, there is no

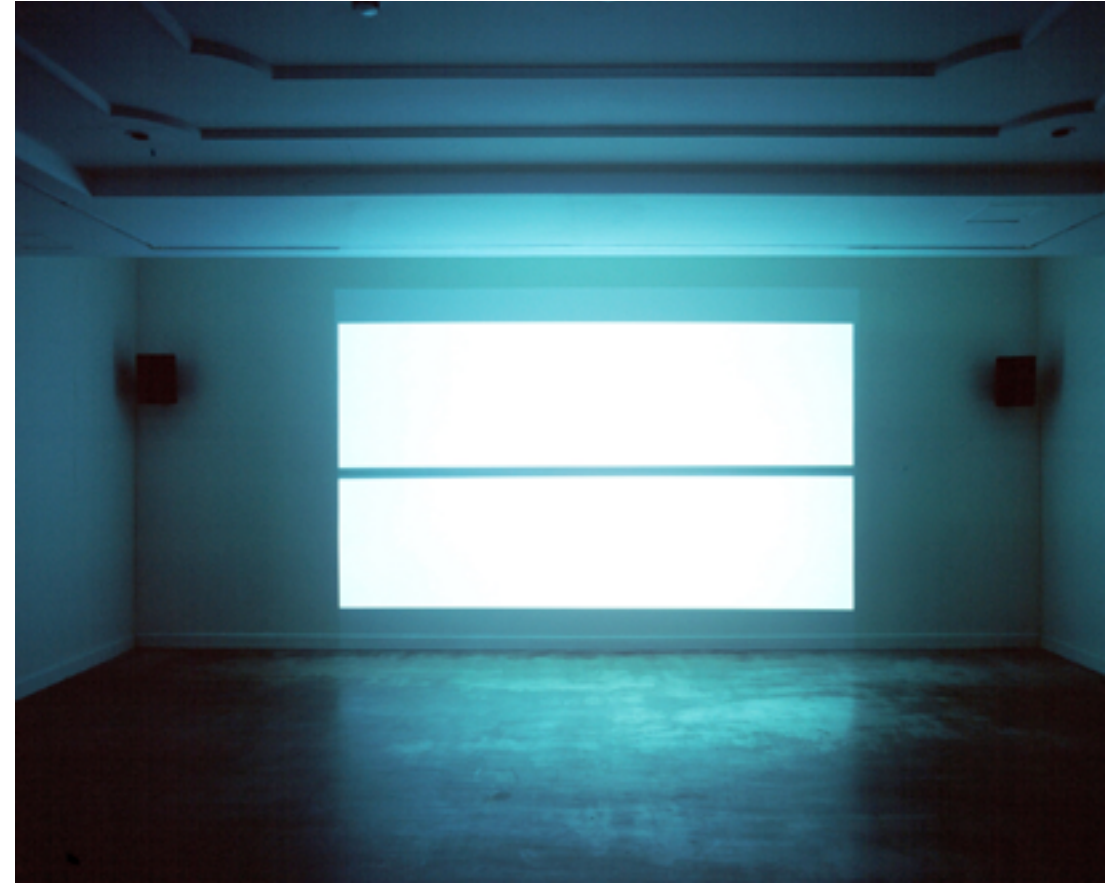
video installation and such things. I try to work on videos and performance art, but the studio contains primarily 2D paintings.

I really miss the group I used to work with in the UAE, my community. I still communicate with a few people back home, for instance I still communicate with the Emirates Fine Arts Society and send them articles, which they publish in English and Arabic. Somehow, I am becoming like a correspondent, trying to convey some of the things that I see here in the U.S. and some of the exhibitions that I like; I write articles about such events and publish them in the art magazine *Al Tashkeel*. Also, I still communicate with Mohammed Kazem and Khalil from time to time, I mean I try as much as I can to keep in touch. When I went back home for a visit, I went to the Society and met with the artists. AbdulRahman Al Ma'aini is also one of the people that I still communicate with on an almost daily basis.

So communication is still present but those old days are irreplaceable. It was a period of interchange, and of very deep and close relationships, which still exist in spite of the distance. Intellectually, we continue to reach out and communicate. I hope that I reach a point where I find new groups with which I share the same intellectual principles. Of course, I hope to have the same close relationship or group here in the U.S., and I am sure this will need a lot of effort and time.



Ebtisam Abdulaziz
Line, 2004
 Vinyl on wall
 Courtesy of the artist



Ebtisam Abdulaziz
Line, 2004
 Video and sound installation
 Courtesy of the artist

Abdul-
Raheem
Sharif

Abdul-Raheem Sharif

—Interviewed by Maya Allison and Alaa Edris

October 25, 2016. Dubai, UAE

“The main motivation behind The Flying House was to unfold the artists’ works that I was keeping in the warehouse. And the main spark for that was the fact that everybody was saying there was no serious art in the Emirates. To me that was nonsense. I was getting furious, I was boiling from inside. So initially it was an idea to make it a house dedicated to only five artists’ work, but gradually we ended up having nine artists. This was also Mohammed Kazem’s initiative, as he was inviting them and I am grateful to him and his sincere efforts.”



Abdul-Raheem Sharif, 2015
Photo: Maaziar Sadr

INTERVIEWER: It's very well known that you have played an important role in The Flying House and particularly with archiving, storing, and documenting Hassan Sharif's work. Give us a sense of how you see your role in relationship to the arts in the UAE.

ABDUL-RAHEEM SHARIF: I noticed that there was an urgent need to document all the artists' works properly and precisely, and to preserve them as well. So I used to take whatever information I could, working at home on Fridays, on my days off, or at night when I was in Dubai. I also started photographing the new artworks, or I would take them home to photograph them. Then there were a lot of articles that were published in newspapers or magazines, which Hassan had kept and which I would take home, photograph and archive chronologically. So, in fact I continued what Hassan had started; I consider Hassan as my teacher, let's put it that way.

So when you say Hassan was your teacher, can you tell me more about what you mean?

He documented all his early works. There were a lot of slides or printed photographs that he had shot and that's the base from which I started. I started not only his work, but his friends' work as well. In terms of talking about him as my teacher, this goes back to 1982 or 1983: on one of the trips when I was in London and he was studying there, he took me to the Tate. I remember vividly that there was a solo show of Joseph Beuys, and he told me, "Look at this, this is what you should see." These words still echo in my ear. Don't forget that Hassan is younger than me, by only one year; and so we had grown up together and were more as friends than just brothers. So when he told me, "This is what you should see and understand," it echoed deep inside of me and that's why I consider him my teacher. Through him I read about Joseph Beuys, about Marcel Duchamp, about [Constantin] Brancusi, about many from the Western avant-garde.

When he came back from the UK, I would go to his house regularly, and I met the other artists. I met Mohamed Ahmed, Mohammed Kazem, and Abdullah Al Saadi, and we used to talk about different topics. I gradually developed friendships with all of them, and this amounts to something, which I call love, you know? A love story between friends. And I enjoyed their words, what they were doing, and their conversations they had together as artists, and I would listen to all of these with curiosity. Then I found that these things influenced me. So I came to realize that all of these works had

to be documented. My background is in banking, so I used that knowledge for documenting these works. Initially, nobody supported my idea. "What do you mean documenting? We are photographing them and we don't need to document more." But I insisted and gradually succeeded.

Do you mean the artists didn't want you to take more photographs of their work?

They did not see the need as I did, and thought that it was not necessary. They were photographing and exhibiting their work, and that was the whole life of the work and all that was needed. Now Hassan, whenever possible and with the space that he had, preserved his work as well as that of some of his colleagues. He kept all the newspapers and the magazines; articles published about him, or what he had published about his colleagues, the friends. But they did not see the need for documenting everything in detail, as I did. I saw that need vividly.

So in the early 1980s when Hassan Sharif was in London, you went to visit him a few times. You already knew about his artwork when you went to visit him, right?

I knew that he wanted to be an artist before he went to London. Those were the days he was painting. This was in the 1970s. Also, he had been drawing caricatures and publishing them since 1973, and he made his first solo show of caricatures in 1976 at the Dubai Library. In those days he also did illustrations for *Akhbar Dubai*, *Al-Nasr Sport Club*, and other magazines. In 1976, he illustrated a children's book. He also did paintings with oil on canvas, and, in 1976, he received an award for the second place in a competition. We documented his early paintings. So I knew that; but I didn't know the depth. In the UK, he was in the experimental department headed by Tam Giles, and that changed the whole concept of art for him: it was a revolution. I was in the UAE and so I did not see that change until my trip to London. During my short stay of about 10 days, we were staying together and had a lot of conversation, and it was from that experience that I say he was my teacher.

Could you talk to me about your own experience when you first saw his work changing?

I don't remember exactly what I felt immediately, but for sure my reaction was neither positive nor negative. I took it as "I have to digest this," and

now as I look back on this, it was a shock but it wasn't a rejection shock, you know? Rather, it was a shock that art could be that, and it made me think, look at the work, go behind it and investigate by reading. For example, I cannot enjoy any piece of work now unless I know the artist. So I try to familiarize myself and read about the artist; if possible, I even try to meet the artist. The more I know, the more I enjoy their work. And the same thing happened with Joseph Beuys and the same thing happened with Duchamp, the same thing happened with Brancusi, and all the others.

So he helped you realize that you could and should learn about the artists so you could then understand their work.

