

## The Underexplored Histories of Modern and Contemporary Art in the United Arab Emirates

by [Dorian Batycka](#) on March 9, 2016



'1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates,' installation view at The Flying Saucer, Dasman, Sharjah (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

SHARJAH, United Arab Emirates — In the words of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory.” In equating the archive with memory, Derrida suggests that history without self-identity is doomed for political failure. Accordingly, revisionist projects of historical and cultural memory can enable the establishment of new archives and canons, thereby helping to give voice to those previously left silent. In [1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates](#), an exhibition at the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) that features the work of 15 of the region’s most important contemporary artists, archival material is used to illuminate their under-explored presence within the canon of contemporary Gulf art history.

Curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, founder of the [Sharjah Art Foundation \(SAF\)](#), the exhibition presents the work of artists who have been instrumental in shaping the visual language of the region

over the past four decades. The show is situated in Sharjah's Flying Saucer building, an iconic architectural landmark noted for its triangular "diagrid" of intersecting columns, strangely reminiscent of the flying saucer from Slava Tsukerman's 1982 cult-classic [Liquid Sky](#).



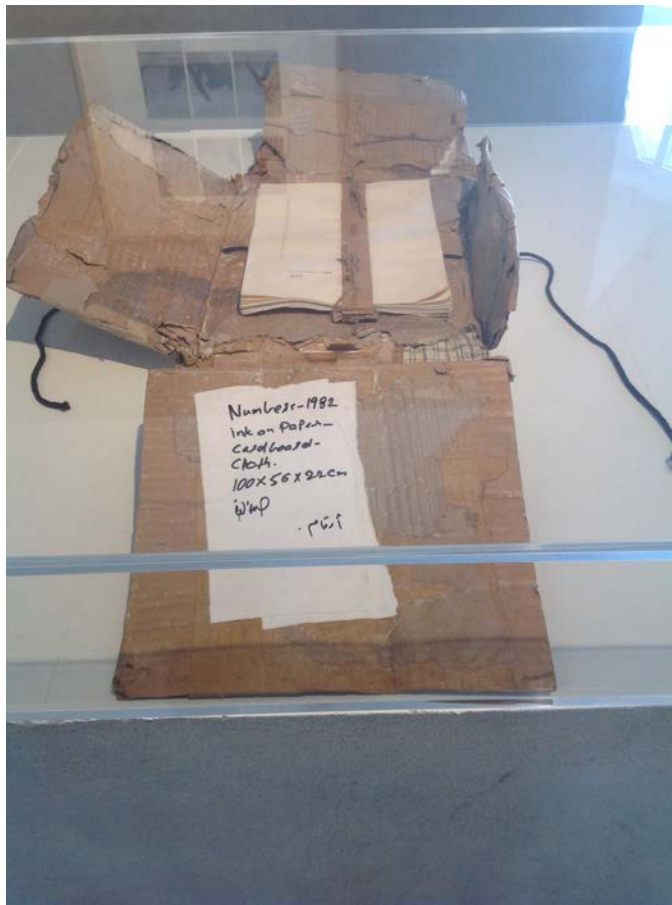
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[Originally exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale](#), the exhibition has made its domestic debut, supplemented by a vast array of research materials, texts, and documents. These were sourced from the [Emirates Fine Arts Society \(EFAS\)](#), founded in 1980, and the non-profit gallery the Flying House, co-founded in 2007 by brothers Hassan, Abdul Rahim, and Hussein Sharif. Notable for its active role in shaping and giving life to arts in the UAE, the EFAS was instrumental in producing exhibitions and archiving artists' materials from the 1980s onwards. The EFAS was also the first organization in the region to provide space for exhibitions, nurturing artists through technical and theoretical courses, later expanding to the allocation of resources for regional artists to study and exhibit abroad.



Installation view of Mohammed Kazem's prints, 'Tongue' (1994) (click to enlarge)

The work on view ultimately speaks to a diverse range of practices, the most interesting of which relates to the development of conceptual art practices in the UAE. In Mohammed Kazem's series of nine gelatin silver prints, *Tongue* (1994), the artist humorously depicts himself licking various domestic objects, such as water jugs, pipes, and door handles. In licking these rather banal, mass-produced objects, the artist creates a conduit between himself, his art, and the random objects he chooses to lick. Almost like a disturbing fetishization of the emerging mercantile and commodity futurism of the region, Kazem's work is like a ready-made social mirror. The series is an extension from his larger one, *Autobiographies*, in which the artist pictures himself in juxtaposition to commercial objects. *Tongue* can be seen to foreground questions about the role and place of art within traditional Arab culture. This is similar in many respects to the work of Hassan Sharif, one of the founders of Flying House and a former teacher of Kazem's.



Hassan Sharif, "Book of Numbers" (1982—2006),  
installation view (click to enlarge)

Hassan Sharif has been making art since the 1970s. In many ways, his work ushered in a radical new format and method of artistic production in the UAE, conjuring the ghosts of Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp. Though it is difficult to place Sharif's work into words, I will say this: much of it outright disposes away with commercial logic and traditional modernist aesthetics; it is art meant to question, in an absurdist way, the very scope and definition of itself as well as the viewer's own ideas of what art could be. In "Book of Numbers" (1982—2006), made of cardboard cloth, jute rope, cord, marker, and ink on paper, Sharif displays the everyday object of the book as one of aesthetic contemplation. What may seem like an overtly simple, even mundane gesture, instead takes on the form of a deeply philosophical purging of the book as an archive and repository of collective knowledge. It does away with established and conventional methods of artistic production, in favor of a conceptual practice that questions the relationship between object and idea, knowledge and truth.



Ahmed Al Ansari, “The Beggar” (1979) (image courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

The show establishes a bird’s eye view of artists who have actively challenged the canon of what defines art in the UAE. Of the more socially engaged works in the exhibition, Ahmed Al Ansari’s “The Beggar” (1979), a work executed in pastel on canvas, illustrates in profile a rather taboo subject within the oil rich GCC country: poverty and its malcontents. As a gesture of solidarity and even a comment on the social necessity of helping the poor, the painting depicts a man in profile with his hand open and extended outwards, head bowed towards the ground. The unfettered realism of the work can be seen as a respectful and commemorative gesture positioning the lived experience of those less fortunate as worthy of representation. The work directly confronts governmental responsibility in providing social support for the poor, also offering a not-so-subtle commentary on the fact that **begging remains illegal in the UAE**.

All told, the exhibition summarily underscores the need for examining the UAE’s recent past in the context of the present, and establishes a point of departure for anyone interested in the recent art history of the region.

**1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates** continues at the Sharjah Art Foundation’s *Flying Saucer* (Dasman, Sharjah) through May 14.

**Emirates Fine Arts Society Sharjah Art Foundation Venice Biennale**