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A practical look at the world

Hassan Sharif believes art is for everyone and integrates everyday objects in his work

By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review

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WEEKEND REVIEW

For Hassan Sharif, art is not about spirituality or expressing feelings — it is about doing.

"I am a practical person. For me art is not about inspiration or emotion — it is about decision. It is about moulding your thoughts into something tangible so that others can see what you have visualised. And the real essence and beauty of art is that through his work an artist can say to society that he is different," Sharif says.

True to his words, the well-known Emirati artist has showcased his individuality and his ability to present his ideas using diverse media in an exhibition titled Press Conference.

Sharif is a pioneer of contemporary art in the UAE. Born in 1951 in Dubai, he studied fine art in London. He began his career as a cartoonist and columnist. He was among the first Emirati artists to experiment with performance art and to use the concept of semi-systems in his work.

He has made significant contributions to Emirati art as an educationist, writer, founder member of the Emirates Fine Art Society and the founder of the Dubai Art Atelier for Youth Theatre and Arts. Sharif is an accomplished painter but he is best known for his installations made from ordinary objects. A huge selection of such works was on display at the Venice Biennale 2009.

In Press Conference, Sharif has revisited some of his earlier works such as semi-systems. In these ink-and-pencil drawings, the artist plays with the infinite artistic possibilities of simple elements such as dots, lines and basic shapes by creating repetitive precisely measured patterns in much the same way as a musician plays with notes to create music.

"Like a jazz musician, I enjoy both the precision and the tiny imperfections and improvisations in these simple compositions," he says.

The show also features some typical Hassan Sharif installations such as a heap of colourful rubber slippers randomly cut and tied into bundles and a sculpture created from steel spoons wound around copper tubes.

These artworks, titled Slippers and Spoons, make a cynical comment on modern consumerism and also underline the artist's belief that rather than being a solitary and elitist pursuit, art should be a collective effort that involves the common people.

Sharif's wry humour is evident in his series of paintings of Venus with titles such as Venus with Fish.

"For centuries archaeological finds of female statues have been named after Venus, the mythological deity of beauty, such as Venus de Milo or Venus of Willendorf. These are my versions of Venus," he says.

As a cartoonist and art writer, Sharif has had a close association with newspapers. But as the title of this exhibition suggests, this time he has explored newspapers from a different perspective.

"These days everyone seems to be talking about what was said at a press conference. So I decided to create my own narrative and meta-narrative on the subject," Sharif says.

The story his colourful paintings tell begins with celebrities, accompanied by body-guards and surrounded by microphones. Gradually the audience, the microphones and the bodyguards disappear but the celebrities keep talking.

Day turns to night and it begins to rain but they stand there in the muddy water compulsively airing their views. This series is complemented by paintings of cricketers and footballers inspired by newspaper photographs and also a painting of a cow.

"In my mind there is a connection between cows and newspapers because I have often seen cows eat newspapers," Sharif explains. But, his final statement on Press Conference, presented in his signature style, is a heap of old, torn newspapers, neatly wrapped and tied up with colourful strips of cloth, piled on the floor.

Sharif is also exhibiting a series he created in the 1980s, titled Daily and Daily Mail. The title refers to the newspapers he read when he was in England.

"I watched people reading these papers in cafés. But as an artist I read the papers differently. I used tracing paper and marked certain letters every time they appeared on a page. I then transcribed the tracings on to drawing paper and drew random lines through each of the points I had marked to create my own version of the newspaper.

This series represents not the words but the spaces between the words," Sharif says.

One section of the exhibition is dedicated to Sharif's friend, the late Dutch artist Jos Clevers. In his Homage to Jos Clevers, Sharif has exhibited pictures of Clevers' sculptures and paintings and copies of e-mails he received from his friend during the last few months of his life. But he has covered most of the text with random strokes to create his own narrative of their communications.

Etchings of these same notes on copper transform a simple e-mail into a work of art and a permanent, tangible expression of the relationship between two friends.

Sharif has also used some of these etchings in an elaborate installation composed of copper tubes, aluminium plates and chimes made from buttons, forks, mugs, belts, clothes pegs, bottle caps, nuts and bolts. To Sharif, each object in the chimes represents a word or sound, perhaps as a reminder of all the conversations he shared with his friend.

The show has been organised in collaboration with The Flying House, a non-profit foundation and a permanent location to preserve and exhibit the work of contemporary UAE artists. Sharif pays tribute to The Flying House with a series of still life paintings of objects in a house. Asked if he has a message for young Emirati artists, Sharif's reply is: "All I want to tell them is that art is important."