Yes. I remember it was 1985 and he made his first solo show at the Emirates Fine Arts Society. It was a table with measurement tape and a barrel and few drawings. Apart from me and one or two others, the rest of the audience were artists and journalists and everybody was shocked. Later at home, I asked him about people's reactions, and he said, "Look you have to show people what they should see or what they must see, not what they want to see."

This represents two different outlooks on the issue. To understand and appreciate a new idea—in this case, a new context for art—the audience has to come out of the box, out of their own comfort zone to be able to look at the artwork in an unbiased way; otherwise, people come and look at the artwork and start criticizing, but they don't understand what they are objecting to. They criticize out of habit because they are still living in the box and this is what happened. As an objection to Hassan's solo show, one of the artists resigned from the Emirates Fine Arts Society, saying this type of artist should not be allowed to exhibit their artworks in such premises. Another journalist wrote that Hassan Sharif should be expelled from Emirates Fine Arts Society. In my opinion this was expected from the society of that time.

For example, if we look back at the avant-gardes in the West, we notice that they all had to face similar issues or even worse. A quick look at Impressionism or Post-Impressionism and other movements shows this clearly. This happens because people are generally afraid of change; they are frightened of losing their security. That's why they don't want to lose their sense of knowledge about things, and, in Hassan's case, it was about art. I think this is the way we have been conditioned. This conditioning is what I call, "living in the box or living in our cocoon." To come out of this cocoon

we need a different perception. One should work very hard on oneself to become liberated. This is metamorphosis. The objection to his artwork and way of thinking came from being exposed to the artists and journalists of those days in the past.

Do you think that Hassan Sharif was especially able to connect and help people here in the UAE step "out of the box," partly because he's from here? That because he's not an outsider, does that make it easier for the audience to understand, or does that make it more difficult?

I guess it makes it more difficult. I remember talking to him in London when we were together and he said, "When I come back I have to start everything afresh." I told him, "Why don't you stay in London?" He said, "No, I have to return. I have a discourse to communicate. I have to do something over there. That is what I am needed for over there [in the UAE]."

He had a good opportunity in London, but he wanted to come back despite the obstacles and I think he knew it was not going to be easy. He had to build a visual art family as well as an audience. Even his teacher, Tam Giles, told me this when we met her in London in March 2015. She said, "Although Hassan had a great chance [in London], I think he made the right decision."

The negative and upsetting response to his artworks gave him strength and made him determined to work very hard. He had to create his audience. Artwork without an audience has no meaning. Also, contemporary art needs a contemporary audience, a contemporary public. So he had to write, translate many articles on Western avant-garde artists, write about them, talk about them, and publish them in newspapers. He also had to focus on the new generation and explore their potential. He worked hard to establish art ateliers.

Now as for Hassan Sharif, he would say: "You have to shock people with new things, with something new. Let them question. All of them will not question, very few will. And out of those that do, very few continue to question. But that opens the sense of curiosity and this is the first step towards change. They might not get the answer, but this is a very important spark that can illuminate the mind." He always felt that he had been sent from here to the UK to study, funded by the government. The government had paid the money, that is, the nation's money, and he had to give back and this was his responsibility. That was what he said to me there [in London]: "I have to come and face whatever I have to face." He did that with great passion.

So in order to give back, he had to face a hard time.

Yes.

Did your family attend his shows?

With the exception of Hussain, no—nobody else.

You did?

I did. But Hussain was there more than me, because Hussain is an artist. So he was always with Hassan.

Did Hussain also study abroad or was he always here?

Hussain studied over here and also in Kuwait. He did remarkable works; the depth and seriousness of his works is evident in group shows in Sharjah, the Al Ahli Club and at the French Cultural attaché in Dubai. All this has been documented. He has a series of stimulating artworks. Although it is not easy for me to talk about Hussain, since he is also my younger brother, but in my opinion, his works are very important. Some of the main characteristics or themes of his artworks center on playfulness, impermanence, and illusion. Hassan has written about his works in many of his articles that have been published in newspapers as well as in one of his books, *Sharp Tools for Creating Art* (Sharjah: Department of Culture and Information, 1995).

As I review the exhibition records, I've noticed there is "The Five," there's "The Four," there's "The Six," there's "The Seven" and I think that we like to think of packages. There's this package of artists. But it's pretty clear to me that it wasn't a single group. Part of it I think must have been the teaching that Hassan Sharif was doing for all of the people that were coming into this community, not a group but I think of it more as a community, right? That they feed each other with ideas. Does that sound right?

Absolutely—that's absolutely true. It was not only five. It is difficult to say only five or seven or ten. There were not only artists, but also writers and poets. For example, one of the people with them was Ahmed Rashid Thani, Yousif Abo Alloz, Adel Khozam... They are writers, they are poets. Khalid Albudoor: poet. Nujoom Alghanem was a performance artist at that time and now she's a filmmaker. So they were all together as friends and they fed off one another. It is a question of mindset rather than a group. Again, Hassan always rejected this notion that he "taught" them.

If you look at intellectual movements throughout the world, it is not possible to separate visual art from poetry, philosophy, literature, and so on. Ultimately, they all meet together somewhere. The mindset of a visual artist is to that of the poet, and so on. And when they meet together, they can communicate. And all of them have to be resilient and maintain equanimity toward other ideas and thought processes. They have to be out of their own comfort zone to understand one another and to be able to encourage dialogue, not lecture. This is what happened.

Thinking about a positive coming out of a negative and vice versa: can you tell me the story of the 1985 Gulf art show in Abu Dhabi and *Bakh Bakh* (1985), his painting.

I wasn't there but I know it quite well. This was a GCC show and every artist had to show their work, so Hassan presented his *Bakh Bakh*, which was a very radical painting. It has a different dimension than the organizer had expected, so they kept his painting aside. It is a piece of cloth, one dimension painting with two colors, which, to them had no meaning. So when Hassan went and saw that his painting was not exhibited for the opening, he enquired, "Where is my painting?" and they answered, "It is in storage." He went to the store, brought out *Bakh Bakh*, nailed it on the wall, and stayed there until the opening of the show. Now we tend to take this as a negative action in the sense that this is not right. But if we look at this episode from a different angle, we find that the organizers were not aware about art. This determination and persistence in Hassan made him take on the criticism without allowing it to affect him negatively, and the proof is that he kept on producing and talking about art despite how others saw it.

So I want to come back to the idea of how the people around Hassan Sharif became artists.

I personally think that creativity has nothing to do with decision. One cannot decide to be an artist. However, one can decide to be a painter or sculptor, but that is very limiting. Art is much more complex and deep. This has to boil from within. Its rupture has to dance inside one. Art is not a thing; it is immense or indescribable and so on. Genuine artists or intellectuals have to take serious steps into unknown worlds that might have no return. It is a one-way ticket to discover oneself. Self-knowledge is more easily said than done; it is extremely hard to achieve. One has to overcome all

obstacles and temptations, even desire for fame. This is, of course, my personal opinion.

I know that Hassan made that decision to take a step into the unknown. This was before he went to London to study. I remember clearly that we had a conversation about that and he said, “Shall I go and work?” At that time, he had good opportunities to work even before he finished his high school. In those days there was great demand for UAE nationals and one could find a good job easily. During our conversation, my answer to him was, “Make up your mind.” So he made up his mind and sent his application to France, the UK, and, I think, to Italy also—I’m not sure. The UK accepted him first, and then he said, “I’m going to be an artist.” I believe he had that spark from an early age. When he was in primary school, he was called the Artist of the School. So he wanted to be an artist, but at that time, the notion of an artist meant to be a painter who paints beautiful paintings. I think Hassan influenced Hussain in London when he visited Hassan and stayed with him about a month or more, and I guess that visit had a great impact on him.

Did you visit the Atelier in Dubai?

Yes, a few times. I can’t remember how many times; and after Hassan retired, Mohammed Kazem was in charge of the Atelier and he continued.

Okay. Could you describe to me what you remember of the Atelier in Dubai?

It was a small, modest room, a little smaller than the size of this room, not very big, and it was called Marsam al-Hur—it’s a bit difficult to translate that—and Hassan was there every day. He went after his duty was over. Mohammed Kazam was also there regularly. They taught painting classes. Hassan did not paint from 1985 until 2000; and this was the period that he was teaching about painting and writing, and was more into his objects. That’s why if you ask the public they say “Hassan Sharif” means “object.”

So you would have first met Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed, and Abdullah Al Saadi around the same time?

Yes, I think that’s right.

Who else do you remember from that period? This would have been the late 1980s I’m thinking.

Yes, it was towards the end of the 1980s when I met Ahmed Rashid Thani. He was a poet and a historian. Hassan used to call him an archeologist because he was perfect for digging up historical information and publishing them. He has done a great job. I met Yousif Abo Alloz, too. He is a poet now and heads the cultural supplement in the *Al-Khaleej* newspaper. Adel Khozam, also, who is a poet and a novelist. Saad Juma, a poet now: he is in Abu Dhabi and heads *Al-Ittihad* newspaper’s cultural supplement, and many others.

Do you think that poetry was more developed here and that was why there were so many poets?

Again, this poetry was within the same line of contemporary art, because this was not conventional poetry. It was a new poetry. So not many people understood it to enjoy it. Like visual art, this also needed a new public, with a different dimension and outlook on life. I feel visual art has been more successful in creating audience awareness than new poetry, but this is changing with the new generation.

