

## 1988-2008

This exhibition traces these artists' aesthetic connections over a period of development that 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. Their influence on one another's work is visible, and intentional. Many of the artists were Hassan Sharif's students at some point, and 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.

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.

This art community's work diverged dramatically from the existing art practices in the UAE at the time, 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. 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. They worked enthusiastically despite their relative obscurity. In many ways, they were one another's audience, critics, and arts infrastructure.

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.

## Hassan Sharif

Hassan Sharif's early career included co-founding the Emirates Fine Arts Society, along with his brother Hussein and many others. In those early years, after Sharif returned from studying art in London, he co-founded an avant-garde group, complete with a manifesto and publication. His early exhibitions generated both excitement and heated public debates.

By 1988, the year this survey starts, Hassan Sharif had found his footing, turning inward to focus on arts education, writing about art, and his own artwork. The intensive creative community that formed thereafter shares certain traits with famous art historical communities, which have produced webs of creative influence alongside distinct individual artistic innovation.

A philosophical passion for art motivated his practice:

**... 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, from an interview with Cristiana de Marchi, 2009

## Ebtisam Abdulaziz

Ebtisam Abdulaziz is a multidisciplinary artist based in Washington DC, USA. Her work has been included in landmark exhibitions including: the 2013 Houston International Fotofest; Emirati Expressions at Manarat Al Saadiyat, UAE; 25 years of Arab Creativity, at L'institut du Monde Arabe, France. Her work has shown at international museums such as the Mori Art Museum (Tokyo, Japan); the Denmark National Museum (Copenhagen); Vitra campus Museum (Weil am Rhein, Germany), and the Sharjah Art Museum (UAE). Abdulaziz participated in the inaugural UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009 and the Benin Biennial, in West Africa in 2012.

Several of the works on view here are from the artist's first major exhibition of conceptual work. In her interview for this project she explains how her studies with Mohamed Kazem and this community affected her own artistic practice:

**I discovered that art does not only mean that you know how to make artworks literally... the issue was to discover my way of thinking, to discover myself more... I was subjected to an internal shock, I discovered that I was making paintings which I did not like, this was not me... 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 installation that integrated mathematics and geometry. The exhibition marked a change and a shift from the Ebtisam who used to produce paintings, to Ebtisam who produces conceptual installations.**

## Abdullah Al Saadi

Abdulla Al Saadi lives and works in Khorfakkan, UAE. He has exhibited extensively regionally and internationally. Museum exhibitions include the Kunst Museum (Bonn, Germany), and the New Museum (New York, USA). His work has been featured in numerous biennials including São Paulo (2004), Venice: UAE Pavilion (2011, 2015) and multiple Sharjah Biennials. In 2017, Al Saadi will participate in the Sharjah Biennial, the Antarctica Biennial, and the 57th Venice Biennale.

The work on view here includes that from his sojourn in Japan (1994-1996). His journeys generate both paintings and objects collected, together creating records of his experiences. As he describes it:

**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. 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. After that, 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.**

**[My time in Japan] 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.**

## Jos Clevers

Jos Clevers founded the Sittard Art Center in the Netherlands. He lived in the UAE from 1994 to 1996, and returned periodically, until 2007 when he helped establish The Flying House. While in the UAE, he participated in many exhibitions and projects, and notably *The 6* exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum, in 1996, with most of the artists in this room. Clevers curated the *Emirates 4* at the Sittard Art Center, Netherlands (1995), the first presentation of this UAE group of artists internationally. As he told Hassan Sharif in an interview in 1999:

**I would like to assure you that I am neither a professor nor an orientalist nor an anthropologist. I am just among you, not to discover you, but in order to reveal my unconscious side as an artist, to foster it more. Briefly, I don't want 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.**

## **Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim**

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim lives and works in Khorfakkan, UAE. Ibrahim's work has exhibited in major institutions worldwide including: Kunst Museum, Bonn, (Germany); Sharjah Art Museum (UAE); Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany; Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris); and at the Sittard Art Center (Netherlands). He has participated in the Sharjah Biennial on seven occasions where he has twice received the First Prize for Sculpture (2001, 1999). Additional biennial participation includes the inaugural UAE Pavilion at Venice in 2009; Dhaka (2002, 1993); Havana (2000); Cairo (1998); and in connection with the Kochi Biennale (2016). Cuadro Art Gallery presented a comprehensive survey of his work in 2014 and 2016.

**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. 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?!" 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.**

## Mohammed Kazem

Mohamed Kazem lives and works in Dubai, UAE. He has been participating in the Annual Exhibitions of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah since 1986, as well as numerous editions of Sharjah Biennial, receiving first prize for installations in 1999 and 2003, and in 2007, co-curated the Sharjah Biennial. Kazem's work has appeared in many international exhibitions at institutions such as the Mori Art Museum (2012), Boghossian Foundation (2013), Gwangju Museum of Art (2014), and *Here and Elsewhere* at the New Museum (2014). He has exhibited at the Venice Biennale three times, including a solo presentation for the UAE in 2013.

Kazem's multi-disciplinary practice centers on documenting his physical relationship to his environment, often using non-traditional methods such as GPS codes and his own body as material. He was a teacher to Ebtisam Abdulaziz at the Atelier in Dubai, and before that he was a longtime student of Hassan Sharif. Rather than influencing each other's work, one can trace the philosophical connections among them on the topic of art education itself:

**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.**

## Hussein Sharif

Hussein Sharif is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Dubai. He participated in major exhibitions both regionally and internationally including: *Cultural Diversity and The 6* at the Sharjah Art Museum in 2005 and 1996 (UAE); *5 UAE* at the Ludwig Forum in 2002 (Germany); *UAE Contemporary Art* at the Institut du Monde Arab in 1998 (France); *Emirates Arts: 4 UAE* at the Sittard Art Center in 1995 (Netherlands). He partook in six Sharjah Biennials in addition to the Dhaka Biennial (2002); and the Cairo Biennial (1998). His solo exhibitions include *Paintings, Oil and Collage* in 1992 at the Sharjah Cultural Center. Hussein is one of the founding members of the Emirates Fine Arts Society.

## Vivek Vilasini

Vivek Vilasini is an artist living and working between Kochi and Bangalore, India. He has had several solo exhibitions including several editions of *Between One Shore and Several Others* in India at: Arushi Arts (New Delhi) in 2008, Sumukha Gallery (Bangalore) in 2007, and Lalit Kala Academy (Kochi) in 2001. His group exhibitions include: *Beyond the Form* at Bajaj Capital Art House (India); *India, Public Place Private Space* at the Newark Museum, (USA); *In Focus: Contemporary Indian Photography* at The Art Resource (India); Phyllis Weston-Annie Bolling Gallery and the Krohn Conservatory (USA); *Who Knew Mr. Gandhi?* at Aicon Gallery (United Kingdom); and *The 6* at Sharjah Art Museum (UAE).