Can you tell me the story of deciding that *The Flying House* should be created?

It takes us back to 1995. Jos was here, we met, and that was the time when I was more involved with all the artists: Mohamed Ahmed, Hassan, Mohammed Kazem, Hussain, and Abdullah Al Saadi. I was documenting their works, and I had almost covered all the artworks they had with minute details, and every piece had code numbers; and I was preserving them in my warehouse. At the same time, I was traveling very frequently. I was going a lot to Amsterdam. So when Jos went to Holland, I used to call him. Once he asked me, “Do you have your laptop with you?” I said “Yes.” And he said, “Do you have time? Can you come to Sittard and we’ll go to the Ludwig museum in Aachen to show them the photographs of the boys’ artworks.” He used to call them “boys,” all five of them. So I said, “Absolutely.” And so we went together to Aachen to meet Dr. Annette Lagler, who was the chief curator at that time. I showed them all the photographs. And they were shocked at what they saw, and said, “We want to show them.” It was nice. After some time, they made a trip to Dubai. They visited all the artists’ studios and our homes, and the result was the *The Five/UAE* artist show in Ludwig museum, Aachen.

It wasn't only the five artists; we also screened Nujoom Alghanem's film, *Between Two Banks*. Also, Khalid Albudoor's poem was printed in the catalogue. This was in 2002.

That event gave me confidence that what I had done so far was useful. I was doing something I wanted to do out of passion. I was sure that one day it would be useful, but I did not expect to see the fruit of it so fast. After some time, my children joined me in business and this was an excellent opportunity because it gave me much more free time. In 2007, Mohamed Ahmed and I went to Kassel to see *Documenta*. Jos came there so it was three of us together. I had an idea to convert my old house into a proper storage place for artworks that were in my warehouse. I was keeping everyone's artwork, except for works of Abdullah Al Saadi, which were very few. My idea was to unpack the works from the container, keep them in the house, and show them to interested people, rather than taking them to the warehouse, which was not a practical exercise and, of course, unprofessional. So I explained my idea in Kassel, and Jos jumped and said, "Beautiful idea. Go ahead, Abdul-Raheem. Name it 'Flying House.'" I said, "I didn't want to name it." He said, "No. Name it 'Flying House' and I will give you my painting called *Flying House*." When I returned, first I told my sons, since it was their house at the end of the day and I am taking it from the tenant, and they encouraged me to do so. I told Hassan and everyone about my intention and everyone encouraged me. Mohammed Kazem was more passionate and with his input, my initial idea expanded and eventually it became The Flying House. I added "The" to Jos's proposal.

Can you tell me more where the name "The Flying House" came from? Why would this painting be the source of the name?

Yeah, the story of that painting is beautiful. Jos had painted that painting in Abu Dhabi and then he took it to Sittard until 2007, and when he came to us in 2008, he brought it with him.

So in a way The Flying House, you could say that it's inspired by how Jos sees the UAE. The name comes from this painting that is about Jos's impression of the UAE, right?

Yes.

But the feeling of The Flying House also seemed like the right name to give to the place. Can you talk more about what the words mean to you? Is there an Arabic version of it?

There is no Arabic version of it. And I was asked many times: "Why The Flying House?" The answer is for the same reason you are asking why: it is to create a question. It's The Flying House and that's it. There is no meaning to that, there is no purpose to that. Other than the purpose of coming to see the works of selected Emirati contemporary artists. You could say: house of selected Emirati contemporary visual artists' works. There was no plan and there never was a board. It wasn't in a commercial area. It was always in a residential neighborhood and we still continue in a residential area. We did not have timing. It was different from what you see today because at that time the whole idea was to cover the wall and the floor with as much art as possible. So there was no question of whether you could see this piece or not, or if it was exhibited like works are exhibited in a gallery or an exhibition hall. We had a very small space with many works and we wanted to show them rather than keeping them packed. One thing was very clear from the beginning: that The Flying House was not a commercial space, like a gallery is, nor was it a foundation. It was a nonprofit center or space for promoting selected works of Emirati contemporary artists. We wanted also the artworks to be closer to people, so we removed the entrance steps leading to the house, filled them with artworks and covered them with glass so one could walk on art. We used a similar idea for doors. Hassan and Hussain excavated the wall and made drawings, which they called contemporary cavemen's drawings. These drawings are still available on the wall. Mohamed Ahmed made a wrapped tree in the house, which made the house unique in the area. So it was an exotic place. One could not move anywhere in the house without being close to the artworks.

The main motivation behind The Flying House was to unfold the artists' works that I was keeping in the warehouse. And the main spark for that was the fact that everybody was saying there was no serious art in the Emirates. To me that was nonsense. I was getting furious, I was boiling from inside. So initially it was an idea to make it a house dedicated to only five artists' work, but gradually we ended up having nine artists. This was also Mohammed Kazem's initiative, as he was inviting them and I am grateful to him and his

sincere efforts. After a few years, things started to change positively and gradually. Everybody found galleries to work with and I'm very happy about it.

But The Flying House was an important moment for them to come together and create some sort of a reinforcement of their art.

Yes it was reinforcement. The Flying House had a lot of positive effects. We had in the first three or four years about 4,000 visitors, mostly from abroad apart from the universities and school students from here, locally. One of the visitors we had was the Swiss cultural minister. He visited us with his delegation, the Swiss ambassador and counsel, and they had lunch at The Flying House and met all artists. In that neighborhood, to see diplomatic cars coming, black Mercedes with diplomatic number plates and security guards, that was new. Also, the Dubai Art Fair had put us on their road map, so we had visitors from all over the world.

Were those shows received differently? Had the audience changed from when he had his shows in 1985 and so on?

Yes. The audience changed, not because of The Flying House. The audience changed because the environment changed. There were more galleries, auction houses were there, the art fair started, you know it was the Gulf Art Fair in Dubai, which eventually became Art Dubai. And Art Paris Abu Dhabi, which eventually became Abu Dhabi Art Fair. So all these affected the audiences. It is a question of cause and effect, where effect became cause and cause became effect. The cycle continued. Everything is interconnected. The whole depends on the parts, and the parts depend on the whole. Everything coexists together.

So the audiences were seeing more art and becoming exposed to more art and so Hassan's job became easier.

Yes.

And then Cristiana de Marchi. Where did she come into this story?

She has always been an extremely important part of The Flying House.

And was she part of this community before she started working at The Flying House? Was she among the artists who would sit at Hassan's house and talk about art?

No. We were looking for someone to assist Jos. So she applied for that and she came for an interview and Jos liked her a lot. Initially we agreed that she would be coming in part time, two or three days a week. But gradually she became an indivisible part of everyone at The Flying House and we started to know each other more and the friendship developed. During that period she talked to Hassan and interviewed him. She had written many articles about Hassan, and did wonderful poems on Hassan's performances. This is another evidence of cause and effect that I mentioned earlier.

It seems like she really connected with his work and that she is also sort of an artist and a poet and a writer and a curator and that in many ways she is very similar to this group even though she's from a different world, and that's why I wanted to know. If we are going to tell the story of this community, these people all affected one another, right?

Absolutely. Everything is everlastingly interconnected. You use the word "magnet"—I like that, you know, and indeed art is a magnet connecting everyone together. I think it was a mindset everyone had, a language everyone spoke. I think it is irrelevant which country one is from. After all, we are human beings and we know one another's language: I don't mean language spoken with alphabets, I refer to a silent language, which cements the relationship. So I would say the success of The Flying House was due to everyone's efforts. It is definitely not one individual's work.

As to Cristiana, in my opinion, she is a very important pillar of the UAE's art history. As far as The Flying House is concerned, Cristiana, Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed, and Jos played extremely important parts. Since the beginning we made a few shows and their contribution was extremely important. In fact, the successes of these shows depended on their hard work. Some of the shows include: The Flying House, group show at Dubai International Financial Center, 2008; The Flying House, group show at Creek Art Fair, 2008; *Vis Roboris*, group show at AB Gallery, Lucerne, Switzerland, 2010; Hassan Sharif's monograph, *Experiments and Objects (1979–2011)*, ADACH, Abu Dhabi; and Hassan Sharif's solo show at Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, 2012.

A meeting of the minds.

Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

Is there anyone else who comes to mind that I haven't brought up that you feel is really important in terms of understanding their role in this growth?

I should talk about Valsalan Kanara as well. Valsalan knew Hassan from the same period when Vivek went. Valsalan stayed with Hassan, and lived with him for a few years. Then he offered to make and then directed a documentary about the five of them, entitled *Objects*. It was shown in India at a film festival. Also, it was shown in the French cultural attaché here, and at ADACH Abu Dhabi. All of these were well before The Flying House. Valsalan continued with us in The Flying House for a few years along with Cristiana.

In the essay that Paulina Kolczynska wrote, she said that in the period from about 1989 to 1999, right before he started painting again, Hassan Sharif turned inward and kept to himself and was focused on his work but was sort of keeping the outside world away a little bit, and I was wondering how this can be true if he's also mentoring the other artists and having all these meetings with artists, but maybe it's because he stopped being with the Emirates Fine Arts Society? Does this make sense to you this idea that from 1989 to 1999 Hassan Sharif sort of had a period where he kind of closed off and just focused on his own work and was not so public?

It makes sense. Not only that: it is true. But I would put it a little differently. From 1985 to 2000 he did not paint. This was the period that he had devoted himself to others; to teach and write about the art and so on. He published four books: *Al-Fan al-Jadeed*, *Sharp Tools For Marking Art* (1995), *Concept of Art* (1997), and *Al-Khamsa* (2003). All the books are in Arabic and published by the Sharjah Department of Culture and Information. It was towards the end of the 1990s that I remember he said he needed his own space. He needed to work for himself. In my opinion, it's fully understandable that he needed time for himself. But he never isolated himself from his friends. What he did was to reduce his circle. A result of this so-called isolation was the eight articles, which he wrote about himself entitled, "My experience and understanding about the role of art." He published them in *Al-Khaleej* newspaper in 2005.

Anyway, he wasn't the kind of social person who is generally understood by the public. For example, he was not interested in going and walking in shopping centers or even traveling for vacation. You might be surprised to know that after he returned from London in 1984, he did not travel until 2010, when he went to Doha for the opening of Mathaf. His holidays were in

his studio among his artworks. At the same time, he had excellent relationships with his friends.

So in this period, when I was reading Paulina's essay I saw that the Emirates Fine Arts Society kicked him out? Rejected him in 1985? Maybe there was a misunderstanding or maybe he left? And then she said that soon after that there was sort of this period of *wahda* or solitude?

Solitude.

Do you remember his attitude changing at a certain point about what he is doing here and why and so on? Just the story of his development as an artist in terms of how he understood it, why he makes art and what's important. Because in the beginning you said he came back from London and said "It's important to come back to create this contemporary community." Did that change over time?

He was never kicked out. I explained what had happened during his solo show in 1985, but that does not mean he was kicked out. But on May 17, 1994, four of them—Hassan Sharif, Hussain Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed, and Mohammed Kazem—resigned from the Emirates Fine Art Society as an objection to the administration's attitudes towards the discourse of art. This was published in *Al-Ittihad* newspaper on May 19, 1994. We have a copy of the letters as well as a copy of the newspaper. As to solitude, I think as one gets older and more mature, one feels a need for privacy. Solitude doesn't mean isolation. Solitude is bliss of its own kind that comes from being alone for some time. It sharpens the inner recesses of the mind and opens the third eye or inner eye. It is not a retreat, but rather an expedition, a journey into the deep sides of one's soul.

Sacred.

Absolutely, it is sacred. It is something that people are afraid of. I mean I'm talking about myself also and I'm sure the same thing was applicable to Hassan. We have discussed this issue many times, and we were in full agreement of it. Being with the public, one loses oneself and sinks in the doing-mode rather than being-mode. I think this is the only path toward being introspective, which is not an easy path. It requires tremendous willpower to remain in solitude and that is sacred.

That's helpful, thank you. And you were saying also about the development of his work, it seems like that period of solitude corresponded to a very important series of developments in his work.

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Do you want to say more about that?

I think this was crucial for him, for his art and his writing. His outlook toward society and the whole world was ironic but not in a negative way, and not judgmental or advocating toward any form of dogma.

[The curators discuss the question of national identity and artistic practice.]

Hassan was not nostalgic about the past. He did not produce any artwork to glorify anything. He was saying heritage is good, but I need to keep moving forward. He used many different materials for producing his artworks. He titled his artworks by the name of the raw materials. He always avoided assigning a poetical or attractive title to his artworks. He was also using the most simplistic and cheap material he could find. An example of this is this work, entitled *Cardboard and Coir*. It was also made of cardboard and coir. He was always saying, "I have no technique or skill. Like people who go shopping, I also go for shopping and buy in big quantity and the cheapest materials and then I change its function and present it as works of art. What I do, any child can do. I don't produce artworks using materials because my father or our ancestors used them. My work has nothing to do with heritage and I am not nostalgic about it." To him even painting had a different dimension. According to him he was not painting, but rather he was making a painting. This process of doing was extremely important to him.

It is using the visual world that he is in, in a contemporary way. Is that it?

That is true. He loved repetition in his work. He used to say, "Each cutting or tying, although it is the same or similar, it is contradicting the earlier act, and done over and over, because it has been tied in different time and so on." He used to say, "With repetition, I am molding my thoughts." He used to like rejected or thrown materials and bring them to the exhibition hall in the context of contemporary visual art. He did not like to label himself as Conceptualist or Minimalist, and so on. He was saying, "I have left all isms." To him, a work of art can be produced from everything and anything, it all

depends on how one looks at things. You do not need a concept or to be stimulated by something to produce artwork. Art should be part of an artist's life. It is like beauty, which is not out there but it is in here. We have to discover our inner being. We have to learn how to look and enjoy a rose rather than trying to discover its secret.

Yes I feel like that becomes really clear, when I look at this sculpture and you know I could see trash but I see something very poetic and lyrical.

Yes. He was saying, "I have collected almost all cardboards that I have used to make my artworks from the grocery shop near my house. I have collected them free of charge because they wanted to throw them away and I wanted to use them in the context of art. To me, fingerprints of all those individuals who contributed in making them—from the raw materials to finished products, to those who brought them here—are folded in these materials. If we contemplate on those individuals, we will find that it is impossible to quantify them. There is an unbroken and interrelated connection and normally we miss its importance. Some has come from India, some from China, some from... I don't know where. Then it was shipped here, and they emptied or used its contents but they had no use for cardboard. But they all have one common connection, which is the fingerprints of those individuals."

Cristiana
de Marchi

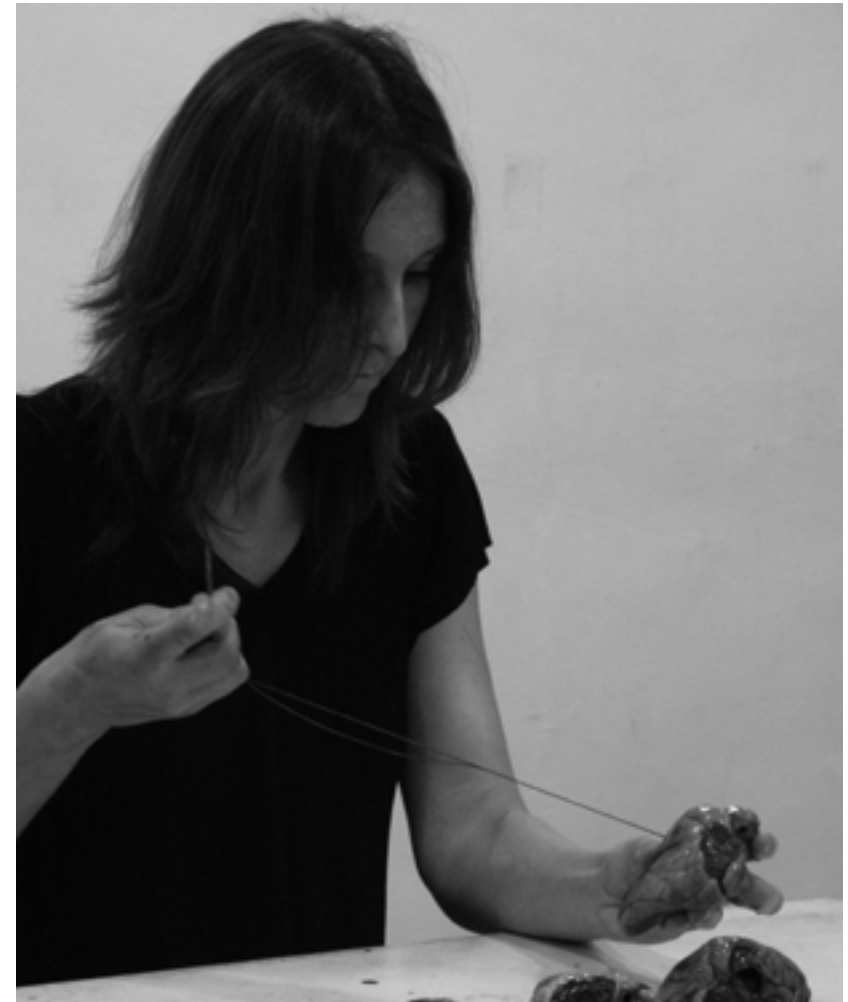
Cristiana de Marchi

—Interviewed by Maya Allison and Alaa Edris

October 31, 2016. Kochi, India

“Was there a job description?”

“No. They needed help and so I sent them a poem.”



Cristiana de Marchi, 2013
Photo: Jason Lim

INTERVIEWER: For this interview, I would like to better understand your story specifically. Here is what I know about you: you've curated, you've served a role that's a sort of curatorial, archival, storyteller for this community, you're part of this community, you're an artist, you're a poet, and you've done critical writing. Does this sound right? I know that you're originally from Italy and that you've spent some time in Beirut, but I don't know when you became an artist, how you became an artist, when you came to Dubai, when you met Hassan Sharif, how you met these people... So, tell me how you came to be where you are.

CRISTIANA DE MARCHI: So as you said, I'm originally from Italy. I'm Greek-Italian actually. My maternal grandmother was Greek.

Mediterranean.

Mediterranean-Torinian. Medi-Torinian.

So I grew up in Italy and also trained there as an archeologist. It is where I had my first relations with the Middle East because during my master's program I had wanted to work on urbanism, Greek-Roman urbanism with regards to the Mediterranean let's say, so the colonies not the empire, the head of the empire, and I was offered the opportunity to participate in archeological excavations in Beirut, following the end of the civil war. So I moved to Beirut and spent three years there between 1994 and 1997 on archaeological excavations, so it was like in-out between Beirut and Turin, which was a very interesting experience. That time in Beirut was really exciting, it was the movement after the end of the war with a lot of energy on many different levels. There were a lot of people returning to Beirut after they'd been away. So I finished my master's and decided that I would like to stay in Beirut and began working with the Italian embassy, with the cultural service of the Italian embassy and with the CNRS, the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, on projects and so on. Then, of course, the personal life got involved as well. But basically, I stayed in Beirut until 2006.

In 2005 after the assassination of Hariri, it was a very, very heavy period in Beirut, there were lots of explosions and killings and so most of the people I'd worked with and knew from different embassies, and even many Lebanese friends who had come back in 1994, left again in 2006 for good. And I really felt like I needed to have a kind of change, so that's where the option of Dubai seemed very reasonable, as I definitely didn't want to return to Europe at that time...

That was in 2006.

Yes, the summer of 2006. So I moved to Dubai and tried to find a job as an archeologist and started a collaboration with the Sharjah Archeological Museum, but felt unsatisfied with the level of academic research in the archeological field and that's where my other interest, which was always contemporary art, resurfaced. I contacted a few galleries and spaces to see if they needed someone to work with them and I met the guys of The Flying House at that time.

Did you, or had you ever seen any of the exhibitions of their artwork before you met them?

I think there was an article which appeared in *Gulf News* at the time about The Flying House and then *Canvas* also posted something at the same time, I guess an interview with Hassan [Sharif] or something like that. I really got intrigued by these guys and so I met them—it was really funny because I met them on a Saturday afternoon. I went into The Flying House.

So I had just reached there and they were all sitting on the floor having their lunch. I didn't know any of them at the time. I mean...

So I got introduced to them and then I sat with Abdul-Raheem. We had a nice conversation and he asked me to send something in writing. I mean, just like my impression and how would I implement something at The Flying House, or whatever.

Was there a job description?

No. They needed help and so I sent them a poem.

A poem?

Yes.

So were you already writing poetry at this point? Have you always been writing poetry?

Yeah. Since I was like I think 13, 14. I have my first collection of poems in small books.

Okay. But that's kind of the perfect thing to send them because they had this whole history with poets.

Yes. Well, but I didn't know that at the time! I mean, it was like Abdul-Raheem wanted to be very professional that day and it was really like a professional boss to potential employee conversation. So it was not very encouraging to send a poem.

What were you thinking!

I don't know, honestly it was...

Was it a poem about what you saw?

No, no. It was occasioned by my day at The Flying House. It was something like that. But I think maybe there is a sixth sense in a way, something that you just feel. Because at the time I had already got a position in a gallery. And then I decided, no, I would just go there. And so that's where it started. At the beginning there was Jos [Clevers], and we curated a few projects together, and then I was writing, so we published a few brochures and writings about the artists of The Flying House. We were also trying to structure further work on the archive with Abdul-Raheem...

What were your impressions of Jos? I think Jos for that group has this charisma.

Yes, Jos was a very charismatic person actually, very cool, extremely. And very temperamental but he really matched well, very well, with all of them. I mean he had a very special relationship with Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, who was really the one who turned to Jos as a guide. He was spending long months or periods of time with Jos in Holland and Jos very often spent time in Khor Fakkan with Mohamed Ahmed and Ahmed Rashid Thani. In 2008, I remember he was still spending long weekends with family and working there, or just following and, in a way, having long, long conversations with Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim around his work.

He was trained as an artist?

He was a painter but he was also working with metal, making sculptural works. He definitely privileged his activity as a curator. So he curated like a hundred exhibitions at this art center that he had in Sittard [art center, in the Netherlands]. It was a long activity, and that's really part of the history that we feel very sad about after all that he had done for us. He worked with

artists who eventually did not become famous and artists who actually became famous, but his story is untold in a way. It's going to get lost.

I'm actually hoping that this exhibition will revive it, that there are these people who are so important to the community. So, just to go back to where we were, you sent the poem to Abdul-Raheem that day? But then... you sent the poem and Abdul-Raheem said "You're hired."

Basically, yes. And I started working on the first of May, which I find hilarious—for Europe, the first of May is Labour Day. So we just started the collaboration. And then of course it was a very short collaboration with Jos because in the early autumn, like the end of summer 2008, he discovered he had cancer.

The same year you were hired.

Yes. So he went back to Holland for therapy and he died beginning of January 2009, so he never came back.

We had many, many projects, so in a way we tried to carry on, and Mohamed and I started curating together. We curated a few shows and I was working on the publications, and so we were quite involved. And this is it. Basically until 2012 when there was a clear... in 2011 already, Mohammed left The Flying House, and I stayed anyway until September 2012. In the end only Hassan and Hussain were still there. So it totally changed the nature of the whole place.

So by the end of 2012 had everyone left except Hussain?

Yes. Hassan, that house in Satwa was evicted, how do you say, by the government, they wanted to reshape the Satwa area, so they just...

So they wanted to tear down his house?

Yeah, so they took the house and they gave him another land or something, I don't know where. So Hassan had to leave and at that point and Abdul-Raheem decided to use that old house himself and turn it into a house where Hassan could live and we could work and everything.

Okay. So the one they remodeled and they dug up the steps and everything to put the art in was in Al Quoz?

Yeah. I mean the one where they are now and still are, it's the second one if you want. But when they moved to the second one, The Flying House it was already... It was just the Hassan Sharif foundation. At some point, internally we started calling it the Hassan Sharif foundation because actually this is what it was. No, I think Hassan left that one in 2013? I guess 2013. The one where we used to be altogether.

Okay. So the other house was really The Flying House and they just referred to this new place as 'The Flying House' even though it wasn't a place you would come to see other artists.

No, not at all.

Although I went there, probably right after that move. It must have been, I can't figure out when it was, I think it was before Hassan moved there because they still had all the different artists' work being shown. That was where I first saw Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's work, which was on display.

I think maybe they were just storing some of the works, because we also had storage still in Al Quoz, which at some point when they took the big house, the big villa in Al Barsha, they had left a storage. So in the storage there was stuff from everyone, a little bit, so maybe on the move they just kept some of the works but gradually...

I remember there was a portrait of Jos that I think Hassan painted. Does that sound familiar?

Yes there was.

When Jos passed away (so that was January 2009), we then had the first solo show for Hassan after decades, in November 2009 at 1x1 Gallery, at the old location. They had this huge warehouse, which was really gorgeous, so we organized, Mohammed and myself, a solo for Hassan and there was a small room where Hassan made a special installation in memory of Jos.

[Maya Allison describes becoming acquainted with Cristiana and the other artists.]

And I was especially struck because that was the first time I heard these stories about this community. And how people would sit around in Hassan's backyard and come and go, and have all these long conversations and that this was the source of all this artistic inspiration and so on. I didn't really

hear this referred to as The Flying House, but I think a lot of people made this mistake, they kind of thought of them as the same thing.

That's possible. They are in fact two distinct things: the informal gathering around Hassan in Satwa, back in the 1990s and early 2000s; and The Flying House, although until end 2012, the nature of informally meeting and discussing ideas was still preserved.

So you started making artwork as well at a certain point.

No, actually I started before, but I always worked as an artist in a very remote way, and I never showed it. That was it. Then at some point, during our conversations it came out that I make artworks, and they wanted to see what I do. And when they saw the works, told me, "Well we need to do something, because it's a bit too much all these works and you have never shown them, nothing." But at that point it started the process of coming to light in a way.

So what was that process? What happened next?

It started very slowly. I just participated in one of the editions of the annual exhibition at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, in 2010? 2011 I think. I showed the *Fish Market* video at that time.

So it wasn't stuff that you were making privately that you were showing, you actually made new work to show with the public audience in mind.

In that case, yes. Some other works were there with me from before. But you know, it is very difficult, the occasions for someone who is not represented by a gallery. And it's very difficult in the UAE so it really came very, very slowly. But they were operating with me in the same way they had operated within the group before. So they were really supportive. It was really important for me as an artist to get that kind of support, they would encourage me not only to keep working but also to show the works. So I think it is the nature of this group of people.

So you sort of integrated into the group almost by accident as an artist, because you were hired to help administer The Flying House, but then you became it sounds like, in effect, one of The Flying House artists in a way.

There was actually a conversation between Mohamed Ahmed and Abdul-Raheem, because Mohamed Ahmed at some point told him that we need to

show Cristiana's work as well because she is like part of us and she is... And that was absolutely rejected, because the very institutional nature of The Flying House was to represent UAE artists, the seminal artists I would say.

Do you think that was a conversation they had about Jos as well?

I'm not sure.

And did you have a sense of whether Jos felt excluded or...? Because he was so clearly part of the group, right?

No that is possible, actually it is possible. Although Jos, when he came back to Dubai, he clearly came with the idea of continuing his work as a curator to keep promoting these guys...

Okay. Not with the idea that he would be showing his own work.

No, I don't think so. But obviously in the 1990s it was much easier, they would just change overnight the title from five to six and they would just include the work of another artist and that would not create any problem for anyone. When The Flying House situation came in, it became more institutionalized in a way that was a desire at least to give it structure and to create a narrative, and to kind of build on history.

What about somebody like Layla Juma [Rashid] or Huda Assad or Ebtisam [Abdulaziz]? These people, they're a younger generation. But they were very clearly connected.

I think it is a different case for all of them I mean... Like Layla never really got involved in the kind of intellectual conversations and dialogue...

So how was Layla involved then? She just made art and she brought it to The Flying House?

She was one of the students of Mohammed Kazem, and he really liked and wanted to promote all of them. Ebtisam is more like an intellectual herself and she really worked on that more consistently I would say.

Were there other women you know of who, in that way, kind of connected with the group?

It's such a male universe.

Yeah. Who were the non-artists who were helping? So I'm thinking Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, Zaki Nusseibeh, anybody else you can think of that would be, who might have a story to tell or a role to play in this process?

In terms of contemporary art, although it's not in the UAE, one of the key figures in my opinion is Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani in Doha, who...

Who developed the Mathaf collection. Right?

He collected extensively in the 1990s, in the mid-1990s and definitely formed the core collection with regards to the Conceptual art scene in the Gulf.

That's one of the first ones to collect Hassan Sharif right?

Yes.

[The conversation turns to the 1990s artists who were part of the community, including Vivek Vilasini.]

And then of course I mean it's a very sad situation that many of those who were active in the 1990s are not there anymore. Like Ahmed Rashid Thani is really someone you should have met. But maybe if you can find someone to work on the archive, select some of the writings or... Because he had been a huge collector of oral history as well.

Hassan
Sharif

Hassan Sharif

—Interviewed by Cristiana de Marchi

April 23, 2009. Dubai, UAE

“Again there are spaces between words: art is these spaces, it is not the words. Art should be nonsense in order not to use it. If there is meaning it is not art. It is a cup, which you put in a kitchen and fill with water. If you have money you can buy it, if you have taste you can appreciate it, but you must not use it. Art must be without purpose, so you cannot use it. It must be useless in order to be unique. Otherwise if you make art for using it, then it is not art.”



Hassan Sharif, 2007

Image courtesy of the archive of The Flying House, Dubai

INTERVIEWER: How did you develop your awareness about art?

HASSAN SHARIF: In the mid-sixties I studied at Al Sha'ab School (literally the "Public School") here in Dubai. At school, I was good at drawing and the art teacher (in those days there was art at school) was encouraging and helping me a lot. Then the teachers of geography and history liked my paintings and they asked me to copy images from the book on 70 x 100 cm papers, a format like posters, for all the students. And also the natural sciences teacher asked me to illustrate the course for the class. So I got good notes in art, balancing and compensating the other disciplines where I was weaker.

So I started being known as the "public painter" playing on the name of the school and from "artist of public school" I became "public artist." I felt well-evaluated, because my paintings were hung and everyone could see them. The teacher also used to show me reproductions of famous paintings in books. I remember Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* where there is a woman symbolizing freedom with a flag. So I painted it, but I changed the flag and transferred it to the Israeli and Palestinian question, so I actualized the painting, removing something, adding something else... The principal of the school deeply liked the painting and he wanted it to be hung in his office, which gave me a taste of being appreciated for my art. I think I decided at that moment, even before finishing school, to study art. I was approximately 17 or 18. This is the way I decided.

How did your parents react to your decision?

They didn't like it of course. My mother tried to dissuade me from painting women's eyes or hair, since it is prohibited by Islam. But I insisted on doing it. During the 1970s I used to go to Al Nasr Club, a sports club where there was a cultural section and where we issued a magazine, which I helped design and started drawing caricatures for. I was happy that my work was published. This was the beginning of the 1970s until 1972–1973, then I joined *Dubai News (Akhbar Dubai)*, who used to pay 500 AED per month. Every week I had one page and four caricatures about one subject. It was totally different from now: I was very free, even in criticizing the Municipality, which was financing the magazine. At that time, people were freer to criticize and speak about politics or society. Nobody ever censored my work. People used to love my work. Then in 1979, I left to study fine arts.

All of your caricatures were published? I thought you might have encountered some issues and that some of these vignettes could not be published...

Most of the caricatures have been published: only a few of them were not. Sometimes it happened that the editor, who really used to like my work—Omar Aldisi was his name, a Palestinian originally I think, but living in UAE for a very long time—would not dare publish subjects that were too openly polemical or "hot" issues. Once I asked for more money, and they accepted increasing my salary from 500 to 800, which can be considered as a measure of appreciation for my work.

How did it happen that you went to London? And what was the role of your education abroad?

At that time, while I was drawing the caricatures, I was also painting. I had three art books: on Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Picasso. Every day I was looking at the books and reproducing paintings either in oil, acrylic or watercolor. So besides being a caricaturist I also was a painter, participating in exhibitions, for instance the British Council, still in the 1970s. Then after the UAE was established, many magazines started being printed and many other opportunities came. I was recognized as a painter and used to represent the UAE abroad, in the Arab world: in 1975, I was working at the Ministry of Youth and my job was to find artists, to talk to them, to select and collect their work for showing here and abroad. I went to many Arab countries (Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia...), promoting UAE artists, showing that there was art in the UAE. There were few artists at that time and I was collecting not more than 10 to 15 works to exhibit abroad, every year it was a different country.

So let's go back to your decision to perfect your Fine Arts education...

It was a gradual process, not a sudden decision. Every year this decision was becoming stronger and more urgent, even though I had postponed it for quite a while. The Ministry of Education had this system: once you finish secondary school, which means after 12 years of education, you could ask to continue your education abroad. So I was told there were several places where I could go to study Fine Art and from the ministry they addressed me to Italy... But I didn't want to go there.

Why not? Italy is considered as the “place to be” for artists...

At that time France was more exciting for an artist, more inspiring. I definitely preferred to go to France. So I applied for both France and the UK, and the UK answer happened to come first. So I accepted. I didn't want to wait for the France approval, which eventually came but I was already in the UK and didn't want to change. I spent five years in the UK, three in London: I met very important people, saw galleries and museums, went to seminars... I changed a lot. That's why, once back in Dubai, I didn't keep drawing caricatures. That had been a job, a step, nothing more and nothing less. But being in London, I discovered philosophy and I was interested in the very question of what art is, in how to paint. Not from the technical point of view, like anyone can learn how to paint, but from the Conceptual one. You cannot learn how to be an artist. So I went through reading a lot, searching... and experimentation; most of my works from that period are experiments.

Like it is documented in The Flying House archival images... Who took the pictures of those experiments and performances?

I did for the experiments, and for the performances other students took the pictures. On the foundation courses, you have to learn how to document your work: so you have to know how to take photographs and how to print black-and-white photos. So I used to take photos, develop them and document all the phases of my work.

This is a very crucial question, being related to the production one. Today's artists are mostly owners of a copyright on the idea, but they do not materially realize the works, which they give to a third party to execute.

There is nothing wrong with it. In the 1960s in America, with Pop Art, Minimal art and Conceptual art, art moved to the factory and art became like teamwork, not an individual creation. Art becomes a collective work. So everyone can realize his/her own thinking, without the need to be skilled in every technique. There are companies specialized in technical issues. And a same artist can use different techniques: you just need to give the idea to factories for the material realization and to pay for it.

But here we come to a contradiction. You say everyone can make art, but if you have no financial means, then you cannot pay for the production of your work, whereas if you know how to do it yourself you can work it out...

I will give you an example, from my own experience. I want to use expensive materials, but I cannot. So I work with cheaper materials: cardboard, plastic objects... Because I have no market for my objects: someone is interested in my paintings and with the money from the sales I buy materials for my objects. But if I had a market, my objects would be completely different from what they are now. This is why I refer to the concept of Factory: if I had a market, then I would go through an industrial production, a serial one, just like Andy Warhol used to do. I wouldn't make the objects myself, I would give them to a factory for the production.

And what would you do the rest of the time? You look like someone who enjoys working rather than just watching...

I would enjoy myself, going to luxurious places! Indeed I enjoy making my artwork, but the fact of not having a market is also affecting my production. Even when the artist dies, his/her works are still there, and can be produced. So art is not only an act of the artist sitting in his corner. Walter Benjamin, in his 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” says that art has lost its aura and has come out of the palace thus becoming public, for everyone. Again, this way, sitting in a corner, in your studio and painting individually, is not feasible anymore. Artists must go to society: this is why artists can go to the factories, where there are professionals able to translate the idea into a physical object. Art has become part of the society. Time is quickly passing, and we must be aware of this and we have to go as fast as we can. This is really not the time for expressing yourself comfortably in your corner. The artist must hurry...

But eventually what will last does not coincide with fast pace production...

Life now forces you to go as fast as you can. I believe in living fast, doing as many things as you can. For instance, around 1886, Van Gogh painted a pair of peasant's shoes and around 1957, Andy Warhol had a show of his illustrations of women's shoes, later immortalized in the *Diamond Dust Shoes* series: the first one is dirty, poor, and full of mud, reflecting that reality; the second one is elegant and glamorous, and it reflects a completely different society. So these two representations are completely different, no matter how the subject is in principle the same one. So this has to be with the time: how can I accept these two different works? How do I look at Van Gogh's painting? He is describing the society he was living in, and then you examine

the quality of the painting, which gives aura to that painting and to that production. But the aura has been lost, because we are living in the time of technology. There is no more aura, for instance, in Andy Warhol's work. He represents the time of technology, he takes advantage of new technologies. Art has to go with its own time: nowadays you cannot paint the way Van Gogh painted. You have to know what happened in the 1980s and what the reaction to that art production was. Let's look for instance at the controversy between American and European art: Arte Povera (Germano Celant), Anti-Style (Gerhard Richter)... all try to contrast the appropriation of art made by American artists and theorists. The European insisted on going back to the painting, "new spirit painting," stopping the Americans from dictating in contemporary art. Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, with American Abstract Expressionism, had political connections, because it was perceived as a very "nationalist" thing. Rothko (Russian), De Kooning (Dutch), among others, represent American Expressionism: big paintings, because America is big; fast art production, removing figures and opting for the abstract, reflecting the fast pace at which America runs; lines are emphasized, geometrical forms, bright colors... thus respecting a certain vision of life which is typically American.

There is a funny coincidence with some rules of Islamic art: non figurative, colorful, linear... It could be embraced as a manifesto.

There are some young artists who have embraced Abstract Expressionism because it avoids the clash with tradition, but one cannot claim him/herself being an artist if he or she is still referring to conventionality. You have to make art with respect to contemporaneity, to the time you are living in. In the 21st century art is experimental, there are technologies and the artists must use them, compare themselves with it. Some UAE artists, educated abroad, "open-minded" supposed-to-be, eventually happen to make pieces of art in a certain way because it is allowed, it doesn't go against tradition. This mental approach is not contemporaneous, these artists have mentally gone backward and you have to be aware of this approach that doesn't show, but is still there. It doesn't mean that because Islamic art is non-figurative, it is modern or contemporary. Contemporary art can be figurative or non-figurative, and it can also be both at the same time. Plus, the non-figurativeness of Islamic art was totally for another purpose; lots of artists can't differentiate

between heritage and contemporary. Islamic artists never ever asked about the contextual discourse of the function and nature of art, this is the reason why Islamic art exists only in the history of art.

This brings us back to the starting point, the caricatures. You have always been very polemical and provocative with regard to society, but now it has been a pretty long time since you have acted directly. And yet, the society is not "mature," it still needs to be shaken...

We were radical, anarchist, and we acted accordingly. But now somehow we have to be wise; lots of things have changed, either for good or not. We have to fight for other things, and especially for education. The recent *Re-Source* show at Elementa Gallery [Dubai, 2009], for instance, exhibiting 10 young UAE artists: in the 1970s I used to paint and draw but no one was telling me what Impressionism or Expressionism is or giving me any guidance; when I was their age I had no opportunities, now they have lots of opportunities, coming from education. Things are changing fast and in a very good way: I don't need to be poignant at society anymore because I can see a progress. There is a whole new generation of artists, who are given opportunities to learn and express artistically. So we don't need to be aggressive; instead we need to be wise in order to be sharper, and we need to know how to select, out of the group of young artists. In the 1970s there was no issue of choosing, there were only very few artists at that moment. Positive change is witnessed in every field of life, and fast. Again we have to be quick in appropriating these new materials and technologies and use them for our artistic purposes.

You mentioned the young generation actually growing in the UAE: when I look at their work, I sense a lack in education, an almost complete absence of references to universal culture, to philosophy, to psychology, to art history... It is more technical what they are doing.

They have no time for studying these profound issues. They have their duties for obtaining their diploma. Besides, this "culture" should not be taught: it is something to be discovered individually. I never blame youth for not studying, they are living contemporary philosophy: they respect tradition and at the same time they know how to use the new technologies. It is good to know, but you have to discover by yourself, no one can guide you in this.

But sometimes they simply don't know where to head. I am not saying they should be instructed, but if there is someone showing you the path then you are aware of the very existence of that path. Of course it is up to you the decision of taking it or not...

Universities are improving in this. And again they have demands, and they have the right to ask. So I am positive about the future. There is a difference between here and Europe: in Europe, young artists start having a studio and producing artworks, then exhibiting... Here not, because they must first educate the society. This is why I started writing articles: I wrote nearly a hundred articles. Because I had to make my audience: contemporary artists need a contemporary audience.

And now, how do you still consider yourself in terms of social engagement?

Still I do write but now I act on a different level. I taught, gave lectures, organized exhibitions for young artists... but now I am less active, now I see young artists doing better than me and I feel I also have to take care of my work. Being an artist, you must have artwork. If you are too active [in developing the art scene] then you lose yourself, you renounce expression of your own voice artistically.

Do you believe the artist can influence the society?

Art can enlighten the society: enlightening is very important. And it can provoke. But it is not a bus, taking you from here to there. It is totally different: as Johannes Itten said, art is like a bus that takes you to the end of the road and those who want to go further have to get out of the bus and they must walk on their feet. Those young artists must decide how they want to provoke the society, it is an individual choice. And art can change the mentality of the society.

These young artists don't seem to be very much interested in educating the society or enlightening the society. They seem to be more behind the approval: they provoke in order to be listened to, but what they are ultimately chasing for apparently is recognition, rewards...

I think the young artists have the right to look for this reconnaissance from the media... Not everyone goes to the exhibitions: many read the reviews in the papers, so reaching the media is fundamental. They are right in trying to get the media's attention: media is their platform and there's

nothing wrong in promoting their work and image. Their discourse can reach the society through the media, and they should not be blamed for this. Artists want to say to the society that they exist, artists are selfish and being recognized is very important for them. I like all these things that they are experimenting [with]. Khalid Mezaina's work for instance: I like the figures he has drawn, the fact of printing them in several copies... This is not repetition, because one is here and the other one is in a different position. If the place is different then there is no repetition, because you cannot see them at the same time, and time is another variable, which means this is not a repeated image, it is yet another image. And he knew what he was doing, which is a kind of philosophy. Philosophy is not quoting philosophers; it can be an experienced philosophy... and there is a lot of irony in his work. And this is just an example.

Let's talk about "Books and Boxes." They seem to come by in waves: there is a series dated 1982–1984, another one in 1995 and then a last one in 2006–2007. Can you talk about this "project?"

I have done boxes in 1996 and then again in 2005... during that period I made lots of boxes and each box is a piece of art in itself. I wanted to make something small and the title is *My Little Tiny Box*. You can open them and there are lots of things inside: it has to do with the making, with the weaving. You don't need many things: you need scissors, rope, nail, cardboard, needles... and the object has small dimensions so you can work on many of them. I enjoyed doing these boxes and I have done them during two different periods: I stopped because I went back to making bigger objects. Sometimes I made a delay: I used to make two or three boxes and then stopping for doing something else. And then during one year I made only boxes. It has to do with different materials. When I go to the shops where they sell needles, screws, hammers, pipes... I love the way they exhibit things, in a very tiny way: it is beautiful. So I go and ask about prices and I was involved in going again and choosing small objects in these small shops...

And then there are books, books as a work of art, I emphasized those. The audience can open them, touch them... I made most of them in 1983–1984 and then again later in 2006–2007, sometimes a second version. Because some of them I have lost, and I remembered and felt they were important with regard to some period of my life.

But they are not the same, of course, they cannot be the “repetition” of what you have done before?

Of course not. The idea is that I know I have done this before and I have lost it. So I have done it again, but I don't like doing again what I have already done. It is very difficult for me. For instance the barrel: I have done it before, in 1985, and it was lost; it is now more than two months I keep thinking of doing it again and still I haven't. Doing a second version is very difficult for me. It wasn't the case for the table, because I had the drawing and it was the carpenter who materially executed it. I did the first version. Why should I waste my time doing again something which I have already done when I could make something new?

But for the books it was different, you felt like you wanted to have a second version?

Yes, it was different because I had done them on my own. It was different to make these few master lines and to go through these lines, three at first and then two different colors. It is like a semi-system.

And now that you have done the second version (which is obviously still unique), you feel “released?”

Yes, I know the first version has been lost but I have a second one, which of course cannot be the same like the first one, but at least I have one similar to the first one. And I have both dates of both works. In art it is common to have second versions, sometimes in different materials. And also different techniques allow the artists to have more than one copy of a same work, multiple exemplars of a same piece of art. Duchamp and Richard Hamilton's story about reproduction of *The Large Glass* give us just one example of this reproducibility in art. Now the artist has the right to make copies, especially thanks to the technologies. The artist has the right to try any means.

Do you conceive any of your productions (*Books and Boxes, Experiments, Semi-systems, Objects*) as a whole?

During the 1980s I was emphasizing on making objects, then from 1984–1985 and until 2000 so many things had changed politically and socially on the international scale. So I questioned myself about my “dogmatic” approach, asking why I don't do something else. I know how to paint if the question is about knowing, or not knowing. But the question is not

even there. It is an old question. Now I know what painting is, I know how to make a “contemporary” painting. So I went back to it and lately, I am deeply involved in painting. It is a kind of “obligation,” I cannot not be doing it. And also now there is not only one way of doing things, there is no style anymore: you can paint, use photos, make objects, use performance... But I only paint, make objects and semi-systems. And they are all related to one another. It is a matter of repetition again: when I paint, I paint several paintings named after the same title with a same “subject”; so it is similar to my objects, where I repeat the process of making and making again using my fingers, and to the semi-systems, where the act of making is just the same but with a brush. There is no scheme, there is no secret, it is just a process. Anybody can do lines like these ones.

And the acrylic version of the semi-systems?

I am only talking about the ink on paper, whereas the acrylic version is a model to be executed by factory as a work of art for public places, whether in 2D or 3D.

So the lines, in their repetition, are just the same like when I take pieces of materials and I combine them in objects. Here I use the brush and there my hands, but in both cases it is a matter of manipulation. People think there is a very complicated idea behind these semi-systems. Actually I use numbers (1–2–3 or 1–2–3–4) and then I manipulate them, I play with them, and I can do the same with lines, the alphabet and shapes. It is ironic. There are lines—most of them are horizontal lines—inscribed in rectangles and the lines can be variously oriented; I can play with straight lines or waves, introduce colors, use simple geometrical patterns... Then I choose a variation and I apply to the pattern a certain “correspondence” and I create a process in manipulation. All of what I do has a certain relation with the rest of my production. There is no difference between my productions. All the works of an artist are one piece of art.

What is your relationship with materials? Just something to use or a valuable source of inspiration?

Some of them I simply use them. I buy cups for instance, and first I cancel the purpose they were made for so you cannot use them anymore as cups. Then I want to add another material, or more. Then I choose another object, lately aluminium and copper or glass or rope, and I just combine them. The

relation comes through dealing with them. Only while using the materials you realize their secrets and you discover different ways of using these same materials. Sometimes you realize that the first time is not good. And this goes through a repeated process: I try to show that there is no repetition through repetition. Each time is different. The material act of making, of canceling the original purpose and adding something else transforms the objects into something else, eventually into a work of art.

Do you feel you perceive the fact of erasing the original purpose as indispensable? You cannot use these materials without cancelling their identity?

I think it is difficult, and then I don't want these objects to be used as per their original function. I de-construct, I cancel the original function—and then I re-construct. Canceling the function is important. When people buy, they buy new objects only at the very moment they are in the shop, but once you own the thing the condition of being new is canceled. If I had money I would use very expensive objects and then destroy their original function. Since I don't have money, I choose cheap materials. But the very act of appropriation through cancelation of the original function is necessary. The easiest thing is to make a hole, to cut it... and I do it just the same way the consumers do, whenever they buy something: that changes the function. I don't want to make a readymade like Duchamp or to just make a whole, that's why I usually combine a few materials together. None of the actions I make on the "raw materials" has a function, unless ultimately making a work of art. Doing something for nonsense, which does not allow any further use. It is a kind of protest, ultimately. It is like recycling. My act is provocative, while following the same path of consumerism, like everyone else does in our societies. But while the consumerism has no meaning, and those objects people buy in huge quantities can only be shown as themselves, the things I buy become objects and they can be exhibited, thus gaining an extra value. So they are not simply consumed, they acquire an additional value. It is very important to use the material that is available now, for instance plastic, or trademarks that are actual.

But your older works were also made with natural materials, ropes, palm leaves...

Yes, but I don't use them as traditional materials, and they are produced in India or Pakistan. It is not an evolution in my work, not really. I didn't

use them because they were referring to a traditional society, it was simply available at the moment when I wanted to make those objects. It is mainly a matter of availability. In my work I don't want to express anything, or be "meaningful" or to help. I don't want to put heaviness on my work, I am simply making objects.

This is hard to believe for a person like you who has such a critical approach, who deeply enjoys words and concepts like you do. What you say now introduces a kind of discrepancy...

I look at society in a very ironical way. Also my paintings, I choose the titles after a minor object I introduce in the painting, I don't point at the main subject, which is a very old-fashioned approach. I like to play with words, and I like those artists playing with words, like Duchamp again.

Since we mention words, let's go back to your books. Books are made to be read: how should the viewer read yours?

Books as a work of art are not done as a conventional book, for reading a story: it is a matter of watching and touching. These books are treated in different ways, combined with different materials. Sometimes yes, there is a file inside which you cannot read, but you can see. And sometimes the audience is curious about the contents and they want to open the book. Well the book is not sealed and they can cut the rope, which closes the book, and open it: I am not going to punish them. The audience thinks there is a secret inside the book because it is closed and roped but once they open it, they don't see anything. So they get confused: it was better not to open and they start questioning the act of closing it so carefully...

So it is like reading a book: whenever we have a new book in front of us we have expectations and what you are telling me now is just like a story, a non-written story in fact...

Again there are spaces between words: art is these spaces, it is not the words. Art should be nonsense in order not to use it. If there is meaning it is not art. It is a cup, which you put in a kitchen and fill with water. If you have money you can buy it, if you have taste you can appreciate it, but you must not use it. Art must be without purpose, so you cannot use it. It must be useless in order to be unique. Otherwise if you make art for using it, then it is not art.

What do you think of this new approach, when there is a competition, artists have to present their work, to write statements, in order to “support” their work?

Of course artists must be conscious, they must know what they are doing; otherwise it becomes a work that anyone can do. But mentally ill persons or children cannot do art, they can do works that look like art but this is not art, even though sometimes people criticize the work and say that anyone can do it. In our times, it is very difficult to know whether an artist is aware or not. And this is why they ask for statements and it becomes essential to know what you, as an artist, are doing. It is very important especially for the curators who have a very critical and crucial role. Nowadays artists are making things difficult and easy for curators: curators must go and search. Because the question is not about how to paint but about what a painting is and how I make a painting. You must be aware, you cannot do things which you are not aware of, and you cannot accept things which you do not know what they are...

But sometimes you can understand aspects of an artist’s production retrospectively, after a certain time or simply from a different perspective, a circumstance which justifies the role of art critics...

You are talking about interpretation. They interpret the work of art in a different way, with reference to poetry, literature... Art criticism has changed, because artists are more conscious and they give their statements about their work. For instance, the Mona Lisa smile is nothing, there is no smile: why do people go crazy for that? Because of all the words spent about it. Venus de Milo, another example: before the invention of the camera people were blind. Only few people could see these masterpieces, and the rest of the people had to rely on “reports,” which were over-emphasized also because of the difficulties in getting close to the work of art. With the invention of the camera, reproduction comes, and everyone can finally see the work with their own eyes.

It is now too late for de-constructing the obsession, the hysteria built around these masterpieces...

This is why Duchamp drew a moustache and a goatee on a cheap postcard-sized reproduction of the Mona Lisa, in order to demystify, to degrade a

famous work of art. But it is the advent of camera that has really changed our perspective, making people decide.

You have never used photography as an expressive means.

I have done few photographic works but I don’t use the camera as my main expression. There are many artists using photography without being photographers. I use photography for documenting more than for expressing.



Hassan Sharif
Cardboard and Coir, 1999
 Cardboard and coir
 Variable dimensions (as shown: 100 × 220 × 180 cm)
 Courtesy of Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



Hassan Sharif
Cardboard and Glue, 2002
 Cardboard and glue
 Variable dimensions (as shown: 100 × 220 × 180 cm)
 Courtesy of Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



Hassan Sharif
Toftbo - Ikea - Made in India, 2007
 Bathroom mat, copper tube and wire, plastic combs, cloth, double-sided tape and wooden door with glass
 203 x 91 x 5 cm
 Courtesy of Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



Hassan Sharif
Email (Homage to Jos Clevers), 2009
 Mixed media
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Epilogue

Daily Newspaper

By Hassan Sharif

First published in *Al-Bayan* Newspaper, April 12, 1988

Translated by Abdul-Raheem Sharif

At 11:30 am he left his home, heading for the market in a street crowded with restaurants, video cassette stores, garment shops, tobacco, vegetables and other shops. Walking every day in the same street, he sees the same people, hears the same conversations, enters the same restaurant and asks for the same food. After he leaves the restaurant, on his way to the coffee shop, he buys the daily newspaper and in the coffee shop, he asks for a cup of coffee and a glass of water and begins to read the newspaper.

What to read, shall I read political news or local, sports or cultural? Shall I read the front page, and leave the second page, read the third page and leave the fourth page and so on? Shall I read commercial advertising?

He sips at his coffee and starts his daily work. The first column of the front-page consists of 480 words. The second column on the front page has 570 words and the third column consists of... etc. The front page has 4 photographs, the second page has 6 photographs and the third page has... etc. The editorial article consists of 540 words and the last article has 670 words. The fifth page has more than 300 “N” letters and the second page has more than 150 “F” letters.

He finishes his coffee and leaves the coffee shop towards home to start tomorrow, a new day with the new daily newspaper and another cup of coffee.

This is a rare sourcebook for one of the most important contemporary art communities in UAE history. It centers on a group sometimes called “The Five” and their cohort of visual artists, writers, and filmmakers. Its members identified with a “new culture” of encouraging radical, formal and conceptual experimentation. Eventually, some of these artists founded the celebrated Flying House.

But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988–2008 includes essays by Maya Allison, Aisha Stoby, Adel Khozam, and an historical timeline by Bana Kattan. It includes interviews with key members of the community, including Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Khalid Albudoor, Nujoom Alghanem, Jos Clevers, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem, Cristiana de Marchi, Abdullah Al Saadi, Abdul-Raheem Sharif, Hassan Sharif, Hussain Sharif, and Vivek Vilasini.

“In the course of two decades, a small community of unknown experimental practitioners transformed into a group of well-established figures in the UAE arts scene. Today, most of the artists mentioned here have participated in the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, many are collected by museums, and they continue to develop their individual voices. Their path, as well as what they have produced, also serves as an inspiration for emerging artists in the UAE, a kind of cultural root structure for the Emirates.”

Maya Allison
Founding Director and Chief Curator
New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery

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